

# The Authority of Scripture in the “Homosex” Debate

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I want to begin the discussion, first, by offering a “mainline view” of biblical authority, where due weight is given to Scripture’s core values; second, by discussing what the best analogies are to changing or retaining Scripture’s views on homosexual practice; third, by examining how Jesus himself understood the double love commandment; and, fourth, by examining Paul’s views on law and grace.

## I. A Mainline View: Giving Due Weight to the Core Values of Scripture

It may be helpful to begin by saying something about how I come to Scripture. Some on both the right and the left of the homosexuality debate may be discomfited by the fact that I do not approach this sensitive subject as a biblical fundamentalist or inerrantist. I make full use of historical-critical methodology, see development and significant tensions within the canon, take account of metaphors and the imaginative power of stories, and recognize the necessity of interpreting texts anew in our contemporary context. This last named step of “translating” the Bible into our own day, of developing principles of interpretation for moving from “what it meant” to “what it means,” is called hermeneutics. I consider the hermeneutical aspect of the homosexuality debate so important that I devote a third of my book to it. One cannot rule out change, particularly when it involves going further than the biblical witness without radically contravening it. Women’s ordination is a case in point.

When all is said and done, however, Scripture must retain its status as the single most important authority for faith and practice. The great Reformers recognized the primacy of Scripture for the church. If that primacy counts for anything, certainly it counts for core values. The question then arises: what constitutes a core value?

Certainly to be included among Scripture’s core values are values that are held

1. pervasively throughout Scripture (at least implicitly),
2. absolutely (without exceptions), and . . .
3. strongly (as a matter of significance).

This applies all the more in instances where:

4. such values emerged in opposition to prevailing cultural trends and . . .
5. prevailed in the church for two millennia.

The limitation of acceptable sexual intercourse to sexually complementary partners and the strong abhorrence of same-sex intercourse is just such a value.

What is the bottom line here? It is this: If the authority of Scripture means anything, those who seek to overturn its core values must meet an extraordinary burden of proof. The evidence adduced must not only be so strong and unambiguous that it makes the strong and unambiguous witness of Scripture pale by comparison; it must also directly refute the reasons for the Bible's position.

For example, it is not enough to prove that the primary expression of homosexuality in antiquity was an inherently exploitative form (pederasty or cult prostitution) or that modern science has demonstrated that homosexuality is primarily a genetic phenomenon—two dubious claims. One must also prove that the Bible condemned homosexual practice *primarily* on the grounds of the exploitative mismatch created by pederasty or on the grounds that homosexual behavior was a willfully chosen rejection of God's design for sexuality. Otherwise, even if these claims were valid (and they are not), they would still have little relevance for ascertaining the deficiencies in the Bible's reasons for condemning homosexual behavior. As it is, none of these points can be substantiated. There were non-exploitative models for same-sex intercourse in antiquity (by ancient standards) *and* the Bible's critique of same-sex intercourse was not aimed primarily at typically exploitative features. Modern science has not demonstrated that homosexuality is a direct result of conditions present at birth *and* the notion of a partially innate character to homoerotic desires fits quite well with a number of ancient theories and Pauline perspectives on sin generally.

## II. The Proper Use of Analogies

Yet are there not instances where we have deviated from Scripture's stance, including the New Testament? The analogies usually cited are slavery, women's roles, and divorce. As with any application of analogies, the key question is: what are the best analogies? There are significant points of difference between these alleged analogies and the Bible's stance on homosexual practice.

As regards slavery and women's roles:

- There is tension within the canon itself on these issues; there is no scriptural tension on the question of homosexual behavior.
- Moreover, the Bible's stance on slavery and women's roles looks fairly liberating in relation to the broader cultural contexts out of which the Bible emerged. The exact opposite is the case for the Bible's stance on homosexual practice. Scripture is far less accommodating to homosexual practice than the surrounding cultures and remains so throughout the history of Judeo-Christian faith covered by the

canon. The trajectory is entirely in the direction of countercultural disapproval of all homoerotic dimensions to human sexuality.

