

Robert Gagnon to Stacy Johnson: Two Positions on Homosexual Practice, Not Six (With Postscript)

by Robert A. J. Gagnon

Posted in [The Presbyterian Layman Online, Aug. 6, 2004, with postscript on Aug. 10.](#)

Stacy Johnson's presentation [of six views on homosexuality] cannot be judged a fair representation of the issue.

The impression left by [his] analysis is that the scriptural position is an extreme view.

The truth is that there are only two positions of any consequence on the issue of homosexual practice: (1) the scriptural position and (2) anti-scriptural positions.

[John Adams](#) of *The Layman Online* (Aug. 4), [Leslie Scanlon](#) of *The Presbyterian Outlook* (Aug. 5), and [Jerry L. Van Marter](#) of the Presbyterian News Service (Aug. 5) have all written long accounts of Prof. Stacy Johnson's presentation of six views on homosexuality to the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity (Aug. 4). Johnson, professor of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, posits six basic positions in the PCUSA on homosexuality: (1) the "prohibitionist" or "categorical prohibition" position; (2) the "Definitive Guidance" or "welcoming but not affirming" position; (3) the "justice issue" position; (4) the "pastoral issue" position; (5) the "celebrationist" or "welcome, affirm, and celebrate" position; and (6) the "consecrationalist" or "welcome, affirm, and consecrate" position.

All three write-ups are in basic agreement of the substance of Johnson's remarks. Assuming, then, the basic accuracy of the combined reports, Johnson's presentation cannot be judged a fair representation of the issue. Both the categories and the descriptions, certainly of the first two categories, are skewed. Moreover, though Johnson was allegedly engaged in a purely descriptive task, his biases and personal assessments come through clearly at a number of points.

The scriptural position as middle ground

The first and most problematic dimension of Johnson's analysis is to delineate six distinct point of views, in which only two, operating on a far end of the Johnson's spectrum, represent anything resembling the scriptural position.

The impression left by such an analysis is that the scriptural position is an extreme view, corresponding to the "celebrationist" view on the other end. Another false impression is that four positions *favoring* ordination of "self-affirming, practicing homosexual persons"—the language of the 1978 Definitive Guidance—constitute some sort of numerical superiority within the PCUSA. Indeed, Johnson tells us that the so-called "prohibitionists," whose relationship to the "Definitive Guidance" view Johnson confuses, encompasses only 5 (or 5-10) percent of the church. How Johnson knows this is a mystery. In reality, survey after survey of the Presbyterian Panel, and vote after vote of the presbyteries, has repeatedly shown that two-thirds of the PCUSA membership supports the chastity amendment against homosexual practice.

The truth is that there are only two positions of any consequence on the issue of homosexual practice: (1) *the scriptural position* and (2) *anti-scriptural positions* that

Johnson claims that the biblical passages that speak to homosexual practice “by themselves are inconclusive.” He might as well argue that the biblical passages that speak to promiscuity, infidelity, incest, adultery, and bestiality “by themselves are inconclusive.”

The 1978 Definitive Guidance, while not using the explicit language of complementarity, clearly embraces the concept.

deviate from Scripture in varying degrees of severity by favoring the ordination of self-affirming, practicing homosexual persons. Everything else is sociological muddle.

Johnson claims that the biblical passages that speak to homosexual practice “by themselves are inconclusive.” He might as well argue that the biblical passages that speak to promiscuity, infidelity, incest, adultery, and bestiality “by themselves are inconclusive.” The biblical witness against homosexual practice is as conclusive as conclusive can be. Of course, one must still evaluate counterarguments that attempt to discount the overwhelming witness of Scripture, as I have done at length in my own work. But to pretend that the witness of Scripture on homosexual practice is something other than overwhelming, or even limited to a few isolated texts, is ridiculous.

Since people tend to gravitate toward what is presented as a “middle” position, Johnson’s sixfold division implicitly invites hearers to locate themselves in one of two “middle” (read: moderate) positions: Johnson’s so-called “justice issue” or “pastoral-care issue” positions (or, possibly, his “consecrationist” position, which alone of the six positions was presented outside of a sequence from greatest opposition to greatest approval). From what I know of Johnson’s own position, Johnson conveniently locates himself in one of these “moderate” positions.

