

The Bible's Surprisingly Consistent Message on a Male-Female Requirement for Marriage

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This article is a merging of my op-ed piece for the [CNN Belief Blog](#) (“My Take: The Bible really does condemn homosexuality” [Religion Editor’s title, not mine], Mar. 3, 2011) with my [Addendum](#) (“More on Knust’s Blunders...” also Mar. 3), with some minor editing.

In her Feb. 9, 2011 CNN Belief Blog post [“The Bible’s surprisingly mixed messages on sexuality.”](#) Jennifer Wright Knust claims that Christians can’t appeal to the Bible to justify opposition to homosexual practice because the Bible provides no clear witness on the subject and is too flawed to serve as a moral guide.

As a scholar who has written books and articles on the Bible and homosexual practice, I can say that the reality is the opposite of her claim. It’s shocking that in her editorial and even her book, [“Unprotected Texts,”](#) Knust ignores a mountain of evidence against her positions.

It raises a serious question: Does the Religious Left (i.e. persons generally dismissive of Scripture) read significant works that disagree with pro-gay interpretations of Scripture and choose to ignore them? I’m sure Prof. Knust is a nice person in other contexts but it is inexcusable to be so uninformed (and even condescendingly abrasive) about a subject on which she claims to be an expert.

Knust’s misuse of the gender-neutral human in Genesis

Knust’s lead argument is that sexual differentiation in Genesis, Jesus and Paul is nothing more than an “afterthought” because “God’s original intention for humanity was androgyny.”

It’s true that Genesis 2 presents the first human (Hebrew *adam*, from *adamah*, ground: “earthling”) as originally sexually undifferentiated. (I have made this point myself, long before Knust.) But what Knust misses is that once something is “taken from” the human to form a woman, the human, now differentiated as a man, finds his sexual other half in that missing element, a woman.

That's why Genesis 2:18-24 speaks of the woman as a "counterpart" or "complement," using a Hebrew expression *neged*, which means both "corresponding to" and "opposite." She is similar as regards humanity but different in terms of gender. If sexual relations are to be had, they are to be had with a sexual counterpart or complement.

Knust cites the apostle Paul's remark about "no 'male and female'" in Galatians 3:28. Yet Paul applies this dictum to establishing the equal worth of men and women before God, not to eliminating a male-female prerequisite for sex. Applied to sexual relations, the phrase means "no sex," not "acceptance of homosexual practice."

All the earliest interpreters agreed that "no 'male and female,'" applied to sexual relations, meant "no sex." That included Paul and the ascetic believers at Corinth in the mid-first century; and the church fathers and Gnostics of the second to fourth centuries. Where they disagreed is over whether to postpone mandatory celibacy until the resurrection (the orthodox view) or to begin insisting on it now (the heretical view).

Jesus' belief in a male-female dynamic as essential for sexual relations

According to Jesus, "when (people) rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like the angels" (Mark 12:25). Sexual relations and differentiation had only penultimate significance. The unmediated access to God that resurrection bodies bring would make sex look dull by comparison.

At the same time Jesus regarded the male-female paradigm as essential if sexual relations were to be had in this present age. In rejecting a revolving door of divorce-and-remarriage and, implicitly, polygamy Jesus cited Genesis: "From the beginning of creation, 'male and female he made them.' 'For this reason a man ... will be joined to his woman and the two shall become one flesh'" (Mark 10:2-12; Matthew 19:3-12).

Jesus' point was that God's limiting of persons in a sexual union to two is evident in his creation of two (and only two) primary sexes: male and female, man and woman. The union of male and female completes the sexual spectrum, rendering a third partner both unnecessary and undesirable. The sectarian Jewish group known as the Essenes similarly rejected polygamy on the grounds that God made us "male and female," two sexual complements designed for a union consisting only of two (*Damascus Covenant* 4.20-5.1).

Knust insinuates that Jesus wouldn't have opposed homosexual relationships. Yet Jesus' interpretation of Genesis demonstrates that he regarded a male-female prerequisite for marriage as the foundation on which other sexual standards could be predicated, including monogamy. Obviously the foundation is more important than anything predicated on it.

