

A Letter to Louise

A Biblical Affirmation of Homosexuality

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INTRODUCTION

I have been asked if Louise is real. Yes, and this was a real letter to her. Shortly after I had gone to my first pastorate out of the seminary, Louise invited my wife, Anna Marie, and me to have Sunday dinner with her family. That was over 50 years ago, and she has been one of our dearest friends ever since.

The last time we visited her she told me what I have related in the first sentence of this Letter. At that time I really knew nothing about homosexuality. I did have some suppositions— quite negative—and had never thought I needed to study it. But her words made me want to know as much as I could learn about it.

When I began reading I soon realized things about myself I now deplore: I was *ignorant* of the many facts about homosexuality and what the Bible says about it. Without facts I had pre-judged it; I was *prejudiced*. With little thought *I had read into the Bible* what I presumed it ought to say instead of reading out of it what it does say. *My idea of not needing to study* the subject was pure anti-intellectualism. I am now grateful to God that He led me to study.

I read some two score books, most by eminent sociologists, psychologists and theologians. Then I wrote this letter to Louise, reflecting what I now have come to believe is the truth about homosexuality, what the Bible says and what God wants us to think and do about it.

Now I want others to study seriously this matter of such importance to many lives and many churches and denominations. I asked for and received Louise's permission to share the Letter with others. I pray it may be helpful.

Bruce W. Lowe

January 2002

A LETTER TO LOUISE

To: Louise, dear friend, beloved of God

From: Bruce, by the immeasurable grace of God, a brother in Christ

Your heavy-hearted words to Anna Marie and me the last time we saw you will always burn in our hearts: “My brother hates God because God made him gay, and he knows he is going to hell, and I do, too, for that is what the Bible says.” I struggled for a response, realizing suddenly that what I knew about gays and what the Bible says about them was very superficial. Anna Marie’s immediate response to you was, “No one will go to hell who puts his faith in Jesus Christ.” How gloriously true! Whatever else the Bible says or doesn’t say, homosexuals are *not* necessarily going to hell.

I decided to give serious study to homosexuality and what the Bible says about it. Thank God! There was so much to learn about gays and lesbians—and the Bible—that I am so glad to have come to know. It distresses me, though, to realize that most others of our church people do not know these facts about homosexuality and what the Bible really says, and that their thinking, like my previous concept, is based on suppositions, not facts, and on feelings, which, of course, have no place in a thoughtful consideration of facts.

I am now convinced that the presumption that you and your brother have about his condemnation is unjustified. I have written out what I believe is clearly a correct interpretation of pertinent Biblical passages; it is Appendix B to this letter. A correct interpretation is dependent on following dependable principles of interpretation, so I discuss these principles in Appendix A. In the body of the letter I have put the convictions I have come to into ten statements that I believe you and I and your brother and our church families must come to understand about homosexuality and about gays and lesbians. But I know some will never accept them, so I have something I want to say to those people; I have made it Appendix C.

Forgive the length of this treatise, but I didn’t think I could address this matter adequately with fewer words. Also forgive the somewhat academic structure; I felt the nature of my study rather required it. I pray that this will give you some of the welcome insights my study has given me.

One. Homosexuality is an unchangeable nature; it is not a lifestyle choice.

Louise, this is an essential basis for understanding homosexuality. There may still be a few knowledgeable people who do not believe this, but practically all behavioral scientists now accept this statement as a fact. Down through history same-gender sex was universally considered to be acts by (*heterosexual*) people who had chosen to engage in perverted sex. Advances in the sciences, particularly psychology, in the last 100 years have shown that not all people are heterosexual; some are homosexual, and their homosexuality is an unchangeable nature, not a choice.

The concept of a homosexual nature first appeared in print in Europe in 1869 and in the United States in 1889. Acceptance of it spread slowly over the next 100 years. Freud accepted it and discussed homosexuality rather extensively in the first half of the twentieth century. The American Psychiatric Association (APA) officially recognized it in 1973 when it declassified homosexuality as being a mental illness. The American Psychological Association followed with similar action two years later.

Helmut Thielicke, a theologian conservatives respect highly and quote often, recognized in his work, *The Ethics of Sex*, written some forty years ago, that at least some gays and lesbians have “constitutional homosexuality,” and therefore we must “accept” the fact that it is “incurable,” that “our attitude toward [it] *changes*” [his italics]. and that it is “a divine dispensation” and “a talent that is to be invested (Luke 19:13f).”¹⁻¹

Evidence that homosexuality is unchangeable includes: (a) ten thousand suicides each year of young homosexuals unwilling to face life with that orientation; (b) the high percentage of homosexuals who go to psychotherapists desperately wanting to change their orientation, and then (c) the very small percentage of them reportedly being changed after hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars being spent in psychotherapy; (d) the millions of homosexuals who remain “in the closet,” not acting like homosexuals and not wanting anyone to learn of their orientation; (e) the thousands who are reported as coming to pastors and counselors devastated to have to recognize their unchangeable orientation and wanting assistance in dealing with it.

A few, after psychotherapy, report successful change. It is believed that most of these are not true homosexuals, but because of some trauma in childhood they adopted homosexual traits; with these, psychotherapy can often do away with the results of the trauma and lead the person back to his or her natural heterosexuality. The results of extensive psychotherapy with homosexuals who desperately wanted to change their orientation have been studied, and several books document the disheartening lack of success of their time, money and efforts. In 1998 the APA adopted a position opposing any therapy designed to change a person’s sexual orientation. The APA President stated, “There is no scientific evidence that reparative or conversion therapy is effective in changing a person’s sexual orientation. There is, however, evidence that this type of therapy can be destructive.”¹⁻²

Scientists and sociologists do not know what causes homosexuality, just as they don’t know what causes heterosexuality, but virtually all are convinced that whatever the cause, it is unchangeable. Homosexuals are homosexual by nature; it is never something they choose.

Two. All people are created in the image of God. The homosexuality of gays and lesbians, created by God, is good and not evil.

This is the second essential basis for coming to a right understanding of homosexuals. If I can say God made me as I am, a heterosexual, then homosexuals can say God made them as they are. If God made them that way, that way is good. If I am created in the image of God, *homosexuals are created in the image of God*. And if God has a purpose for every life, the lives of homosexuals have a God-given purpose. Then refusing to accept and affirm them in the same way we affirm others would be trying to thwart the purposes of God. Can we draw any other conclusion?

Some church people who are not accepting of gays and lesbians may say that homosexuality is an aberration of nature and that God doesn't want it, just as he doesn't want a child with Downs Syndrome because of the limitations it places on that child throughout life. But homosexuals have no physical or mental limitations, and there is nothing about the homosexual that can be defined as an aberration.

Some accept it as unchangeable but say it is like the predisposition to alcoholism—that a person with this predisposition is not to blame for having it, but since acting on it can lead to much destruction in many lives, the person is responsible for not acting on it and, if he becomes an alcoholic, needs to recover from it. New Testament professor Jeffrey Siker considers this analogy “not only useless but dangerous.” First, he says, the damaging effects of active alcoholism are readily apparent, but the APA ceased characterizing homosexuality as a disease “because there was no clinical evidence that homosexual activity resulted in any more destructive behaviors than was the case for persons engaging in heterosexual activity.” Further, we recognize that alcoholics need to “recover,” but homosexuals find nothing in their nature that they can change or need to recover from. Finally, alcoholism is a disease triggered by the act of drinking; the focus is on the act of either drinking or abstaining from drinking. Homosexuality is not an act, it is a nature. It is unfortunate that heterosexuals often focus on same-gender sex when they think about homosexuality, but—and this is why the analogy is dangerous—“to do so is to miss the point of the larger context of the relationship. It is to dehumanize and depersonalize gays and lesbians, caricaturing them only in terms of their sexual activities rather than seeing them as whole persons with lives that include more than sex.”²⁻¹

Dr. Siker says a better analogy is in the first Jewish Christians and their acceptance of the Gentiles. Jews considered Gentiles as unclean, polluted, idolatrous, and sinful—the same revulsion many church people feel for homosexuals. Before Gentiles could be accepted as Christians, many thought, they must first repent of being Gentiles, become Jews and obey Jewish laws such as Sabbath-keeping and kosher food; then they could become Christians. Like the Gentiles, homosexuals do not need to repent of being such; they just need to be accepted.²⁻²

Another analogy would be the left-handed person, created that way, different from others, but whose difference is in no way an aberration or predisposition and whose personhood is the same as that of others. There is no reason for not admitting that the homosexual is simply made in the image of God as is every other person. The only reasonable statement is that homosexuality is God-given and, therefore, with a God-given purpose. We should embrace gays and lesbians and mutually help one another achieve the purposes God has for us all.

Three. The homosexual is just as normal a person as a heterosexual and should not be thought of in sexual terms.

Evelyn Hooker, who taught psychology at UCLA, conducted the “...very first investigation into whether or not homosexuality was an illness that examined a population of ‘normal’ gay men—men who were not residents of mental hospitals, prisoners, or distressed patients in therapy [common subjects of study at that time], but ordinary people living ordinary, if closeted, lives....In 1956 Hooker presented her findings—that no psychological differences existed between homosexual and heterosexual men—before the annual meetings of the American Psychological Association.”³⁻¹

But do not most heterosexuals have the very narrow view that homosexuality means engaging in sex with a partner of the same gender? That is a gross distortion. The homosexual has all the interests and concerns in life that a heterosexual has. Whatever importance sex has for the heterosexual, it has the same importance for the homosexual—*no more, no less*. The best definition I have read of a homosexual is that he or she is a person who falls in love with someone of the same gender. What made me, a heterosexual, fall in love with a person of the opposite gender? I can't say—it is just some innate characteristic of my makeup. In the homosexual, that characteristic works differently for some yet unknown reason, and the falling-in-love process is directed at the same gender. But it is a true falling in love. It isn't a sexual thing for them any more that it is for heterosexuals.