As for divorce:

- Here too, while Scripture's stance on same-sex intercourse is unequivocal, there is tension within Scripture on the question of divorce. The Old Testament permits divorce and both Matthew and Paul make exceptions to Jesus' teachings.
- Even more to the point, neither Scripture nor the contemporary church celebrates divorce as part of the glorious diversity of the body of Christ. Divorce and same-sex intercourse share in common the fact that both are forgivable sins for those who repent. The church works to end the cycle of divorce and remarriage, just as it ought to work towards the goal of ending the cycle of serial, unrepentant same-sex intercourse. Mainline denominations take a dim view of candidates for ordination who have had a string of divorces. Why, then, should they look the other way when a candidate for ordination not only has repeatedly engaged in same-sex intercourse in the past but also plans to continue such practice on a recurring basis? It is the serial and unrepentant character of much homosexual behavior that sets it apart from divorce issue.

I propose that the best analogies are those that most closely correlate with the distinctive elements of the Bible's opposition to same-sex intercourse:

- sexual behavior
- proscribed by both Testaments and pervasively within each Testament (at least implicitly)
- strongly and absolutely proscribed
- with the proscription making sense

Here we would include among analogies the Bible's stance against adultery, prostitution, incest, and bestiality—all forms of sexual behavior that the church continues to proscribe. Incest is a particularly strong analogue, not only because it elicits comparable revulsion in Scripture—actually less revulsion than for same-sex intercourse—but also because the reason for its proscription is comparable. Why is incest wrong, even when it is conducted between committed consenting adults? The Levitical proscriptions make clear why: first and foremost it is sex with the “flesh one's own flesh” (Lev 18:6). A “one-flesh” union—that is, the establishment of kinship across blood lines—cannot be created between two people who are already of the same “flesh,” i.e., close blood relations. Incest is sex with someone who is too much of a “like” or “same” on the familial level. Similarly, same-sex intercourse is proscribed because it is sex with a non-complementary sexual “same” or “like.”

The weakness of a number of arguments commonly used to advocate homosexual unions becomes apparent when the same arguments are applied to incest.

- As with male-male intercourse, incest is strongly proscribed in Levitical law, incurring the death penalty. We do not say: “Incest is just an outdated purity rule like some other legislation in Leviticus.” Nor do we say: “The fact that incest is regarded as a capital crime in Leviticus is reason enough to disregard altogether the Levitical stance against incest *per se*.” No, we recognize that in the dispensation of the new covenant, Paul (and undoubtedly Jesus) maintained rigorous opposition to incest. Paul did not apply the death penalty to incest, just as Jesus did not apply the death penalty prescribed by Mosaic law to the case of the adulterous woman in John 8:1-11. Yet both maintained that serial unrepentant sexual sin, including incest and adultery, could get one excluded from the kingdom of God and thrown into hell—a fate worse than capital punishment in this life (1 Cor 6:9-10; Gal 5:19-21; 6:7-9; 1 Thess 4:3-8; Eph 5:3-5; Matt 5:27-32). In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul argued that the incestuous man should be subject to the discipline of the church—here temporary exclusion from the life of the believing community—in the hope of saving his spirit on the day of judgment. Capital punishment for sexual immorality is deferred in the new covenant not because sexual immorality is regarded as a light matter but because a dead person cannot repent and so be saved for God’s coming eternal kingdom. Today there might be some quibbling over how much time to give a person an opportunity to repent before implementing church discipline, what form the discipline should take, and whether to apply it only to church officers or to members as well. But there would be little disagreement that the church should stand solidly against incestuous behavior, even in committed adult relationships. So the passage of two millennia does not significantly alter the contemporary church’s stance on this comparable core value in sexual ethics. Why then should we alter it for same-sex intercourse?
- Cross-culturally we know that most people develop an early instinctive aversion to incest. But some do not. Who would choose to have incestuous desires if it were purely a matter of choice? How then can anyone with incestuous desires be held morally accountable for acting on them? Most recognize that such an argument carries little moral weight because, while people may not be responsible for possessing sinful desires, they are morally accountable for what they do with such desires. Yet pro-homosex apologists often argue for the acceptance of homosexual behavior from the involuntary quality of homosexual desire, without recognizing the illogic of the argument.
- Even in the absence of scientifically measurable proof that incest harms all participants in all circumstances, we proscribe the phenomenon as a whole, regardless of whether the relationships are committed and caring. Why? Because we recognize that there is something developmentally wrong about someone wanting to have sex with someone who is too much of a same or like. The combination of (i) a strong scriptural stance against incest, (ii) the unnatural character of incest, and (iii) the disproportionately high rate of problems associated with it are sufficient grounds for rejecting every conceivable form. These are precisely the same grounds for rejecting every conceivable form of same-sex intercourse.