Jesus developed a principle of interpretation that Knust ignores: God's "from the beginning" creation of "male and female" trumps some sexual behaviors permitted in the Old Testament. So there's nothing unorthodox about recognizing change in Scripture's sexual ethics. But note the direction of the change: toward less sexual license and greater conformity to the logic of the male-female requirement in Genesis. Knust is traveling in the opposite direction.

It is not accurate to say, as Knust does, that Jesus “discouraged” marriage. He merely created the option for those like himself who “made themselves eunuchs because of the kingdom of heaven” on *pragmatic* missionary grounds (Matthew 19:9-12). Foregoing marriage and thus all sexual relations was an option for those who wanted to proclaim the message about God’s kingdom with greater freedom of movement and risk than would otherwise be the case with a spouse and children.

A sidebar on the “intersexed”

In response to my rebuttal Knust might argue that the existence of hermaphroditic or “intersexed” persons in our society undermines Jesus’ argument that the creation of two primary sexes, “male and female,” is an indicator that God limits sexual unions to two persons. It doesn’t.

First, the phenomenon of the intersexed involves an amalgam of the two primary sexes, not distinct features of a third sex. Second, extreme sexual ambiguity is very rare, encompassing only a tiny fraction of one percent of the general population. Usually an allegedly intersexed person has a genital abnormality that does not significantly straddle the sexes; for example, females with a large clitoris or small vagina, or males with a small penis or one that does not allow a direct urinary stream. The extreme exception merely underscores the prevailing rule of foundational twoness.

Third, the category of the “intersexed” no more justifies an elimination of a two-sexes prerequisite than does the equally rare phenomenon of conjoined (‘Siamese’) twins justify the elimination of a monogamy principle; or than does some fuzziness around the edges of defining “close blood relations” and “children” justify the elimination of standards against incest and pedophilia. Fourth, homosexual persons who seek to discard a binary model for sexual relations do not claim, for the most part, to be other than male or female. Thus they, at least, remain logically and naturally bound to a binary model for mate selection.

Knust’s slavery analogy and avoidance of closer analogies

Knust argues that an appeal to the Bible for opposing homosexual practice is as morally unjustifiable as pre-Civil War appeals to the Bible for supporting slavery. The analogy is a bad one.

The best analogy will be the comparison that shares the most points of substantive correspondence with the item being compared. How much does the Bible’s treatment of slavery resemble its treatment of homosexual practice? Very little.

Scripture shows no vested interest in preserving the institution of slavery but it does show a strong vested interest from Genesis to Revelation in preserving a male-female prerequisite. Unlike its treatment of the institution of slavery, Scripture treats a male-female prerequisite for sex as a pre-Fall structure.

The Bible accommodates to social systems where sometimes the only alternative to starvation is enslavement. But it clearly shows a critical edge by specifying mandatory release dates and the right of kinship buyback; requiring that Israelites not be treated as slaves; and reminding Israelites that God had redeemed them from slavery in Egypt.

Paul urged enslaved believers to use an opportunity for freedom to maximize service to God (1 Corinthians 7:21) and encouraged a Christian master (Philemon) to free his slave (Onesimus). Knust's insinuation that Paul wouldn't have cared if masters sexually abused their slaves is absurd, inasmuch as Paul rejected *all* sexual relations outside of marriage, to say nothing of coerced relations.

Relative to the slave economies of the ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman Mediterranean basin the countercultural dynamic of ancient Israel and the early church appears quite liberating. The countercultural dynamic of Scripture with respect to homosexual practice moves decisively in the direction of equating liberation with freedom from enslavement to homoerotic impulses. No culture in the ancient Near East or in the Greco-Roman world was more strongly opposed to homosexual practice than ancient Israel, early Judaism, and early Christianity.

How can changing up on the Bible's male-female prerequisite for sex be analogous to the church's revision of the slavery issue if the Bible encourages critique of slavery but discourages critique of a male-female paradigm for sex?

Much closer analogies to the Bible's rejection of homosexual practice are the Bible's rejection of incest and the New Testament's rejection of polyamory (polygamy). Homosexual practice, incest, and polyamory are all (1) forms of sexual behavior (2) able to be conducted as adult-committed relationships but (3) strongly proscribed because (4) they violate creation structures or natural law. Like same-sex intercourse, incest is sex between persons too much structurally alike, here as regards kinship rather than gender. Polyamory is a violation of the foundational "twoness" of the sexes.