While some homosexuals are sexually lustful and promiscuous, the percentage may actually be lower than that of heterosexuals. The pornographic industry, estimated at up to one hundred billion dollars a year, the gentlemen's clubs, the brothels, internet pornography, etc. are all supported by heterosexual lust. That industry annually lures two thousand teenage girls into prostitution in the city of Dallas alone.³⁻² Homosexuals have little interest in any of that widespread industry. Every fifteen minutes in America a heterosexual rapes a woman; homosexuals don't rape women or kidnap young girls or give birth to babies infected with AIDS. If we look at a heterosexual man or woman and do not immediately think of sex, then when we look at a gay or a lesbian, we should not immediately think of sex. They are people like us with the same needs and concerns, problems and failures and successes and sorrows and joys that we have, plus lots of problems that we do not have. What is a homosexual act? Examples: a gay man walking his dog or a lesbian fixing her supper.

Four. Several passages in the Bible speak of same-gender sex. *In every instance, the Bible is talking about heterosexuals who, filled with lust, have become sex perverts. The Bible says nothing about innate homosexuality as we know it today or about people who are homosexuals.*

Until the late nineteenth century, as already mentioned, the concept of homosexuality was totally unknown. No Bible writer knew of homosexuality, so *no Bible writer could have said anything about it*. When the Bible speaks of same-gender sex, it is always talking about *heterosexuals* who are given over to such lust that they commit lustful acts. There *cannot* be anything in the Bible that says anything about (unknown) homosexuality or homosexual people or acts by homosexuals.

No one questions the Bible's condemnation of sexual lust, and today that would be whether it was homosexual or heterosexual. Some want to say that same-gender sex acts are condemned by the Bible, and it doesn't matter by whom they are committed. No, lustful same-gender sex acts are. Heterosexual sex acts are also condemned by the Bible whenever they are lustful, but that doesn't mean all heterosexual sex acts are condemned. It is the lust that is condemned, not an act. If we recognize that opposite-gender sex can be either lustful and evil as in rape or be moral and beautiful as between loving spouses, we must recognize the possibility that same-gender sex can be moral and beautiful, as well as lustful and evil. (This is discussed further in Eight below.) The Bible says nothing about homosexual people being sent to hell.

Five. The burden imposed on homosexuals by society is a great evil. We should stand in revulsion against, and do all we can to oppose, the prejudice, the hatreds, and the condemnation of a society that make the homosexual's life so difficult.

Can Professor Stein be correct about America?: “The evidence is overwhelming that the United States is a society where there is a strong fear and a deep hatred of lesbians and gay men. This hatred and fear are manifested in discrimination and oppressive laws and social practices.”⁵⁻¹

The lynching of Blacks has almost passed, but not the lynching of gays and lesbians. Some one hundred hate-crime murders of gays and lesbians are recorded in the U.S. each year. Most receive little press. An exception was Matt Shepard—beaten and tied to a fence to die in Wyoming because he was gay. Shortly afterwards, gays and lesbians all over America received faxes, emails and phone calls saying, “Matt Shepard is dead; you may be next.” Two such murders have had books written about them. A man walking in a wilderness area in Pennsylvania observed from a distance two women camped there, and they were holding hands. He walked back to his truck for his rifle. One of the women survived his shooting and wrote the book, *Eight Bullets*.⁵⁻² (For the other book, see Six below.) Gays in a major city complained to the police that it was not safe for them to walk in their neighborhood. The police didn't believe them but finally had plain-clothes officers walk there as decoys. The officers, mistaken for gays, were attacked by men with baseball bats. Twelve men were finally arrested for homophobic attacks in that one neighborhood. An article in our paper a few days ago told of a man asking where the nearest gay bar was; he said he wanted to shoot some queers. A few minutes later he did. Such things are happening everywhere in America, and gays and lesbians live in constant anxiety about these kinds of hate crimes.

Homosexuals do not have the natural protection of the law that others have. There are nationwide laws against discrimination on the basis of race and national origin, but only one-fifth of our states have laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation—there is no federal law. The U.S. Supreme Court has upheld laws in two states making same-gender sex illegal. A Dallas judge gave a light sentence to a murderer explaining that the victim was only a homosexual. What encouragement is thus given to gay-bashers! The hatred gays and lesbians encounter, added to the psychological problems most face in accepting their homosexuality, make many of them live in an ever-present milieu that borders on trauma.

Psychotherapist John J. McNeill writes,

Many problems... make a positive adjustment to a [homosexual] life extremely difficult. Among these difficulties can be enumerated the agonies of remorse and self-torture over what typical homosexuals feel to be their immoral desires, whether these arise from conscious identity with the condemnations of Church and society or from neurotic conflicts within themselves; their openness to blackmail and other forms of intimidation; their status of being outside the normal protection of the law; their necessity continually to conceal what they frequently believe to be their true identity from public view, with the added threat that accidental revelation could result in loss of their job, expulsion from school, dishonorable discharge from military service, loss of future security and job opportunities, loss of friends and the respect of family and dependents. Still other problems involve their

propensity to sexual promiscuity [because they are] divorced from a complete and healthy interpersonal relationship; and the resulting tendency for sexual desires indulged in, but never fully satisfied, to occupy a disproportionate place in their life. Above all else, there is the very real threat of ultimate loneliness to one to whom all the normal structures of society - marriage, children, dependents, etc. - are closed. It should be noted, however, that all these negative aspects of homosexuality are not due to homosexuality as such, but are the results of both society's and the Church's attitude to the homosexual. All these rather common aspects of homosexual life can effectively paralyze all initiative, result in a feeling of inferiority, and lead to an emotional breakdown which could make social adjustment impossible.⁵⁻³

All of this hate is a sickness in our society that comes from ignorance about homosexuality. Our society must become informed, enlightened about it. Those who are involved in discussions in denominations and churches about it must study it and not speak from ignorance of it and the result of ignorance: prejudice.

Six. Homosexuals are being sinned against by our churches. Like our society, our churches need to change.

“Kill a Queer for Christ”

I added the italics, foolishly; what italics are needed for such a statement. In your small town you probably have not seen that cleverly alliterative bumper sticker. For you and me it is unbelievable, unreal. Sadly, it is very real.

The thinking shown in the bumper sticker and the position of many churches and their pastors abets the crimes against gays and lesbians. Peter Gomes, Professor of Christian Morals at Harvard, says, “The combination of ignorance and prejudice under the guise of morality makes the religious community, and its abuse of scripture in this regard, itself morally culpable.”⁶⁻¹ He relates this:

In preparing for her novel *The Drowning of Stephen Jones*, based upon the true story of a young gay man tossed from a bridge to his death by a group of young gay-bashers, author Bette Greene interviewed more than four hundred young men in jail for various forms of gay-bashing. Few of the men, she noted, showed any remorse for their crimes. Few saw anything morally wrong with their crimes, and more than a few of them told her that they were justified in their opinions and in their actions by the religious traditions from which they came. Homosexuality was wrong and against the Bible. One of those interviewed told her that the pastor of his church had said that homosexuals represented Satan and the Devil. The implication of his logic was clear: Who could possibly do wrong in destroying Satan and all of his works? The legitimization of violence against homosexuals and Jews and women and blacks, as we have seen, comes from the view that the Bible stigmatizes these people, thereby making them fair game. If the Bible expresses such a prejudice, then it certainly cannot be wrong to act on that prejudice. This is the argument every anti-Semite and racist has used with demonstrably devastating consequences, as our social history all too vividly shows.⁶⁻²

When the funeral of Matt Shepard (above) was held, a Baptist preacher from Kansas with sympathizers from several states were there marching in front of the funeral site with placards reading, “God Hates Fags” and “Fag Matt in Hell.” It is some consolation to know that the people of the town formed themselves into a wall between the marchers and the family, and when the marchers began to cry out their messages, the people sang “Amazing Grace.” (“Fag,” short for “faggot,” originated several centuries ago in Europe when people who had engaged in same-gender sex were burned at the stake.)

In the summer of 1998 fundamentalist Christian organizations, fearful of the consideration by some states of recognizing same-gender marriage, spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on ads in major newspapers telling the nation that gays and lesbians are “sick” and “sinful,” that they can and should be “cured,” and that *their rights and protections should be denied*.⁶⁻³

Louise, one of the first things I realized when I started to think about this subject was that the millions of gays and lesbians in this nation will never, with few exceptions, darken the doors of our churches, because they know our attitude toward them is one of hatred and condemnation. Is “hatred” too strong a word? A few years ago a Baptist church in Austin ordained a homosexual, and the leaders of the Baptist General Convention of Texas asked the church to disassociate itself from the Convention. The next day *The Dallas Morning News* ran this two-column headline: “Baptist General Convention Reasserts Its Hatred of Gays, Lesbians.”⁶⁻⁴ We may piously say that we don’t hate the sinner, only the sin, but the newspaper believed it just the way it was printed, and gays and lesbians do, too.

A writer says, “Those of us who have published opinion pieces in favor of gay equality can testify that most of the hate mail we get cites religious justifications for the hate.”⁶⁻⁵

A gay and a straight man worked together and became close friends. Then the straight man became a Christian. When his friend learned about it, he was concerned and asked, “Now that you are a Christian, will you still love me?” Isn’t that a tragic question? What did this man think about Christians that made him ask that? The Christian has a love that transcends anything known by the world, *doesn’t he/she?* Yet how many Christians would desert such a friendship? *Christians!* Jesus’ love included; our lack of love excludes. I have read that Carl Sandburg was once asked what he thought was the ugliest word in the English language. He thought for a minute and replied, “Exclusion.”

Our churches need to change, for the churches ought to be havens for gays and lesbians from the insufferable burdens they bear constantly. But when the world believes that churches despise and condemn homosexuals, those who hate them find encouragement. Fundamentalists such as Southern Baptists and Catholics promote the problems seemingly with a vengeance, declaring homosexuality itself a sin.⁶⁻⁶ Even the mainstream denominations do to a great extent as we read frequently in the papers. Most denominations are discussing it openly; without exception they are divided in their thinking, and the news reports of the discussions publicize the negative rhetoric along with the positive. This subject so needs to be examined and discussed at length in our churches, without passion and with open minds. I believe what I am stating in this letter will be the truth the churches will discover. Then they must act on and proclaim that truth.

