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All That Heaven Allows *Homosexuality and the Meaning of Love*

“It can’t be wrong when it feels so right . . .”

— Debby Boone, title song in *You Light Up My Life* (1977)

As much consternation and confusion as the feminist movement that took Western culture by storm in the 1970s has brought to Christians and to society in general, the demands of even the most radical feminists seem tame in comparison to the homosexual rights movement that came into prominence in the 1990s. No other issue seems to provoke stronger feelings in people than this one.

A great deal of hate, in fact, seems to surface whenever this subject is discussed. Some people, including some people who profess to follow Christ, clearly hate homosexuals. They are not only the object of occasional acts of violence motivated by hate, but are often reviled by people who simply loathe them. In turn, some homosexuals

just as clearly hate anyone, especially conservative Christians, who question or criticize their lifestyle. Christian churches and individuals have in recent years become the targets of harassment by militant homosexuals who go out of their way to offend and intimidate people whom they perceive — rightly or wrongly — as hating them. Indeed, homosexuals who favor a more brazenly alternative lifestyle are sometimes hostile toward homosexuals who seek a more “mainstream” fit into the general culture.

One of the favorite slogans of the homosexual rights movement and of those sympathetic to them is “Hate is not a family value.” It is not a Christian value, either. In this chapter we have no desire to add fuel to the fire of anyone’s hatred of homosexuals. The goal of thinking about this and any other ethical issue is not to give “us” ammunition against “them,” but to understand our own moral responsibilities first of all and then enable us to stand up for our convictions and honestly “speak the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15) to anyone who will listen.

Love, Law, and Sex

We have just spoken about the need for love in the ethical debate over homosexuality. We live in a society that is obsessed with love. Our songs glorify it and our ads glamorize it. But the homosexual debate, probably more than any other issue, exposes a troublesome fact about our society: we don’t even agree about what love *is*. The central claim of the homosexual rights movement is that gays and lesbians should be allowed to love in their own way, and that a failure to accept them and their lifestyle as a permanent and open part of society is a failure to love. The central claim of all those who reject

homosexuality is that it is an unacceptable way to express love. Thus, simply calling upon everyone to “love” one another, without coming to some common understanding of what that means, will not solve the homosexual debate.

We mentioned in chapter 12 that one of the great gifts God has given us in Scripture is a clear explanation of the meaning of love. As both Jesus and Paul pointed out, the Old Testament Law specifies what behaviors and attitudes are inconsistent with love so we will not fool ourselves into thinking that we are exhibiting love when we are not (Matt. 7:12; 22:37-40; Rom. 13:8-10). It also sets forth positive instruction in how we are to love one another in our marriages, families, friendships, and communities. Biblical morality is a morality of love, and nothing more or less — but this does not mean that we are left to our own feelings to determine what love means for us. Rather, if we truly love God, who is love (1 John 4:7-8), and who must be loved above all else, and if we love each other with the love of God, we will seek to express that love in the way that God tells us. We keep God’s rules because, as his children, we know that he makes the rules for our benefit. Jesus said that those who love him *keep his commandments* (John 14:15, 21; 15:10). If we fail to see the love principle at work in some moral injunction in the Bible, then we need to adjust our notion of love.

In the New Testament the supreme example of love in action is provided by Jesus Christ, God’s beloved Son. Jesus shows us how to love those our society deems unlovable, whether on account of their own actions (such as the tax-collectors and the sexually immoral) or through no fault of their own (such as the lepers and the Gentiles). Those who are in distress through no sin of their own we are to show compassion and kindness (Mark

1:40-42). Those who are in sin and who recognize their sin we are to offer an opportunity for repentance and to show them tender mercy and forgiveness (Matt. 9:11-13; Luke 15:1-32). Those who are in sin and who proudly deny their sin we are to leave in their blindness (Matt. 10:14-15; John 9:40-41).

The relevance of these principles to the homosexuality controversy should be clear. If Scripture teaches that homosexual acts are wrong, then we cannot paper over that fact or hold back from declaring God's moral will in this matter, any more than we should in other matters. But our goal as people of love should be not merely to condemn homosexuals, but to reach out our hands to them and offer them the love, forgiveness, and spiritual and moral healing which Jesus also has extended to us.

Those who act as spokespersons for the Christian church, whether as teachers or writers or preachers or evangelists, should make it clear when they speak about homosexuality that sexual sin is an essentially universal problem in the human race. By no means is homosexuality the only, or even the most prevalent, form of sexual sin in our society. For every person who engages regularly in homosexual acts, there are at least five (and probably more than that) who are regularly engaging in adultery or other "heterosexual" sins. Hardly any adult in America today, it seems, can honestly claim to have lived a completely chaste life. (Sometimes it seems hardly anyone even knows what "chaste" means!) Worse, the vast majority of the people who commit sex crimes — rape, incest, and the like — are heterosexual males. To ignore these facts when dealing with the issue of homosexuality skews the discussion and prevents legitimate criticisms of the homosexual lifestyle and movement from being heard.

On the other hand, there are those who believe that entirely too much attention has been given in Christian ethics to sexual matters. They point out that Jesus said nothing about homosexuality, very little about sex at all, and had a great deal to say about greed, hypocrisy, and other besetting sins of the most religious people of the day. Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong, for example, has written:

Compared to the sin of idolatry, for example, or to the ritual details of temple worship, the time spent on homosexuality by the biblical authors is minuscule. There is not one reference to homosexuality in any of the four Gospels. The argument from silence is not a powerful one, but it does suggest that those who consider this “the most heinous sin” must be terribly disturbed that our Lord appears either to have ignored it completely or to have said so little on the subject that no part of what he said was remembered or recorded.¹

While Spong’s factual assertions about the lack of emphasis on homosexuality in the Bible and the silence of Jesus in the Gospels are basically correct, one must be careful about basing moral conclusions on relative *emphases* in certain portions of Scripture. For example, only one out of the ten commandments is about sex (two if you count the fairly all-encompassing tenth commandment that prohibits coveting), but there is also only one commandment about respecting life. Even if we decide that the commandment forbidding murder is more important than the commandment forbidding adultery (or, say, false witness), they all carry the same divine authority. God only has to say “no” once for something to be wrong!