In delineating six different groups Johnson has to consider as unique to one group characteristics that actually straddle two or more groups. There is not a dime’s worth of difference between his “celebrationists” and “consecrationalists,” since few “celebrationists” in the PCUSA argue for the “anything goes” philosophy that Johnson attributes to them. Nor is there any material difference in the pragmatic response to homosexual practice by Johnson’s “justice issue” and “pastoral issue” positions. Indeed, all four of these positions arrive at the same basic view that the church should bless committed homosexual unions and be willing to ordain persons in committed homosexual unions.

“Categorical prohibition” is “welcoming but not affirming”

Moreover, two of the key features that Johnson claims to be dividing elements between the “categorical-prohibition” position and the “welcoming-but-not-affirming” position actually straddle both positions: the complementarity argument and a recognition of “sexual orientation.”

The complementarity argument. Johnson states that a complementarity argument defines the former but not the latter, which he identifies with the [1978 Definitive Guidance on Homosexuality](#) (more precisely, as [Jim Berkley](#) notes in his Aug. 6 blog, the Authoritative Interpretation). But the 1978 Definitive Guidance, while not using the explicit language of complementarity, clearly embraces the concept, stating: “God created us male and female to display in clear diversity and balance the range of qualities in God’s own nature. . . . Nature confirms revelation in the functional compatibility of male and female genitalia and the natural process of procreation and family continuity.”

The obvious compatibility of male and female genitals is both part of and emblematic of the broad complementarity of essential maleness and femaleness ... illustrated by both the copulative act and the story ... in Gen 2:21-24.

Johnson states that the Definitive Guidance, in “embracing the category of sexual orientation,” has in effect “made a decision to exit the worldview of the biblical writers....” This is false.

It is fairly obvious that the creation stories in Gen 1:26-27 and 2:21-24 illustrate the point that men and women are complementary halves of a single sexual whole. Only a determined effort to reject the biblical witness can ignore this. That is why the intertextual echoes and citations in Paul’s critiques of homosexual practice in Romans 1:24-27 and 1 Corinthians 6:9 point to the creation texts. Jesus, too, clearly embraced the biblical witness that only a sexual union of a man and woman, male and female, could reestablish in this life the integrated, “one-flesh” sexual whole that existed prior to the splitting.

There is also on Johnson’s part a distortion of the so-called “body parts” argument. Johnson argues confusedly that a “focus on body parts for the sake of body parts” would not rule out rape, incest, or promiscuity. But who is focusing only on body parts? I have stated over and over again, in numerous writings, that the obvious compatibility of male and female genitals is both part of and emblematic of the broad complementarity of essential maleness and essential femaleness that is so well illustrated by both the copulative act and the story of the splitting off of woman from a sexually binary, primal human in Gen 2:21-24. And who is arguing that sexual complementarity is the only prerequisite for acceptable sexual behavior? Obviously Scripture views other-sex sexuality as a necessary but insufficient condition for an acceptable sexual union. But “insufficient” does not make the “necessary” any less necessary.

Another criticism that Johnson levels against the complementarity position is that the purposes of marriage as outlined in the Bible, in Johnson’s view, are limited to procreation, the prevention of promiscuity, and mutual companionship. And procreation doesn’t count for Johnson because we do not condemn childless unions. The problem with Johnson’s view of the biblical purposes of marriage is that it leaves out the most important purpose of all: to reunite the complementary halves or sexual “counterparts,” male and female, into an integrated sexual whole.

I treat at the end of this article Johnson’s contention that the Bible does not define the image of God in terms of sexual complementarity.

Sexual orientation. Johnson also states that the Definitive Guidance, in “embracing the category of sexual orientation,” has in effect “made a decision to exit the worldview of the biblical writers who focused on sex acts.” This is false.