When the story of the Holocaust became more fully known, there was recognition that the sin of the Nazis was not the only sin involved—there was the silence on the part of the churches and of other nations as they learned about it during the war. When we know of the hate and the hate-crimes against lesbians and gays, we should not be silent; we have a responsibility to fight it. Our silence encourages it and makes us guilty.

Pastor Paul Duke is preaching about the sufferings of gays and lesbians:

Whose fault is this? It's the fault of us all. It's the fault of any of us who make jokes about gay people, who insult them with the use of demeaning names. It's the fault of us who are silent when others do these things or when they publish lies about what homosexuality is. And it's the fault of us who don't provide a safe place and a caring response to those of homosexual orientation. Who knows how many hundreds of thousands of lives have been lost - to violence, to suicide, to drugs, to promiscuity, to AIDS, to shattered self-esteem, to life forever outside the doors of the church - because we have participated in or by silence colluded with the demeaning and the ostracizing of homosexual people. In this respect there is blood on the hands of the church. And that's what has driven me more than anything else to talk with you as I am doing. I have had a vision of Christ at the judgment asking, "Why were you silent?" Why has the church abandoned these children of God to despair and to death? When people are lost and dying by the millions you don't pontificate about sexual morality, you reach out to them, you give them a safe place, you listen, you talk, you love with the love of Christ.⁶⁻⁷

You and I realize that the people in our churches are ignorant about the truths I have already stated about homosexuals and homosexuality. They must be made to realize that honesty and integrity demand they make judgments on the basis of knowledge and not on groundless feelings and prejudice. It's like the race hatreds and segregated churches of a few decades ago; most church people know better now and our churches are at least open to all. The same must happen with this issue. I think of the homespun philosopher Josh Billings' saying, "The longer I live the more I find it necessary to reexamine those things about which I was once most certain." The church can't begin its reexamination too soon.

I've given a lot of space to the church here, but that's where we both have our hearts. And our churches are so terribly wrong here, just as they were in the sixties with the race issue and 150 years ago with slavery. All the wonderful things our churches are doing and the immeasurable importance they are to our society can't cover up our woeful failures in this matter.

Seven. Gays and lesbians in general have the potential for outstanding character and accomplishment; some may have greater potential than most heterosexuals to be exceptional persons.

It is well known that while certain characteristics are dominant in men and others dominant in women, all people have some of both characteristics. Psychologists have found that the gay man has an exceptional supply of feminine characteristics (enough that he falls in love with a man -?), and the lesbian has an exceptional supply of male characteristics (enough that she falls in love with a woman -?). Psychologists are recognizing that this special combination of characteristics in homosexuals often results in their having exceptional potential.

Psychologist Mark Friedman, from a series of tests administered to both gays and lesbians, found that the homosexuals he tested were superior to their heterosexual counterparts in such psychological qualities as autonomy, spontaneity, orientation toward the present, and increased sensitivity to the value of the person.⁷⁻¹ Thielicke remarked that the homosexual “is frequently gifted with a remarkable heightened sense of empathy.”⁷⁻²

The eminent psychologist Jung gives five very positive aspects of the homosexual male:

- This [homosexuality] gives him a great capacity for friendship, which often creates ties of astonishing tenderness between men, and may even rescue friendship between the sexes from its limbo of the impossible.
- He may have good taste and an aesthetic sense which are fostered by the presence of a feminine streak.
- Then, he may be supremely gifted as a teacher because of his almost feminine insight and tact.
- He is likely to have a feeling for history, and to be conservative in the best sense and cherish the values of the past.
- Often he is endowed with a wealth of religious feelings, which help him to bring the *ecclesia spiritualis* [the spiritual church] into reality, and a spiritual receptivity which makes him responsive to revelation.⁷⁻³

A special hope for homosexual influence on society is expressed by McNeill:

There is no doubt that the homosexual man is freer to develop aesthetic values than is his male counterpart in the heterosexual world, and thus he has an important role to play in guiding humanity to a deeper appreciation of aesthetic values.... There is the hopeful possibility that the homosexual community could serve the human community as a whole by making the male free to do works of service in the human community without feeling guilty about betraying the standards of his male identity.⁷⁻⁴

Many writers speak of the contributions gays and lesbians have made to our world and name dozens of examples, some of the world’s most famous statesmen, artists, writers, musicians, etc., present and past. While gays and lesbians make up probably 4%–6% of the population, a study of the biographies of 1004 eminent people found 11% of them to be homosexual or bisexual, with certain categories higher: 24% of poets, 21% of fiction writers, and 15% of artists and musicians.⁷⁻⁵

Louise, it seems as though one ought to look on a gay or a lesbian as potentially a very special person made that way by God, one we should seek out, especially for our churches.

Eight. It is not only unrealistic to expect homosexuals to live without sex, but also it is psychologically harmful to them for them to do so.

Now we are face to face with the question of what is moral in sex expression. In so many people's minds, the whole meaning of homosexuality is immoral sex. And that is evil, they say, because sex must be between male and female, and it is evil because sex must be in marriage; it is as simple and black and white as that. But nothing as complex as sex, which plumbs both the heights of beauty and the depths of ugliness, can be simple, and no black and white rule can touch it. Professor Kathy Rudy says, "Christian ethicists, moral theologians, and religious leaders throughout the ages have spent an enormous amount of time and energy thinking about when sex can be considered moral and when it cannot."⁸⁻¹

Theologian James B. Nelson writes,

Even on such a major issue as sexual intercourse between unmarried consenting adults there is no explicit prohibition in either Hebrew Scripture or the New Testament (which John Calvin discovered to his consternation). Indeed, the Song of Solomon celebrates one such relationship. I believe that our best biblical scholarship reaches Walter Wink's conclusion: "There is no biblical sex ethic. The Bible knows only a love ethic, which is constantly being brought to bear on whatever sexual mores are dominant in any given country, or culture, or period."⁸⁻²

One reason theologians and Christian ethicists have difficulty finding a sex ethic in the Bible is that the Bible's condemnation of sexual acts is always associated with selfish lust, with nothing said about a loving sex life. Further, the Bible does not say that moral sex is confined to what we understand marriage to be. For example, David and Solomon, beloved and used by God, were polygamists. Solomon had hundreds of mistresses. A pastor is found to have one mistress, and he is quickly gone. (This is not to comment on whether he should or should not be, only to point out the contrast between our concepts and a Biblical example.) Some New Testament Christians, church members, obviously were not "the husband of one wife" or I Timothy 3:2 would not have been written.

Must sex be between male and female? One act of sex must be. Is that all of sex, or for heterosexuals does sex—let's think only of beautiful sex—involve many other acts, some of which sometimes become more important than that one act? Does marriage make sex beautiful and moral? Even those who insist that sex must be only in marriage admit that there is often immoral sex within marriage—selfishness, exploitation, even rape. So the marriage certificate is not what determines whether sex is moral or immoral. Then we must say that if legality is not the criterion for the morality of sex, lack of legality cannot be the criterion for its immorality.

McNeill speaks to this:

The average person has associated and confused the question of the *morality* of sexual conduct with the question of its objective *legal* status. The reason for this confusion is, in part, that one finds a very easily applied objective norm: sex before marriage is wrong; sex after marriage is right.... There is something more to the moral quality of sexual behavior than the purely objective legal question of marriage... Something else ought to be present; that something else is love.... The human conforms to the divine image revealed in Christ not by acting in an impersonal, rational way, but by acting from a motive of love.⁸⁻³

Nelson, Wink, and McNeill say love is the criterion. At least we can know that the definition is not in either a certificate or a specific sex act but is somewhere in the heart and mind of the participants. This does not define moral sex, but it tells us that the definition is not in an objective rule, but in the subjective psyche of the participants. Since the minds and hearts of gays and lesbians are in no way limited, are no different from the minds and hearts of heterosexuals, they can have the same criteria as heterosexuals for a moral sex act.

These things clearly indicate that requiring celibacy of gays and lesbians cannot be supported by the Bible, is unjustifiable from an ethical standpoint, and can be damaging psychologically. Many psychiatrists believe (a) it is wrong to consign a person to such isolation and loneliness, one who is thus cut off from close relationships with either sex, not temporarily but until death; (b) it is unrealistic to expect this for it is virtually impossible for it to be done; (c) many of those who attempt to do this do so for pathological reasons; (d) the “almost inevitable results [of attempting celibacy] will be tragic in terms of suffering, guilt, and mental disorder;” and (e) growth and maturity require deep and committed relationships in one’s life.⁸⁻⁴

I wondered about pathology in attempts at celibacy until I read McNeill’s statement:

In my experience as a psychotherapist, I have found that the vast majority of people living out a life of abstinence do so for pathological reasons. Many have interiorized the homophobia of the surrounding culture and the Church and as a consequence hate and fear their sexual feelings....Others live out a life of abstinence because of serious trauma to their capacity for intimacy with another human....Those who have repressed or denied their homosexual feelings for pathological reasons are the ones in greatest danger of acting out those needs compulsively, imprudently, and unconsciously, seeking punishment for what they see as their crime....I would heartily advise all gay people to develop the most intimate and committed relationship possible for them.⁸⁻⁵

It would seem that a sound scriptural argument against requiring celibacy would be Paul’s writing clearly in I Cor. 7:9 that he does not expect all the church people to be able to be celibate even for the brief time before the (expected) return of Christ. Some commentators suggest that I Tim. 4:1–4, in speaking of marriage being good and not to be denied because “everything created by God is good,” would include homosexual marriage because God created homosexuality.