While it is true that Jesus never mentioned homosexuality in the Gospels, this silence does not “suggest” anything except, perhaps, that the subject was not a controversial

issue between Jesus and the Jewish leaders — which would imply, in turn, that *he agreed with their judgment that homosexual acts were sinful*. For this same reason the Gospels do not record Jesus commenting on the sinfulness of child sacrifice, bestiality, sex with minors, and various other behaviors. One wonders if Spong this there is any validity to reasoning that since Jesus said nothing about bestiality, it cannot be all that terrible a sin! That Jesus regarded sexual sin as a serious matter is made clear by the fact that two of the six subjects in Jesus' corrections of Pharisaic ethics in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:21-48) relate to the marriage relationship (5:27-32; cf. Matt. 19:3-12). In any case, Spong's protest that homosexuality may not be as heinous as "Bible-believing Christians" think is disingenuous, since he thinks it is not a sin at all.

Paul deals more often than Jesus (judging from the Gospels) with issues relating to sexuality (Romans 1:24-27; 2:22; 13:9, 13-14; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 6:9-7:40; Gal. 5:19; Eph. 4:19; 5:3-5; Col. 3:5; 1 Thess. 4:3-5). While these references are numerous enough to show that Paul thought the matter fairly important, they do not dominate his ethical teaching to such an extent that he could be accused of being obsessed with sexual matters. To the extent that Paul gives such matters more attention than Jesus did, the reason is probably that Gentile converts were particularly weak in this area.

It might be supposed that advocates of a homosexual lifestyle would simply reject the Bible's teaching on the matter out of hand. While some do, in fact many homosexuals and others who defend their lifestyle claim that the Bible does not give as clear a condemnation of homosexuality as Christians commonly claim. Indeed, there is a significant community of people today who profess to be Christians — some even

regarding themselves as evangelicals — who openly admit to being homosexuals. We cannot merely assume our understanding of the Bible on this question, then, but must be prepared to show what the Bible really says about homosexuality and to answer the arguments used to counter the traditional interpretation of the Bible's teaching.

What Does the Bible Say?

The biblical teaching on sex is not merely negative. Contrary to popular belief (admittedly fostered by some Christians over the years), sex in biblical thought is not sin. It is sex *outside the proper relationship* that constitutes sexual sin. That relationship, according to the Bible, is the husband-wife relationship.

Sex in the Beginning

The foundation for the biblical view of sex is laid down in the opening chapters of Genesis. Basic to the biblical view of human nature is that God created the human race in his image as *male and female* (Gen. 1:27). God ordained that the human race would reproduce itself through the sexual union of the male and female (v. 28), thus making it clear that sex was of God's design and is "very good" (v. 31). We should not miss the revolutionary character of this teaching. Most of the developed religions of the world have regarded sex (and indeed, biological life in general) as inherently unspiritual and as unavoidably interfering with the higher aspirations of humanity. On the other hand, polytheistic and animistic religions have generally divinized the sexual functions and attributed carnality to the gods. Biblical religion strikes a healthy balance between these

two extremes, affirming sex as divinely created, not divine, and as good when pursued in the proper relationship, though abused when pursued outside its divinely intended purpose and context.

Genesis goes on to elaborate on the marital relationship by explaining that woman was created as a complementary partner for the man (Gen. 2:18). The physical union of male and female, the man and the woman, is the paradigm of marriage (vv. 23-25). When Genesis says that “a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife” (v. 24a), the reference to the man’s father and mother indicates that the marriage institution is designed to be a union of a man and a woman that is repeated from generation to generation. This does not mean that sex is merely about procreation; the text goes on to say that sex is intended by God to be a uniting of two complementary halves into “one flesh” (v. 24b). Sex is therefore intended to be a part of a relationship with a person of the opposite sex. The paradigm of Adam and Eve clearly excludes the notion that such a relationship is properly formed between two men or between two women.²

In appealing to Genesis 1-2 as providing the paradigmatic view of marriage, we are following the precedent set by Jesus when he was asked to settle an ethical dispute about marriage (Matt. 19:3-6). This does not mean that the Christian view of homosexuality is based on a speculative reading of Genesis 1-2. On the contrary, the teaching of the rest of the Bible on the subject informs our reading of Genesis. But the point is that Genesis gives us the positive model of the marriage relationship that enables us to understand properly the *reasons* for the biblical prohibitions of sexual activities outside that marriage relationship. In other words, the Bible does not arbitrarily forbid homosexual acts for no good reason,

but offers a positive view of sexuality within which the Bible's commandments and prohibitions make sense.

Two objections may be answered here to making the man-woman relationship in Genesis 1-2 a model which excludes all homosexual unions. The first is that the Old Testament appears to permit polygamy, which is inconsistent with the picture in Genesis of marriage as a union of one man and one woman. The issue here is actually a little complicated. Although it is true that the Old Testament apparently never explicitly forbids polygamy, it clearly does discourage it in a number of ways. The statutes relating to marriage in the Law of Moses never encourage or sanction polygamy, but instead strictly regulate it to protect the women involved, so much so that men would normally be discouraged from taking more than one wife (Ex. 21:10; Lev. 18:17; 20:14; Deut. 21:15-17). Evidently God allowed polygamy but regarded it as a concession, just as he allowed divorce without approving of it (Deut. 24:1-4; compare Jesus' comments in Matt. 19:7-9). Throughout the Old Testament the men who took two or more wives — Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, and Solomon being the most notable examples — lived to regret it, and the consequences for the children were often distressing. In the New Testament, the Genesis ideal is reaffirmed and Christian leaders are required not to be polygamists (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6).

Technically, polygamy is not a different *form* of marriage, but is an arrangement in which one man is party to *more than one marriage*. That is, each marriage is a relationship between one man and one woman, but in polygamy a man has committed himself to more than one marriage relationship. Thus, polygamy does not violate the Genesis paradigm of

the marriage relationship itself, though it does compromise that paradigm with respect to the number of marriage relationships to which a man is designed to be a party.

The second objection to basing a Christian model of marriage and sex on Genesis 1-2 is that in Genesis marriage was permitted between close relatives (such as a brother and a sister), but in the Law of Moses such marriages were forbidden. This objection fails to give due regard for the unique circumstances of the human race in the early generations of its history. If the human race was to be propagated from an original couple (which is necessary if the human race is to be united), it was unavoidable that siblings would marry in the second and perhaps third generation. Beyond that point marriage between cousins appears to have been allowed, but closer relatives were not encouraged or sanctioned to marry. It is now realized that after the human race had multiplied over many generations, intermarriage between siblings was likely to result in children with birth defects or other congenital problems. In any case at no time in history did God ever permit marriage across all relations — for example, it was never morally permissible for a man to take his daughter, or for a man to marry his mother.

