



John Boswell (1947-1994)

On Boswell and “Men who lie with a male” in 1 Corinthians 6:9: A Response to Harwood and Porter

Regarding material posted on Presbyweb on [June 23](#) and [June 25](#), 2004

By Robert A. J. Gagnon, Ph.D.

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[Harwood and Porter claim that] “the best scholarly discussion of ‘arsenokoitai’ is probably John Boswell’s.”

Boswell’s arguments have not persuaded most New Testament scholars. Even a number of those supportive of homosexual practice... accept that the terms malakoi and arsenokoitai collectively designate a general condemnation of male-male intercourse.

Brit Harwood and Hal Porter are misinformed and uninformed at a number of points in their recent string of Presbyweb postings. I will focus here, however, on only a few of them.

On Boswell’s Interpretation of Arsenokoitai in 1 Cor 6:9

Walter Taylor is quite right in pointing out in www.Presbyweb.com ([June 24](#), 2004) that the statement by Harwood and Porter—namely, “the best scholarly discussion of ‘arsenokoitai’ is probably John Boswell’s” ([June 23](#))—is ill informed. It suggests that Harwood and Porter do not know the literature on the subject for the past 25 years.

Boswell believed that *arsenokoitai* referred to “active male prostitutes. . . . capable of the active role with either men or women” (*Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* [University of Chicago Press, 1980], 344).

However, Boswell’s arguments have not persuaded most New Testament scholars. Even a number of those supportive of homosexual practice (e.g., **Dan Via**, **William Schoedel**) accept that the terms *malakoi* (not *malachoi*, as Harwood and Porter incorrectly transliterate) and *arsenokoitai* collectively designate a general condemnation of male-male intercourse.

Even **Walter Wink** has acknowledged this. In his review of my book for *Christian Century* he quotes the following question that I put in the mouth of an imaginary Corinthian inquirer to Paul regarding the meaning of the word *arsenokoitai*: “When you mentioned that *arsenokoitai* would be excluded from the coming kingdom of God, you were not including [men in committed homosexual relationships], were you?” Wink admits: “No, Paul wouldn’t accept that relationship for a minute” (click [here](#)).

Had Harwood and Porter taken the time to look up the extant uses of the word *arsenokoitai* in ancient literature, cited on pp. 315-23 in *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, they would have seen that (a) at no time, at least not prior to the ninth century A.D., is there any indication that the word was used of heterosexual intercourse; and (b) the term is not restricted to homosexual prostitution. Boswell was clearly wrong. **Robin Scroggs** back in 1983 (*The New Testament and Homosexuality*) acknowledged these two points, though Scroggs himself was wrong in other ways.

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Two days later ([June 25](#)), in response to Taylor's letter, Harwood and Porter backtracked a bit: "No doubt, specialists have quarreled with Boswell on particular points. An article in *Vigiliae Christiani* [*sic*] (1984), for instance, challenged him on *arsenokoitai*. As a Roman Catholic, he may have gone too easy on the church's antipathy to gays." The article in *Vigiliae Christianae* (1984), by **David Wright**, didn't merely tweak Boswell's interpretation of *arsenokoitai*; it demolished it.

The question is: What happened between [June 23](#), when Harwood and Porter made their confident assertion that "the best scholarly discussion of 'arsenokoitai' is probably John Boswell's," and [June 25](#), when they conceded that "he may have gone too easy on the church's antipathy to gays"? Who tipped them off to the Wright article, which apparently they were unaware of just two days earlier?

Although Harwood and Porter now seem to admit that they may have been wrong in dismissing *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* as a Pauline critique against all male-male intercourse, they close their [June 25](#) letter with the contradictory assertion that "Those who teach that same-sex practice is sinful in and of itself get scant support from Paul." Huh?

Boswell's Work on Biblical Texts Generally

As regards Boswell's other interpretations of biblical texts, I don't know of any *biblical* scholars of the past 15 years, including prohomosex scholars, who, having written serious pieces of their own on the Bible and homosexual practice, regard Boswell's exegesis of *biblical* texts as "high quality" or in any sense definitive or near definitive. Boswell is okay in ferreting out data but often very sloppy in its analysis.