The fact that Knust chooses a distant analogue (slavery) over more proximate analogues (incest, polyamory) shows that her analogical reasoning is driven more by ideological biases than by fair use of analogies.

David and Jonathan

Knust makes a mistake common to persons unfamiliar with ancient Near Eastern conventions when she discusses David's relationship to Jonathan. She confuses non-erotic, covenant-kinship language with erotic love language.

All of the expressions that she takes as erotic in the David and Jonathan narrative have stronger Old Testament and ancient Near Eastern parallels with non-sexual relationships between close kin of the same sex. The narrator of the Succession Narrative (1 Samuel 16:14 to 2 Sam 5:10) legitimizes David's succession of King Saul by showing that David was accepted by Jonathan into his father's household as *an older brother*, not as Jonathan's lover (see my book *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 146-54). For example:

- Compare “the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul” (1 Sam 18:1; cf. 20:17) with “[Jacob’s] soul is bound up with [his son Benjamin’s] soul” (Gen 44:31) and “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18); compare it too with the language of covenant treaties, such as “You must love [him] as yourselves” (addressed to vassals of Assyrian king Ashurbanipal) and the reference in 1 Kings 5:1 to King Hiram of Tyre as David’s “lover.”
- Compare Jonathan “delighted very much” in David (1 Sam 19:1) with (1) “The king [Saul] is delighted with you [David], and all his servants love you; now then, become the king’s son-in-law” (1 Sam 18:22); with (2) “Whoever delights in Joab, and whoever is for David, [let him follow] after Joab” (2 Sam 20:11); and with (3) the reference to God “delighting in” David (2 Sam 15:26; 22:20).

When David had to flee from Saul, David and Jonathan had a farewell meeting, in which David “bowed three times [to Jonathan], and they kissed each other, and wept with each other” (1 Samuel 20:41-42). Is this an erotic scene? Not likely. Only three out of twenty-seven occurrences of the Hebrew verb “to kiss” have an erotic dimension. Most refer to kissing between a father and a son or between brothers.

At one point in the narrative Saul lashes out at his son Jonathan: “You son of a perverse, rebellious woman! Do I not know that you have chosen the son of Jesse [David] to your own shame and to the shame of your mother’s nakedness?” (1 Samuel 20:30-34). Does this remark imply that David and Jonathan were in an erotic relationship? No, Saul here simply charges Jonathan with bringing shame on the mother who bore him by acquiescing to David’s claim on Saul’s throne (cf. 2 Samuel 19:5-6).

When David learns of the deaths of Saul and Jonathan he states of Jonathan: “You were very dear to me; your love to me was more wonderful to me than the love of women” (2 Samuel 1:26). The Hebrew verb for “were very dear to” is used in a sexual sense in the OT only two out of twenty-six occurrences. A related form is used just three verses earlier when David refers to Saul as “lovely”—hardly in an erotic sense. Jonathan’s giving up his place as royal heir and risking his life for David surpassed anything David had known from a committed erotic relationship with a woman. David is not referring to erotic lovemaking on the part of Jonathan. As Proverbs 18:24 states in a non-erotic context, “There is a lover/friend who sticks closer than a brother.”

The narrators’ willingness to speak of David’s vigorous heterosexual life (e.g., his lust for Bathsheba) puts in stark relief their complete silence about any sexual activity between David and Jonathan. Homosexual interpretations misunderstand the political overtones of the Succession Narrative in 1 Sam 16:14 – 2 Sam 5:10. Jonathan’s handing over his robe, armor, sword, bow, and belt to David was an act of political investiture (1 Sam 18:4) that transferred the office of heir apparent.

The point of emphasizing the close relationship between David and Jonathan was to establish the fact that David was not a rogue usurper to Saul’s throne. He was rather adopted by Jonathan into his father’s “house” (family, dynasty). He has become Jonathan’s beloved older brother. Neither the narrators of the Succession Narrative nor the author(s) of the Deuteronomistic History show

concern about homosexual scandal. The reason for this is that in the context of ancient Near Eastern conventions, nothing in the narrative raised suspicions about a homosexual relationship.