Neither of these two objections really undermines the claim that Genesis indicates that marriage is intended to be a relationship between persons of the opposite sex. Admittedly marriages among God's people did not always match the Genesis paradigm exactly, but no commandment or teaching in either the Old or New Testament suggests that there is any legitimate exception that would allow homosexual unions to be regarded as morally acceptable.

The Sins of Sodom

Probably the most often discussed passage in the Bible in relation to homosexuality is the account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19. On the traditional view, these cities were destroyed because they had become so morally degenerate that homosexual acts were common there. Defenders of homosexuality often argue that the sin of Sodom in particular (the city in which Lot lived) was inhospitality — or more strongly, mistreatment of strangers.

The account in Genesis 19 is an historical narrative and not a piece of ethical instruction, so we should not expect to find a fully developed “case” against homosexuality. In particular, we do not find a general discussion of the moral status of homosexual acts. Still, the attempt by some interpreters to eliminate homosexuality from the picture in Genesis 19 must be judged unsuccessful. For example, it is often claimed that when the townsmen ask for the men staying with Lot (who were actually angels) to be sent outside “that we may know them” (Gen. 19:5, literal translation), that they are demanding an opportunity to interrogate them and are not asking to “know them *carnally*” (NKJV). But this reading misses two points in the immediate context. First, Lot’s response to the townsmen is to offer to send his daughters out to them so that they can do whatever they like to them (v. 8). This is obviously an offer to satisfy their sexual demands in an alternative way. Second, Lot describes his daughters by saying that they “have not known a man” (v. 8). Here the same word “know” is used as in verse 5, and here it is clear that Lot is describing his daughters as virgins.³ Thus there is no getting around the fact that the men wanted to have their way sexually with the strangers.

A better point is that the townsmen were not seeking consensual homosexual relations with the strangers, but were in fact threatening to rape them.⁴ There is no denying that such was their intention. However, the underlying assumption in Lot's offer of his virgin daughters as alternatives was that he saw homosexual acts as inherently immoral. This does not mean, as Spong erroneously claims, that "the biblical narrative approves Lot's offer."⁵ Rather the point is that the whole story assumes that homosexual acts were regarded as particularly strong evidence of moral corruption — the basis for the Lord's judgment of the cities in the first place. The text does not present a sinless Lot in contrast to a wicked Sodom, but a sinful but believing Lot saved by grace from the punishment brought on the wicked and unrepentant Sodom.

Later texts in the Bible show that while homosexual acts were not the only evidence of moral degeneration in Sodom, such activity was part of the picture. Ezekiel states that Sodom was condemned for their arrogance, failure to help the poor and needy, and their committing "abomination" (Ezek. 16:49-50), which in context appears to refer at least in part to sexual sins (cf. vv. 43-48, 51-58), and which is used in both of the texts in Leviticus (to be discussed shortly) that specifically condemn homosexual acts (18:22; 20:13).⁶ In the New Testament epistle of Jude, Sodom and Gomorrah are said to have been condemned because they had "given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh" (Jude 7).

The claim here is not, as some critics of the traditional view have mistakenly supposed, that the entire male population of Sodom was exclusively homosexual in today's concept of a person with homosexual orientation.⁷ But the fact is that at least some of the

men of Sodom must have had some experience with homosexual acts for them to come to Lot's house demanding to gang rape his guests. And evidently the male population of Sodom as a whole was enthusiastically supportive of the idea of some of their members forcing the strangers to engage in such acts.

As wicked as Sodom and Gomorrah were judged to be, there is a sin that is far worse than any they committed. The worse sin possible is the sin of rejecting the mercy and forgiveness which Jesus offers. Jesus said that it would be more tolerable on the day of judgment for Sodom and Gomorrah than for those who reject his disciples when they bring the message of his saving kingdom (Matt. 10:15). The comparison Jesus makes is this: The angels who went to Sodom were prepared to take anyone who respected them and accepted their message out of the city to safety, yet were rejected and threatened with abuse. The disciples who went to the towns of Israel with the gospel were offering eternal salvation to anyone who respected them and accepted their message; those who rejected them were therefore rejecting a greater salvation and would be judged more harshly. In making this comparison, Jesus is not denying the sexual immorality of the Sodomites; indeed, part of why he refers to them is because their homosexuality had made them in Jewish thinking proverbial examples of gross sin. Nor is he saying that judgment would come on Jewish towns merely for refusing "to welcome His disciples with appropriate hospitality," as evangelical gay writer Mel White has argued.⁸ Rather, Jesus is saying that as grossly immoral as the people of Sodom were, their punishment will not be as severe as that brought upon the Jewish people if they reject their Messiah. Jesus' comparison thus presupposes the traditional Jewish understanding of the time that the Sodomites were

destroyed because of their complete moral degeneracy, of which their homosexual practices were symptomatic.

Leviticus and Abominations

By far the most difficult passages in the Bible relating to homosexuality to explain away are the categorical prohibitions of homosexual acts in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. As J. Gordon Melton puts it, these verses “have proved the hardest to reinterpret.”⁹ Both of these texts forbid men to engage in sexual activity with men, and label such activity an “abomination.” Most writers defending homosexuality admit that these texts condemn same-sex acts, but try to show that they reflect a culturally archaic situation and thus no longer apply today.

The basic difficulty facing any such explanation of the Leviticus texts is that the description of homosexual acts as an “abomination” is in the context referring to *God’s* assessment of homosexual acts. That is, Leviticus asserts that God himself finds such practices abominable, and makes that the reason they are so strongly forbidden.

Two completely opposite strategies have been used to discredit these prohibitions as moral absolutes. On the one hand, it has been suggested that Leviticus is describing homosexuality as offensive to the Israelites, and not necessarily to God. On the other hand, it has been argued that Leviticus describes homosexuality as an abomination to God only because of some religious or ritual associations which same-sex acts had in ancient Israelite society. The context rules out both of these interpretations. Shortly after

forbidding men to lie with other men and stating, “It is an abomination” (Lev. 18:22), God warns the Israelites that they

shall not commit any of these abominations . . . for all these abominations the men of the land have done, who were before you, and thus the land is defiled. . . . For whoever commits any of these abominations, the persons who commit them shall be cut off from among their people. Therefore you shall keep my ordinance, so that you do not commit any of these abominable customs which were committed before you, and that you do not defile yourselves by them: I am the LORD your God (Lev. 18:26-30).

Several points should be noted here. First of all, this is God speaking. The passage is thus an expression of *God’s* judgment of homosexual and other acts, not the Israelites’ judgment about them.