Even **Bernadette Brooten**, a lesbian New Testament scholar at Brandeis who has high praise for some facets of Boswell's work, has written: "Boswell . . . argued that . . . '[t]he early Christian church does not appear to have opposed homosexual behavior per se.' The sources on female homoeroticism that I present in this book run absolutely counter to those two conclusions" (*Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* [University of Chicago Press, 1996], 11).

Of course, I do think that Boswell was occasionally right on some things as, for example, when he stated:

If the difficulties of historical research about intolerance of gay people could be resolved by simply avoiding anachronistic projections of modern myths and stereotypes, the task would be far simpler than it is. Unfortunately, an equally distorting and even more seductive danger for the historian is posed by the tendency to exaggerate the differences between homosexuality in previous societies and modern ones. One example of this tendency is the common idea that gay relationships in the ancient world differed from their modern counterparts in that they always involved persons of different ages. . . . (*Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 27)

Since Harwood and Porter think so highly of Boswell, do they agree with Boswell here? If they do, then they would have to agree that it is much less likely that Paul was limiting his indictment of homosexual practice only to pederastic forms. At least they cannot assume that Paul was unaware of loving, adult homosexual relationships.

Recent Work on Malakoi and Arsenokoitai in 1 Cor 6:9

To be sure, there has been an occasional New Testament scholar on the prohomosex side who, since Boswell (though not with much reliance on Boswell), attempted to argue that *arsenokoitai* is limited to persons engaged in *exploitative* forms either of male-male intercourse or of both male-male and male-female intercourse.

Probably the best example of this is **David Fredrickson** (a Yale-trained New Testament scholar who teaches at Luther Seminary), who has an article entitled “Natural and Unnatural Use in Romans 1:24-27” in *Homosexuality, Science, and the “Plain Sense” of Scripture* (ed. D. Balch; Eerdmans, 2000), 197-222 (treatment of *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* on pp. 218-21).

A full refutation of Fredrickson’s views appears in my critical review essay of this book, part 2, in *Horizons in Biblical Theology*, vol. 25 (Dec. 2003): 179-275, now [posted on my website](#). The critique of the Fredrickson article appears on pp. 206-39, with the assessment of his views on *arsenokoitai* on pp. 229-39. Note that Fredrickson wrote his piece prior to the publication of my book. I have debated him twice since and on neither occasion did Fredrickson elect to challenge my view of the meaning of these terms.

So I challenge Harwood and Porter to read this portion of my article and see if they can name the *nine* reasons that I give for why the term *arsenokoitai* cannot be restricted to men who penetrate “boys” with “violent, hybristic” intent (as Fredrickson alleges). Then I would like to see them rebut all nine arguments. Failing that, let them find some biblical scholar connected with the Covenant Network or Witherspoon Society to do it for them.

It is interesting that no one who has reviewed my book, including the two reviewers that Harwood and Porter cite (Countryman and, presumably, Thurman), has offered a rebuttal of my interpretation of *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. Countryman, in particular, would have had a vested interest in doing so since my book contains a rebuttal of Countryman’s views.

On the Critical Review of My Book

This leads me to their disparaging comment about my book *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*. They wrote ([June 25](#)):

Robert Gagnon’s *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* came out only in 2001, and no doubt additional scholarly reviews will be forthcoming. But the only two we can find to date, in the *Anglican Theological Review* (2003 [by William Countryman]) and the *Review of Biblical Literature* (2003 [by Eric Thurman? note: there are actually two reviews in RBL]), are very unfavorable. Perhaps this

So I challenge Harwood and Porter to read... my article and see if they can name the nine reasons that I give for why the term arsenokoitai cannot be restricted to men who penetrate “boys” with “violent, hybristic” intent.

[Harwood and Porter infer that I] might have written a better book...had [I] subjected [my] manuscript to the more rigorous review process of a major university press.... They can start by reading 29 endorsements and reviews....

[Concerning Countryman's unfavorable review] Countryman... was incapable of writing a fair review.... Countryman is an extremist—the logical result of a prohomosex position consistently carried through.

would not be the case if Gagnon had subjected his manuscript to the conventional review processes of a major university press.

