

Staying *the* Course

Supporting the Church's Position on Homosexuality

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cannot forget or set aside either the pivotal text of Scripture on homosexuality or its consensual interpretation.

My conclusion is: The Fathers understood themselves to have received a well-defined classical consensual Christian teaching on homosexuality. It is grounded in idolatry, not simply lust as such. It dishonors the body. It tends divisively to pit male against female. It does not yield the pleasure expected. It is a voluntary activity. It demeans human sexuality.

CHAPTER 7

The Real Disagreement

Elizabeth Moreau

Probably not since slavery has The United Methodist Church witnessed and been party to such vehement and often hostile disagreement akin to the debate over homosexuality. It is arguable that even the ordination of women did not evoke the polarization within The United Methodist Church currently seen both nationally and locally. Perhaps for this reason, or perhaps because of initial similarities, the Church's debate over homosexuality is too frequently couched in the language of civil rights. However, homosexuality is not finally a civil rights issue; and as long as the discussion remains one of civil rights, the deeper and more significant issue at stake cannot be addressed; that is, the role and authority of Scripture within the worshipping community of faith.

Both slavery and the rights and ordination of women were battles fought over the appropriate moral interpretation of the scriptural authority; the disagreement over homosexuality is fundamentally a disagreement about what or how much authority the Scripture is to have in the contemporary Church. Consider, for example, the ambiguity of the biblical witness regarding women: On the one hand, Paul instructs women not to speak, teach, or have authority over a man,¹ although in other passages, Paul encourages women leaders in the early church and holds them up as examples of godliness.² Thus, the debate over the equality of women was, at least in significant degree, a debate over apparently contradictory teachings within the primary authority for Christian life: Scripture. The biblical witness regarding slavery is even more

ambiguous in that there is no record of Jesus or Paul ever actually addressing the social sin of slavery.

In contrast, the biblical witness is uniform in its rejection of homosexuality, not only in explicit written condemnation, but also in the complete absence of any positive homosexual role model anywhere in the Bible.³ Unlike past debates linked to civil rights, in which the interpretation and morality of particular biblical passages were in conflict, there is general agreement about what the Bible actually says regarding homosexuality.⁴ Therefore, the entire debate surrounding homosexuality focuses on whether that biblical teaching can be normative for this generation of Christians. While the debate over women's rights and slavery arises from within the biblical texts, the second debate over homosexuality challenges the biblical texts themselves.

It is this undermining of the role and authority of Scripture within the Church that has created such an impasse. How we receive and interpret the Bible depends upon how we understand the authority of Scripture. What we must realize is that, should the Scriptures cease to be authoritative for The United Methodist Church, we will cease to be a part of the church, which has existed from the day of Pentecost onward. It has always been the case that the gospel stood outside the culture to which it spoke and judged that culture with the mercy and grace of Christ; it has never been the case that the culture judges the faithful obedience of the church. If the real disagreement underlying the conflict is the question of the applicability and relevance of the ancient writings for today's Christian, how can we understand them to speak to contemporary society?

Although the writings that make up the Bible are predominantly from the first century, it was not until the late fourth century that the writings were compiled into the list, or canon, that comprises today's New Testament.⁵ There were a large number of Gospels and letters circulating in the first four centuries, but the early church determined this particular list of books, which now constitute the New Testament, to be authoritative for Christian life and faith.

However, long before there was ever an official biblical canon, the texts that now make up the New Testament were in use within the church. The basis for giving authority to the books of the New Testament was their influence on the lives of individuals as divinely revealed truth. The content of the many ancient writings varied

substantially, and those books that accurately depicted the nature of God, human nature, the human condition, and the gift of salvation *as experienced by individuals* converted to Christianity became the primary teaching texts of the church. In the centuries between the times the texts were written and the church canonized the New Testament, these particular writings had already become authoritative within the early church because they functioned as a means of grace through which individuals encountered and came to know the living God in Jesus Christ. The experience of the early church was that through prayerful study of the message contained in these writings—the Gospels and letters we now call the New Testament—lives were transformed by the truth divinely revealed.

Thus, the source of the authority of the Bible is nothing less than divine revelation; God reveals himself to us through these particular writings and, in so doing, reveals to us our own being, nature, and condition. Stating the obvious, there can be no appeal to a higher authority than God. Moreover, the only reasonable construal of creation is to conceive of its existence as an expression of its Creator. Logically, an omnipotent God could have created any imaginable number of cosmoses; however, if a particular god chose to author a particular creation, then that creation is necessarily ordered in a particular way reflective of its creator. All of the components of the story must necessarily cohere in a manner that illuminates, enlightens, and explains its existence, its source, and its meaning, for the story to be recognizable and for it to have transformative power in the lives of individuals. To the extent that the creature/creation reflects the Creator, any change in the order of creation likewise reflects a change in the Creator, that is, to alter one portion of the story necessarily influences another piece of the story; the story ceases to make sense and must be reconceived in a coherent manner.