Second, what God calls detestable acts are said to be customary in Canaan. The obvious implication is that the Canaanites, at least, did not find these behaviors abominable. Thus the test of sexual morality is not how it makes *us* feel, but rather how it makes *God* “feel.”

Third, twice in this passage the description of the acts as “abominations” is linked to the land and the people becoming “defiled.” Defilement is a religious concept, not a sociological one. The point again is that these acts were an offense to God, whether or not they were offensive to human beings.

Fourth, this reference to defilement has been taken to prove the theory that homosexuality is being condemned only in some ritual or ceremonial religious context. But this will not work. For one thing, nothing is said to indicate that a pagan ritual

association was even part of the rationale for the prohibition. Besides, sex acts between men and women were also (indeed, more commonly) part of pagan rituals. It makes no sense for language specifying same-sex acts to be used if the problem that was really being targeted was not limited to such acts. Moreover, the pagans practiced homosexual acts both in ritual settings and outside them. Since such a distinction would have been familiar in that culture, there is no reason why Leviticus might not have allowed for non-ritual homosexual acts if they were deemed morally permissible. In any case, that homosexual acts are being condemned here for reasons unrelated to pagan rituals is clear in the larger context of the chapter. It is not merely homosexuality, but *all* of the acts forbidden in this chapter, that are considered abominable (as verses 26-30 say); these include the following.

Incest (vv. 6-18). Specifically, Leviticus 18 forbids sex with parents or children, siblings, and other close relatives. (Note that “uncovering the nakedness” of another does not mean merely seeing them in the nude, but is a euphemism for sexual intimacy.) The prohibitions here are as general and categorical as they could be. All such sexual acts are forbidden, regardless of how the two people involved feel about each other, or how old or young they are. By extension, these prohibitions have been extended to forbid marriages between people related in the ways mentioned. Obviously, these prohibitions have nothing to do with ritual taboos.

Violating a woman during her menstrual period (v. 19). It is unlikely that this verse is referring to sex between a husband and wife during her menstrual period, as Spong and others assume.¹⁰ A few chapters earlier such an act is regarded as making the man ritually unclean for seven days (15:24). Here, though (compare v. 29), and explicitly in a

related text (20:18), the act is punishable by death. Thus, the act in view here must be different from the one in chapter 15 and must be regarded as a more serious kind of offense. It is therefore most likely that the act forbidden here is one that took place between persons who were not married, and probably one in which the man violated the woman (since she is not likely to have consented freely during that time). We are therefore not dealing here with a matter of ritual purity, but of morality.

Adultery (v. 20). Notice that this act is also said to be defiling. There is no denying that this refers to a consensual sexual act. Moreover, the general description of all of these acts as detestable to God (vv. 26-30) shows that God considers heterosexual adultery to be detestable, too, and not merely homosexual acts. Adulterers in the church (and there are many) who openly condemn homosexuality as an abomination but refuse to repent of their sin of adultery are hypocrites. The hypocrite is still right in his view of homosexuality, though. The problem with the hypocrite is generally not that he is wrong about others, but that he is wrong about himself (cf. Matt. 23).

Child sacrifice (v. 21). I think it safe to assume we all know this is an offense to God; if we have any doubts, such an act is said here to “profane the name of your God.” This is the one sin condemned in Leviticus 18 that is not overtly sexual in nature, though evidently child sacrifice to Molech was part of pagan rituals that included sexual immorality as well (cf. Lev. 20:4-5). This is also the one prohibition dealing with acts that clearly did take place in a pagan context — but presumably no one is prepared to say that child sacrifice was condemned only when the children were sacrificed to the wrong god! Surely the horrific abuse of the children is itself being condemned. Would it be permissible to kill

innocent children today, as long as it was not in a pagan ritual? (Come to think of it, that *is* happening now — it's called *abortion*.)

Homosexual acts (v. 22). These are the acts under consideration.

Bestiality (v. 23). This act is described as a “perversion,” a term which connotes that the act is utterly unnatural.

It is clear from surveying all of the forbidden acts in Leviticus 18 that all of them are condemned as categorically immoral. The term “abomination” in this context clearly means something that is particularly offensive in the sight of God. This is true of the word “abomination” in general. If we list those offenses which Deuteronomy, for example, labels “abomination,” it becomes clear that it is impossible to exclude a moral force to the term, either by limiting it to a description of how the Israelites felt about these practices or by understanding it to denote a mere ritual uncleanness.¹¹ These offenses are sometimes specifically called “an abomination to the LORD,” at other times simply called “an abomination”:

1. idolatry (Deut. 7:25-26; 13:13-14; 17:4; 27:15; 32:16-17)
2. child sacrifice (Deut. 12:31)
3. offering blemished sacrifices (Deut. 17:1)
4. occult practices — divination, witchcraft, necromancy, etc. (Deut. 18:9-12)
5. cross-dressing (Deut. 22:5)
6. offering money from prostitutes (Deut. 23:17-18)
7. divorced and remarried woman returning to her first husband (Deut. 24:4)
8. using different weights and measures, i.e., fraud (Deut. 25:13-16)

Were we to go through the entire Old Testament, we would see the same sorts of things. Some of these practices have specifically religious contexts (idolatry, most obviously), but others just as obviously don't involve ritual or sacral practices (the last two listed above being rather obvious examples). The sinfulness of none of these behaviors appears to be dependent on some archaic cultural feature of ancient Israelite society. If we regard biblical morality as normative, then all such behaviors are just as wrong today as they were three thousand years ago. Again, if we have a problem with that, it is an indicator of our own moral compass being "off" rather than of any defect in biblical teaching.

So far, we have said nothing about the fact that in Leviticus 20:13 homosexual acts are said to be punishable by death. The argument that homosexuality is immoral and forbidden by God is not based on the premise that Leviticus imposes the death penalty for such acts. Rather, Leviticus shows that homosexuality is immoral because it is ranged with a variety of other sexual sins that are indisputably moral offenses (Lev. 18:6-23; 20:10-21). The death penalty shows how severely this particular act was judged under the Mosaic Law, and does not necessarily translate into a prescription for how the act should be viewed in the criminal codes of modern, non-Israelite nations.

On the other hand, the Mosaic Law did not impose death penalties for trivial offenses. Mel White's argument is typical. Leviticus, he says, imposes the death penalty "for a variety of other sins as well" as homosexuality. "Imagine killing a child for cursing her parents or putting someone to death for working on Sunday or executing a neighbor for using God's name in vain."¹² But White has misconstrued all three of the Levitical laws to which he is referring here. Let's take them one at a time.