The Definitive Guidance subordinates “sexual orientation” to the biblical prohibition of homosexual acts. It expresses full agreement with the New Testament witness that “all homosexual practice is incompatible with Christian faith and life.” It calls every act of homosexual intercourse “sin” and a “failing to be obedient,” irrespective of a person’s claim to homosexual orientation. So when Johnson claims that the Definitive Guidance condemns homosexual acts as a “tragedy” rather than a “perversion,” he puts forward a false dichotomy. The Definitive Guidance characterizes homosexual acts as both a tragedy and a perversion, or deviation, from the biblical norm.

Johnson ignores, or does not understand, the implications of Paul's view of sin, which assumes innate and congenital dimensions.

***To restrict culpable sin only to an actual act ...is to engage in the kind of legalism that Jesus expressly rejected in his adultery-of-the-heart saying.... [But contrary to Johnson's summary of the "prohibitionist" position as "Repent of being gay,"]
UnobodyU in the PCUSA is advocating that persons repent merely for experiencing unwanted sexual desires***

When Johnson talks about "exiting the worldview of the biblical writers," Johnson also shows no awareness of Greco-Roman theories that both posited something akin to sexual orientation behind at least some forms of homosexual practice and still classified such practice as "against nature." Paul's reference to the "soft men" in 1 Corinthians 6:9 indicates his knowledge of men with a lifelong attraction toward other males. Johnson also ignores, or does not understand, the implications of Paul's view of sin, which assumes innate and congenital dimensions.

"Orientation" to a certain form of sinful behavior does not validate the behavior in question. If it did, multiple-partner sexuality would have to be validated, to say nothing of some forms of pedophilia. Not a single biblical moral imperative is predicated on the assumption that believers first lose all innate desires to violate the imperative in question before they are required to adhere to the imperative. The Holy Spirit empowers obedience even when sinful impulses of the flesh urge contrary behavior.

Johnson's comments on "sexual orientation" exhibit the same love affair with the term that proponents of homosexual practice generally exhibit. A sexual "orientation" is simply the directedness of sexual desire at any extended period of an individual's life. Some orientations are negative, some positive, and some neutral. The identity of the object of desire, not the orientation itself, plays a pivotal role in determining the morality of that orientation.

Johnson claims that, in contrast to the "prohibitionist" position that allegedly requires homosexual persons to repent "both of the deed and of the homosexual desire," the Definitive Guidance tells homosexual persons "not to be ashamed of their desires, but not to act on them," "welcoming homosexual identity, but non-affirming of what that identity really means." This is inaccurate. The Definitive Guidance states: "Even where the homosexual orientation has not been consciously sought or chosen, it is neither a gift from God nor a state nor a condition like race; it is a result of our living in a fallen world." The desire to have sex with a person of the same sex is sinful desire, just as desire to have sex with one's immediate blood relations or with multiple persons or with another person's spouse or with children is sinful. But obviously a person is not held culpable for, and does not have to repent of, merely the *experience* of sinful desire. Culpability occurs when one actively entertains and nurtures sinful desires, not only in deed but also in thought. To restrict culpable sin only to an actual act, excluding completely the domain of one's thought life, is to engage in the kind of legalism that Jesus expressly rejected in his adultery-of-the-heart saying (Matthew 5:27-28).

According to the articles by Van Marter (see chart at the end), Scanlon, and now Adams's Aug. 6 posting (["Task force members comment on views about homosexuality"](#)), Johnson summarized "reconciliation" for the "prohibitionist" position as "Repent of being gay" and "reconciliation" for the "Definitive Guidance" position as "Repent of gay behavior." If this accurately represents Johnson's views, it is an absurd characterization of the so-called "prohibitionist" view. *Nobody* in the PCUSA is advocating that persons repent merely for experiencing unwanted sexual desires.

Both the “categorical-prohibition” position and “welcoming-but-not-affirming” position prohibit homosexual conduct categorically and elevate the act over the orientation.

The Definitive Guidance would have done better to leave out entirely the term “homophobia” and instead concentrate on exhorting persons not to hate the sinner.