- Who would argue that to maintain an absolute and strong ecclesiastical proscription of all incest is to forsake grace for law and to abandon love for intolerance? Possibly this is what the Corinthians might have argued. But Paul made quite clear that sex, unlike food, was not a matter of indifference (1 Cor 6:12-20). Grace and love in no way lead to the toleration of sinful behavior. We shall say more about this below.
- Who would argue: Jesus said nothing about incest so it must not have been important to him? Obviously Jesus did not need to address the issue in his own cultural context because (1) he agreed with Scripture's strong proscription of it and (2) encountered no "incest problem" in first-century Israel. Does this silence mean that Jesus thought divorce and remarriage was a greater wrong than incest? Surely not. The same points can be made with respect to the absence of a specific Jesus saying about same-sex intercourse.

What I am emphasizing here is that the choice of analogy can make an enormous difference in how one frames the issues. No analogy is perfect—that's what makes it a mere analogy—but as regards Scripture's stance against same-sex intercourse the analogy of incest is clearly superior to the usual analogies of slavery, women's roles, and divorce.

### **III. Jesus on the Double Love Commandment**

I do not believe that everything in Scripture carries equal weight. The central lens through which the witness of Scripture must be read is the gospel message regarding the grace and love of God, the redemption in Christ, and the liberating power of the Spirit for a life of holiness. Too often in contemporary church circles themes such as love, grace, redemption, and liberation have been severed in an unbiblical way from concepts of holiness, transformation into the image of Christ, and obedience to Christian norms of behavior.

Take, for example, Jesus' view of love. The meaning of love in our day has erroneously merged with the meanings of tolerance and even acceptance of various lifestyles incongruent with Scripture. Advocates of this view then utilize Jesus' appeal to the double love commandment (Mark 12:30-31)—love of God (Deut 6:5) and love of neighbor (Lev 19:18)—as a "screen" to eliminate from other parts of Scripture judgmental commands that conflict with modern-day notions of tolerance and acceptance. What's the problem with this?

- First, advocates of this "screen method" often start with a definition of love to which Jesus did not subscribe. If love for Jesus meant a non-judgmental acceptance of various lifestyles, especially sexual lifestyles, then Jesus' own carefully thought-through position on divorce and remarriage and on adultery-of-the-heart must be viewed as eminently unloving (Matt 5:27-32). For Jesus did not broaden the array of sexual expression allowable to humans but took an already narrow understanding of human sexuality available to him in the Hebrew Scriptures and narrowed it even further. He also declared that sexual misbehavior

could get one thrown into hell. Did Jesus not understand the very commandments that he lifted up? Or are we the ones in error?

- Second, this “screen method” usually collapses “the great and first commandment” (Matt 22:38), love of God, into the second, love of neighbor, and then defines the latter broadly to embrace all sorts of behavior that Scripture categorically rejects. But this is precisely what Jesus did not do. Persons who violate the strongly attested commands of God in Scripture—for example, regarding sexual behavior—cannot be said to love the God whose will they reject, nor the persons made in God’s image whom they involve in their corruption.
- Third, Jesus’ appeal to Lev 19:18, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself”—incidentally a command from the much-maligned Holiness Code (Lev 17-26)—reverberates with the echo of Lev 19:17:

You shall not hate your brother in your heart. *You shall firmly reprove your fellow-countryman and so not incur guilt because of him.* You shall not take revenge and you shall not hold a grudge against any of your people.