Leviticus 20:9 states that “everyone who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death.” Since this statute follows immediately upon statutes condemning child sacrifice (vv. 1-5) and occultism (v. 6), it is clear that the offense is a serious one. All three of the offenses involve attempts to wield destructive power from spiritual forces that in fact are evil and demonic. The offense in verse 9 is that of calling upon some deity to bring a curse on one’s parents. It is not merely using words like “damn” in reference to one’s parents (though that is also wrong).

Leviticus 23:30 is said by White to call for the death penalty for “one who works on the Sabbath.” On this supposition he suggests that a modern-day literal application would be to execute anyone working on Sunday.¹³ But his reading of the text is either careless or a deliberate misrepresentation, since it has nothing to do with the weekly Sabbath. The death penalty in this passage is imposed on any Israelite who works on *the Day of Atonement* (Yom Kippur), the most solemn holy day of the Israelite calendar (vv. 26-29). Since there is nothing in Christianity or the general modern culture outside Judaism corresponding to the Day of Atonement, there is no reason to expect that this capital offense in Old Testament religion would apply today.

The third death penalty which White misconstrues is the one associated with blaspheming God’s name (Lev. 24:16). White trivializes the offense by describing it as “using God’s name in vain.” In fact the offense was that someone spoke a curse against God (vv. 10-15). Again, cursing in biblical thought is not merely careless language using God’s name, but invoking a deity or spiritual power to bring evil upon someone. To curse the Lord God, then, is to declare spiritual warfare against the true God, the God of Israel. Since

Israel's national existence was the direct result of God's miraculous intervention on their behalf, and their nation was constituted legally as a people sworn by a covenant oath to worship and honor the Lord as their God, it is perfectly understandable that the Law would impose the maximum penalty on someone who openly cursed God. Such an act is akin to treason, and in fact more serious than treason, since the government that is betrayed is the kingdom of God.

Again, the few death penalties in the Mosaic Law for offenses relating to the Israelite religious system rather than directly moral offenses do not apply directly to modern non-Israelite nations. But it does not follow that the acts that were punishable by death are not still sins. Christians do not have a Day of Atonement, but the other two offenses are still possible today. Anyone who called upon a false god or occult power to bring harm upon their parents, or who cursed God himself, would surely have to be regarded as having sinned grievously. Even if we decided that none of the capital offenses in Leviticus should be punished by death today, that wouldn't change the fact that they were and are still wrong — they are still *sins*. White himself slips and admits this when he says that “the death penalty was also demanded for a variety of *other sins* as well.”¹⁴ And indeed all of the capital offenses White cites are *all* sins: cursing one's parents, adultery, incest, bestiality, occultism, prostitution, cursing God, and sexually violating a woman (even during her period, when she cannot become pregnant) are all surely sins (Lev. 20:9-18, 27; 21:9; 23:30; 24:16). Roughly the same list is produced by Spong, who also fails to notice that even in his radically liberal ethic most of these acts are viewed as immoral.¹⁵ It is therefore purely arbitrary to exclude homosexual acts, which are included in the same section of

Leviticus as acts identified as “abominations” to God and as punishable in Israel by death (18:22; 20:13), from the category of sins.

Further confusing the matter, White argues that the laws in this section of Leviticus have no moral force because “even conservative Christian scholars seem to agree that the warnings were not about ethical or moral issues so much as they were a ‘Holiness Code’ describing acts that caused a Jewish man to be unclean and therefore unable to enter the courtyard of the temple for worship.”¹⁶ The confusion is obvious: how can Leviticus impose the death penalty for offenses that merely cause Jewish men to become ritually unclean? If a man is put to death, surely the question of whether he can “enter the courtyard of the temple for worship” is moot!

What White is confusing here are those elements of the “Holiness Code” (a term scholars do often use for this portion of Leviticus) that have to do with *ritual* purity and those that have to do with *moral* purity. It should be obvious that such commands as “Do not have sexual relations with an animal” (18:23) and “Do not defraud your neighbor or rob him” (19:13) are moral in their intent and force. The majority of the commands and statutes in Leviticus 18-20 clearly fall into this category. Most of the exceptions fall in one passage (19:19-37), where moral and ritual laws are mixed in order to make the point that Israel was expected to abide by all of the laws regardless of what kind they were. Both of the texts forbidding homosexuality are part of extended passages dealing unambiguously with issues of sexual morality (18:6-23; 20:10-21).

A couple of other objections to reading the Levitical texts as condemning all same-sex unions should be considered. It is sometimes argued that the texts do not condemn all

such relations since nothing is said in Leviticus (or anywhere else in the Old Testament) about same-sex unions between two women.¹⁷ The premise is correct, but the argument ignores the form and perspective of Leviticus 18. All of the prohibitions are directed to adult men because the family heads in Israelite society were indisputably the men and therefore the primary responsibility for making certain these laws were obeyed was assigned to the men. Thus Leviticus commands the Israelite man not to have sexual relations with his mother (v. 7), stepmother (v. 8), sister or half-sister (v. 9), granddaughter (v. 10), stepsister (v. 11), aunt (vv. 12-13), uncle's wife (v. 14), daughter-in-law (v. 15), or sister-in-law (v. 16); he is also forbidden to marry or have sexual relations with a woman and her daughter or her granddaughter (v. 17), or to marry or have sexual relations with a woman and her sister (v. 18). Finally, he is forbidden to have sexual relations with a woman during her period (v. 19), to commit adultery with his neighbor's wife (v. 20), to allow any of his children to be sacrificed to Molech (v. 21), to have sexual relations with a man (v. 22), or to have sexual relations with an animal (v. 23). Only the last prohibition, regarding bestiality, explicitly adds a statement specifying that women are also prohibited from that act (v. 23). It is clear that the Israelites were to see these prohibitions as paradigms, not as an exhaustive list; what was forbidden to the men was also by implication forbidden to the women.

One of the more interesting explanations for the Levitical condemnations of homosexuality is that the Israelites were greatly concerned with increasing their population and therefore forbade sexual activities, such as homosexual acts, that “wasted” reproductive resources. Spong, for instance, argues that the Levitical laws originated during the exile in

the sixth century B.C. (in other words, about nine centuries after Moses), when “the passion to reproduce, to guarantee the future of the exiled nation, was a very high priority and would have mitigated against any practices wherein the potential source of life was wasted.”¹⁸

Setting aside Spong’s assumption that Leviticus was written centuries after Moses (which we deny, but which is not essential to Spong’s conclusion), there are still several major difficulties with the theory.

