

It's Silly to Compare Homosexual Practice to Gluttony

A Response to Craig Gross's CNN Belief Blog Op-Ed

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On July 5, 2012 CNN posted an op-ed piece on its Belief Blog site one of the silliest arguments that I have read in a long time, entitled “[My Take: Will there be gays in heaven? Will there be fat people?](#)” The piece was by Craig Gross, who is described as “the pastor and founder of XXXchurch.com and ... the author of seven books.” Apparently Rev. Gross ministers to the porn industry. Given Jesus’ outreach to sexual sinners, this is an honorable ministry, so long as he calls people graciously and lovingly to repentance and gently warns of the eternal consequences of unrepentant sexual immorality. Even in the story of the woman caught in adultery, Jesus tells the woman “Go, and from now on no longer be sinning” (John 8:11), a statement that, based on a parallel command in John 5:14, implies “lest something worse happen to you,” namely, forfeiture of eternal life.

My concern is with Gross’s comparison of homosexual practice with overeating or (as he puts it) being “fat.” He is not the first evangelical Christian to attempt the analogy. Alan Chambers, president of Exodus International (an umbrella organization for ministries that help people to leave a homosexual life) is fond of comparing homosexual practice to gluttony (most recently as reported in a [July 6, 2012](#) New York Times article).

Gross's misuse of 1 Corinthians 6:13 to say the opposite

Gross uses Paul’s remark in 1 Corinthians 6:13 as his main proof text. As it happens, Paul is making the exact opposite point in that text.

“Foods are for the stomach and the stomach is for foods, and God will put out of work both this (stomach) and these (foods).” But the body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.¹

The vast majority of English Bible versions and commentators on 1 Corinthians rightly treat the first half of the verse, or at least the first quarter (“Food for the stomach and the stomach for foods”), as a slogan concocted either by the Corinthian pneumatics (spiritual people) or by Paul to represent or satirize the Corinthian position.²

¹ All translations of New Testament texts from the original Greek are my own.

² Most commentators of 1 Corinthians put quotation marks around the first half of the verse (so, for example, Joseph Fitzmyer, Anthony Thiselton, Raymond, Collins, Richard Hays, Ben Witherington, Gordon Fee, Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, Hans Conzelmann, C. K. Barrett; also NET, TNIV), while most English Bible versions do so around only

Paul fears that some believers at Corinth might be drawing a parallel between the spiritual irrelevance of food and an alleged spiritual irrelevance of sexual immorality. Paul is *disagreeing* with the view that sexual immorality is analogous to food. The body, Paul says, can eat all kinds of food and it matters not for purposes of spiritual life. But sexual immorality (Gk. *porneia*) is a different story entirely. While the belly is intended to consume food, the body is *not* intended for sexual immorality (6:13b). Although the belly will not be resurrected, the body will be (6:14), albeit transformed into a material “spiritual body” (15:44). Moreover, what one does sexually affects the body holistically and morally, unlike the eating of food. This is Paul’s point in 6:18:

Every (other) sin, whatever a person does, is outside of the body; but the one who commits sexual immorality sins against [Gk. *eis*, literally, ‘into’] his own body.³

Other actions may injure the body but not to the extent of becoming “one body” or “one flesh” with another in an immoral sexual act (6:16). In a perverse way, the believer who is joined in an illicit sexual union to another involves the indwelling Christ with whom the believer is joined in “one spirit” (6:15, 17). Because the act of sexual intercourse is designed by God to join two into one, even withdrawal from the immoral relationship can have long-term negative effects on the conscience, such as a feeling of loss and alienation from the former partner and a deep sense of guilt. In commenting on this verse, John Calvin notes: “Other sins do not leave the same filthy stain on our bodies as immoral sexual intercourse does.”⁴

Gross’s misguided claim of inconsistency

When Gross erroneously concludes from 1 Cor 6:13 that gluttony and homosexual practice are comparable sins, he means not that gluttony is as bad as homosexual practice but rather that homosexual practice is no worse than gluttony. “Ultimately,” Gross writes, “I believe homosexuality gets blown way out of proportion in our churches.” Would Gross say the same about a man sleeping with his mother? Paul wouldn’t say that about either incest or homosex.