Love never takes personal a wrong committed: it does not hate, take revenge, or hold a grudge against another. Yet love often entails reproving another in order to reclaim that person for the kingdom of God. If a child is about to touch a hot stove it is not loving to withhold warnings. So love in Jesus’ understanding cuts against contemporary notions of tolerance and acceptance of behaviors that Scripture proscribes.

- Fourth, Jesus’ understanding of love combined a radical outreach to sinners with an intensification of God’s ethical demand. This is amply illustrated in Jesus’ dealings with tax collectors. Tax collectors had a justly deserved reputation of not only collaborating with an oppressive foreign power but also profiting by collecting more from the poor than the tax owed (Luke 19:8). Two of the most secure elements of the scholarly reconstruction of the historical Jesus are: (a) on the one hand Jesus spoke out against the love of money and sided with the poor; and (b) on the other hand Jesus fraternized with tax collectors who profited from ripping off the poor. Here is a classic example of the intersection of grace and holiness in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus extended God’s offer of grace to a group of sinners while simultaneously warning of the eternal consequences of continuing their sinful practices. Why is it so hard for us to accept today that Jesus did the same with respect to the sexually immoral? He reached out in love to sexual sinners while intensifying God’s demand in the area of sexual ethics. The Pharisees were unable to get their theological imaginations around this way of thinking and acting. They assumed that Jesus’ fraternization with sinners meant that Jesus was cutting ethical corners and they were unhappy with the latter. We today are like the Pharisees, except that we are happy with the idea of a diminished role for obedience. In both instances there is a misunderstanding. Jesus calls his family, those who actually *do* the will of God (Mark 3:34-35), to reach out to sinners without softening by one iota the ethical imperatives of the kingdom of God.

- Fifth, the stereotype of a Jesus who put love over commandments and eschewed all judgment simply does not square with the range of evidence from the preserved sayings of Jesus. For example (note that “Q/Luke” indicates Lukan texts with Matthean parallels): Salt that loses its taste will be thrown out (Q/Luke 14:34-35; Mark 9:48-50); the weeds will be separated from the wheat and thrown into the fire (Matt 13:24-30, 36-43); the bad fish in the net will be thrown out (Matt 13:47-50); the goats will be separated from the sheep (Matt 25:31-46). Those who do not do anything with the investment God gives will have even the little they do have taken away (Q/Luke 19:11-27). Many of the "children of the kingdom" will be thrust into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Q/Luke 13:28-29). The men of Ninevah will arise at the judgment and condemn this “evil generation” (Q/Luke 11:29-32). These judgment sayings could easily be multiplied. As two liberal scholars, Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, argue in their seminal work *The Historical Jesus* (Fortress): “There is no reason to deny that Jesus preached judgment. The tradition of this is too broad.” Indeed, the major theme of the Sermon on the Mount is that Jesus has not come to relax the moral demands of the law. Quite the contrary: Jesus has come to up the demand for righteousness and to close the loopholes in the law (Matt 5:17-20). The six antitheses regarding murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, retaliation, and hating one’s enemy all take the form: you use to be liable to divine judgment only for doing ‘x’; but I say to you that you will be liable to judgment not only for ‘x’ but also for ‘y’ (Matt 5:21-48). The Sermon ends with a series of judgment sayings regarding the narrow gate, throwing trees that bear bad fruit into the fire, the surprising retort “I never knew you” to many who call Jesus “Lord,” and the destruction that befalls those who build their house on sand by not doing what Jesus says (Matt 7:13-27, with parallels in Luke).

To the church’s shame we have taken the central theme of love and mercy in Jesus’ ministry and message and contorted it in ways that demean calls for holiness and radical obedience as necessarily legalistic. If it were so, then Jesus himself would be the prime proponent of legalism—surely an absurdity. Legalism comes when the church uses the commands of God as an excuse for not making every effort to find the lost and to reclaim them for God’s kingdom; or when believers forget the huge debt that God has forgiven them, lose humility, and fail to extend forgiveness repeatedly to serial backsliders who repent (see especially Luke 17:3-4; Matt 18:21-35). However, the church is most emphatically not legalistic when it recognizes that critical importance of leading a transformed life, including in the sexual sphere, and warns of the great risk of God’s judgment upon those who fail to exhibit such transformation. As Jesus put it: all who want to follow me must take up their cross and deny themselves; otherwise, they will lose their lives (Mark 8:34-37; Q/Luke 17:33; John 12:25).