A number of Task Force members have shown themselves in the past to be tone deaf to nuanced arguments about sexual orientation. When reviewing the position that I put forth in an article for [Theology Matters](#) (available also at [my website](#)), [Prof. Mark Achtemeier](#) of Dubuque Seminary claimed that I made “homosexual orientation . . . essentially a voluntary sort of condition.” He said this in spite of the fact that I was quite clear in my article that “I do not contend that self-identified homosexuals can be easily rid of homoerotic desires” but that change can at least include “a reduction or elimination of homosexual behavior” and usually “a reduction in the intensity and frequency of homosexual impulses” even when it does not include development of heterosexual functioning or eradication of all homoerotic impulses. Moreover, societal sanctions and family and peer influences can affect the rate of incidence for homosexuality in a population. Nowhere do I state that in all or even most circumstances one can simply “choose” to eradicate every vestige of homosexual desire, with or without the Spirit’s help. But neither is homosexuality genetic and immutable in the way that one would define race or sex as genetic and immutable. Obviously it is closer to alcoholism and pedophilia in terms of its origination and malleability than it is to race and sex. But this nuanced view translates for some members of the Task Force as: “Gagnon thinks homosexuality is a voluntary condition.”

In short, both the “categorical-prohibition” position and “welcoming-but-not-affirming” position prohibit homosexual conduct categorically and elevate the act over the orientation.

Peripheral concerns about the 1978 Definitive Guidance

The 1978 Definitive Guidance is not perfect but it is a lot closer to the truth of Scripture than the “four” positions seeking its repeal.

“Homophobia.” One can debate whether in railing against the sin of “homophobia” the Definitive Guidance has sufficiently distinguished between, on the one hand, being repulsed by homosexual practice and fearing the consequences of its approval (which Scripture clearly affirms) and, on the other hand, acting hatefully toward persons who engage in self- and other-degrading behavior (which Scripture rejects). Persons *should* be repulsed by the thought of being erotically attracted to what they already are as sexual beings, just as it is healthy and right to be repulsed by the thought of having sex with one’s parents or siblings (another instance of sex with a same). But I do not know anyone in the PCUSA who advocates as a theological position that the church should hate homosexual persons—certainly not the “categorical prohibition” position delineated by Johnson. The “love the sinner, hate the sin” approach is quite scriptural and held by both “categorical prohibition” and “welcoming but not affirming.”

The Definitive Guidance would have done better to leave out entirely the term “homophobia” and instead concentrate on exhorting persons not to hate the sinner. The term “homophobia” is as confusing, misleading, and unworkable as “incest-phobia” or “polyphobia” (fear of multiple-partner sexuality). Nevertheless, in the end, the Definitive

The alarming consequences [of enshrining “sexual orientation” as a protected category like race or sex] may not have been clear back in 1978 but, given the developments in Scandinavia and Canada over the past decade or so, they should now be self-evident.

The Definitive Guidance should have applied its own logic when it said “As persons repent and believe, they become members of Christ’s body.”

Guidance rightly restricts the term to “contempt, hatred, and fear” of “homosexual persons,” while implying the repulsive quality of homosexual acts.

“Civil Rights.” In hindsight the 1978 Definitive Guidance was incredibly naïve in thinking that it could support “civil rights” legislation that would enshrine “sexual orientation” as a protected category like race or sex but preclude such legislation from ever affecting “the church’s employment policies,” or revising society’s definition of marriage, or promoting homosexuality in the secular workplace while discriminating against persons averse to such promotion. Eventually such legislation will put extraordinary pressure on the church to promote homosexual practice by, among other things, threatening seminaries with loss of federal loans or academic accreditation if they do not actively recruit homosexual persons in influential administrative and teaching positions; denying tax-exempt status to churches that do not perform homosexual weddings; and ultimately holding even preachers liable to prosecution for “hate speech” if they preach from Romans 1 or other biblical texts against homosexual practice. These alarming consequences may not have been clear back in 1978 but, given the developments in Scandinavia and Canada over the past decade or so, they should now be self-evident.