Ultimately, Gross’s position is closer to that of the Corinthians than to that of Paul. I am afraid that his op-ed piece reflects some of that “puffed up” or “inflated with pride” approach of the Corinthian pneumatics (1 Cor 5:2), who at best thought this particular case of incest to be a

the first quarter (RSV, NRSV, ESV, NAB, NIV, REB, HCSB, CJB, CEV, NLT). David Garland does not view any part of 6:13 as a Corinthian slogan but he does agree that Paul is showing that, while the food that a believer eats is morally irrelevant, sexual immorality is “a grave sin.”

³ The qualifying remark that Paul makes in the second half of the verse makes clear that Paul means something like “every other sin, excepting immoral sexual intercourse,” granting also a bit of hyperbole on Paul’s part (there is no word for “other” in the Greek text; it must be assumed by the context; so RSV, ESV, NASB, NAB, NIV, REB, NJB, CJB, NLT, Anthony Thiselton, David Garland). Or, less likely, the statement “every sin ... outside the body” could be another instance of a Corinthian slogan where the meaning is: “The body has nothing to do with sin” (so NET, HCSB, Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, Charles Talbert, Richard Hays, Joseph Fitzmyer). Either way, Paul is qualifying a Corinthian view by asserting that sexual immorality is indeed a sin “against” or “into” (Gk. *eis*) the body.

⁴ *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (Calvin’s NT Commentaries 9; trans. J. W. Fraser; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 131-32. I replaced the translation “fornication” with “immoral sexual intercourse” as a more accurate rendition.

minor offense and at worse no offense at all. The “spiritual people” among the Corinthians prided themselves for not getting so ‘shook up’ (to use our idiom) about such an extreme sexual matter in their midst. Well, Paul got all ‘shook up.’ He told the Corinthians that they should be mourning instead, indicating to them that the man’s eternal life was at stake (5:2, 5; 6:9-10). Most Christians today happen to think that Paul, and not the Corinthian “strong,” acted rightly.

Gross goes on to bemoan the following alleged inconsistency:

If you indulge your body with sex via pornography, affairs, strippers or hookers, and your secrets are exposed, you will not be preaching on Sunday. Sexual sin is not tolerated in our churches. If clergy are caught in these things, they’re disqualified. What if you indulge your body with food? Well, then you can pastor some of the largest churches on the planet and have the most successful broadcasts on the religious channels and sell a lot of books.

One can only conclude that Gross holds either of the following untenable conclusions:

1. Pastors engaged in unrepentant sexual immorality of any and every sort should be able to continue in the pastorate without repenting of their immoral activities.
2. Fat pastors should be removed from the pulpit.

Presumably, based on the train of Gross’s argument, he is in favor of the former. So, to be consistent, Gross must think that if a pastor were having sex with his mother, multiple partners concurrently, someone in addition to a spouse, a prostitute, or even a child, and either didn’t repent or kept falling back into such activity, that pastor should not only remain in office but also be blessed with a prosperous pastorate. All of this follows if, as Gross claims, no sexual sin is worse than overeating.

Gross’s erroneous claim that every sin is the same and should be handled the same way

Gross adds:

Same biblical passage, same sin. Why is one [gluttony] accepted and one [sexual immorality] rejected? ... Why do they believe that the gay guy goes to hell but the fat preacher who builds some of the largest churches in the world makes it to heaven? I have no problem bringing my fat friends to church; they fit right in. Our Los Angeles church has doughnuts to eat during worship service, which makes the hymns we sing sound so much better.

Gross’s questions are easy to answer: The reason is that serial-unrepentant sexual immorality of an egregious sort is much more of an indication of a life controlled by sin than is the act of overeating. Even Gross must know this. Take his example at the end of his paragraph. His church leaves out “doughnuts to eat during worship service” (we’ll leave aside the oddity of eating *during* a worship service). Eating doughnuts can bring on weight gain while providing no nutrition (but they are delicious; in fact, I’m having a hankering for some right now). Does Gross really regard this accommodation by his church as comparable to setting aside rooms in the

church where people can go to commit fornication, sex with prostitutes, adultery, three-way sex, incest, homosexual practice, pedophilia, and bestiality? If he did, he would be perverse. And, for the record, eating several doughnuts in a single venue is not a sin.

Gross adds:

Homosexual activity and overeating are both sins – just like speeding, gossip, lying and cheating. I think I did all of those just today. All are forgivable in Christ and, with the leading of the Holy Spirit, can be changed. Just remember that change does not happen overnight.