#### **IV. Paul on Law and Grace**

A similar distortion of the authoritative contents of Scripture comes from truncated notions of the “law/gospel” grid in Paul’s letters. In its more extreme form this grid is

used to characterize as legalism any emphasis on the importance of obeying God's commands and on the risk to salvation of gross disobedience.

Let there be no misunderstanding: Paul did declare the Mosaic Law to be abrogated in Christ. No one can be justified on the basis of doing "the works of the Law." No one can merit the salvation accomplished through Christ's redemptive work on the cross. In Christ we are no longer "under the law." But consider the following:

- When Paul refers to the Law being abrogated he has in view the Law of Moses as the ruling power over Adam's descendants. Christ's death makes amends for human iniquity and makes possible a new creation in the Spirit. What was defective about the Law of Moses? According to Paul's argument in Romans and Galatians, (1) the Law of Moses with its distinctive Jewish identity-markers excluded Gentiles. (2) It did not have its basis in the climactic redemptive work of God in Christ but rather stressed human doing and could thus lead to boasting in self. And (3) it was helpless to empower obedience in the face of the strong sinful impulse operating in Adamic flesh but powerful to curse those who violated its commands.
- Paul recognized considerable continuity, especially in sexual ethics, between the will of God reflected in the Law of Moses and the will of God reflected in the leading of the Spirit. This is not surprising. The God who gave the Law to Moses is the same God who gives the Spirit to those who believe in Christ. Indeed, the Spirit is the Law now written on our hearts, no longer mere "letter" or script (Jer 31:31-34; Rom 2:29; 7:6). While the Law of Moses contained many elements applicable only to Israel's specific circumstances pre-Christ, its core values remained in place, for the Law's commandments are "holy and righteous and good" (Rom 7:12). Christ died for our sins and ended sin's reign in human flesh "in order that the just requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us who are walking not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Rom 8:3-4). For Christ "died for all, in order that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for them died and was raised. . . . God made him who did not know sin to be sin for us, in order that we might become the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor 5:15, 21). This is the great purpose of Christ's death, not that we should be free to do what we want, but that we should be "free" to live a life of righteousness, no longer enslaved to sin's power (Rom 6:18-22).
- At the center of the center-section of Romans (6:1-8:17) Paul asks and answers the question of whether believers should continue to sin since they "are not under the (Mosaic) Law but under grace" (6:14-15). The answer is an emphatic "May it not happen!" For if being "under the law" meant being under subjection to sinful impulses operating in the human frame, then being "under grace" must mean liberation from a sin-controlled life and for service to God through the power of the Spirit (6:16-23; 7:5-6). This precise point is made by Martin Luther in his commentary on Rom 6:14.
- That is why Paul can assert in 6:15-23 that the indispensable middle term between freedom from the law through Christ's death and eternal life is the new obedient or righteous conduct of the believer. "Having fruit for holiness" is a necessary



intermediate step in a redemptive process that leads to eternal life (6:19-23). Otherwise, the grace of God is short-circuited in the life of the Christian. As Martin Luther himself put it (commenting on Rom 6:19): *“The one who serves uncleanness, that is, sexual uncleanness, is already becoming more and more unrighteous, for sin now rules over him, and he has lost faith and has become an unbeliever.”* Or as John Calvin stated (commenting on Rom 8:9): *“Those in whom the Spirit does not reign do not belong to Christ; therefore those who serve the flesh are not Christians, for those who separate Christ from His Spirit make Him like a dead image or a corpse. . . . free remission of sins cannot be separated from the Spirit of regeneration. This would be, as it were, to rend Christ asunder.”* To return to the sexual “uncleanness” mentioned in 1:24, a context that features prominently same-sex intercourse (1:26-27), is to find one’s primary identity in the flesh rather than in the Spirit. That in turn places one back under the Law of Moses, the binding legal authority with jurisdiction over the old fleshly creation. *“If you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law”* (Gal 5:18). Conversely, if you are not led by the Spirit, then you are—precisely as fleshly beings—subject to the law’s jurisdiction and so condemnation.