Don’t ask, don’t tell? Johnson calls the Definitive Guidance position a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. It is true that the Definitive Guidance instructs candidates committees, etc., not “to make a specific inquiry into the sexual orientation or practice of candidates for ordained office or ordained officers where the person involved has not taken the initiative in declaring his or her sexual orientation,” because to do so would ostensibly be “a hindrance to God’s grace.” This is a dumb policy that contradicts the Definitive Guidance’s own acknowledgement that “no phrase within the *Book of Order* can be construed as an explicit mandate to disregard sexual practice when evaluating candidates for ordination.” Take any other area of sexual immorality as an example. If a candidates committee had good reason to believe that the candidate was currently involved in an adulterous affair, that committee cannot ask any questions unless the candidate first volunteers the information regarding the affair? That is absurd and does no favor to the candidate or to the church.

Even so, as [Jim Berkley](#) has pointed out in his Aug. 6 blog, the Definitive Guidance does not *commend* to candidates that they keep secret any homosexual behavior that they are engaged in, any more than it commends secrecy regarding any other form of sexual immorality. It expects, albeit naively, that candidates will be honest about volunteering relevant information. The Definitive Guidance is certainly not commending duplicity and deception.

Membership. Finally, the 1978 Definitive Guidance (and the PCUSA generally) may have erred in giving a blank membership check to homosexual persons *or any persons* actively engaged in self-affirming, grossly immoral behavior. The Definitive Guidance was correct in asserting that “The church is not a citadel of the morally perfect” and that “It may be only in the context of loving community . . . that homosexual persons can come to a clear understanding of God’s pattern for their sexual expression.” At the same

The Apostolic Decree in Acts 15 admitted Gentiles into the household of faith on the condition that they not continue in the kind of sexually immoral behavior delineated in Leviticus 18—chiefly, incest, adultery, same-sex intercourse, and bestiality.

time the Definitive Guidance should have applied its own logic when it said that “As *persons repent* and believe, they become members of Christ’s body” and that PCUSA membership entails “honest affirmation to the vows. . . . ‘Jesus Christ is my *lord* . . . “ and ‘I intend to be *his disciple, to obey his word*. . . .’”

Granted, the church should not expect moral perfection or anything close to it as a condition of membership. Nevertheless, some behaviors deviate so grossly from the Christian faith as to render suspect claims to even the *minimum* repentance associated with conversion.

How far does the PCUSA want to take off the table any consideration of behavioral repentance as a sign of genuine conversion? Would the PCUSA enroll as members persons who, in a “self-affirming, practicing” manner, remained involved in a sexual relationship with their mother or sibling, two persons at once, persons other than their spouse, prostitutes, or children? Would the PCUSA enter into membership persons who, in a “self-affirming, practicing” manner, remained involved in schemes to bilk the elderly, or who were leaders of “skinhead” Nazi groups, or who regularly beat their spouse without remorse? Perhaps, but I doubt it.

It would be interesting to see how a “More Light” church session would handle the membership of Fred Phelps if Phelps continued to maintain his callous “God hates fags” approach to homosexual behavior.

The confession “Jesus is my lord” must be reflected in some basic behavioral compliance to Christian norms. The Apostolic Decree in Acts 15 admitted Gentiles into the household of faith on the condition that they not continue in the kind of sexually immoral behavior delineated in Leviticus 18—chiefly, incest, adultery, same-sex intercourse, and bestiality. That was a condition of membership. Paul’s opening moral exhortation in 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 tells us that the first order of business for Paul with converts or potential converts was to insist that they immediately discontinue practices of “sexual uncleanness” (the term used in Rom 1:24 for same-sex intercourse) or else face God’s avenging wrath. Paul’s handling of the case of the incestuous man in 1 Corinthians 5 tells us exactly how Paul would have handled a case of serial, unrepentant same-sex intercourse in the church’s midst that was initiated unexpectedly by the offender some time after conversion (compare the vice lists in 5:10-11 and 6:9-10).

Yet, despite the problematic dimension of its membership argument, even the 1978 Definitive Guidance does not preclude the administration of church discipline on members who persist in committing self-affirming violations of minimal standards for purity and holiness in the church. The church would cease to be operating on scriptural principles if it simply declared outright that no immoral conduct of any sort would ever trigger discipline of a member.