Furthermore, once we have changed the order of creation—such things as the nature of human relationships, the purposes of human sexuality, and the identity of sin—then these changes must also be reflected in the nature of the Creator. Literally, the God revealed to us must be altered, become a distinctly different god. The reason the debate over homosexuality is so intense is because it brings into question the whole idea of divine revelation. The counterclaim that homosexuality is compatible with Christian teaching challenges the truth of divine revelation: Did God not reveal the truth to us

through Scripture? If the Bible is wrong on an issue it specifically addresses, on what issues is the Bible authoritative? What biblical teaching *can* be trusted?⁶ It is inevitable that the Bible ceases to function as a means of grace to salvation and is reduced to a series of encouraging stories and helpful suggestions subject to personal preference.

For the generations that followed, the early church proved itself to be guided by the Holy Spirit. The humble study of Scripture has led people to Jesus Christ. As persons subject themselves to scriptural instruction, they receive new life in Christ and are transformed in Christ's image (in Wesleyan language, justified, sanctified, and perfected). Across the span of two millennia of history, through wars, plagues, and the rise and fall of nations, these Scriptures have sufficed to bring salvation to people. Even today, as old and culturally relative as the biblical texts are said to be, this Bible continues to bring new life in Jesus Christ to such culturally diverse churches as the church in Africa, the church in Asia, and elsewhere. Only within Western Protestant Christianity has the notion of improving upon the divine revelation found in Scripture become commonplace.

We are faced with a dilemma at this point. Either the God who is the source of these writings has played a grand, malevolent joke on billions of people who think they have received spectacular grace and salvation but are wrong, *or* these Scriptures are in fact divinely revealed truth whereby we can be saved. After two thousand years and billions of Christian conversions, a measure of humility is in order. To make the counterclaim that homosexuality is compatible with Christian teaching, and thus to receive the Scripture in a manner at odds with the interpretation of every other branch of the church of Jesus Christ, one must depend upon extensive—as well as selective—knowledge from human sources.

The exegetical methods of biblical interpretation used to overcome the biblical teaching on homosexuality arise from contemporary secular philosophy, scholarly proposals committed to reading the Bible without any possibility of divine revelation. Virtually all academic assumptions begin from a secular mind-set, excluding the proposition that God exists, much less speaks.⁷ It would seem, then, that for the average Christian to be able to read the Bible and understand what it really means, as opposed to what it merely seems to report, he or she must have highly specialized knowledge in the lat-

est exegetical methods for biblical interpretation. This stands in stark contrast to Article V of the Articles of Religion of the United Methodist *Book of Discipline*, which states that "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation."⁸

Perhaps more significant is this approach to biblical interpretation that implies a sort of modern-day gnosticism, in which secret or special knowledge is required to understand the Scriptures and, therefore, to encounter and know God. If we take seriously the notion of human sin, then we finally cannot allow human knowledge and experience to judge divine revelation; rather, divine revelation judges human knowledge and experience. The role of Scripture is to take the human experiences of sin, darkness, and death, and through the light of revelation, bring human beings to the fullness of life in Jesus Christ, to true freedom as sons and daughters of God.

Through humble, prayerful study, the teachings found in the Bible call us forth from darkness to light, from bondage to freedom, from death to life. This has been the experience of Christians throughout the history of the church and across the globe today, that these Scriptures reveal the pathway to salvation by bringing persons to the transforming knowledge and love of God in Christ Jesus. Realistically, homosexuality is a relatively minor issue in Scripture. Unquestionably, the Christian church can and should be in ministry with and to the homosexual community. It is not a question of whom the church will baptize or to whom the church will offer the Sacraments, but rather a question of what gospel will be preached.

If it is necessary to abandon the authoritative teaching of the Bible, then we have little to offer the homosexual community, and everyone else for that matter. When we dismiss the Bible's portrayal of sin, we must also discard the promises of new life and transformation found in the Bible. To alter our understanding of the human condition, we must be prepared to change the nature of God, the nature of salvation, and on and on. All of these concepts are inextricably linked in one cohesive and coherent story in the Scriptures. If we now abandon the gospel of the Scriptures, to accommodate cultural preferences, then we do not have the gospel of Jesus Christ, at least not a gospel recognizable to the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us.