Did you catch Gross's sleight of hand? He compared homosexual practice with a series of what most regard as relatively minor offenses, at least potentially (though if Gross did all of them in one day he should probably 'up his game' a bit and take these matters a tad more seriously). Imagine instead if he had said the following:

Homosexual practice and overeating are both sins—just like committing adultery (not just of the heart), being in a consensual sexual relationship with one's mother, raping women and children, cutting open people's bodies while they are still alive and dumping them in the river, and robbing banks and kidnapping at gunpoint. I think I did all of those today. All are forgivable in Christ and, with the leading of the Holy Spirit, can be changed. Just remember that change does not happen overnight.

Most people would react to such a comparison with a deep sense of moral outrage, not least of all people like Gross who contend that all sin is equal. How dare you compare homosexual practice to truly heinous offenses, Dr. Gagnon! And then they would have made my point. No one really believes that all sin is equally heinous. And if a member of Gross's church were involved in any of these serious offenses, I would wager (if I were a betting man!) that not even Gross would retain the caveat, "Just remember that change does not happen overnight." No, that incest, rape, murder, etc., better stop today.

Any sin can get one excluded from God's kingdom if one thinks that one can earn salvation through personal merit or make do without Jesus' amends-making death and life-giving resurrection. Yet that doesn't mean that all sin is equally offensive to God in all respects. Put differently, Christ's universal coverage of sin through his death on the cross does not mean that all sins are equal in all respects but only that all sins are equal in one respect: They are all covered. By way of analogy, one may have health coverage for all injuries great and small and pay the same amount for the coverage regardless of the injury; but that doesn't mean that no one injury is more severe than any other injury.

The Bible is clear that some sins are worse than others. Jesus clearly spoke about greater and lesser commandments (Matt 5:19; Mark 12:28-31), weightier matters of the law (Matt 23:23), some people loving more because they were forgiven more (Luke 7:36-50), and a blasphemy against the Spirit that could not be forgiven (Mark 3:28-30). This is in keeping with different

grades of punishment for different sins in the Old Testament (including different tiers of sexual offenses in Lev 20) as well as references to the “great sin” of the Golden Calf episode (Exod 32:30) and “greater abominations” (Ezekiel 8:6, 13, 15). Paul obviously treats a case of incest at Corinth as a particularly great offense (1 Cor 5) and speaks of different degrees of wrong actions meriting different penalties (1 Cor 3:10-17).

The Bible gives many indications that homosexual practice is regarded as a particularly severe sexual offense: (1) the fact that Jesus viewed a male-female prerequisite for sexual relations in Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 as foundational for extrapolating other principles of sexual ethics like the limitation of the number of persons in a sexual union to two (Mark 10:6-9 // Matt 19:4-6); (2) the special attention (second only to idolatry in position and amount of attention [1:24-27]) and highly pejorative description that Paul gives to homosexual practice in the listing of Gentile vices in Romans 1:18-32 (a form of “sexual impurity” that is “degrading” or “dishonorable,” “contrary to nature,” “shameful behavior” that is fit “payback” for straying from God); (3) the fact that, apart from a prohibition of bestiality, the male-female requirement for sexual relations is the only sexual requirement held absolutely for the people of God from creation to Christ (something that can’t be said for monogamy or even anti-incest prohibitions); (4) the strong rejection of homosexual practice put forward in Lev 18:22 (which makes a special point of tagging man-male intercourse as an “abomination” among “abominations”) and Lev 20:13 (which lists homosexual practice among a first tier of sexual offenses: adultery, the worst forms of incest, and bestiality); (5) the fact that a real or attempted act of man-male intercourse figures prominently in a triad of stories about extreme depravity—Ham’s offense against his father Noah (Gen 9:20-27), the attempted sexual assault of male visitors by the men of Sodom (Gen 19:4-11), and the attempted sexual assault of the Levite passing through Gibeah (Judg 19:22-25; compare Ezek 16:50; Jude 7; 2 Pet 2:6-10); (6) confirmation for the particular severity of the offense of homosexual practice in ancient Israel from Jewish texts of the Second Temple period and beyond; and (7) the fact that leading interpreters of Scripture in the Church for over two millennia (including the Church Fathers and the Reformers) understood the Bible to treat homosexual practice as an extremely grave offense.⁵ Those who claim that homosexual practice is no worse than any other sexual sin need to wrestle with each of these arguments.