- Yes, there is no condemnation (8:1), but the “no condemnation” is for those who are “in Christ Jesus,” who by definition are those “who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (8:4). Nobody merits eternal life. But this free gift (6:23) is only available to those joined to Jesus who is life itself. And there is no being joined to Jesus without being regulated by the Spirit of Christ. There is no sin transfer to Christ apart from self-transfer to Christ. No living in Christ without dying to sin and crucifying the old human with its sinful desires (6:1-14; Gal 5:24). No “new creation” without the old passing away (2 Cor 5:17). No citizenship in heaven for those not being conformed to Christ’s death by living out of heaven’s power, the Spirit (Phil 3:10-11, 20). The trip to heaven is free, all expenses paid by Christ’s death, but you have to get on and remain on the plane that God provides to get us there (the Spirit). So long as we live as fleshly beings our citizenship is not in heaven but on earth; we are still very much on the tar mat. Our confession to being citizens of heaven, under the lordship of Christ, is empty.
- Accordingly, Paul’s ultimate answer to the question “Should we sin because we are not under the Law but under grace?” (6:15) is given in 8:12-14: “So then, brethren, we are debtors not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh, for if you live according to the flesh, you are going to die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the flesh, you will live. For as many as are being *led* by the Spirit, these are the sons (children) of God.”
- What is “faith” according to Paul? Is it some mere intellectual assent to the truth? A “take-the-money-and-run” approach to God’s gracious offer of salvation through Christ? No, it is rather the kind of trust in God and in God’s work in Christ that issues in a “yes” to God and “no” to self, a dying to self and a living for God. So Paul could say in Gal 2:19-20: “I through the law died to the law in order that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ; and I no longer live but Christ lives in me and the life that I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself over for me.” If we do otherwise,

if we live for self and die to God by pursuing desires contrary to God's will, can we really say that we are trusting Jesus who loved us enough to die for us?

- Suppose a married man wants to have sex with a drop-dead gorgeous woman who happens not to be his wife. What does faith mean in this context? Does it mean believing Jesus died for me, knowing that I'm going to heaven, and then having sex with the other woman? May it not be so! Faith here means: because I am so grateful for salvation through Christ and am convinced that what God has in store for me—forming Christ in me—is better than the gratification of this sinful impulse, I will not yield to that sinful impulse. In other words, one can't live according to the flesh and then say that one is living by the conviction of being justified by faith. If one is conforming to the sinful impulse in the flesh then one is not walking in faith. This is God's doing but we must comply; otherwise it becomes our doing (living out of our flesh) and the outcome of that is death rather than life.
- It is hardly surprising, then, that Paul can refer to “the law (i.e., regulating force) of the Spirit” freeing us “from the law of sin and death (i.e., the regulating force of the sinful impulse in human flesh). The abrogation of the Law of Moses does not leave believers “lawless.” To the contrary: we are subject to the regulating power of the Spirit. The difference between this “law” and the Law of Moses is threefold, answering to the threefold defect in the Mosaic law cited above: (1) This “law” does not set up barriers to Gentiles. (2) This “law” is made possible by the amends-making death of Christ, allowing us to be purified to receive God's Spirit. And (3) this “law” not only commands us to live righteously but empowers such obedience. Again, Paul could say to the Corinthian Christians: “To those without the law I became as one without the law—though I am not without a law toward God but in Christ's law” (1 Cor 9:21). “Bear one another's burdens,” Paul exhorts the Galatian Christians, “and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2).
- Paul does not expect perfection, but neither does he expect the Christian life to be static. A sanctified life does not happen all at once. Even so, in the main, one will serve Christ as Lord by the Spirit's power rather than sin as lord by human power. As he says in his letter to the Philippians, “with fear and trembling work at your own salvation; for God is the one who is at work in you, [effecting] both the willing and the working for his good pleasure” (2:12-13). Note the wonderful balance here: we are to work at our own salvation but such working is nothing else than letting God work in us. Not to progress in holiness is to resist actively the work of God in one's life. And as Paul says later in the same letter: “not that I have already been made perfect (or: reached the goal), but I press on to make it my own. . . . forgetting what lies behind and straining to what lies ahead” (3:12-14). When we fail, we get up, push on, and forget about the failures of the past. We renew our resolve to crucify the sin-controlled life, not by our own efforts but by the power of God, and thereby to reach the goal of eternal life.
- It is entirely consistent with this view of things that Paul regards serial unrepentant participation in *porneia* (the Greek word for “sexual immorality,” including bestiality, same-sex intercourse, incest, adultery, and solicitation of prostitutes) as incompatible with the grace of God and life in the Spirit. Thus he could say to the Thessalonian believers, in the earliest extant NT document:

For you know what commands we gave to you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God: your holiness, that you abstain from *porneia* . . . [and not live] like the Gentiles who do not know God. . . . because the Lord is an avenger regarding all these things. . . . For God called us not to (sexual) uncleanness but in holiness. Therefore the one who rejects [these commands] rejects not humans but the God who gives his Holy Spirit to us. (1 Thess 4:2-8)

And to the Galatian Christians:

The works of the flesh are obvious, which are: *porneia*, (sexual) uncleanness, licentiousness . . . , which I am warning you about, just as I warned you before, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. . . . Stop deceiving yourselves; God is not to be mocked, for whatever one sows this one will also reap. For the one who casts seed into one's flesh will reap a harvest of destruction and decay from the flesh, but the one who casts seed into the Spirit will reap a harvest of eternal life from the Spirit. And let us not grow tired of doing what is right for in due time we will reap, *if* we do not relax our efforts. (Gal 5:19-21; 6:7-9)

And again to the Corinthians, in the context of how to deal with a practicing, self-affirming Christian participant in an incestuous adult union:

Or do you not realize that unrighteous people will not inherit God's kingdom? Stop deceiving yourselves. Neither the sexually immoral (the *pornoi*), nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate males who play the sexual role of females, nor men who lie with males . . . will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor 6:9-10)

In 2 Corinthians Paul expresses deep concern that

I may have to mourn over many who have continued in their former sinning and did not repent of the (sexual) uncleanness, *porneia*, and licentiousness that they practiced. (12:21)

The message of Ephesians is identical:

“*Porneia* and (sexual) uncleanness of any kind . . . must not even be mentioned among you, as is proper among saints. . . . Be sure of this, that no sexually immoral person ( *pornos*) or (sexually) unclean person . . . has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you . . . , for because of these things the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient. (5:3-5; similarly, Col 3:5-6)

What could be clearer? Sex matters. Persistent unrepentant sexual behavior can put a believer at risk of not inheriting the coming kingdom of God. That included for Paul same-sex intercourse, which he defined as sexual uncleanness in Rom 1:24-27 (cf. 6:19) and *porneia* in 1 Cor 6:9. What shall we say? That Paul did not have a good grasp of the

distinction between law and grace? Preposterous. Paul's views coincide with Jesus' views; if anything, Paul is more law-free than Jesus, not less (Paul spoke of the abrogation of the Mosaic law; Jesus did not.) It is we who have truncated the gospel of grace by voiding its irrevocable connection to a transformed life in the Spirit.

If anyone tells you that keeping the commands of God is not an essential part of the Christian life, don't believe it for a moment. Believe Paul instead who said that what matters is "keeping the commandments of God" (1 Cor 7:19). If anyone tells you that our adherence to God's commands does not please or glorify God, prefer Paul's words instead. For it is Paul who urges believers to "present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing to God" (Rom 12:1). It is Paul who exhorts believers to "glorify God in your body" by fleeing *porneia* (1 Cor 6:18, 20). Does this undermine the message of grace and redemption in Christ? Far from it. It is that very redemption or "buying back" that compels Paul to ask rhetorically: "Or don't you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit that is in you . . . and [that] you do not belong to yourself? For you were bought with a price" (6:19). What price? The price of the precious blood of Christ. Precisely because we no longer belong to ourselves but to the God who bought us back, our whole lives now revolve around doing God's will rather than our own.

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