Highly respected theologians are coming to the conclusion that gays and lesbians need to develop intimate and committed relationships. Thieliicke: “It is true that the homosexual relationship is... very certainly a search for the totality of the other *human being*. [Italics his] He who says otherwise has not yet observed the possible human depth of a homoerotic-colored friendship.”⁸⁻⁶ McNeill: “A general consideration of scriptural data concerning sexual behavior leads to only one certain conclusion: those sexual relations can be justified morally which are a true expression of human love. The call of the Gospel is not one of conforming passively to biological givens; rather, that call is to transform and humanize the natural order through the power to love.”⁸⁻⁷

William Barclay, whose commentaries on the books of the New Testament have sold over a million copies, has this comment on celibacy: “Sex is a part of life and the deliberate annihilation of it is not a virtue; it is a criticism of life as God made it and meant it to be.”⁸⁻⁸ McNeill believes, “Only a sadistic God would create millions of humans as gay with no choice in the matter and no hope of changing and then deny them the right to express their gayness in a loving relationship for the rest of their lives under threat of eternal damnation.”⁸⁻⁹

Historical theology professor Rosemary Reuther writes:

Once sex is no longer confined to procreative genital acts and masculinity and femininity are exposed as social ideologies, then it is no longer possible to argue that sex/love between two persons of the same sex cannot be a valid embrace of bodily selves expressing love. If sex/love is centered primarily on communion between two persons rather than on biological concepts of procreative complementarity, then the love of two persons of the same sex need be no less than that of two persons of the opposite sex. Nor need their experience of ecstatic bodily communion be less valuable.⁸⁻¹⁰

One of the earliest affirmations of this that I found is a statement made by Quakers back in 1963: “... the Quaker committee, after a long study of homosexuality, drew the conclusion: ‘Surely it is the nature and quality of a relation that matters; one must not judge it by its outer appearance but its inner worth. Homosexual affection can be as selfless as heterosexual affection, and, therefore, we cannot see that it is in some way morally worse.’”⁸⁻¹¹

In 1975 a symposium on homosexuality at the annual meeting of the Christian Association for Psychological Studies [note *Christian Association*] reported that behavioral science research and the realities of their clinical practice had forced them to propose that while promiscuity, fornication, and adultery should be regarded as sinful for both homosexual and heterosexual persons, a loving, committed, permanent relationship between two persons of the same sex was in an entirely different category and was not condemned in Scripture, and that Christians burdened with an involuntary homosexual orientation could choose a committed homosexual relationship as within God’s will rather than an unwanted celibacy.⁸⁻¹²

If I can believe as I do, that gays and lesbians can have in their hearts and minds the criteria set forth here in their relationships, then I can believe, as I have come to, that they can engage in loving sex that is moral and that provides for their psychological needs—God-created needs—as celibacy cannot. And I can believe that their sexual love is not condemned by scripture, but is within the principles God expects us to live by.

You understand this is not a blanket approval of all homosexual sex. It is speaking of loving, committed relationships. I do not know what percentage of homosexuals are included here, but probably it is, unfortunately, a small percentage (10% in one large-scale study of gays.⁸⁻¹³) Many believe that number would increase if society accepted homosexuality for what it is and encouraged committed relationships, as it does heterosexual relationships.

Nine. Full acceptance by society, including the blessings and legality of marriage should be extended to gays and lesbians in the same way it is extended to others.

Louise, if it is moral as well as psychologically needful—a God-created need—for homosexuals to live as couples in committed relationships, as many theologians and psychologists have said it is, then homosexuals who are in loving, long-term, committed relationships should have the societal rights and privileges that marriage can give them. Following are some statements in this regard.

A graduate school history professor writes,

“Family” need not mean the traditional heterosexual family to the exclusion of all others....Gays and lesbians want the right to marry for the same reasons other Americans do: to gain the moral, legal, social and spiritual benefits conferred on the marrying couple and especially on their family unit. The material benefits of marriage are considerable, but it is the moral benefit that is especially attractive to many couples, including gay and lesbian ones. Marriage is, or can be, a moral commitment that two people make to one another. The marriage vow enshrines love, honor, respect, and mutual support and gives people access to resources and community acknowledgment that serve to strengthen their bond.⁹⁻¹

And Nava and Dawidoff say:

Marriage is not conditioned on the intention or the capacity to have children. Nothing in marriage, except custom, mandates partners of different genders. For example, [Yale historian] John Boswell notes that in ancient Rome ‘marriages between males and between females were legal and familiar among the upper classes.’ The institution of marriage in our society appears to be one that encourages monogamy as the basis for stable personal lives and as one aspect of the family. If we think about what marriage is for, it becomes clear that it is for people to find ways to live ordered, shared lives; it is intended to be the stablest possible unit of family life and a stable structure of intimacy.⁹⁻²

Noting Paul’s advice that it was better to marry than to burn, Theology professor Daniel C. Maguire points out as long as homosexual couples are denied marriage, “there is no alternative to burning.”⁹⁻³

Was it not God who said, “It is not good for man to be alone.” (Gen. 2:18)? James Nelson, Professor of Christian Ethics, believes that “same-sex relationships are fully capable of expressing God’s humanizing intentions,” and views the “homosexual problem” as “more truly a heterosexual problem” (of homophobia), just as the “woman problem” is a problem of “male sexism.”⁹⁻⁴

As I have discussed above, the Bible cannot be used to argue against this for the Bible has nothing to say about homosexual people. Here is a religious editor’s word in this connection:

Nor can the Bible be confidently cited in this debate. Certainly, the concept of same-sex marriage is not found in the Bible. But the concept of government by democracy is also not found in the Bible, only that of monarchy. On strictly biblical grounds, the doctrine of the divine right of kings has a firmer base than government by the people. Human experience, however, has led us to believe that democracy is not an illegitimate, unbiblical form of government. Since the biblical models of marriage range from polygamy at one end to celibacy on the other, we shall have to find our own way and not claim that the Bible permits only one model of marriage.⁹⁻⁵

Lesbians and gays have some interesting thoughts about same-gender relationships:

The fact that we are in a same-sex relationship means that the predetermination of roles by gender, sometimes so destructive a force in heterosexual relationships, is not relevant to our lives. Each member of a same-sex couple is free to act from individual interests, predilections, and skills, rather than having to choose between conforming to or rebelling against the cultural norm. We are able to see the mainstream culture from a greater distance and a healthier perspective. This means that we know that many of the oppressive messages of the culture are inapplicable to us, and that others are simply false or distorted. Thus, we are able to circumvent much of what is jokingly referred to as ‘The Battle of the Sexes’ - really, no joking matter at all. Ironically, it is the same-sex couple that can most clearly see itself as being composed of two human beings, whereas the heterosexual couple is constantly having to deal with the coercive personae of Man and Woman.⁹⁻⁶

Another lesbian says:

In many ways, we [lesbians] have an easier time of creating a truly egalitarian, mutual and mature relationship. In fact, some researchers are now beginning to look at the same-sex couple as a model for helping heterosexuals to create more human relationships. In contrast with heterosexuals, who often feel alienated from their mates, we need only look inside ourselves to know much about our lovers. We are able to relax with each other in a much more trusting way than can most straight couples. The inequities in our relationships are individually made ones, for the most part, and not a function of historically sanctioned power imbalances that have created the fear and hatred in which many women and men coexist today. In a lesbian couple, both women can freely develop strength and competence. In addition, having been socialized as women, we have been trained to be interpersonally sensitive, nurturant, gentle and compassionate. In a heterosexual relationship, these qualities are

used primarily to serve the man and to oppress the woman, who often must bear full responsibility for the emotional quality of the relationship. . . . These same attributes, however, can create a miraculously high-quality relationship when shared by two women who are matched in their capacities to share and to love.⁹⁻⁷

A gay philosophy professor at MIT observes:

Once we understand what marriage is, we can see what marriage would mean for us, and why it is worth fighting for. Same-sex marriage would not force anyone to honor or approve of gay or lesbian relationships against their will. But it would enable those of us who are involved in gay or lesbian relationships to get the rest of society to understand that we take these relationships just as seriously as heterosexual married couples take theirs. And without marriage, we remain second-class citizens - excluded, for no good reason, from participating in one of the basic institutions of society.⁹⁻⁸

There is an interesting note from church history.

[Noted church historian] John Boswell . . . has discovered that, whereas the church did not declare heterosexual marriage to be a sacrament until 1215 C.E., one of the Vatican Library's earliest Greek liturgical documents is a marriage ceremony for two persons of the same sex. The document dates to the fourth century, if not earlier. In other words, nine centuries before heterosexual marriage was declared a sacrament, the church liturgically celebrated same-sex covenants.⁹⁻⁹

Louise, this goes against everything I had ever thought about homosexuality—which I confess now was very little. But I pray for an open mind that puts truth first in my thinking. I see truth in all of the above. Regardless of what I have thought in the past, this is what I have to believe now. Josh Billings, thank you for your encouragement.

Ten. As in society, gays and lesbians should be accepted and affirmed in our churches and given any opportunity for service, including ordination, that others have.

You know that for the past decade or so most Protestant denominations have been debating whether to affirm, and especially whether to ordain, homosexuals. Many committees/commissions have been appointed to study the matter and make recommendations to their general denominational bodies or their churches. I have read of much of this activity and the reports. In every case that I can recall now the commissions have recommended just about what I have said in this discussion. Then when the commissions have brought their recommendations to the general assemblies/conventions or to their churches, their reports have been voted down.

I am impressed that those who have made a serious study of this matter—the members of the commissions—are in favor of affirming gays and lesbians, and that those who vote it down are the ones who have not studied it. If they vote it down because they have not studied it, then they are voting on the basis of pre-judging, that is, prejudice. Prejudging, prejudice, is evil. We need to put aside our prejudices and presuppositions, then seriously and open-mindedly study this matter.

