1. Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies: The Witness of Scripture Concerning Homosexuality

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SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE

Gary came to New Haven in the summer of 1989 to say a proper farewell. My best friend from undergraduate years at Yale, he was dying of AIDS. While he was still able to travel, my family and I invited him to come visit us one more time.

During the week he stayed with us, we went to films together (Field of Dreams and Dead Poets Society), we drank wine and laughed, we had long sober talks about politics and literature and the gospel and sex and such. Above all, we listened to music. Some of it was nostalgic music: the record of our college singing group, which Gary had directed with passionate precision; music of the '60s, recalling the years when we marched together against the Vietnam War—Beatles, Byrds, Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell. Some of it was music more recently discovered: I introduced him to R.E.M. and the Indigo Girls; he introduced me to Johannes Ockeghem's Requiem (Missa pro defunctis). As always, his aesthetic sense was fine and austere; as always, he was determined to face the truth, even in the shadow of death.

We prayed together often that week, and we talked theology. It became clear that Gary had come not only to say goodbye but also to think hard, before God, about the relation between his homosexuality and his Christian faith. He was angry at the self-affirming gay Christian groups, because he regarded his own condition as more complex and tragic than their apologetic stance could acknowledge. He also worried that the gay subculture encouraged homosexual believers to "draw their identity from their sexuality" and thus to shift the ground of their identity subtly and idolatrously away from God.

For more than twenty years, Gary had grappled with his homosexuality, experiencing it as a compulsion and an affliction. Now, as he faced
death, he wanted to talk it all through again from the beginning, because he knew my love for him and trusted me to speak without dissembling. For Gary, there was no time to dance around the hard questions. As Dylan had urged, "Let us not talk falsely now; the hour is getting late."

In particular, Gary wanted to discuss the biblical passages that deal with homosexual acts. Among Gary's many gifts was his skill as a reader of texts. After leaving Yale and helping to found a community-based Christian theater group in Toronto, he had eventually completed a master's degree in French literature. Though he was not trained as a biblical exegete, he knew the difference between sensitive readings and tendentious ones. He had read hopefully through the standard bibliography of the burgeoning movement advocating the acceptance of homosexuality in the church: John J. McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual*; James B. Nelson, *Embodiment*; Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?*, John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*. In the end, he came away disappointed, believing that these authors, despite their good intentions, had imposed a wishful interpretation on the biblical passages. However much he wanted to believe that the Bible did not condemn homosexuality, he would not violate his own stubborn intellectual integrity by pretending to find their arguments persuasive.

The more we talked, the more we found our perspectives interlocking. Both of us had serious misgivings about the mounting pressure for the church to recognize homosexuality as a legitimate Christian lifestyle. As a New Testament scholar, I was concerned about certain questionable exegetical and theological strategies of the gay apologists. Gary, as a homosexual Christian, believed that their writings did justice neither to the biblical texts nor to the depressing reality of the gay subculture that he had moved in and out of for twenty years.

We concluded that our witnesses were complementary and that we had a word to speak to the churches. The public discussion of this matter has been dominated by insistently ideological voices: on one side, gay rights activists demanding the church's unqualified acceptance of homosexuality; on the other, unqualified homophobic condemnation of homosexual Christians. Gary and I agreed that we should try to encourage a more nuanced discourse within the community of faith. He was going to write an article about his own experience, reflecting on his struggle to live as a faithful Christian wracked by a sexual orientation that he believed to be incommensurate with the teaching of scripture, and I agreed to write a response to it.

Tragically, Gary soon became too sick to carry out his intention. His last letter to me was an effort to get some of his thoughts on paper while he was still able to write. By May of 1990 he was dead.

This article, then, is an act of keeping covenant with a beloved brother in Christ who will not speak again on this side of the resurrection. I commit it to print sorrowfully aware that it will outrage some; at the same time, I commit it to print praying that it will encourage others as Gary was encouraged and that it will foster compassionate and carefully reasoned theological reflection within the community of faith.

**WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?**

A theological discussion of homosexuality must proceed through a series of widening circles. Beginning at the center, we must consider the biblical texts that explicitly say something about homosexuality. Then we must consider how these texts are to be assessed within a wider biblical framework and in relation to other factors (scientific evidence, changing social realities, etc.). Finally, we must ask what the church should do in light of scripture and in response to the issues confronting us.

The Bible hardly ever discusses homosexual behavior. There are perhaps half a dozen brief references to it in all of scripture. In terms of emphasis, it is a minor concern, in contrast, for example, to economic injustice. What the Bible does say should be heeded carefully, but any ethic that intends to be biblical will seek to get the accents in the right places. (Would that the passion presently being expended in the church over the question of homosexuality were devoted instead to urging the wealthy to share with the poor! Some of the most urgent champions of "biblical morality" on sexual matters become strangely equivocal when the discussion turns to the New Testament's teachings about possessions.)

**Genesis 19:1-29**

The notorious story of Sodom and Gomorrah—often cited in connection with homosexuality—is actually irrelevant to the topic. The "men of Sodom" comeounding on Lot's door, apparently with the intention of gang-raping Lot's two visitors, who, as we readers know, are actually angels. The angels rescue Lot and his family and pronounce destruction on the city. The gang-rape scenario exemplifies the wickedness of the city, but there is nothing in the passage pertinent to a judgment about the morality of consensual homosexual intercourse. Indeed, there is nothing in the rest of the biblical tradition, save an obscure reference in Jude 7, to suggest that the sin of Sodom was particularly identified with sexual misconduct of any kind. In fact, the clearest statement about the sin of Sodom is to be found in an oracle of the prophet Ezekiel: "This
was the guilt of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy” (Ezek. 16:49).

Leviticus 18:22; 20:13

The few biblical texts that do address the topic of homosexual behavior, however, are unambiguously and unremittingly negative in their judgment. The Holiness Code in Leviticus explicitly prohibits male homosexual intercourse: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination” (Lev. 18:22). In Lev. 20:10–16, the same act is listed as one of a series of sexual offenses—along with adultery, incest, and bestiality—that are punishable by death. It is worth noting that the act of “lying with a male as with a woman” is categorically proscribed: motives for the act are not treated as a morally significant factor.

Quoting a law from Leviticus, of course, does not settle the question for Christian ethics. The Old Testament contains many prohibitions and commandments that have, ever since the first century, generally been disregarded or deemed obsolete by the church, most notably rules concerning circumcision and dietary practices. Some ethicists have argued that the prohibition of homosexuality is similarly superseded for Christians: it is merely part of the Old Testament’s ritual “purity rules” and therefore morally irrelevant today.

The Old Testament, however, makes no systematic distinction between ritual law and moral law. The same section of the Holiness Code also contains, for instance, the prohibition of incest (Lev. 18:6–18). Is that a purity law or a moral law? Leviticus makes no distinction in principle. In each case, the church is faced with the task of discerning whether Israel’s traditional norms remain in force for the new community of Jesus’ followers.

1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10

The early church did, in fact, consistently adopt the Old Testament’s teaching on matters of sexual morality and on homosexual acts in particular. In 1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Tim. 1:10, we find homosexuals included in lists of persons who do things unacceptable to God.

In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul, exasperated with the Corinthians—some of whom apparently believe themselves to have entered a spiritually exalted state in which the moral rules of their old existence no longer apply to them (cf. 1 Cor. 4:8, 5:1–2, 8:1–9)—confronts them with a blunt rhetorical question: “Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God?” He then gives an illustrative list of the sorts of persons he means: “fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, malakoi, arsenokoitai, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers.”

I have left the terms pertinent to the present issue untranslated, because their translation has been disputed recently both by Boswell and others. The word malakoi is not a technical term meaning “homosexuals” (no such term existed either in Greek or in Hebrew), but it appears often in Hellenistic Greek as pejorative slang to describe the “passive” partners—often young boys—in homosexual activity. The other word, arsenokoitai, is not found in any extant Greek text earlier than 1 Corinthians. Some scholars have suggested that its meaning is uncertain, but Robin Scroggs’ has shown that the word is a translation of the Hebrew mishkav zakur (“lying with a male”), derived directly from Lev. 18:22 and 20:13 and used in rabbinic texts to refer to homosexual intercourse. The Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) of Lev. 20:13 reads, “Whoever lies with a man as with a woman (meta arsenos koi¢en gynaikos), they have both done an abomination.” This is almost certainly the idiom from which the noun arse-nokoitai was coined. Thus, Paul’s use of the term presupposes and reaffirms the Holiness Code’s condemnation of homosexual acts.