In short, changing The United Methodist Church's position on homosexuality is like pulling a thread, which then unravels the entire fabric. The end result is, if salvific truth for this generation cannot be found in the Bible, it will be necessary to establish those contemporary writings that do have greater authority than Scripture and that do provide the means of grace for human beings, whether that be the *New England Journal of Medicine*, the *Journal of the American Psychiatric Association*, *The New York Times*, *Reader's Digest*, *Good Housekeeping*, or any other writing deemed to convey the truth necessary for our salvation. Our other option, of course, is to commit ourselves to the belief that nothing exists in our lives from which we need to be saved—a commitment of folly, for sure. However, that assumption is the driving force behind efforts to change the Church's position on homosexuality.

Because some persons feel a compelling urge for homosexual relations, the urge itself must be a natural inclination, thus wholly good and given by none other than God himself. By the same logic, virtually every sin that occurs in human life turns out not to be sinful. Human beings sin because we cannot think of anything better to do; we sin because sin is *natural* to us.⁹ The ancient Scriptures teach that the human condition is one of sin, and the vast majority of us experience the destructive reality of our sinfulness with great clarity on any given day. Tragically, there are few more measurably destructive behaviors—physically, psychologically and spiritually—than homosexuality. Only blind determination can hold to the conviction that one's natural inclinations are wholly good. It is ironic that this propensity for self-destruction is exactly how the Scriptures depict human nature, and it is from precisely this inclination and inevitability that we all must be saved. Scripture stands like a massive, immovable rock; we either cling to it in hope of salvation or run into it full speed ahead and bounce off in misery, claiming "there's nothing there."

The identity of the church throughout the ages has been built upon the writings found in Scripture. When the Bible we have ceases to be authoritative for our denomination, then we have to realize we have broken continuity with the historic church and the proclamation passed down through the ages. Although it seems highly unlikely, it is conceivable that we have found new truth greater than the gospel proclaimed by Christians everywhere for all time; but when we change the gospel, the Good News, then we

have changed religions. We can dress this other new truth up and call it Christianity, but no one from the second century, the eighth century, the fifteenth century, and no one from the churches of Africa or Asia would agree.

Although the debate within The United Methodist Church has focused almost exclusively on homosexuality, the far more serious underlying issue is the authority of Scripture, and it is this issue that must surface if we are ever to understand the full ramifications of the conflict in our denomination. The following quote from the senior pastor of a reconciling congregation makes abundantly clear the depth of the chasm between the two views of the authority of Scripture:

Now it is our turn to get honest. Although the creeds of our denomination pay lip service to the idea that Scripture is "authoritative" and "sufficient for faith and practice," many of us have moved far beyond that notion in our own theological thinking. We are only deceiving ourselves—and lying to our evangelical brothers and sisters—when we deny the shift we have made. . . . We have moved far beyond the idea that the Bible is exclusively normative and literally authoritative for our faith. To my thinking, that is good! What is bad is that we have tried to con ourselves and others by saying, "We haven't changed our position."¹⁰

What is at stake in the debate over homosexuality is what one believes Jesus Christ has to offer homosexual individuals, indeed all individuals. Either we are going to offer the gospel as revealed to us in Scripture, or we are going to offer a gospel of our own making, something that is already happening in far too many of our pulpits. That is why the debate is so ferocious and the conflict so relentless. The issue is not merely homosexuality; homosexuality is the starting point for a debate over the content of the Christian faith.