Since there is no explicit instruction in the Bible about homosexual ordination, we must derive our belief from our understanding of the principles of the Bible. Dr. Tex S. Sample has this concept:

The question of their union - and celibacy and marriage as well, for that matter - is whether it serves the kingdom of God.... [There are three questions about ordination:] the first is whether one's union basically frustrates one's commitment to the kingdom of God.... The second issue for ordination is whether one's union, like marriage or celibacy, frees one for obedience to God and propels one to fulfill God's aims.... Finally, and perhaps most important, does the union itself bear witness to the covenantal reality of the kingdom of God?... When homosexual unions are faithful to God's rule, manifest its power, serve its aims and bespeak its hopes and joys, the basic question of readiness for ordained ministry has been met.¹⁰⁻¹

In 1973 the United Church of Christ's Executive Council urged the full acceptance of homosexual persons symbolized by ordination: "In the instance of considering a stated homosexual's candidacy for ordination the issue should not be his/her homosexuality as such, but rather the candidate's total view of human sexuality and his/her understanding of the morality of its use."¹⁰⁻² The UCC's national body has recently adopted this, the only mainline denomination to have such a policy at this time. In June 2001 the Presbyterian General Assembly voted to permit ordination of openly non-celibate gay clergy. This must be ratified by the 173 presbyteries.

Conservative theologian Stanley Grenz observes that homosexuality in itself should not be considered in selecting a candidate for ordination, because, "The texts that set down guidelines for the selection of officers focus on three basic prerequisites - giftedness for leadership, spirituality and character, and public reputation (e.g., I Tim. 3:1-13).... These criteria give central emphasis to the importance of one's present life of faith."¹⁰⁻³

And Richard Hays, although believing homosexuality to be sinful, notes that other sins are in the same list with homosexuality, and concludes, "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."¹⁰⁻⁴

Louise, surely any gay or lesbian who comes to our churches professing that Jesus Christ is Lord should be accepted and affirmed in every way just as you and I have been.

I have to believe deeply that these ten statements are true. The convictions have come from seriously studying this subject, and, thankfully, I now can feel enlightened about it. How I wish all our church members, especially all our pastors, would make such a study.

Now I know that gays and lesbians do not choose their orientation, for they are created by God, in his image with an unchangeable orientation which is good and with a God-given purpose. I know the love between gays and between lesbians is no less than that of others. I am convinced the Bible supports their loving, committed relationships, that there is no moral evil in such and that society and our churches should affirm them fully.

And homosexuals have those characteristics that give them some extraordinary potential in very desirable areas! If we would only accept them, respect them, affirm them and bring them out of their closets, they could give beauty and strength to society and our churches. It is not only sad, isn't it somewhat irresponsible that for a matter so important to so many people, to churches and to denominations, our churches and their members have never seriously studied what the Bible says and doesn't say about this matter? I am writing out below what I am thoroughly convinced is the correct understanding of scripture that may have relevance to this subject.

APPENDIX A

ON THE INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE

We Baptists believe that each person must interpret the Bible for himself or herself; we are not to let anyone else control our thinking about scripture. Surely there are some helpful guides for interpreting scripture, some principles that we should follow. I have selected a few of these to discuss briefly that I think are very important to our rightly understanding our Bible and perhaps especially the subject of homosexuality.

(1) Understanding the Bible is understanding what the *writer* wanted *his readers* to understand. This seems so obvious, but millions of Bible readers and thousands of preachers violate this principle constantly because when they look at a passage, they do not give a thought either to the author or to those to whom he wrote but immediately begin to decide what the words, by themselves, mean. Practically everyone is guilty of this. This leads to almost as many different ideas as there are readers. But the only truth in a passage is the truth the *writer* was trying to convey to readers who were *his contemporaries*. The New Testament scholar H. E. Dana, in his *Searching the Scriptures*, says, “The ultimate object which we seek in interpretation is the thought in the mind of the New Testament writer which sought expression in the written text.... We should seek to discover the one meaning which the writer had in mind, and then apply that meaning to our moral and religious experience.”^{A-1} This is a basic fact about the whole Bible, and it involves several things:

(a) The writer’s meaning comes out of *his* background. While the Bible is an inspired revelation of God, giving us “truth without any mixture of error” about God as the Baptist Faith and Message Statement says, God did not dictate; he let the authors of the books write out of their own consciousness and experience, using their own words (for example, the Greek of some NT writers was atrocious. Isn’t it wonderful how unimportant that was for God’s using them!). The Biblical author can write only out of his own culture, understandings and presuppositions. (Two presuppositions every writer in the Bible had were that everyone was heterosexual and that women were inferior.) People who have gone to church and Sunday school regularly usually know something about the writer’s circumstances. The problem often is not ignorance of the writer’s background but careless inattention to it.

(b) The writer’s meaning is determined by the background and situation of *those to whom he wrote*. Paul’s letter to Philemon is an obvious illustration of this. The scriptures were written to people who lived thousands of years ago. Everything the author wrote to them had in mind their culture, circumstances and needs. Do we read and with great earnestness ask, “What is Paul saying to me?” The answer: Nothing. He wasn’t writing to me. God is trying to say something to me through something he inspired Paul to write almost 2000 years ago to his (Paul’s) contemporaries to meet their first century needs. Paul was applying eternal, Christian principles to their needs. It is my task to see and understand these principles so that I can apply them to my 21st century life.

(c) Our understanding of the writer’s meaning is colored by *our own* culture, experiences, understandings, presuppositions, etc. It is easier for us to impose our culture on the first century writer and readers than it is to understand theirs, so I am sure our interpretations would often be unrecognizable by the writer. If you and I read the same thing, not just the Bible, our interpretations will often be different just because of our different

backgrounds and experiences. Which of us will be right? So many times I have stood in the vestibule after a service to speak to people as they left the church and had someone comment on something I had said in the sermon, only to think to myself, Where in the world did they get that? I didn't say anything like that! Many church members have such a *cultural* revulsion to the thought of same-gender sex that anything in the Bible about it is interpreted as its being the worst of revolting evils. So their thought is, "No homosexual could ever be welcomed to our church, he or she is just too vile." Actually, same-gender sex is in lists along with greed, envy, lying and gossip and is apparently neither better nor worse than those sins. Our culture's influence is what makes them different, not the Bible. (Now, does the list mean that lust is not very bad or that greed, envy, lying and gossip are just as vile in God's sight as lust? That is a serious question: How does God judge sin? The way we do? Appendix C below attempts to say a little about this.) We must try to keep our own background and culture out of our interpretations.

(d) Isn't it obvious and unquestionable that the Bible writers had a purpose for writing what they did? Our understanding of that purpose may be the most important thing about our understanding the meaning. As we read and watch the author fulfill his purpose, our understanding opens up. Whatever the author's purpose, it was for his *contemporaries*; he didn't have us in mind. Understanding why the writer was writing and what he wanted to accomplish will lead to our finding the principles and eternal truths in the writing.

(e) *The meaning of the author is not in his words (!)*; words are merely imperfect vehicles for use in transferring thought. I can still hear the great W. T. Connor raise his voice in my theology class: "The Bible does not mean what it says, it means what it means." And I also hear thoughtless, defensive cries, "My Bible means what it says!" No, *nothing ever written or spoken* means what it says, it *always* means what it means. Words are the best things we have for trying to transfer the thinking of one mind to the understanding of another mind. If we are face to face, gestures and tone of voice help, and we can ask, "What do you mean?" But if it is something written, we probably never get *exactly* what was in the writer's mind. Nevertheless, we must try, and remembering principles of interpretation helps.

Every principle of interpretation outlined here is violated when we lift words out of the Bible, out of their context, out of their culture, away from the writer's purpose, hold them up and declare, "This is what the Bible says!" An example of this evil is in pointing to Leviticus 18 or Romans 1 and declaring, "The Bible says homosexuals are going to hell." The words of the Bible, wonderful as they are, are still limited in transferring thought, but they are all the writer had for getting his thoughts to his readers. If we can possibly go behind the words to the mind of the writer, we can have a glorious revelation of God. If we stop with the words, we shall find and worship and proclaim only false gods. The right question never is, "What does this passage say?" It always is, "What does this passage mean?"

If all these things are not considered seriously, we shall have either no understanding of what we have read or a wrong understanding.

(2) As the points above indicate, what we must do is find *the central truth* or *God's eternal principle* in any passage we are studying. The words used to form the context are the media for giving us that truth. Unsupportable doctrines and practices are often formed from the setting in which the truth is couched or in peripherals of the truth, or first century practices are turned into rules for practice today. Women keeping silent in some churches and being obedient to their husbands, as Paul instructed, were not central truths of scripture, but practices that would keep the church and Christianity from being unnecessarily “discredited” in the first century’s culture (Titus 2:5). So the central, eternal truth is: Do not (in any century) unnecessarily engage in practices that would alienate unbelievers. Compare slavery. It is evil, but in the first century Paul wanted slaves to obey their masters “so that in every way they [slaves] will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive” (Titus 2:10).

(3) Nothing should ever be taken out of its whole context. Dr. Dana says, “No single sentence or verse should ever be interpreted independent of its logical connections. Interpretation should deal with whole sections, each section being considered from two angles: its connection with... and its contribution to the general progress of thought.”^{A-2} If we ignore the context, for example, then couples would not marry unless one of them “burned with lust,” then it would be OK to marry so the lust could be satisfied in a legal way (I Cor. 7:9)! And that is as ridiculous and repulsive as many of the ways “proof-texts” have had cults built around them. Paul thought Christ would return very shortly, so he was saying that since marriage would last for such a brief period, it was just better, if you were single, to stay as you were. When the time came that it was no longer so certain that couples would have only a brief time for marriage, Paul’s (scriptural) admonition was no longer considered applicable. It was not an eternal rule; it was for the conditions described in the context.

(4) A single passage should be interpreted in the light of the Bible as a whole. Peter said that if we believe and are baptized for the remission of our sins, we shall be saved (Acts 2:38). This *says* rather clearly that faith and baptism are the way to salvation. Baptists don’t believe he *meant* literally what the words say, for we know from the *whole* New Testament that baptism in itself has nothing to do with salvation. So now we know what he really meant and didn’t mean.