In 1 Cor. 6:11, Paul asserts that the sinful behaviors catalogued in the vice list were formerly practiced by some of the Corinthians. Now, however, since they have been transferred into the sphere of Christ’s lord-ship, they ought to have left these practices behind: “This is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the spirit of our God.” The remainder of the chapter (1 Cor. 6:12–20) counsels the Corinthians to glorify God in their bodies because they belong now to God and no longer to themselves.

The 1 Timothy passage includes arsenokoitai in a list of “the lawless and disobedient,” whose behavior is specified in a vice list that includes everything from lying to murdering one’s parents, under the rubric of actions “contrary to sound teaching according to the glorious gospel.” Here again, the Old Testament prohibition is presupposed, but the context offers little discussion of sexual morality as such.

Romans 1:18–32

The most crucial text for Christian ethics concerning homosexuality remains Romans 1, because this is the only passage in the New Testament that places the condemnation of homosexual behavior in an explicitly theological context.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they
exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator. . . . For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their own error (Rom. 1:24–27).

(This is, incidentally, the only passage in the Bible that refers to lesbian sexual relations.)

Because the passage is often cited and frequently misunderstood, an examination of its place in Paul’s argument is necessary. The aim of Romans 1 is not to teach a code of sexual ethics; nor is the passage a warning of God’s judgment against those who are guilty of particular sins. Rather, Paul is offering a diagnosis of the disordered human condition: he adduces the fact of widespread homosexual behavior as evidence that human beings are indeed in rebellion against their creator. The fundamental human sin is the refusal to honor God and give God thanks (1:21); consequently, God’s wrath takes the form of letting human idolatry run its own self-destructive course. Homosexuality, then, is not a provocation of “the wrath of God” (Rom. 1:18); rather, it is a consequence of God’s decision to “give up” rebellious creatures to follow their own futile thinking and desires. The unrighteous behavior catalogued in Rom. 1:26–31 is a list of symptoms: the underlying sickness of humanity as a whole, Jews and Greeks alike, is that they have turned away from God and fallen under the power of sin (cf. Rom. 3:9).

When this context is kept clearly in view, several important observations follow:

1. Paul is not describing the individual life histories of pagan sinners; not every pagan has first known the true God of Israel and then chosen to turn away into idolatry. When Paul writes, “they exchanged the truth about God for a lie,” he is giving a global account of the universal fall of humanity. This fall is manifested continually in the various ungodly behaviors listed in vv. 24–31.

2. Paul singles out homosexual intercourse for special attention because he regards it as providing a particularly graphic image of the way in which human fallenness distorts God’s created order. God the creator made man and woman for each other, to cleave together, to be fruitful and multiply. When human beings engage in homosexual activity, they enact an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual reality: the rejection of the Creator’s design. They embody the spiritual condition of those who have “exchanged the truth about God for a lie.”

3. Homosexual acts are not, however, specially reprehensible sins; they are no worse than any of the other manifestations of human unrighteousness listed in the passage (vv. 29–31), no worse in principle than covetousness or gossip or disrespect for parents.

4. Homosexual activity will not incur God’s punishment: it is its own punishment, an “anti-reward.” Paul here simply echoes a traditional Jewish idea. The Wisdom of Solomon, an intertestamental writing that has surely influenced Paul’s thinking in Romans 1, puts it like this: “Therefore those who in folly of life lived unrighteously [God] tormented through their own abominations” (Wisd. Sol. 12:1).