6. The Classic Christian Exegesis on Romans 1:22-28

1. This study presents selections largely taken from the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture on Romans*, formally cited as: *Romans*, ed. Gerald Bray, vol. 6, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, ed. Thomas C. Oden (Dowers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), hereafter cited as ACCS NT 6. I am deeply indebted to Gerald Bray for this superb translation of much previously inaccessible patristic material on Romans.
2. Augustine, *The Spirit and the Letter*, 19.12, in *Library of Christian Classics*, 26 vols., ed. J. Baillie et al. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953-66), 8:209.
3. Genadius of Constantinople, *Paulskommentare aus der griechischen Kirche: Aus Katenhandschriften gesammelt und herausgegeben* [Pauline Commentary from the Greek Church: Collected and Edited from Catena Writings], ed. K. Staab (Münster in Westfalen: Aschendorff, 1933), hereafter NTA.
4. Presumably by free volition.
5. Ambrosiaster, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* [Commentary on Paul's Epistles], 90+ vols. (Vienna: Hoelder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1866-), 81:41, 43; hereafter CSEL.
6. Pelagius, *Pelagius's Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Theodore de Brynn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 67; hereafter PCR. ACCS NT 6:49.
7. Augustine, *Augustine on Romans: Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans*, *Unfinished Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, ed. Paul Fredriksen Landes (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1982), 3; hereafter AOR. ACCS NT 6:41.
8. Augustine, *On Nature and Grace*, in *Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* 100+ vols. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1947), 86:39; hereafter FC. ACCS NT 6:41.
9. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans* 3, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 14 vols., ed. Philip Schaff et al. (Buffalo, N.Y.: Christian Literature, 1887-94; Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans, 1989-94), 11:352-53; hereafter NPNF. ACCS NT 6:43.
10. Theodoret, *Interpretation of the Letter to the Romans*, in *Patrologia Graeca*, 166 vols., ed. Jacques-Paul Migne (Paris: Migne, 1857-86), 82:64; hereafter PG. ACCS NT 6:45.
11. Romans 1:24 RSV.
12. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans* 3, in NPNF 11:354; ACCS NT 6:44.
13. Origen, *Commentarii in Epistolam ad Romanos* [Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans], 5 vols., ed. T. Heither (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1990-95), 1:144; hereafter CER. ACCS NT 6:43.
14. Pseudo-Constantinus, *The Holy Letter of St. Paul to the Romans*, in *Ein neuer Paulus-text und Kommentar* [A New Pauline Text and Commentary], 2 vols., vols. 7 and 8 of *Vetus Latina* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1974), 2:25-26; hereafter ENPK. ACCS NT 6:44.
15. Augustine, *Letters* 187.29, in FC 30:243; ACCS NT 6:46.
16. Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Paul's Epistles*, in CSEL 81:49; ACCS NT 6:44.

17. *Ibid.*, 81:51, italics added; ACCS NT 6:46-47.
 18. Pelagius, PCR 67; ACCS NT 6:48.
 19. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans* 4, in NPNF 11:356, italics added; ACCS NT 6:47.
 20. *Ibid.*; ACCS NT 6:47.
 21. Pseudo-Constantinus, *Holy Letter of St. Paul to the Romans*, in ENPK 2:26; ACCS NT 6:47.
 22. Pelagius, PCR 67; ACCS NT 6:47.
 23. Terullian, *The Chapter, in Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols., ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo, N.Y.: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885-96; Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans, 1951-56; 1978-80), 3:96; hereafter ANF. ACCS NT 6:46.
 24. Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Paul's Epistles*, in CSEL 81:51; ACCS NT 6:47.
 25. Cyprian, *To Donatus* 9, in FC 36:14-15; ACCS NT 6:47.
 26. Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Paul's Epistles*, in CSEL 81:53; ACCS NT 6:47.
 27. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans* 4, in NPNF 11:356; ACCS NT 6:48.
 28. *Ibid.*, NPNF 11:356-57; ACCS NT 6:48.
 29. Cyprian, *To Donatus* 9, in FC 36:15; ACCS NT 6:47.
 30. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans* 4, in NPNF 11:356; ACCS NT 6:48.
 31. *Ibid.*, NPNF 11:355-56; ACCS NT 6:47.
 32. Origen, CER 1:156, 158; ACCS NT 6:46.
 33. Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Paul's Epistles*, in CSEL 81:53; ACCS NT 6:48.
 34. *Ibid.*; ACCS NT 6:49.
 35. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans* 5, in NPNF 11:360; ACCS NT 6:49.
 36. Manicheans, who viewed the flesh as such as evil.
 37. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans* 5, in NPNF 11:359; ACCS NT 6:48.
 38. Genadius of Constantinople, *Pauline Commentary from the Greek Church*, in NTA 15:359; ACCS NT 6:49.
 39. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans* 4, in NPNF 11:355. ACCS NT 6:47.
- 7. The Real Disagreement**
1. 1 Timothy 2:11-12.
 2. See especially Romans 16:3-16 for an accessible and extensive, if not exhaustive, list.
 3. Compare the absence of homosexual leadership to such role models as Ruth, Esther, Deborah, Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary who sat at the feet of Jesus, the first evangelist in the Samaritan woman at the well, among others. There is a multitude of examples of women who are lifted up as examples of faithfulness, obedience, and leadership and not one corresponding example of a homosexual viewed in like manner.
 4. It would be unfair not to acknowledge that some contemporary scholars have offered creative interpretations redefining the expression of homosexual acts in ancient culture to overcome negative biblical references. However, a full discussion of those proposals is beyond the scope of this essay.