How should the church respond to self-affirming, homosexually active “gay Christians”

I agree with Gross that “God loves gays” and that persons who engage in homosexual practice need to have exposure to the gospel in order to be changed. That means opening the doors of the church to them. However, like anyone else engaged in severe and unrepentant immorality, they should not be allowed to become members until they repent of the behavior. Otherwise, if one were to follow Paul’s advice in 1 Cor 5:4-5, the unrepentant new member would then have to be immediately put on church discipline (5:11). In addition, if a homosexual couple comes to

⁵ For further discussion of these points go to pp. 15-25 of my online article “Time for a Change of Leadership at Exodus?” at <http://www.robagnon.net/articles/homosexAlanChambersAtlanticInterview.pdf>.

church, they must refrain from expressing romantic affections to one another (for example, no kissing one another on the lips in the church). No one should be allowed to parade their immorality in the church. Paul's remarks in 1 Thess 4:3-8 suggest that he would have concurred with the provision of the Apostolic Decree that Gentile membership in the church be conditional on "abstaining from sexual immorality" (compare Acts 15:19-20, 28-31).⁶

Is gluttony even a sin? Another look at Scripture

As we saw above, Paul's remarks about food and sexual immorality in 1 Cor 6:12-20 suggest that the eating of food is not—in and of itself—a matter of moral significance. This is not the only text in Scripture that makes that point.

Later in 1 Corinthians Paul states:

Now food will not affect our standing before God. Neither if we do not eat are we lacking nor if we eat are we abounding. (8:8)⁷

Paul would certainly not have said, "Sexual immorality will not affect our standing before God." On the contrary, in 1 Cor 5-6 Paul insists that the community disassociate with sexually immoral, self-acknowledged "brothers" in the faith who do not repent; and Paul puts "sexually immoral people" first on an offender list warning about not inheriting God's kingdom. Undoubtedly, there were some "fat Christians" at Corinth—as in virtually every church that ever existed—but Paul says not a word about them. Still later in the letter Paul recounted to the Corinthian believers the Old Testament story of the destruction of the wilderness generation as God's judgment for their involvement in idolatry and sexual immorality. "These things," Paul said, "were written for our admonition.... So let the one who thinks that he stands watch out lest he falls" (10:11-12). It is no accident that the two "flee" statements in the letter are "Flee sexual immorality" (6:18) and "Flee from idolatry" (10:14), not "Flee gluttony."

We see the same picture in Paul's letter to the Romans. In Romans 14 Paul tells the Roman believers not to judge one another over matters of food (here specifically over whether to eat meat or abstain from it altogether) since food is a matter of indifference. "The kingdom of God does not consist of food and drink but righteousness ..." (14:17). Paul did not regard sexual immorality as a matter of indifference. In the previous chapter he warns the Roman believers to put off "the works of darkness," including "sexual misbehaviors [Gk. *koitai*] and licentious acts" (13:12-13). Earlier still in the letter he listed homosexual practice (1:24-27) as a serious example of "sexual impurity" (Gk. *akatharsia*), an offense against nature that paralleled idolatry as suppressions of the truth about God and ourselves self-evident through observation of the

⁶ See further my article: "[Church Policy as regards Homosexual Practice: Membership and Ordained Ministry.](#)"

⁷ Some scholars put quotes from "food" to "God" to indicate a Corinthian slogan. But since the next clause clearly reflects Paul's own view and is not introduced by a contrasting "But," this clause too is likely Paul's view.

material structures of creation made by God (1:18-23). In 6:19 he reminded Roman believers not to be slaves of “sexual impurity” any longer lest they reap the wages of sin, death (6:21, 23).

What about Jesus? Did he liken food to sexual immorality? No, in fact, he did the opposite when he stated that it was not so much the unclean food that people ingest that defiles them as gratifying the immoral desires within to do what God expressly prohibits. Three of the vices that Jesus is said to have listed were sexual in nature: “sexual immoralities (*porneiai*) ... adulteries (*moicheiai*) ... licentiousness (*aselgeia*)” (Mark 7:21-23). Food doesn’t defile; committing sexual immorality does. The only time the matter of gluttony comes up in the Gospels is when Jesus himself is accused of it, apparently for eating too much at his “messianic meals” with “sinners and tax collectors” (Matthew 11:19 // Luke 7:34).

Yet isn’t gluttony among “the seven deadly (or cardinal) sins”? Yes, but the list derives from Pope Gregory I in 590, with antecedents tracing back to the fourth-century monk Evagrius Ponticus.⁸ There is no vice list in the New Testament that includes gluttony. Moreover, even in Catholic tradition the seven cardinal sins are not on the list because they are the worse sins but because they are regarded as the originators of other sins. Depending on their particular manifestation, cardinal sins can be either venial (i.e., relatively minor) or mortal (jeopardizing salvation). It is interesting that Gross cites gluttony as comparable to homosexual practice when the Catholic tradition from which the sin of gluttony derives can view the former as venial and the latter as mortal. The truly dangerous sin that could result from gluttony is not weight gain but drifting from devotion to God, sexual immorality, or failing to aid the poor and needy.