Repeated again and again in recent debate is the claim that Paul condemns only homosexual acts committed promiscuously by heterosexual persons—because they “exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural.” Paul’s negative judgment, so the argument goes, does not apply to persons who are “naturally” of homosexual orientation. This interpretation, however, is untenable. The “exchange” is not a matter of individual life-decisions; rather, it is Paul’s characterization of the fallen condition of the pagan world. In any case, neither Paul nor anyone else in antiquity had a concept of “sexual orientation.” To introduce this concept into the passage (by suggesting that Paul disapproves only of those who act contrary to their individual sexual orientations) is to lapse into anachronism. The fact is that Paul treats all homosexual activity as prima facie evidence of humanity’s tragic confusion and alienation from God the Creator.

One more thing must be said: Rom. 1:18–32 performs a homiletical sting operation. The passage builds a crescendo of condemnation, declaring God’s wrath upon human unrighteousness, using rhetoric characteristic of Jewish polemic against Gentile immorality. It whips the reader into a frenzy of indignation against others: those unbelievers, those idol worshipers, those immoral enemies of God. But then, in Rom. 2:1, the sting strikes: “Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.”

We all stand without excuse under God’s judgment. Self-righteous judgment of homosexuality is just as sinful as the homosexual behavior itself. That does not mean that Paul is disingenuous in his rejection of homosexual acts and all the other sinful activities mentioned in Romans 1; all the evils listed there remain evils. But no one should presume to be above God’s judgment; all of us stand in radical need of God’s mercy. That warning must temper the tone of our debate about homosexuality.

THE WIDER BIBLICAL FRAMEWORK

Though only a few biblical texts speak of homoerotic activity, all of them express unqualified disapproval. In this respect, the issue of homo-
sexuality differs significantly from matters such as slavery or the subordination of women, concerning which the Bible contains internal tensions and counterposed witnesses. No theological consideration of homosexuality can rest content, however, with a short list of passages that treat the matter explicitly. We must consider how Scripture frames the discussion more broadly. To place the prohibition of homosexual activity in a canonical context, we should keep in mind at least the following factors in the biblical portrayal of human existence before God.

1. **God’s creative intention for human sexuality.** From Genesis 1 onwards, scripture affirms repeatedly that God has made man and woman for one another and that our sexual desires rightly find fulfillment within heterosexual marriage (see, for instance, Mark 10:2–9, 1 Thess. 4:3–8, 1 Cor. 7:1–9, Eph. 5:21–33, Heb. 13:4). This picture of marriage provides the positive backdrop against which the Bible’s few emphatic negations of homosexuality must be read.

2. **The fallen human condition.** The biblical analysis of the human predicament, most sharply expressed in Pauline theology, offers a subtle account of human bondage to sin. As great-grandchildren of the Enlightenment, we like to think of ourselves as free moral agents, choosing rationally among possible actions, but Scripture unmasks that cheerful illusion and teaches us that we are deeply infected by the tendency to self-deception. Romans 1 depicts humanity in a state of self-affirming confusion: “They became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools ... They know God’s decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but applaud others who practice them” (Rom. 1:21–22, 32). Once in the fallen state, we are not free not to sin; we are “slaves of sin” (Rom. 6:17), which distorts our perceptions, overpowers our will, and renders us incapable of obedience (Romans 7).

**Redemption** (a word that means “being emancipated from slavery”) is God’s act of liberation, setting us free from the power of sin and placing us within the sphere of God’s transforming power for righteousness (Rom. 6:20–22, 8:1–11, cf. 12:1–2).

Thus we must reject the apparently common-sense assumption that only freely chosen acts are morally culpable. Quite the reverse: The very nature of sin is that it is not freely chosen. That is what it means to live “in the flesh” in a fallen creation. We are in bondage to sin but still accountable to God’s righteous judgment of our actions. In light of this theological anthropology, it cannot be maintained that a homosexual orientation is morally neutral because it is involuntary.

3. **The eschatological character of Christian existence.** The Christian community lives in a time of tension between “already” and “not yet.” Already we have the joy of the Holy Spirit; already we experience the transforming grace of God. But at the same time, we do not yet experience the fullness of redemption: we walk by faith, not by sight. The creation groans in pain and bondage, “and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:23). This means, among other things, that Christians, set free from the power of sin through Christ’s death, must continue to struggle to live faithfully in the present time. The “redemption of our bodies” remains a future hope; final transformation of our fallen physical state awaits the resurrection. Consequently, in the interim some may find disciplined abstinence the only viable alternative to disordered sexuality.