5. Synod of Carthage, A.D. 394.
6. Given the claim that the Bible is authoritative for issues addressed specifically, it is easy to draw the mistaken conclusion that it is likewise unscriptural and therefore inappropriate to ordain women, an issue discussed earlier in the essay. However, that conclusion does not necessarily follow. Ordination falls under the rubric of church order and administration, which is not clearly defined in the Bible and is subject to change in accordance with the ebb and flow of the needs of the church, i.e.: the current task force assessing change to the structure of UM administration. Moreover, gender is amoral; that is, the capacity for new life in Jesus Christ, as well as transformation and sanctification, is unrelated to gender, although closely related to sexuality. Sexual immorality in either gender is seen to be a serious obstacle to growth in the life of Christ for the individual, while gender is irrelevant to the process. Finally, as mentioned earlier, there are biblical precedents for women in leadership in both the Old and New Testaments, but there is no comparable evidence of or role model for gay or lesbian spiritual leadership anywhere in the Bible.
7. Certainly, recent years have witnessed an impressive and exciting resurgence of scholarship not only defending the rationality of belief in God but also the belief in God's self-disclosure; however, while gaining respectability, that scholarship remains somewhat marginalized and inaccessible in the academy.
8. Article V, Par. 103, p. 60. "The Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man that it should be believed as an article of faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation."
9. The Rev. Keele Cropper observed that, while raising his sons, he did not teach them to lie; the ability occurred spontaneously during their childhood. Lying came very naturally to them, an observation almost universally experienced by other parents as well.
10. Tom Griffith, "Give a Cheer for Our Evangelical Brothers and Sisters," *Open Hands*, (Winter 1995): 14.

8. The Creation/Covenant Design for Marriage and Sexuality

1. John Stott, *Same-Sex Partnerships? A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1998), 36.
2. Thomas E. Schmidt, *Straight & Narrow? Compassion & Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 47.
3. From Michael Swift, "For the Homoerotic Order," *Gay Community News* (15 February 1987). Quoted in Marshall Kirk and Hunter Madsden, *After the Ball: How America Will Conquer Its Fear and Hatred of Gays in the 90s* (New York: Plume Books, 1989), 361.
4. Kirk and Madsden, *After the Ball*, 361-66.
5. Schmidt, *Straight & Narrow*, 50.
6. Ibid.
7. Stott, *Same-Sex Partnerships*, 71.
8. David Seamands, *Good News* (January-February 1992), 16.

9. Contentious Conversations

1. *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1988), Par. 304.3, 304.6f; 332.6.
2. John Leo, "Is There an Echo?" *US News & World Report* (July 23, 2001).
3. Tom W. Smith, "Adult Sexual Behavior in 1989: Number of Partners, Frequency of Intercourse and Risk of AIDS," *Family Planning Perspectives* 23, no. 3 (May/June 1991): 102.
4. Sally B. Geis, "The Human Faces of Homosexuality," in *Caught in the Crossfire: Helping Christians Debate Homosexuality*, ed. Sally B. Geis and Donald E. Messer (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 33-34.
5. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the nature of sin and whether committed sins are the cause or the evidence of human sinfulness. See Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 383-87.
6. See *Journal of Homosexuality* 20, nos. 1-2 (1990).
7. Description in paragraph 71 of the 1988 *Book of Discipline*.

10. Homosexuality in the Postmodern World

1. Guralnik, D. B., ed., *Webster's New World Dictionary* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), s.v. homosexuality.
2. Neil Whitehead and Brian Whitehead, *My Genes Made Me Do It! A Scientific Look at Sexual Orientation* (Lafayette, La.: Huntington House Publishers, 1999).
3. For a discussion of the changes in psychiatric/psychological attitudes toward homosexuality in the twentieth century, read H. Newton Malony, "Changes in Attitudes Toward Homosexuality Among Mental Health Professionals: What Pastoral Counselors Need to Know," *American Journal of Pastoral Counseling* 3, nos. 3-4 (2001): 23-36. Further, see the Division 44 of the APA report "Guidelines for Psychotherapy with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients" in *American Psychologist* (2001): 1440-51.
4. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1956).
5. The most recent publications asserting the biblical support for disapproval of homosexual practice are *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* by Robert Gagnon (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), and *Homosexuality: Contemporary Claims Examined in Light of the Bible and Other Ancient Literature and Law* by James B. De Young (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 2000). Both are well researched and erudite.
6. This distinction between erotic and other types of relationships can be seen in Leviticus 18, in which types of relationships other than husband and wife are eschewed. Although a number of chapters in this section of Leviticus are concerned with ritual behavior, dietary laws, and clothing, the eighteenth chapter clearly states that its teachings pertain to daily life. These rules are to be followed in order that the Israelites may not live as those around them, that