Furthermore, most people who hold what Johnson calls a position of “categorical prohibition” do not believe that members who engage in homosexual practice in a self-affirming way should be immediately put on church discipline. Nor do they preclude all

In the end, the divide that Johnson posits between “categorical prohibition” and “welcoming but not affirming” is not significant enough to warrant ... two distinct positions.

It is not that a person has to engage in sex to be made in God’s image. It is rather that, if a person chooses to engage in sexual intercourse, there are ways of doing so that would enhance God’s image and ways that would efface that image.

attendance at church meetings by persons engaged in homosexual behavior or any other immoral practice. There has to be some opportunity for adequate exposure to the gospel if people are to be influenced by that message. Nor do they advocate that homosexual persons not engaged in active, self-affirming homosexual practice be denied membership. Nor do they equate occasional “backsliding,” followed by repentance, with willful, unrepentant, and serial participation in homoerotic acts.

So, in the end, the divide that Johnson posits between “categorical prohibition” and “welcoming but not affirming” is not significant enough to warrant a separation into two distinct positions.

On sexual differentiation and the image of God—and other issues

Erroneous value judgments are also sprinkled throughout Johnson’s sixfold division (some of his statements appear to go beyond the merely descriptive). One deserves special mention. Johnson declares that sexual complementarity cannot be tied to the image of God because, if that were so, single persons, including Jesus, could not express the image of God. Johnson has misunderstood the point.

Genesis 1:27 clearly brings into close connection creation “in God’s image” and creation as “male and female.” It is not that a person has to engage in sex to be made in God’s image. It is rather that, if a person chooses to engage in sexual intercourse, there are ways of doing so that would enhance God’s image and ways of doing so that would efface that image. Humans are angled or faceted expressions of the image of God, “male and female.” When they engage in sexual activity, they engage another in their sexual particularity, as only one incomplete part of a two-faceted sexual whole. Ignoring this particularity effaces that part of the divine image stamped on human sexuality.

Johnson’s statement that defining heterosexuality as normative makes persons who experience homoerotic proclivities “subhuman” is simply rhetorical demagoguery. Do we say that because monogamy is normative persons who live out sexual impulses for multiple sex partners are “subhuman”? His line of reasoning here is offensive and pejorative.

Five other erroneous observations by Johnson can be briefly noted:

- *Prevalence.* Johnson claims that “4 to 10 percent of the population [is] considered exclusively homosexual.” This statement suggests that Johnson does not know the socio-scientific evidence on homosexuality. Stanton Jones and Mark Yarhouse devote an entire chapter of their book, *Homosexuality: The Use of Scientific Research in the Church’s Moral Debate* (Intervarsity, 2000), to discussing “How Prevalent is Homosexuality?” (pp. 31-46). After citing numerous studies they conclude: “Homosexuality almost certainly characterizes less than 3% (and perhaps less than 2%) of the population.” J. Michael Bailey, a prohomosex researcher and chair of the department of psychology at Northwestern, similarly states: “Before [the 1990s], gay activists frequently asserted that ten percent of the population was gay. [Surveys in

It is “Gnostic” to argue for a complete bifurcation of Creator and Redeemer.

Johnson repeatedly assumes that the value of monogamy can be upheld in the absence of upholding the Bible’s two-sexes requirement. It can’t.

Redemption does not come from permission to engage in what Paul describes as self-dishonoring and self-degrading behavior.

the 1990s] suggest that the true figure is more like one to three percent” (*The Man Who Would Be Queen* [Joseph Henry Press, 2003], 111). The 1992 National Health and Social Life Survey, still the most accurate survey of American sexuality, noted that only 2.8 percent of the men and 1.4 percent of the women identified as homosexual *or* bisexual. The 2004 Canadian Community Health Survey indicated that only 1 percent of the nation’s population self-identified as homosexual and only .7 percent as bisexual.