4. **Demythologizing the idolatry of sex.** The Bible undercuts our cultural obsession with sexual fulfillment. Scripture, along with many subsequent generations of faithful Christians, bears witness that lives of freedom, joy, and service are possible without sexual relations. Indeed, however odd it may seem to contemporary sensibilities, some New Testament passages (Matt. 19:10–12, 1 Corinthians 7) clearly commend the celibate life as a way of faithfulness.

### BIBLICAL AUTHORITY AND OTHER VOICES

But what about the authority of the Bible? Are Leviticus and Paul the apostle trustworthy guides on sexual ethics? We must still consider how the Bible’s teaching is to be weighted in relation to other sources of moral wisdom. An adequate discussion of this problem would be very long indeed. For the present, I offer only some brief reflections as places to start the discussion.

1. **The Christian tradition.** Far more emphatically than scripture itself, the moral teaching tradition of the Christian church has for more than nineteen hundred years declared homosexual behavior to be contrary to the will of God. Only within the past twenty years has any serious question been raised about the church’s universal prohibition of such conduct. If anything, a passage like Romans 1 might serve to moderate the tradition’s harsh judgments. (John Chrysostom, for example, a brilliant and influential theologian of the fourth century, declared that homosexual intercourse was a sin worse than fornication, worse even than murder. Surely the biblical passages give no support to such a claim.) In any case, it is impossible to construct an argument for acceptance of homosexuality by juxtaposing the authority of tradition to the authority of Scripture. The result of the juxtaposition is to strengthen the Bible’s prohibitions.

2. **Reason and scientific evidence.** Here the picture is cloudy. Some
studies have claimed that as much as 10 percent of the population is inclined to same-sex erotic preference, and some theorists hold that homosexual orientation is innate (or formed by a very early age) and unchangeable. This is the opinion espoused by most advocates of full acceptance of homosexuality in the church: If homosexual orientation is a genetically determined trait, so the argument goes, then any disapproval of it is a form of discrimination analogous to racism.

Others, however, regard homosexual orientation as a form of developmental maladjustment or “symbolic confusion.” Some therapists claim significant clinical success rates in helping homosexual persons develop a heterosexual orientation; others challenge such claims. A major cross-cultural study recently published by David F. Greenberg,3 professor of sociology at New York University, contends that homosexual identity is socially constructed rather than inborn. According to Greenberg, the “essentialist” view of sexual orientation is a fallacy.

In one sense, however, the etiology of homosexual orientation is not a significant factor for the formation of normative Christian ethics. We need not take sides in the debate of nature versus culture. Even if it could be shown that same-sex preference is somehow genetically programmed, that would not necessarily make homosexual behavior morally appropriate. Surely Christian ethics does not want to hold that all inborn traits are good and desirable. The analogy of alcoholism, while only an analogy, is perhaps helpful: A considerable body of evidence suggests that some people are born with a predisposition to alcoholism. Once exposed to alcohol, they experience an attraction so powerful that it can be counteracted only by careful counseling, community support, and total abstinence. We now conventionally speak of alcoholism as a disease and carefully distinguish our disapproval of the behavior associated with it from our loving support of the person afflicted by it. Perhaps homoerotic attraction should be treated similarly.

The argument from statistical incidence of homosexual behavior is even less useful in normative ethical deliberation. Even if 10 percent of the people in the United States should declare themselves to be of homosexual orientation (and that figure is a doubtful one), that would not settle the normative issue; it is impossible to argue simply from an “is” to an “ought.” If Paul were shown the poll results, he would reply sadly, “Indeed, the power of sin is rampant in the world.”

3. The experience of the community of faith. This is the place where the advocates of homosexuality in the church have their most serious case. Scroggs argues that the New Testament’s condemnation of homosexuality applies only to a certain “model” of exploitative pederasty that was common in Hellenistic culture; hence, it is not applicable to the modern world’s experience of mutual, loving homosexual relationships. I think that Scroggs’s position fails to reckon adequately with Romans 1, where the relations are not described as pederastic and where Paul’s disapproval has nothing to do with exploitation.