First, the Bible never urges the Israelites to have large families or to avoid non-procreative sexual pleasures in order to guarantee the survival of their race.

Second, if we may express the point somewhat crudely, on Spong’s theory as long as men were having sex with women on a regular basis, there would be no reason for the Jews to object to a little man-on-man sex “on the side,” as long as the girls were kept pregnant.

Third, why doesn’t Leviticus condemn masturbation by married men, since such acts waste procreative resources just as much as homosexual acts? Sexual libertines delight in pointing out that the Bible never actually condemns masturbation. But this very fact proves that the Bible does not condemn homosexuality for trivial or non-moral reasons, and certainly not because it “wastes seed.”

Fourth, the Old Testament is replete with narratives of the Israelites winning armies despite the numerical superiority of the opposing forces. Their cultural and political success did not depend on winning a procreation race.

Fifth and last, Deuteronomy 7:7 notes the fact that Israel was numerically very small, and makes the point that the Lord’s favor does not depend on its size. This statement is at least in tension with the notion that Israel was under pressure to increase its population.

One more objection to the Levitical prohibitions of homosexual acts must be considered. It is often argued that even if Leviticus condemns all same-sex acts, that condemnation should not be taken seriously today because people didn't know back then that natural homosexuals existed. Later in this chapter we will discuss the question of whether homosexuality is a natural orientation. But there are several problems with this objection to the applicability of the Levitical laws, *even assuming for sake of argument that the premise is true.*

First of all, if it was true that some people are naturally homosexual, *God* knew it then. This is an important point, since Leviticus presents these moral laws as coming from God through Moses. Is this true, or isn't it? Some defenders of the morality of homosexual acts, such as Spong, have the candor to say forthrightly that they think it isn't true — that “the Levitical condemnation of homosexuality is a pre-modern illustration of ignorance.”¹⁹ But even on the supposition that Leviticus wasn't divinely inspired, other problems remain.

For example, if some people grow up always feeling naturally homosexual, wouldn't *they* know it, even if most of the Israelites didn't believe it? Wouldn't such homosexuals have known that about themselves two and three thousand years ago, as well as they supposedly do today? They wouldn't need to wait for modern science, because some people in the modern gay-rights movement were claiming that homosexuals are born that way long before any scientists had produced studies supposedly lending credence to that claim. But in fact there is no evidence that anyone in the ancient world believed or claimed, for example, that some men were naturally attracted only to men. There is no evidence that

the Jews ever felt it necessary to deny, much less refute, the notion that some people are naturally homosexual while others are not. If no one felt that way when Leviticus was written, then evidently there were no “homosexuals” in the modern sense of the word. But of course the legitimacy of the modern homosexual rights movement depends on the claim that some percentage of the population has *always* been naturally inclined toward homosexuality.

In other words, it is quite true that Leviticus makes no distinction between heterosexuals engaging in homosexual acts that were not natural to them and homosexuals engaging in homosexual acts that were natural to them. But in light of the fact that this distinction seems to be unknown not only to ancient times but to all history until the past century or so, it would seem that no one whose homosexual acts were condemned under the Levitical law would even have thought about claiming that they were only doing what came naturally. That being the case, rather than conclude that Leviticus reflects a primitive ignorance, we might consider the possibility that our modern notions about homosexuality reflect a modern arrogance.

Another way the objection is sometimes made is that Leviticus does not deal with homosexual acts between two consenting adults in a monogamous, caring relationship. Again, it is quite true that no distinction is ever made in Leviticus, or anywhere else in the Bible, between homosexual acts in a “loving” relationship and homosexual acts outside such a relationship. Nor does any Old Testament text say or imply that these sexual acts are permissible as long as the “relationship” can be characterized in that way. But this omission in Leviticus does not create a “loophole” that can be used to justify homosexuality. After

all, it makes no sense to understand any of the other sexual prohibitions in Leviticus 18 in this fashion. No one seriously suggests, for example, that Leviticus condemns casual sex between a man and his mother but by omission leaves open the possibility that a man might ethically choose to marry his mother (we'll assume his father is dead) and have sex with her, as long as it's in the context of "a monogamous, caring relationship." "Love" cannot make sex with one's sister or mother, or with one's neighbor's wife, or with an animal, all right. To say otherwise is to substitute one's own notions of love for the biblical view.

We conclude that there is no way around the clear prohibitions of Leviticus against homosexual acts. The traditional Jewish and Christian understanding, that these verses forbid certain kinds of sexual acts irrespective of how people feel who engage in them, seems to be the only legitimate interpretation.

Paul on Homosexuality

The clearest passage in the New Testament on homosexuality is Romans 1:26-27, where Paul says that

God gave them [the Gentiles] up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due.

Paul is traditionally understood here to be describing same-sex acts, both between women and between men, in the most general terms as indicative of the moral corruption that resulted from the Gentiles' idolatrous ignorance of God. Paul specifically

characterizes homosexuality here as vile, unnatural, and shameful, terms that appear to indicate that homosexual sin is particularly degrading and offensive.

As with the prohibitions in Leviticus, critics of the traditional interpretation of Romans 1:26-27 admit that Paul is talking about homosexual acts but try to show that what he says does not condemn homosexuality as a sexual orientation. In support of this claim, some have argued that Paul is here describing same-sex acts as a punishment for the sin of idolatry, and therefore such acts are not themselves the real sin. Spong, for example, reasons, “Homosexual activity was regarded by Paul as a punishment visited upon the idolaters by God because of their unfaithfulness. . . . Homosexuality was thus for Paul not the sin but the punishment.”²⁰

Spong’s argument overlooks just how Paul relates Gentile idolatry with Gentile sexual practices. Twice Paul describes God’s action as God “giving them up” to improper sexual desires: “*God also gave them up* to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts. . . . *God gave them up* to vile passions” (vv. 24, 26). This language is used a third time in verse 28, where Paul says that “*God gave them over* to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting. . .” (v. 28). The expression “gave them over” implies that God allowed the Gentiles to suffer the consequences of their idolatrous ignorance of God. In other words, in verses 24-31 Paul is describing how the Gentiles’ moral corruption followed upon their spiritual and religious corruption.