The New Testament view of the Sodom story

Citing Jude 7 Knust alleges that “from the perspective of the New Testament” the Sodom story was about “the near rape of angels, not sex between men.” She misinterprets Jude 7. Understood in relation to leading first-century Jewish commentators (Philo and Josephus), Jude 7 should be read as a rhetorical figure known as hendiadys (literally, “one by two”): *By attempting to commit sexual immorality (men with males)*, the men of Sodom got more than they bargained for: nearly having sex with angels (compare the parallel in 2 Peter 2:7, 10). For further discussion of Jude 7 see pp. 9-13 of an online article [here](#).

There is no tradition in early Judaism that the men of Sodom were even aware that the visitors were angels (on the contrary, compare Hebrews 13:2: “... entertained angels unawares”). Furthermore, Paul’s indictment of homosexual practice in Romans 1:24-27 has multiple echoes in its context to the Sodom story, with no hint of an offense toward angels. The New Testament witness does indeed understand a key element in the judgment of Sodom to be attempted man-male intercourse.

The canard that only a few Bible texts reject homosexual practice

Knust dismisses the texts that reject homosexual practice as “few.” But limited explicit mention can be an indication of an irreducible minimum in sexual ethics that doesn’t need to be talked about extensively. Bestiality, an offense worse than homosexual practice, is mentioned even less in the Bible; and sex with one’s parent receives a comparable amount of attention to homosexual practice.

The Bible’s attention to homosexual practice is also not as limited as Knust pretends it to be. Knust leaves out some texts that have to do with homosexual practice. A case in point are the repeated references in Deuteronomy through 2 Kings to the “abomination” of the *qedeshim* (so-called “sacred ones”), cult figures who engage in consensual sex with other males, also echoed in the Book of Revelation (22:15; 21:8).

Even more importantly, every biblical narrative, law, proverb, exhortation, metaphor, and poetry in the Bible that has anything to do with sexual relationships presumes a male-female prerequisite – no exceptions. A more consistent ethical position in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation could hardly be found. This is not, as Knust claims, “a very particular and narrow interpretation of a few biblical passages.”

Knust’s claim that the Bible doesn’t reject homosexual practice absolutely

Knust claims that texts like Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 and Paul’s indictment of homosexual practice in Romans 1:24-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9, and 1 Timothy 1:10 are not absolute indictments of all homosexual acts for all time. She makes a number of sloppy allegations.

She states that the Levitical prohibitions applied only to Jews living in Palestine. However, the laws in Leviticus 17-18 apply also to non-Jews living in Israel. By the period of the New Testament they make up the “Noahide laws” that Jews thought were binding on Gentiles (see, for example, the Apostolic Decree in Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25). Both Jews living outside Palestine and “God-fearing” Gentiles attracted to the Jewish religion understood the prohibitions of incest, adultery, man-male intercourse, and bestiality in Leviticus 18 and 20 as morally binding on them.

Knust states that the prohibitions address only male homosexual practice but this is true only in a pedantic sense. Lesbianism isn’t mentioned in Leviticus because such behavior was largely unknown to men in the ancient Near East where society tightly regulated women’s sexual lives (it goes virtually unmentioned elsewhere). The first-century Greco-Roman world did know about lesbianism so it is not surprising that Paul explicitly rejected it in Romans 1:26, in keeping with the normative Jewish view of his time.

Knust states that “biblical patriarchs and kings violate nearly every one of these commandments.” It is true that some of the close kin marriages forbidden by Levitical incest law were practiced by the patriarchs. Nevertheless, this exemption is withdrawn for later generations by biblical narrators - and the worst forms of consensual incest are never accepted in the Bible. As with Jesus’ rejection of concurrent and serial polygamy, an earlier permission in sexual ethics is retracted.

Knust says: “Paul’s letters urge followers of Christ to remain celibate.” Like Jesus, Paul commends to converts a celibate life, but on pragmatic missionary grounds, not because sexual relations in the context of marriage are a bad thing. Like Jesus, he insists that marriage is no sin and a necessary institution for those who would otherwise drift into immorality. Not that this was the only value of marriage for Jesus and Paul. Neither person was known to be an ascetic. Jesus was accused of being “a glutton and drunkard” (Matthew 11:19) and Paul boasted that he knew how to be content both in lack and in abundance (Philippians 4:12).