But the fact remains that there are numerous homosexual Christians—like my friend Gary and some of my ablest students at Yale—whose lives show signs of the presence of God, whose work in ministry is genuine and effective. How is such experiential evidence to be assessed? Should we, like the earliest Jewish Christians who hesitated to accept “unclean” Gentiles into the community of faith, acknowledge the work of the Spirit and say, “Who are we to stand in the way of what God is doing”? (cf. Acts 10:1–11:18) Or should we see this as one more instance of a truth that all of us in ministry know sadly about ourselves: “We have this treasure in earthen vessels”? God gives the Spirit to broken people and ministers grace even through us sinners, without thereby endorsing our sin.

In view of the considerable uncertainty surrounding the scientific and experiential evidence, in view of our culture’s present swirling confusion about gender roles, in view of our propensity for self-deception, I think it prudent and necessary to let the univocal testimony of Scripture and the Christian tradition order the life of the church on this painfully controversial matter. We must affirm that the New Testament tells us the truth about ourselves as sinners and as God’s sexual creatures: Marriage between man and woman is the normative form for human sexual fulfillment, and homosexuality is one among many tragic signs that we are a broken people, alienated from God’s loving purpose.

PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES: LIVING UNDER THE CROSS

How then shall we respond in the church to the pastoral and political realities of our time? Having said that we cannot condone homosexual behavior, we still find ourselves confronted by complex problems that demand rigorous and compassionate solutions. Those who uphold the biblical teaching against homosexuality must remember Paul’s warning in Romans 1:21–23: We are all “without excuse;” we stand or fall under God’s judgment and mercy. The second thing to be said—as a presupposition for all that follows—is that the church is called to be a fellowship of committed believers, knowing itself to have an identity and vocation distinct from the world.

In what follows, I pose several key issues and venture some discernments. These opinions—based on the exegesis and theological reflec-
tions already set forth in this essay—should be taken as proposals offered to the community of faith, to be judged in light of Scripture and the community's prayerful corporate wisdom.

1. Should the church support civil rights for homosexuals? Yes. Any judgment about the church's effort to influence Caesar's social policies requires complex reasoning. There is no reason, however, for the church to single out homosexual persons for malicious discriminatory treatment. Insofar as Christians have done so in the past, we must repent and seek instead to live out the gospel of reconciliation.

2. Can homosexual persons be members of the Christian church? This is rather like asking, "Can envious persons be members of the church?" (cf. Rom. 1:29) or "Can alcoholics be members of the church?" Unless we think that the church is a community of sinless perfection, we will have to acknowledge that persons of homosexual orientation (granting, as I am willing to do, that there is such a thing) are welcome along with other sinners in the company of those who trust in the God who justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5). If they are not welcome, I will not have to walk out the door along with them, leaving in the sanctuary only those entitled to cast the first stone.

3. Is it Christianly appropriate for homosexual Christians to maintain a homosexual lifestyle? No. The only one who was entitled to cast a stone instead charged the recipient of his mercy to "go and sin no more." It is no more appropriate for homosexual Christians to persist in a homosexual lifestyle than it would be for heterosexual Christians to maintain a lifestyle of fornication or adultery. (Insofar as the church fails to teach clearly about heterosexual chastity outside of marriage, its disapproval of homosexual coupling will appear arbitrary and biased.) Unless they are able to change their orientation and enter a heterosexual marriage relationship, homosexual Christians should seek to live lives of disciplined sexual abstinence.

Despite the smooth illusions perpetrated by American mass culture, sexual gratification is not a sacred right, and celibacy is not a fate worse than death. Here the Catholic tradition has something to teach those of us raised in Protestant communities. While mandatory priestly celibacy is unbiblical, a life of sexual abstinence can promote "good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:35). It is worth noting that 1 Cor. 7:8-9, 25-40 commends celibacy as an option for everyone, not just for a special caste of ordained leaders. Within the church, we should work diligently to recover the dignity and value of the single life.