This is an irresponsible comment. Their inference is: *Gagnon might have written a better book than he obviously has*, given the two unfavorable reviews, had he subjected his manuscript to the more rigorous review process of a major university press.

Harwood and Porter need only go to the [page](#) of my website that treats endorsements and reviews of the book. They can start by reading twenty-nine endorsements and/or favorable reviews testifying to the book's importance, written by conservative, moderate, and liberal scholars. To these he can add the [endorsements](#) of my second (co-authored) work, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views*. Have Harwood and Porter ever bothered to read these? Can they not take the time to get their facts straight?

Apparently, Harwood and Porter are ignorant of how the big denominational publishing houses work (Abingdon, Fortress, Westminster John Knox—I have published books with the first two). Their academic departments generally subject manuscripts to critical review and scrutiny. I dare say that my book had been assessed by more scholars while in the manuscript stage than is the case for 98% of the approved manuscripts that go through the major university presses.

Ironically for Harwood and Porter, with only a couple of exceptions the best work on the Bible and homosexuality *from the prohomosex side* has been published in one of the major denominational publishing houses or other non-university presses. And the two exceptions that I can think of (Brooten and **Stephen Moore**; see below) disagree with the claim of Harwood and Porter that Paul did not think same-sex intercourse per se was sinful.

Now let's talk about the two unfavorable reviewers that Harwood and Porter allude to.

William Countryman, professor of New Testament at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley (an Episcopal seminary), was incapable of writing a fair review of my book. First, he himself is a self-affirmed, practicing "gay man." Second, I had refuted several of Countryman's positions in my book, including the farfetched claim that Paul in Romans 1:24-27 thought same-sex intercourse was "dirty" but not sinful (*The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 273-77). Third, Countryman is an extremist—the logical result of a prohomosex position consistently carried through.

[In response to a question](#) about how the Church should respond to nonmonogamous homosexual relationships, Countryman has said: "I would be *distressed* if the drive toward blessing gay unions merely applied Reformation understandings of heterosexual unions to gay unions."

He has written in his book *Dirt, Greed, and Sex* (Fortress, 1988) that "the gospel allows no rule against the following, in and of themselves: . . . bestiality, polygamy, homosexual acts," or "pornography," or (apparently) adult incestuous unions. As regards such matters we are not free to "impose our codes on others."

Countryman leveled three main charges against my work.... I show, in detail, that all of Countryman's claims are baseless.

[Concerning Thurman's unfavorable review] Thurman's "beef" about my work is that I don't think Paul and the other authors of Scripture, and Jesus, were the big misogynists that Thurman believes them to be.

Do Harwood and Porter find such views to be congenial to their own?

Getting an unfavorable review from Countryman is not only to be expected; it is a badge of honor.

Countryman leveled three main charges against my work: (1) that I imposed natural law theory on Jesus and Paul; (2) that I exhibited careless exegesis in my interpretation of Jude 7; and (3) that I used careless arguments in assessing the impact of culture on the incidence of homosexuality. Readers can see my response to Countryman's claims [here](#) (for pdf) or [here](#) (for html). There I show, in detail, that all of Countryman's claims are baseless: (1) that early Judaism, Jesus and Paul included, accepted a limited notion of natural law; (2) that it is Countryman whose exegesis of Jude 7 is careless; and (3) that culture can indeed impact the incidence of homosexuality.

If Harwood and Porter disagree, let them show how every point that I make for each of the three charges is in error. Otherwise, merely to refer readers to Countryman's unfavorable review as evidence that my book is subpar is intellectually dishonest.

Similar things can be said for the review by **Eric Thurman**, a doctoral student and disciple of the radical deconstructionist New Testament scholar Stephen Moore. In his review of my book Thurman claims that, because Paul inhabited a "symbolic world" predicated on "female inferiority," Paul's stance on homosexual practice can be criticized as misogynist *even if* the evidence indicates that Paul's main motivation lay elsewhere (e.g., the Genesis creation paradigm and attention to male-female structural complementarity).

Yet even Thurman has to acknowledge that my book is "the most up-to-date and exhaustive survey of biblical literature on same-sex sexual practices currently available" and "will be taken by some as the definitive, perhaps final, word on the subject—as the host of biblical luminaries whose names light up the book's dust jacket suggest. Interested readers cannot ignore his contribution." Thurman's "beef" about my work is that I don't think Paul and the other authors of Scripture, and Jesus, were the big misogynists that Thurman believes them to be.