- *Nature.* Johnson repeatedly intimates that any reference to an argument from nature is unbiblical or non-Reformed. It is not. As my [critique of Jack Rogers](#) (section III) shows, Scripture and the Reformed tradition (including Calvin) work with limited nature arguments (Romans 1:18-27 is just one among many cases in point). It is “Gnostic” to argue for a complete bifurcation of Creator and Redeemer. Johnson himself, in his continual positive refrain for “sexual orientation,” adopts a nature argument, however unbiblical and non-Reformed such an appeal is. Of course, the revelation of Scripture is primary, but ironically Johnson appears not to give this the priority it deserves.
- *Commitment.* Johnson repeatedly plays up in his presentation the view that making a homosexual relationship committed and long-term answers to the primary problem with homosexual practice. It doesn’t. Same-sex intercourse is rejected by Scripture on the grounds that it reflects either the narcissism of being attracted to what one is as a sexual being or the delusion that one needs to merge with another of the same sex to complete one’s own sexual deficiencies. Arguing that we should grant marriage status to homosexually inclined persons to avert promiscuity is like insisting that we grant marriage status to adult incestuous or polygamous unions to promote relational longevity. It doesn’t address the reason why Scripture deems homosexual practice to be wrong.
- *Monogamy.* Johnson repeatedly assumes that the value of monogamy can be upheld in the absence of upholding the Bible’s two-sexes requirement. It can’t. The limitation of two persons in a sexual union at any one time is itself predicated on the idea that two sexes are necessary and sufficient for establishing a sexual whole. Once church and society reject a two-sexes prerequisite, there will be no logical ground for maintaining the sacredness of the number two in sexual relations.
- *Redemption.* Johnson repeatedly assumes that there can be no redemption for the sexuality of homosexual persons unless they are allowed some latitude to engage in homosexual practice. This is untrue. Redemption does not come from permission to engage in what Paul describes as self-dishonoring and self-degrading behavior. Redemption comes, as with all sinful impulses, in taking up one’s cross and denying oneself (Mark 8:34-37), allowing Jesus to be formed in one’s special weaknesses in this life (2 Corinthians 12:9-10; 4:7-12; Galatians 2:20; Romans 6:1-14). What is Johnson’s redemptive word to persons who are not “wired” to find sexual satisfaction in monogamy or in adult sex? Does he simply conclude that there is no redemptive word for such persons?

Johnson obscures the crucial divide between accepting Scripture's strong, pervasive, and absolute stance against homosexual practice and rejecting that unequivocal witness. That is, after all, the only divide that counts.

Johnson's approach [of having Task Force members cite the strengths of each position] was a clever way to try to get them to say something nice about positions that are deeply opposed to Scripture.

Conclusion

Johnson's scheme for discussing differences on the homosexuality issue does not advance the discussion. It retards the discussion. He misrepresents and caricatures the position of those opposed to homosexual practice. Most importantly, he obscures the crucial divide between accepting Scripture's strong, pervasive, and absolute stance against homosexual practice and rejecting that unequivocal witness. That is, after all, the only divide that counts.

Postscript (Aug. 9, 2004): "A Still More Excellent Way"

On Aug. 5, the day after his presentation, Stacy Johnson led a 90-minute feedback session in which he asked the members of the Task Force to identify what proponents of each of the six views might see as strengths of their position. Some of the comments of Task Force members have been reported by John Adams (["Task force members comment on views about homosexuality,"](#) Aug. 6, *The Layman Online*), Jim Berkley (Aug. 6 blog, ["Task Force members talk!"](#)), and Leslie Scanlon (["Members React to Views of Homosexuality Found in the PC \(USA\),"](#) Aug. 7, *The Presbyterian Outlook*)—with Adams and Berkley giving more coverage than Scanlon.

Johnson's approach was a clever way to try to get members of the Task Force to say something nice about positions that are deeply opposed to Scripture. It gave respectability to positions that should not have respectability in the church and desensitized some to the harm caused by promoting such positions. While it is important to understand a contrary position correctly—something that I think that Stacy Johnson failed to do in delineating a "prohibitionist" position—there is a tendency in this kind of exercise to speak more favorably of an anti-scriptural position than the position warrants.