(5) *The Bible is not a rule book.* Grievous errors are made by those who believe it is. The Bible is a *record* that gives us a revelation of God by the writers’ having recorded their experiences with God, things that happened in the first and preceding centuries. I regret it now, but I’m sure I have said it a thousand times—you’ve heard me—“Jesus commanded us to do” so and so. Louise, I lied—well, it was at least misleading and careless of me. Jesus didn’t command my hearers or me to do anything; *We weren’t there.* But I contributed to the mistaken idea that any statement found in the Bible is a rule for us to follow today. What we need to do is find the eternal, central truth behind the “rules” and apply that truth to our 21st century circumstances. Many rules are eternal, but that is because of the eternal truth in them, and it is that truth we follow, not the rule that contained it. For example, Jesus didn’t command me to go into all the world; I wasn’t in the group that heard him that day. But when I read the *record* of that event, I understand God’s plan and that if I want to do God’s will in my age, I must do all I can to go into all the world, not because that is a rule to follow as a child follows a parent’s rule, but because it is my mature understanding of God’s plan and my place in it. We follow the fundamental truth, not a first century rule. If the Bible is a rule book, we should stone to death anyone who eats a cheeseburger (see below)!

Jesus and Paul made it clear that the rule of law was in the past and now we live by grace and the spirit, not the letter of the law. The Christian Jews stopped observing the Sabbath and worshipped on Sunday; one of the Ten Commandments was no longer a commandment for them! God himself told Peter that the laws regarding what food is clean and the law about not associating with Gentiles were no longer in effect (Acts 10:13-15). One reason the Jewish leaders hated Christ so much was his constant violation of the Sabbath laws. Jesus condemned the Pharisees for following the letter of the law in tithing every little thing but having “neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith” (Matt. 23:23). Paul has lengthy discussions about the laws of circumcision being useless to the Christian. This is his strong word about trying to obey law: “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” (Gal: 5:1) Instead, he says, we live by “faith working through love” (v. 6). Rom. 6:4 tells us we are “not under the law but under grace,” and Rom. 1:14 that “Christ is the end of the law,” and II Cor. 3:6 that “The letter kills, the spirit gives life,” and Gal. 5:14 that “The whole law is fulfilled in one word, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Legalism has no place in Christian living today, but much of it is already in our churches and it should be rooted out. Actually, the “law” of the spirit is the broader law. Consider how Jesus so greatly broadened the law against adultery. Now we see it is not only a lustful act but also a matter of a man’s thinking of a woman as a sex object rather than as a person (Matt. 5:28). Our wonderful Bible is a *revelation* of God through *records* of God’s experience with people of some centuries ago. It is not a book of rules for our lives today to be imposed on us from the outside; it is a book of spiritual principles from which we build our lives from the inside out. *It is not a rule book.*

(6) How do we move from the first century Bible to today? We have talked about principles, but applying the principles is not always easy. The Bible has nothing to say about much that we encounter in the twenty-first century, for example, innate homosexuality.

To begin with, we remember that we have the Holy Spirit promised to us for this task; we must always ponder the text and/or the subject in the posture of prayer to the Holy Spirit for guidance.

Because the Bible does not speak of many things we encounter today and yet we believe God wants to lead us in our decisions today, we realize that revelation did not end when the Bible was completed but is “living,” “dynamic,” meaning that each age or circumstance has new revelation for the new challenges. All our spiritual growth through learning more about God means the Holy Spirit has given us a new revelation.

Bible commentators still follow John Wesley’s pattern for finding God’s new revelation for the current time: consider (a) scripture, (b) tradition—how Christian churches have interpreted and applied scripture through history, (c) reason—Wesley thought religion and reason went together, that any irrational religion was false religion, and (d) experience—what produces Christlikeness in individual lives.

Then there is the final test. Christ is the perfect revelation of God, and he is the final and supreme criterion by which our concepts are to be judged and shaped. The principles he taught and exemplified as unchanging and eternal have to be met by our conclusions about the Bible's message for our lives. Commentators agree, "We must constantly hold the interpretations...up against the person of Christ, who is the final criterion for valid understanding."^{A-3} Our (1963) Baptist Faith and Message Statement says, "The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ."

An excellent example for seeing this "living" revelation is in our concept of slavery. The Bible supports slavery, mentioning it frequently with acceptance. Philemon was not told to free Onesimus. Slaves are repeatedly told to obey their masters (Eph. 6:5, Col. 3:22, I Tim. 6:1, Titus 2:9). Our revelation today is that in order to be Christian we must ignore the Bible's approval of slavery. We also know that we have to ignore tradition, for our churches supported slavery, at least in the South, until it was finally destroyed by a great civil war. By our reason/wisdom and our personal experience of seeing right and wrong and being a part of it, we came to recognize that the spirit and principles of Christ are found in the abolition of slavery. Most of us now recognize the same about segregation, but it took a civil war and congressional laws in this century to bring about the reason and experience to make us see the Christian truth about slavery and segregation. How sad! Why didn't our *churches* destroy slavery before it ever started in America? And why didn't our *churches* do away with segregation long ago? And where are our churches' blind spots today? (I am convinced that they include homosexuality and sexism.)

Another example of "living" revelation is in divorce, for our current beliefs go against Jesus' clear statement (Matt. 5:32, 19:9; Mark 10:11,12) that divorce and remarriage after divorce are adulterous. With this condemnation by Jesus, why do we sanction divorce and remarriage today? Conservative ethics professor Stanley Grenz summarizes the thinking of most scholars:

Situations arise in which God's ideal for marriage is being effaced and human failure and sin are causing great suffering.... At this stage, the principle of God's compassionate concern for the persons involved, God's intent to establish shalom (peace) or human wholeness, must take precedence over the concern to maintain the inviolability of marriage.... The church, as the redemptive community [has the] opportunity to model the compassion of the God of new beginnings.^{A-4}

We believe God blesses and uses many of those remarriages as he could never use the original marriage. I think many Bible principles go into our current belief about divorce and remarriage: love, forgiveness, the ideal of freedom for every individual, the value of God-given talents and the responsibility to develop and use them, etc. Psychological principles also are involved, which, if true, are God-given.

(Some would accept divorced people in the church but never ordain them. Dr. Grenz has an applicable word about this.

The past of every believer is marred by sin and failure. There are no righteous ones in the church. The disqualification of a believer from an office solely because a divorce is found in that person's past elevates this one expression of sin and failure to a status of sinfulness beyond all others....The texts that set down guidelines for the selection of officers focus on three basic prerequisites - giftedness for leadership, spirituality and character, and public reputation (e.g., I Tim. 3:1-13)...These criteria give central emphasis to the importance of one's present life of faith.^{A-5})

By our thinking about slavery and divorce are we *ignoring* the Bible? No, we are searching for its eternal principles and the best understanding we can have of Jesus Christ. This incredible, priceless Bible is not God's final revelation. Christ with his life and principles is the authentic revelation to be applied to every new age. Just as the Old Testament and its laws were reinterpreted by the New Testament, so the New Testament's applications to the first century are reinterpreted by Christ and his principles in the centuries after the New Testament.

The *relative* importance of the Bible to the life of Christ is indicated when we realize that those Christians who were said to have turned the world upside down for Christ in the first century (Acts 17:6) did not have a New Testament; it had not been written. They had *only* (!) a life-transforming experience with Jesus Christ and were living like him to the best of their understanding of him. (Do you suppose if we didn't have a New Testament to wrangle over and had only such an experience with Jesus Christ that we would do better at turning our world upside down for him?) Surely we can see that the important thing is to weigh every understanding of revelation—scripture, tradition, reason or experience—in the scales of Jesus Christ.

Interpreting scripture is surely one of the most glorious and rewarding privileges we have. It is worth making every effort we can to learn what eternal principles God was trying to give for all ages when he inspired writers long ago to write to their contemporaries.

Louise, let me preach a moment about a related evil. Failure to observe these principles of interpretation is so sad and damaging to the Kingdom not only regarding homosexuality but also regarding the ordination of women. The kingdom of God is denied the ministry of great women who have gifts for preaching the Word in a world that needs the Word preached every way possible. I am sure Satan laughs; he doesn't have to do a thing; he just lets God's church keep half of its members from preaching and ministering as pastors.

Those who so restrict women make the great and far-reaching mistake of ignoring the first century's culture [(1)(b) above]. The eastern half of the Roman empire had been infused with Greek culture following the conquests of Alexander the Great. Here women could not be in public without their husbands and should never speak with another man; the only woman who did talk with a man in public would be the man's paramour. Paul told the Christian women in this culture to submit to their husbands and not to talk in church, or they, presumed by unbelievers to be immoral, would make a Christian church appear to be a brothel. *Every such injunction for obedience and silence was to a church in this culture.* In the western half of the empire (and in Roman colonies in the eastern half), Roman culture prevailed; women had legal rights, could operate their own

businesses and could converse freely with anyone in public without being considered a prostitute. Paul rejoiced that the women in the churches in this culture contributed so much to spreading the gospel. In Romans 16 he speaks of several, calling Phoebe a deacon (using the same word he uses elsewhere for men) and saying that Junia is “prominent among the apostles.” He tells of Priscilla’s “expounding” the truths of Christianity to a man (Acts 18:26) and of two women in Philippi (a Roman colony) who labored alongside men in helping him in his work (Phil. 4:2-3). It is significant (and disheartening) that even in the Greek culture, since the church did understand that in Christ there is neither male nor female (Gal. 3:28), *women could pray and prophesy* (often meaning “preaching”) for that was not conversing with men, and so they were not considered immoral characters when they did this (e.g., I Cor. 11:4; Acts 21:9)!

The failure to ordain women in our culture is unbiblical, and it is hindering the kingdom of God. The humble following of basic principles of interpretation would eliminate this evil.^{A-6}

In our treatment of homosexuals and women are two great mistakes from misinterpretation of the Bible. How many minor ones are there in our churches and in our individual lives?