Now, in context these consequences of the idolatrous rejection of God are most obviously sinful. The catalog of sinful attitudes in verses 29-31 are the very sort of wicked attitudes that Spong and other liberal Christians emphasize as the greatest sins — greed,

murder, strife, gossip, arrogance, and the like. But *these are just as “natural” to sinful human beings as are the sexual lusts described earlier*. More properly (since Paul says same-sex acts are actually “unnatural”), such sins as greed and murder are just as much the result of God’s judicial decision to give the pagans over to follow their own inclinations. Yet these acts are obviously sinful and immoral.

In context, then, same-sex acts are cited by Paul as particularly offensive examples of the moral corruption in the Gentile world. The long list of sins in verses 29-31 follows the references to sexual sins as a bridge to the next stage of Paul’s argument, where he will point out that no one, whether noble pagan or religious Jew, is free from the moral corruption that is so obvious in the larger Gentile world (Rom. 2:1-3:20).

Spong and others also reason that Paul spoke critically of homosexual acts because he was unaware of the possibility that some people were naturally inclined to homosexual affections. “He did not or perhaps could not imagine a life in which the affections of a male might be naturally directed to another male.”²¹ Once again, this we-know-better-now reasoning fails to see just how much Paul did seem to understand. In this very passage we find Paul explaining that the same-sex acts which he criticizes are motivated by the passions of those who engage in them. Paul understood full well that the people who engage in such acts feel driven to them by their emotions, by their sexual and emotional urges. He simply did not share the modern assumption that if a person has passionate feelings, those feelings *must* be “natural” for the person and therefore should be affirmed and accepted and even, if possible, acted upon. In fact, Paul specifically says that same-sex acts, even those motivated by strong passions, are *unnatural* (vv. 26-27).

It turns out that we need to distinguish between what *feels* natural and what really *is* natural. The depraved may feel sexual passion toward persons of the same sex, or toward children; they may feel hatred toward persons of another color; they may feel that it is natural to them to feel this way — but all of these feelings are a *perversion* of human nature.

Romans 1 is not the only passage where Paul mentions homosexuality, although it is the main one. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 practicing homosexuals are listed among those who will not inherit the kingdom of God. They are associated with idolaters, adulterers, thieves, swindlers, and the like (vv. 9-10), all of whom heard the gospel and left their sinful lifestyles behind by the grace of God. Similarly, in 1 Timothy 1:9-10 Paul says that the law is intended to expose sinners of all kinds, including homosexuals along with murderers, kidnappers, perjurers, and the like.

Both of these passages use the term *arsenokoitai*, which is traditionally understood to refer to those committing same-sex acts. Critics of this traditional interpretation have tried to prove that the word has been mistranslated; they usually conclude that the word referred to male prostitutes. But David Wright has shown that the term is a compound word based on two Greek words used in both of the Leviticus texts condemning homosexual acts as found in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament used in Paul's day by Greek-speaking Jews). Leviticus 18:22 in the Septuagint says, "Do not lie with a male [*arsenos*] as one lies [*koiten*] with a woman," while Leviticus 20:13 reads, "Whoever lies with a male as one lies [*arsenos koiten*] with a woman." The word *arsenokoites* was evidently coined by Greek-speaking Jews (possibly even by Paul himself) to refer to

persons guilty of engaging in the act forbidden in these texts.²² Thus Paul is not referring to male prostitutes or to some other special class of persons, but to anyone who engages in homosexual acts.

The reasonable person might come away from the Bible uncertain as to whether every passage traditionally thought to condemn homosexuality really does so. The account of Sodom's destruction, for example, seems to stop short of explicitly teaching that all homosexual acts are immoral. But there is no reasonable way to eliminate the idea from the Bible altogether. Both Old and New Testaments contain explicit statements categorically describing same-sex acts as sin, going so far as to label them abominations, unnatural and shameful acts, and warning that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. Only someone wanting desperately to justify homosexual acts, either for himself or herself or as part of a larger agenda of sexual liberation from biblical and traditional morality, could convince themselves that the Bible does not condemn all homosexual acts as grievous sin.

We have argued that the Bible clearly teaches that homosexual acts are immoral. But is the Bible right? The principal objection to the validity of the Bible's teaching on this matter is that the biblical writers did not realize that some people are naturally homosexuals. This is the question that will occupy our attention in the rest of this chapter.

Doing What Comes Naturally?

The modern homosexual rights movement insists that the traditional Christian (and Jewish and Muslim) view of homosexuality as a perversion is wrong. While engaging in

same-sex acts may be unnatural for most people, it is claimed that such acts are natural for those who identify themselves as homosexuals or “gays” (male homosexuals) and “lesbians” (female homosexuals). Those who say that all homosexual behavior is immoral on this view are actually attacking *a class of people* who are the way they are through no fault or choice of their own. Homosexuals commonly compare their appeal for equal status and acceptance in society to the civil rights movement for racial minorities or the feminist struggle for equal rights for women. Usually they claim that homosexuals are born as such — that is, that those who feel sexual attraction toward persons of the same sex do so because they are born with a genetic predisposition toward same-sex intimacy that can no more be denied than most people’s instinctive desire for sexual intimacy with someone of the opposite sex.

Gay Apologetics

Those who argue that homosexuals are born that way and that it is perfectly natural for them offer a number of arguments in support of this conclusion. We will confine ourselves to what seem to be the three most common and important lines of reasoning. First, it is argued that roughly 10 percent of the population are homosexuals. Spong regards this as a very important point.

Statistically this means that in the United States of America, homosexuality is the sexual orientation of some twenty-eight million citizens. It means that every time one hundred people gather in a church anywhere in this nation, the mathematical probability is that ten of them are gay or lesbian persons. . . . It means that in every core family or extended

family, when the circle expands to ten persons, there is a mathematical probability that one member will be gay or lesbian.²³

Not only does this suggest that all of us have family members and close friends who are homosexual, but it also undermines the notion that homosexuals have something wrong with them, since “any process of nature that occurs one time out of every ten can hardly be called a malfunction.”²⁴

Second, various scientific studies are cited that show that the brains of homosexual men differ in certain subtle ways from those of heterosexual men. The most famous such study, published in 1991, showed that tiny parts of the anterior hypothalamus region of the brain that are usually “more than twice as large in men as they are in women” were in gay men about the same size as those of women.²⁵ Another commonly cited 1991 study reported that slightly more than half of the identical twin brothers of gay men were also gay, while only 22 percent of the non-identical twin brothers and 11 percent of the adopted brothers of gay men were themselves gay.²⁶ A 1993 study appeared to provide even stronger proof of a genetic link. It examined the DNA of 40 pairs of brothers who were both gay and found that 33 of the 40 pairs “shared five different patches of genetic material grouped around a particular area on the X chromosome.” The study suggested that this finding provided “by far the strongest evidence to date that there is a genetic component to sexual orientation.”²⁷

Third, it is asserted that homosexuality is an incorrigible sexual orientation in gays and lesbians that cannot be changed. Any suggestion that homosexual feelings and desires can be unlearned, or that people can be “cured” of homosexuality, is rejected. It is in fact

argued that attempting to change homosexuals' sexual feelings and practices, in psychotherapy for example, is actually harmful to them.²⁸

Cumulatively, these arguments seem to be convincing a growing number of people today that homosexuality is an inborn orientation, not a choice. What shall we say about these arguments?