Let Harwood and Porter read my response to Thurman [here](#) (for pdf) or [here](#) (for html) and then make the case that Thurman has given a persuasive critique. Remember, too, that Thurman disagrees with the claim of Harwood and Porter that "those who teach that same-sex practice is sinful in and of itself get scant support from Paul."

"Scant" Evidence for Paul's Absolute Opposition to Same-Sex Intercourse?

Let's go back to that just-cited comment by Harwood and Porter in their [June 25](#) letter.

Harwood and Porter [claim] that “those who teach that same-sex practice is sinful in and of itself get scant support from Paul.” [The following prohomosex scholars disagree with this claim: Stephen Moore, Dan Via, Walter Wink, Bernadette Brooten, William Schoedel, and Louis Crompton.]

Not only would Eric Thurman disagree with it, but so too would his mentor **Stephen Moore** (*God’s Beauty Parlor: And Other Queer Spaces in and around the Bible* [University of California Press, 2001]).

Dan Via, in his response to my essay in *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* concedes that the Bible’s prohibition of homosexual practice, in both Testaments, is “absolute.” Via at no time attempts to contest the accuracy of my “accumulation of biblical texts condemning homosexual practice” (p. 94).

Walter Wink has acknowledged, in the *Christian Century* review: “The Bible is negative toward same-sex behavior, and there is no getting around it. . . . Paul wouldn’t accept [a nonexploitative homosexual] relationship for a minute.”

Bernadette Brooten has written: “I see Paul as condemning all forms of homoeroticism” (*Love Between Women*, 244).

William R. Schoedel, a prohomosex professor emeritus at the University of Illinois who has expertise in early Christianity and classics, has written: “Paul’s wholesale attack on Greco-Roman culture makes better sense if, like Josephus and Philo, he lumps *all* forms of same-sex eros together as a mark of Gentile decadence,” including committed relationships by those homoerotically oriented (“Same-Sex Eros: Paul and the Greco-Roman Tradition,” *Homosexuality, Science, and the “Plain Sense” of Scripture*, 68; my emphasis).

Louis Crompton, emeritus professor of English at the University of Nebraska and author of the recent work, *Homosexuality and Civilization* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003; 622 pgs.), writes:

According to [one] interpretation, Paul’s words were not directed at “bona fide” homosexuals in committed relationships. But such a reading, however well-intentioned, seems strained and unhistorical. Nowhere does Paul or any other Jewish writer of this period imply the least acceptance of same-sex relations under any circumstance. The idea that homosexuals might be redeemed by mutual devotion would have been wholly foreign to Paul or any other Jew or early Christian. (p. 114)

Yet Harwood and Porter say categorically that “those who think that same-sex practice is sinful in and of itself get scant support from Paul.” What are they going to do with the fact that a number of *prohomosex* New Testament experts disagree with their assertion?

Let Harwood and Porter read my extensive rebuttal of Fredrickson’s attempt to discount Romans 1:24-27 (pp. 207-24), in addition to my rebuttal of his attempt at discounting 1 Cor 6:9 (cited above). (Fredrickson claims, wrongly, that Paul did not have in view a male-female creation norm and that “use” in Rom 1:26-27 is indeterminate for gender.)

I don’t want to overload Harwood and Porter all at once, but if they have time they might also look at my article, “Does the Bible Regard Same-Sex Intercourse as Intrinsically

Sinful?” in *Christian Sexuality* (ed. Russell Saltzman; Kirk House, 2003), 106-55. Perhaps, too, an alternative medium, my new 2 DVD set called “Truth in Love,” would be useful as a three-and-one-half hour presentation of my views (see www.robgagnon.net [scroll down a bit]).

All of these resources may be more manageable for Harwood and Porter than would be an assignment of the 460 pages in *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*. And these newer, smaller resources add some new material not in *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*.

I urge Mr. Harwood and Rev. Porter to take responsibility for their allegations by reading the material that I have recommended to them and, if they can, show me where my positions explained there are wrong, responding to each of my points.

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