APPENDIX B

THE BIBLE AND HOMOSEXUALITY

As stated above, until 1869 there was no written idea of homosexuality being an innate part of one's nature. Until that time it was believed that all people were heterosexual, but some were so perverted that they engaged in same-gender sex. When the Bible writers talked on this subject, within their culture and understanding, that is what they were talking about—that kind of *heterosexuality*.

Nevertheless, there are Bible passages used by some people today to condemn homosexuals. I want to discuss each passage in some detail to show that not only is there no statement about homosexuality, but also that there is no statement applicable to homosexual sex if that sex is not lustful. Many authors write on this subject, and I am indebted to many of them.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

Genesis 1-2, The Creation Story

Critics of homosexuality enjoy saying, “The creation story is about Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.” Those who say that marriage can be only between a man and a woman argue that God's creation of Adam and Eve as heterosexuals shows that this is what he intended all persons to be; anything else is outside His will and therefore sinful. Dr. Gomes responds,

[As] Jeffrey S. Siker has pointed out in the July 1994 issue of *Theology Today*, to argue that the creation story privileges a heterosexual view of the relations between humankind is to make one of the weakest arguments possible, the argument from silence....It does not mention friendship, for example, and yet we do not assume that friendship is condemned or abnormal. It does not mention the single state, and yet we know that singleness is not condemned, and that in certain religious circumstances it is held in very high esteem. The creation story is not, after all, a paradigm about marriage, but rather about the establishment of human society.^{B-1}

One can read anything one wants to into the creation story but cannot read anything about homosexuality out of it.

Genesis 18:20 to 19:29—The Sodom Story

Some consider the sin of Sodom to be same-gender sex, although we are not told in Genesis what Sodom's sins were, only that they were so great that God determined to destroy the city. On the evening before its destruction he sent two angels, in disguise as men, to the city to lead Lot and his family out early the next day. Hospitable Lot invited them to spend the night at his house. During the evening the men of the city surrounded the house and demanded of Lot that he bring the two men out so that they could [19:5]

King James Version: “know them.”

Revised Standard Version: “know them.”

New International Version: “have sex with them.”

When Lot refused to bring his guests out, the men of the city were about to break his door down when the angels struck them all blind and the mob dispersed. The next day Lot and his family were led out of Sodom, and the city was destroyed by fire and brimstone from heaven.

The Hebrew verb used here, “*yadha*,” “to know,” is used 943 times in the OT and only ten times clearly to mean “have sex,” then it always means heterosexual sex. The word normally used for homosexual sex is “*shakhabh*.” Many scholars believe that in Gen. 19:5 *yadha* means “know” in the sense of “get acquainted with” (the city’s men may have wondered if these were enemy spies or they might have sensed the city’s impending doom and been concerned with what these strangers were doing there) and have several arguments for this, including Sodom’s being used as an example of great sin numerous times in the Old and New Testaments with nothing ever said about same-sex sex, and the context of Jesus’ references to Sodom (Luke 10:10-13) which seems to imply lack of hospitality as the sin.

Other scholars think it was the common practice of showing dominance over and humiliating outsiders by forcing them to take the part of a (an inferior) woman in a same-gender rape.

Others think it means “have sex,” and point to Lot’s offering his two virgin daughters to the crowd if sex is what they want, if they will just leave his guests alone. If this is the right interpretation, it is clearly about violent, criminal, gang rape, something always condemnable.

Another thought is expressed by Religion Professor David L. Bartlett: “This story is certainly an unlikely starting point for a ‘biblical’ understanding of sexual ethics. While the attempted homosexual rape by the men of Sodom is explicitly condemned, the offer by Lot to hand his two virgin daughters over to the violent and lecherous inhabitants of Sodom is related without a word of judgment.”^{B-2}

Conservative theologian Richard Hays says, “The notorious story of Sodom and Gomorrah—often cited in connection with homosexuality—is actually irrelevant to the topic.”^{B-3}

There is nothing in this story applicable to our consideration of homosexuality.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

Revised Standard Version:

22 You shall not lie with a male as with a woman, it is an abomination.

13 If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death...

The King James and New International versions say virtually the same thing.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are the only direct references to same-gender sex in the Old Testament. They are both part of the Old Testament Holiness Code, a religious, *not a moral code*; it later became the Jewish Purity Laws. [“Abomination” is used throughout the Old Testament to designate sins that involve ethnic contamination or idolatry. The word relates to the failure to worship God or to worshipping a false god; it does not relate to morality.] Professor Soards tell us, “Old Testament experts view the regulations of Leviticus as standards of holiness, directives for the formation of community life, aimed at establishing and maintaining a people’s identity in relation to God.”^{B-4} This is because God was so determined that his people would not adopt the practices of the Baal worshipers in Canaan, and same-gender sex was part of Baal worship. (The laws say nothing about women engaging in same-gender sex; probably this had to do with man’s dominance, and such acts by the subservient had nothing to do with religious impurity.)

God required purity for his worship. Anything pure was unadulterated, unmixed with anything else. These Purity Laws prohibited mixing different threads in one garment, sowing a field with two kinds of seed, crossbreeding animals. A few years ago in Israel when an orthodox government came into power, McDonalds had to stop selling cheeseburgers. Hamburgers, OK. Cheese sandwiches, OK. But mixing milk and meat in one sandwich violated the Purity Laws—it had nothing to do with morality. These were laws about worshipping God, not ethics, and so have no bearing on our discussion of morality. Helmut Thielicke remarks on these passages: “It would never occur to anyone to wrench these laws of cultic purification from their concrete situation and give them the kind of normative authority that the Decalogue, for example, has.”^{B-5}

Another reason they are not pertinent to our discussion is that these laws were for the particular time and circumstances existing when they were given. If you planted a fruit tree, you could not eat its fruit until its fifth year, and all fruit the fourth year must be offered to the Lord. A worker must be paid his wage on the day of his labor. You must not harvest a field to its edge. We readily dismiss most of them as not applicable to our day and culture, and if we dismiss some of them for any reason, we have to dismiss all of them, including the sexual regulations, for that same reason.

When we add the fact that these laws were talking about heterosexuals, it makes three reasons, any one of which would be sufficient, why they have no bearing on questions about homosexuals or homosexuality or on the morality of same-gender sex by homosexuals today.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the New Testament there are three passages to consider.

Romans 1:21, 26, 27

Revised Standard Version

21 for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him...

26 For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, 27 and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameful acts with men...

The King James and New International versions say virtually the same thing.

Romans 1:26 and 27 clearly speak of same-gender sex by both men and women, the only passage in the New Testament that does so. Rom. 1:18-32 speaks of Gentiles (heterosexuals) who could and should have known and served and given thanks to God but would not, so God gave them up and let them do whatever they wanted to do, and that resulted in degrading and shameful acts, including same-gender sex. It is almost a moot point, but Paul is not listing sins for which God will condemn anyone, he is listing sins that occur because people have forsaken Him. These are acts committed by those who have turned away from God and so become “consumed with passion.” All of us recognize that those who forsake God and give themselves over to lustful living—homosexual or heterosexual—stand condemned by the Bible. This passage is talking about people who chose to forsake God.

Conservative theologian Richard Hays says, “No direct appeal to Romans 1 as a source of rules about sexual conduct is possible.”^{B-6}

I Corinthians 6:9

King James Version:

9...Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate [*malakoi*], nor abusers of themselves with mankind [*arsenokoitai*], 10 Nor thieves..., shall inherit the kingdom of God.

New International Version

9...Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes [*malakoi*] nor homosexual offenders [*arsenokoitai*] 10 nor thieves... will inherit the kingdom of God.

Revised Standard Version—1952 edition:

9...Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals [*malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*], 10 nor thieves..., will inherit the kingdom of God.

Revised Standard Version—1971 edition:

9...Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts [*malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*], 10 nor thieves..., will inherit the kingdom of God.

A comparison of how the two Greek words are translated in the different versions shows that translations often, unfortunately, become the interpretations of the translators. In I Cor. 6:9 Paul lists the types of persons who will be excluded from the kingdom of God and for some he uses the Greek words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. KJ translates the first “effeminate,” a word that has no necessary connection with homosexuals. The NIV translates the first “male prostitutes” and the second, “homosexual offenders”. The RSV in its first edition of 1952 translated both words by the single term, “homosexuals”. In the revised RSV of 1971, the translation “homosexuals” is discarded and the two Greek words are translated as “sexual perverts”; obviously the translators had concluded the earlier translation was not supportable.

Malakoi literally means “soft” and is translated that way by both KJ and RSV in Matt. 11:8 and Luke 7:25. When it is used in moral contexts in Greek writings it has the meaning of morally weak; a related word, *malakia*, when used in moral contexts, means dissolute and occasionally refers to sexual activity but never to homosexual acts. There are at least five Greek words that specifically mean people who practice same-gender sex. Unquestionably, if Paul had meant such people, he would not have used a word that is never used to mean that in Greek writings when he had other words that were clear in that meaning. He must have meant what the word commonly means in moral contexts, “morally weak.” There is no justification, most scholars agree, for translating it “homosexuals.”

Arsenokoitai, is not found in any extant Greek writings until the second century when it apparently means “pederast”, a corrupter of boys, and the sixth century when it is used for husbands practicing anal intercourse with their wives. Again, if Paul meant people practicing same-gender sex, why didn't he use one of the common words? Some scholars think probably the second century use might come closest to Paul's intention. If so, there is no justification for translating the word as “homosexuals.” Other scholars see a connection with Greek words used to refer to same-gender sex in Leviticus. If so, it is speaking of heterosexuals given to such lust they turn to such acts.

Richard Hays tells us, “I Corinthians 6:9-11 states no rule to govern the conduct of Christians.”^{B-}

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One commentator has another reason for rejecting the NIV and original RSV translations, “homosexuals.” Today it could mean that a person who is homosexual in orientation even though “of irreproachable morals, is automatically branded as unrighteous and excluded from the kingdom of God, just as if he were the most depraved of sexual perverts.”^{B-8}

So I Cor. 6:9 says nothing about homosexuality with the possible exception of condemnable pederasty.