(Of course, Johnson knows how to play the game in such a way that he can still work in his own criticisms, as he is reported doing twice when commenting on the "strengths" of the "Definitive Guidance" position. By contrast his reported comments on the positions supportive of committed homosexual unions are generally positive.)

For example, the "pastoral" position is, not surprisingly, characterized as "more pastoral" by one Task Force member (someone who is suppose to lean toward a "traditional," i.e., scriptural, view). But the assertion "more pastoral" is predicated entirely on the faulty premise that engaging in same-sex intercourse does not endanger a person's inheritance in the kingdom of God. If this premise is false, and Scripture declares categorically that it is, then it is obviously more "pastoral" to counsel a believer lovingly against engaging in homosexual practice than to counsel the believer to try to make the best of a homosexual union by making it long-term and monogamous.

Can anyone imagine Paul enumerating the "strengths" of the Corinthians' tolerant position toward the incestuous man in 1 Corinthians 5 as being more "pastoral" or "justice" oriented, even from their perspective? Or Paul saying to the incestuous man that

Can anyone imagine Paul enumerating the “strengths” of the Corinthians’ tolerant position toward the incestuous man in 1 Corinthians 5 as being more “pastoral” or “justice” oriented?

The “still more excellent way” is not the approach espoused by Johnson but rather the approach espoused by Eph 5:3-12.

he should at least keep the relationship with his stepmother long-term and monogamous? Or Paul commending the incestuous man for attempting to “order his life as a part of God’s covenant community” (Johnson’s “consecrationist” position)?

With good reason Ephesians 5:3-12 adopts a different approach than the one taken by Stacy Johnson and many members of the Task Force:

Sexual immorality (porneia) and sexual impurity (akatharsia) of any kind . . . must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. . . . Know this indeed, that every sexually immoral person (pornos) or sexually impure person (akathartos) . . . has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God is coming on the children of disobedience. . . . And do not be partnering with the unfruitful works of darkness but rather even be exposing/refuting them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that are done in secret by them.

This view of things understands the harm done when believers speak positively of behaviors that risk the participant’s exclusion from God’s eternal kingdom. It advises that believers not speak approvingly of such behavior, referring to such talk as “shameful” and ultimately deceitful, since it misleads members of the household of faith into a false sense of security regarding God’s wrath.

Johnson was reported as saying at a Task Force presentation for the General Assembly at the end of June 2004: “Is the present climate of hostility something you enjoy? Or are you willing to see if there is a still more excellent way?” (go [here](#) and [here](#)).

Try, again, to imagine Paul saying the following to the Corinthian believers over the case of incest in 1 Corinthians 5: “Some of you at Corinth have one policy on man-(step)mother incest, others have another policy. Let’s not have this hostility but see, instead, if we can find a ‘still more excellent way’ toward unity and purity that ends our bickering.” Remember: This is the same Paul who makes a connection between incest and same-sex intercourse later in 6:9.

The “still more excellent way” of which Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians 12:31, referring to love, does not cancel out his earlier remarks in chs. 5-6. For love “does not rejoice in unrighteousness but rejoices in connection with the truth” (13:6). The “still more excellent way” is not the approach espoused by Johnson but rather the approach espoused by Ephesians 5:3-12, cited above.

How can we end the hostilities in the PCUSA? Many will advocate something like a “local option” solution, which is simply a euphemism for “incremental coercion” of those who support the biblical position.

But those who understand the issues rightly will recognize that “the still more excellent way” always comes by “speaking the truth in love” so that the church is not “tossed to and fro . . . by every wind of teaching” (Ephesians 4:14-16). It can never come by blessing a form of behavior that brings ruin on its participants and guts one of the most

essential prerequisites to God-ordained sexual behavior, all in the name of peace and unity.

*Dr. Robert A. J. Gagnon is Associate Professor of New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, author of *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Abingdon, 2001), and co-author, with Dan Via, of *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Fortress, 2003). Other relevant materials by Dr. Gagnon can be viewed at www.robagnon.net.*

© 2004 Robert A. J. Gagnon