Knust adds to her indictment of Paul that he “blames all Gentiles in general for their poor sexual standards.” I’m not sure what her point is here. Relative to the sexual morality of Jews, Gentile sexual morality on the whole was indeed in very bad shape. Read the graffiti found in the ruins of first-century Pompeii to get a sense of how bad things were. Homosexual practice was a case in point but so too the widespread sex with prostitutes, adultery, and fornication.

Paul’s indictment of homosexual practice in Romans 1:24-27 is clearly absolute. This is indicated by multiple layers of evidence, including: the strong echoes to Genesis 1:26-27 in Romans 1:23-27; the nature argument based on the material structures of creation (compare Romans 1:26-27 with 1:20); the indictment of lesbianism, not known for exploitative practices; the emphasis on mutuality (“inflamed with their desire on one another,” 1:27); Jewish and Christian texts from the second and third centuries rejecting same-sex marriage; and the broader Greco-Roman context where some moralists and physicians condemn as “against nature” even loving forms of homosexual practice by persons congenitally predisposed to same-sex attractions.

After her skewed assessment of what Scripture has to say about homosexual practice, Knust asks: “So why are we pretending that the Bible is dictating our sexual morals?” There is no pretending. The Bible’s witness against homosexual practice is consistent, strong, absolute, and countercultural, as any informed stance will recognize.

The contribution of philosophical reasoning and science

The notion that Scripture provides firm and clear moral guidelines against homosexual practice is all too obvious. Although Knust intimates that the only arguments that could be used against societal endorsement of homosexual unions are (invalid) scriptural ones, there is also a strong case from reason and science. These include good philosophical arguments, where it is reasonable to view as inherently self-dishonoring and self-degrading sexual arousal for what one already is and has as a sexual being – males for essential maleness, females for essential femaleness – and the attendant effort at reuniting with a sexual same as though one’s sexual other half.

In effect participants in homosexual practice treat their individual sex as only half intact, not in relation to the other sex but in relation to their own sex. If the logic of a heterosexual union is that the two halves of the sexual spectrum, male and female, unite to re-form a single sexual whole, the logic of a homosexual union is that two half-males unite to form a whole male, two half-females unite to form a whole female.

Finally, there are good scientific arguments against affirming homosexual practice, including the disproportionately high rate of measurable harms associated with it. These harms correspond to gender differences between males and females: for homosexually active males, higher numbers of sex partners lifetime and STIs; for homosexually active females, shorter-term unions and mental health issues (even relative to homosexually active males). These gender-type harms are not surprising since in a homosexual union the extremes of a given sex are not being moderated, nor the gaps filled, by a true sexual counterpart.

Condemnation, love, and grace

Knust caricatures the moderate view of the Bible on homosexual intercourse as “the Bible forces me to condemn them” (i.e. “gay people”). Augustine put it better in explaining his dictum “Love and do what you want”: “Let love be fervent to correct, to amend. . . . Love not in the person his error, but the person; for the person God made, the error the person himself made.”

Ironically, it is Knust who brings condemnation on persons who engage in homosexual practice in a serial-unrepentant manner. She acts as judge and jury, substituting God’s judgment for her own by acquitting persons of behavior that the Bible’s authors view as endangering their inheritance of eternal life.

Which set of parents is loving? Parents who are negligent in preventing their young children from touching a hot stove (or, worse, give assurance that no harm will come) or parents who strenuously warn their children to avoid such behavior? Much more is at stake in affirming homosexual behavior than any burn that comes from touching a hot stove.

Judgment and grace are the opposite of what Knust portrays them to be. In Romans 1:18-32, which includes Paul's searing indictment of homosexual practice (1:24-27), Paul depicts God's *wrath* as God stepping away from moral intervention, thereby allowing people to gratify themselves in impure, degrading, and indecent behavior. As a consequence, offenders heap up their sins and bring upon themselves cataclysmic judgment at the End. By contrast, Paul presents God's *grace* in Romans 6:14-23 as God through Christ actively stepping back into the lives of believers in order to destroy the rule of sin and put a stop to impure and shameful practices.

I welcome further dialogue or debate with Prof. Knust in print, radio, or television. It is disturbing to read what passes nowadays for expert "liberal" reflections on what the Bible says about homosexual practice.