I Tim. 1:10

King James Version:

9...the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners,...10...for them that defile themselves with mankind (*arsenokoitai*)...

Revised Standard Version - both 1952 and 1971 editions:

9...the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for 10 immoral persons, sodomites (*arsenokoitai*),...

New International Version:

9...the law is not made for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful...10 for adulterers and perverts (*arsenokoitai*)

Here only the RSV specifically refers to same-gender sex, using the term “sodomites,” which is the translation given in both the Old Testament and New Testament to Hebrew and Greek words for male temple prostitutes. The KJV probably has the same thought. The NIV does not necessarily refer to same-gender sex. Again Paul has used the Greek word *arsenokoitai*, the word in I Cor. 6:9.

As discussed above, this word would have no reference to homosexuality or homosexual sex in our discussion.

So like the other two New Testament passages, I Tim. 1:10 says nothing about homosexuality or homosexuals and nothing about same-gender sex unless that of temple prostitutes or possibly the molestation of young boys by heterosexuals.

In view of the facts set forth above, we realize there is no moral teaching in the Bible about homosexuality as we know it, including homosexual sex (except possibly pederasty). The Bible cannot be used to condemn as immoral all same-gender sex. It clearly condemns lust, whether homosexual or heterosexual. There is certainly nothing in the Bible about anyone going to hell because he or she is homosexual. All who go to hell will go for the same, one reason: failure to commit their lives in faith to Jesus Christ as their lord and savior.

From a slightly different approach to interpretation, Dr. Robin Scroggs states, “The basic model in today’s Christian homosexual community is so different from the model attacked by the New Testament that the criterion of reasonable similarity of context is not met. The conclusion I have to draw seems inevitable: *Biblical judgments against homosexuality are not relevant to today’s debate.*”^{B-9} [Italics his]

Dr. Gomes concludes his discussion of homosexuality and the Bible with these words:

The Biblical writers never contemplated a form of homosexuality in which loving, monogamous, and faithful persons sought to live out the implications of the gospel with as much fidelity to it as any heterosexual believer. All they knew of homosexuality was prostitution, pederasty, lasciviousness, and exploitation. These vices, as we know, are not unknown among heterosexuals, and to define contemporary homosexuals only in these terms is a cultural slander of the highest order, reflecting not so much prejudice, which it surely does, but what the Roman Catholic Church calls “invincible ignorance,” which all of the Christian piety and charity in the world can do little to conceal. The “problem,” of course, is not the Bible, it is the Christians who read it.^{B-10}

APPENDIX C

The Three Sins

When we say to homosexuals, “We love the sinner but hate the sin; go clean up your act and then we will welcome you,” what they hear us say is, “you” are sinners and “we” are not. Since we know that everyone is a sinner, what do we mean? “You are great sinners and we are little sinners”? Or possibly, “Well, everyone knows what your great sins are, but ours are hidden from other people”? This is all ridiculous, but isn’t it easy to see why gays and lesbians hate this statement? I believe many of our church members (heterosexuals) honestly think that same-gender sex is a worse sin than any they commit, so much worse that homosexuals cannot be welcomed into our churches, or if welcomed to visit, never affirmed in their homosexuality. Can we be sure that such a judgment of same-gender sex, even that of loving, committed couples, is right?

It seems to me that Ezekiel 16:49 sums up clearly the Bible’s categories of sin. It says, “The sins of Sodom were...” Sodom, destroyed for its sinfulness with fire and brimstone from heaven (Gen. 19:24), is mentioned throughout the Bible as an example of sin at its worst. So Ezekiel’s statement should be most instructive to us. Ezekiel names three types of sin attributable to the people of Sodom.

First named is pride and its companion, haughtiness. We didn’t expect that; this isn’t one of the terrible, unspeakable things that criminals and perverts do. That’s right, Ezekiel first names the *sin of the spirit*. Now we recall that the sins of the spirit were the sins for which Jesus so condemned the Pharisees. The Pharisees were the “back to the Bible” people of Jesus’ day, organized originally for just that purpose. They went regularly to worship services, they knew their Bible thoroughly and they tithed faithfully; how can fault be found with them? But Jesus knew their pride and hypocrisy and said such was a great sin, so great they could not get into his kingdom because of it. It was their sins of the spirit that condemned these people who otherwise were so exemplary.

The problem about sins of the spirit is that for most of us we are not conscious of them. We go to church and study the Bible and give to the church; we must be pretty good people, But if, like the Pharisees, we are not conscious of our sins of the spirit, then maybe we *are* like the Pharisees. Religious editor Marv Knox recently wrote that “insidious enemies—such as greed, apathy, self-interest and hate—... threaten us all.”^{C-1}—all sins of the spirit. And the list could go on. We all know that we are not free of the sins of the spirit. They must be great sins for Jesus to condemn them so - *our* great sins.

Ezekiel then says that the people of Sodom had been blessed with abundance, but they did not help the poor and needy. This is a *sin of omission*. Are we guilty? Maybe we are not sure because, as with our sins of the spirit, we are not really conscious of our sins of omission. But shouldn’t we think about how much we have failed to be what God made our potential to be and how much we have left undone and how indifferent we have been to the needs of others when the Lord expected us to help?

I ponder this one sin of omission that Ezekiel speaks of here and have a feeling of great guilt, for both the Old and New Testaments have so very much to say about helping the poor, but my hands have never been dirtied by working with or for the poor. Should most of our church members feel the same way? But partly it's not their fault; we preachers have not preached and taught about this responsibility God expects us to take. So the sin of us preachers is multiplied in this, our sin of omission. And this is only one sin of omission. When we add all the others... I often think that surely our sins of omission must be our greatest sins. Or do I think that because I am so unconscious of my sins of the spirit? I don't know, but I am certain that *our* sins of omission are very great.

Finally Ezekiel says of the people of Sodom that they committed other abominations. These are the *sins of commission*. These we are more conscious of, but we probably still think that we are such good people, we don't commit many of them. I read of a woman who said she had not sinned for 43 days. Incredible, almost, that someone could have that concept of what sin is. But then, is that pretty close to the concept of many church members? Why did our Lord give us a model prayer that could be prayed every day and that included "Forgive our sins."? If homosexual sex is sin, it is the sin of commission. This was the third sin Ezekiel mentioned. The three sins may not have been given in order of their evil, but wouldn't you expect him to name the worst first? If they were in such order, then the sin of commission is not as great as the others, and the sexual sin would not be as great as our sins of the spirit and of omission. But whether our sins of commission are small or great, are we not all such great sinners in God's sight that we cannot possibly point a finger at anyone else and say "Sinner"? Is this why Jesus said, "Judge not, that ye be not judged" (Matt. 7:1)? When we have done—no, even if we could possibly do—all that Jesus commanded, can we say anything except, "We are unprofitable servants" (Luke 17:10)?

Welcoming gays and lesbians and affirming them in our church fellowship is not going soft on sin. Just the opposite. It is recognizing that we are all such great sinners in God's sight that we can never judge another's sins as worse than our sins. If we, sinners as we are, can be part of the fellowship of the church, then homosexuals, if they are considered sinners, can also be part of the fellowship. The criteria for their being welcomed is in their love for the Lord, their desire to worship and serve him and to have fellowship with us.

Philip Yancy in his splendid little book, *What's So Amazing about Grace?*, tells of the prostitute who was so sick of her life that she went to a counselor for help. In the course of their session the counselor asked her if she had thought about going to church. She was appalled at the thought. "Of course not," she said. "I feel bad enough about myself now; how would I feel among those people?" Then Yancy notes that when Jesus was on earth, prostitutes and such sinners were attracted to him. The Pharisees criticized him harshly for that very thing. And Yancy wonders why church people today, Christians who are supposed to be little Christs, repel instead of attract these people. Perhaps our churches are wont to say that we must project an image of what is right and moral in this world. Oh, so we must mean that if Jesus attracted these people, he did not project such an image. We are without defense. Until we become more Christlike, the prostitutes and homosexuals will never want to come to us. Yet, do we not realize that we cannot be less sinful than they? We are in no position to judge them.

Even Richard Hays, a conservative theologian who believes homosexuality itself is sinful, insists that gays and lesbians must be taken in and affirmed by our churches, saying, “Unless we think the church is a community of sinless perfection, we will have to acknowledge that [gays and lesbians] 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 have to walk out the door along with them, leaving in the sanctuary only those entitled to cast the first stone.”^{C-2}

Louise, how can we sinners, we great sinners, say anything to gays or lesbians or *anybody* who wants to worship and work with us except, “You say you love the Lord and want to serve him. We do, too. Come be a part of our fellowship of worship and study and work. We are all such sinners in God’s sight we need one another and we can help and support one another. We are not here to judge one another’s sins; we are here to love one another as brothers and sisters in Christ as we make our Christian pilgrimage.”

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- A-5 Stanley J. Grenz, 128, 143f
- A-6 See discussion by James R. Payton, Jr., "A Tale of Two Cultures" in Priscilla Papers, Winter 2002, 13ff
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- B-1 Peter J. Gomes, 149
- B-2 David L. Bartlett, "A Biblical Perspective on Homosexuality" in Polaski and Eiland, 27
- B-3 Hays, Richard, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, p.381
- B-4 Soards, Marion L, *Scripture and Homosexuality: Biblical Authority and the Church Today*, 57
- B-5 Helmut Thielicke, 227
- B-6 The Journal of Religious Ethics, Vol 14:1(1986) 206,7
- B-7 Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996) 394
- B-8 Quoted in D. S. Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian*, 39
- B-9 Robin Scroggs, *New Testament and Homosexuality*, 127, quoted by Shields, 127
- B-10 Gomes, 162
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- C-1 *Baptist Standard*, November 13, 2000
- C-2 Richard B. Hays, 400

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