My friend Gary, in his final letter to me, wrote urgently of the imperatives of discipleship: "Are homosexuals to be excluded from the community of faith? Certainly not. But anyone who joins such a community should know that it is a place of transformation, of discipline, of learning.

and not merely a place to be comforted or indulged." The community demands that its members pursue holiness, while it also sustains the challenging process of character formation that is necessary for Jesus' disciples. The church must be a community whose life together provides true friendship and emotional support for persons seeking an alternative to the gay subculture, as well as for heterosexually oriented single persons. In this respect, as in so many others, the church can fulfill its vocation only by living as a countercommunity in the world.

4. Should the church sanction and bless homosexual unions? No. The church should continue to teach—as it always has—that there are two possible ways for God's human sexual creatures to live well-ordered lives of faithful discipleship: heterosexual marriage and sexual abstinence.

5. Should homosexual Christians expect to change their orientation? This tough question must be answered in the critical framework of New Testament eschatology. On the one hand, the transforming power of the Spirit really is present in our midst; the testimonies of those who claim to have been healed and transformed into a heterosexual orientation should be taken seriously. "He breaks the power of canceled sin; he sets the prisoner free." If we do not continue to live with that hope, we may be hoping for too little from God. On the other hand, the "not yet" looms large; the testimonies of those like Gary who pray and struggle in Christian community and seek healing unsuccessfully for years must be taken with no less seriousness. Perhaps for many the best outcome attainable in this time between the times will be a life of disciplined abstinence, free from obsessive lust. (Exactly the same standard would apply for unmarried persons of heterosexual orientation.) That seems to be the spiritual condition Gary reached near the end of his life: "Since All Saints Day I have felt myself being transformed. I no longer consider myself homosexual. Many would say, big deal, you're 42... and are dying of sins. Big sacrifice. No, I didn't do this of my will, of an effort to improve myself, to make myself acceptable to God. No, he did this for me. I feel a great weight has been lifted off me. I have not turned 'straight.' I guess I'm like St. Paul's phrase, a eunuch for Christ."'

6. Should homosexuals be ordained? I save this question deliberately for last, where it belongs. It is unfortunate that the battle line has been drawn in the denominations at the question of ordination of homosexuals. The ensuing struggle has had the horrible effect of reinforcing a double standard for "clergy" and "lay" morality; it would be far better to articulate a single set of moral norms that apply to all Jesus' followers. Strictures against homosexuality belong in the church's moral catechesis, not in its ordination requirements. It is arbitrary to single out homosexuality as a special sin that precludes ordination. (Certainly the
New Testament does not do this.) The church has no analogous special rules to exclude from ordination the greedy or the self-righteous. Such matters are left to the discernment of the bodies charged with examining candidates for ordination; these bodies must determine whether the individual candidate has the gifts and graces requisite for ministry. In any event, a person of homosexual orientation seeking to live a life of disciplined abstinence would clearly be an appropriate candidate for ordination.

We live, then, as a community that embraces sinners as Jesus did, without waiving God's righteousness. We live confessing that God's grace claims us out of confusion and alienation and sets about making us whole. We live knowing that wholeness remains a hope rather than an attainment in this life. The homosexual Christians in our midst may teach us something about our true condition as people living between the cross and the final redemption of our bodies.

In the midst of a culture that worships self-gratification and a church that preaches a false Jesus who panders to our desires, those who seek the narrow way of obedience have a powerful word to speak. Just as Paul saw in pagan homosexuality a symbol of human fallenness, so I saw conversely in Gary, as I have seen in other homosexual friends and colleagues, a symbol of God's power made perfect in weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). Gary knew through experience the bitter power of sin in a twisted world, and he trusted in God's love anyway. Thus he embodied the "sufferings of this present time" of which Paul speaks in Romans 8: living in the joyful freedom of the "first fruits of the Spirit," even while groaning along with a creation in bondage to decay.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What does it mean to approach the biblical writings both seriously and responsibly?
2. How do you sort through the various teachings in the Bible regarding human sexuality?
3. What do you think the Bible has to say regarding homosexuality? Why? What do the biblical authors mean by "homosexuality"? What are the problems in discerning a biblical approach to homosexuality?
4. Where do you find yourself agreeing or disagreeing with Hays's interpretations of the biblical passages? Why?
5. To what extent are biblical passages on human sexuality pertinent to contemporary discussions of homosexuality? Why?