The references to gluttony in Scripture bear out the view that the main concern with gluttony has to do with something other than the gluttony per se: namely, the immoral or ungodly state of which gluttony may be a symptom or the sins to which gluttony may lead.

In Deut 21:20 it is paired with drunkenness as a mark of a “stubborn and rebellious son” whose persistent disobedience to his parents and refusal to comply with parental discipline manifests itself in dissolute living that in turn publicly dishonors his parents. Similarly, Proverbs 28:7 contrasts “companions of gluttons shame their parents” with “those who keep the law are wise children.” Disconnected from a spirit of rebellion toward authority or law and from a state of intoxication, overeating would probably not merit mention. Proverbs 23:20-21 warns that a glutton and drunkard “will come to poverty” become of the resulting drowsiness that overtakes him. “A fool when he is stuffed with food” appears in Prov 30:22 as an image of someone who (pardon the pun) bites off more than he can chew.

The adage “Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die” (Isa 22:13; alluded to in parables in Luke 12:19, 45 and quoted in 1 Cor 15:32) characterizes a life lived solely for self-gratification and without regard for God, morality, or a day of judgment. Ezekiel 16:49-50 refers to Sodom’s “oversatiation of food” but Sodom’s sin is not that her inhabitants gained weight but rather that

⁸ Proverbs 6:16-19 lists seven things that the Lord detests. Gluttony is not one of them.

an excess of food led to complacency and a haughty disregard of the poor and needy, climaxing in the “abomination” of attempting to emasculate vulnerable male visitors through sexual penetration. Failure to help the poor and emasculating visitors through homosexual rape are the severe offenses here, not the overeating per se.⁹ According to Daniel 1, the diet of vegetables and water embraced by Daniel, Shadrach, and Abednego when they were being trained as young men in the court of King Nebuchadnezzar left them in better shape and with greater wisdom than the other young trainees who were fed “the royal rations of food and wine.”

The Old Testament Apocrypha, a collection of Jewish works from ca. 200 B.C. to ca. 130 A.D., speaks about gluttony. The Jewish sage Yeshua ben Sira (ca. 200 B.C.) advised moderation in eating so that one could avoid a sleepless night, nausea, and colic (Sirach 31:20). The author of Fourth Maccabees (mid-1st to early 2nd cent. A.D.) took a more philosophical approach. In 1:3 gluttony is paired with “(sexual?) desire” (*epithumia*) as two examples of “emotions that hinder self-control” and thwart “reason”; similarly, in 2:7 where “glutton” is paired with “drunkard.”

In 1 Cor 11:17-34 (the abuse of the Lord’s Supper) the issue is not that some at Corinth are gaining weight from overeating. The issue is that wealthier members of the Corinthian church are shaming poorer members by consuming most of the food at the community meal before the poor believers can arrive. The result is that “while one is hungry, another is drunk.” So Paul commands them to “eat at home” if they lack the self-control to hold their appetite in check long enough to “wait for” the “have-nots” to arrive. In that way there can be an equitable distribution of food. The reference in Phil 3:19 to those “whose god is their stomach” is likely being applied ironically not to gluttons but to the Judaizing missionaries in 3:2-6 who emphasize adherence to food restrictions in the law of Moses (compare the next line, “[whose] glory is in their shame,” probably an allusion to a circumcision requirement).

As can be seen from the passages above, being overweight is not the issue. Overeating becomes a *moral* problem only when it makes one insensate either to the demands of God or to the needs of people. Usually it doesn’t lead to such an outcome unless the overeating is accompanied by drunkenness, the latter being a more effective vehicle for losing self-control. Then it is the consequences of the overeating, and not the overeating itself, that puts a person at odds with God. Comparing gluttony to acts of immoral sexual intercourse, including a pattern of self-affirming homosexual practice, trivializes sin and makes of mockery of God’s holy demand.

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⁹ Note that for the narrator of the Sodom story the difference between a man who has homosexual practice forced on him and a man who willingly receives it is that the former is unwillingly emasculated and not culpable while the latter willingly has himself emasculated and is culpable.