How Many Are They?

Until very recently homosexual rights advocates have confidently made the claim that ten percent of Americans are homosexual. Analyses of the study on which this figure is based, as well as more recent studies, have weakened that confidence. The original study on which the figure was based was a 1948 Alfred Kinsey study²⁹ that was seriously flawed and even more seriously misconstrued by the homosexual rights movement. The study was flawed primarily because it was based on an unrepresentative sample of the population: 25 percent of his sample were or had been prison inmates; all of the people included in his survey were volunteers who agreed to tell him about their sexual experiences and practices (leaving out most people of traditional morals who would be more reticent to talk about such matters); the sample was heavily weighted with homosexuals because Kinsey gathered his interviews by visiting gay bars and other gathering places.³⁰

The study was also badly misused, though, because Kinsey did not conclude that ten percent of Americans were homosexual. Rather, he concluded that about ten percent of Americans had been primarily or exclusively homosexual in their sexual activities for a period of three years. Only about four percent of American males and about two percent of

American females, on Kinsey's count, were primarily homosexual throughout their life. When the skewed nature of his sample is taken into account, it becomes clear that if anything his study suggests that the percentage of homosexual males in America is probably significantly less than four percent.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s more sophisticated and accurate studies completely discredited the ten percent figure. Six separate surveys were conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics and the National Opinion Research Center between 1988 and 1990; these surveys consistently show that about three percent or less of American males have engaged in same-sex acts during the past fifteen years. Studies published in 1993 and 1994 found that between 5.5 and 7 percent of men, and between 2.5 and 4 percent of women, had *ever* engaged in same-sex relations.³¹ The author of the 1993 study of genetic factors in homosexual brothers, mentioned earlier, that same year reported that his research showed that the percentage of American males who were exclusively homosexual was about 2 percent.³²

Probably the most illuminating study to date was one published in 1994 that surveyed 3,432 Americans. It found that about 9 percent of men, and about 4 percent of women, had engaged in a same-sex act at least once in their lives. Roughly 5 percent of men and 4 percent of women said they were attracted to persons of the same sex; these numbers include persons who said they were attracted to persons of *both* sexes. Most telling, "About 1.4 percent of the women said they thought of themselves as homosexual or bisexual and about 2.8 percent of the men identified themselves in this way."³³

It appears, then, that the percentage of Americans who think of themselves as homosexuals is roughly 2 percent — a little higher for men, a little lower for women. Somehow it should not have surprised us to learn that the number of homosexuals in America is probably less than six million, not the twenty-eight million claimed by Bishop Spong. Moreover, homosexuals are not spread evenly through the American population. In the twelve largest U.S. metropolitan cities about 9 percent of the population consider themselves homosexual or bisexual, compared to less than 2 percent in most of the nation's suburbs and about 1 percent in rural areas.³⁴ This means that, contrary to Spong, the vast majority of families and churches in America are unlikely to have *any* homosexual members.

Were They Born That Way?

Some of the studies that have been thought to prove that homosexuals are born that way are of dubious relevance to that claim. LeVay, for example, denies that his study proves that homosexuals were genetically determined to be homosexual.³⁵ He does think there may be a genetic factor, but his own study is inconclusive. LeVay had studied the bodies of deceased men; all of the men thought to be homosexuals had died of AIDS, and some of the men thought to be heterosexual had also died of AIDS. Since the sample was small (35 males) and probably skewed by the dominance of AIDS victims (a problem especially since the HIV virus can affect brain cells), and since LeVay could not determine if the differences in the brains of homosexual men were the *cause of* their homosexuality,

or were *caused by* their homosexuality (or by something related to it), drawing conclusions about the basis of homosexuality from his study is hazardous.³⁶

On the other hand, some scientific studies do seem to be making plausible cases for the idea that there may be a genetic *factor* that *contributes* toward homosexual orientation. But this is a far cry from the idea that homosexual orientation is genetically *predetermined*. Indeed, the studies nearly always suggest that this is not so.

For example, the study involving twins of homosexuals does seem to show a possible genetic factor (though even this is disputable), but it flatly *disproves* genetic determinism of homosexuality. After all, if genetically identical twins are raised together and one of them is gay, the percentage of their identical twins who are also gay should be near 100 percent. Yet the actual figure in the study was 52 percent.³⁷ Why, then, were only 22 percent of the non-identical twins of gay men themselves gay, as compared to 52 percent of identical twins? The answer is quite probably that identical twins tend to be treated differently, and tend to interact with each other and with other persons differently, than do non-identical twins. Indeed, logically the twins study leaves open the possibility that there is no genetic factor at all.³⁸

The best evidence for a genetic factor so far seems to be the study comparing the DNA sequencing around the X chromosome in forty pairs of homosexual brothers. But even this study appears to be rather inconclusive. The findings are given punch by the observation that “homosexuality was the only trait that all thirty-three pairs shared.” But if this study holds up, the most it seems to be able to prove is that there is some genetic factor that makes it more likely that the brother of a gay man will also turn out to be gay. The fact

that seven of the forty pairs (that is, about 18 percent) did not have the genetic “marker” suggests that the factor might predispose but not predetermine homosexual feelings. The sample size is fairly small, and the structure of the study (focusing exclusively on pairs of brothers that were both gay, with no comparisons to pairs where one or none is gay) is also a problem.

We may eventually reach some definitive conclusion about the genetic factors in homosexuality. But we can be reasonably confident even now that the evidence will stop short of proving that homosexuals are genetically predetermined from the womb to be homosexuals. At most some people may have a genetic predisposition that makes them more susceptible to becoming attracted to people of the same sex. This still leaves room for social, psychological, and spiritual factors in the development of same-sex attitudes and behaviors.

Similarly, some scientists have been suggesting for years that various other behaviors, including undesirable and destructive behaviors, also have underlying them a genetic component that makes certain people more susceptible to them (e.g., alcoholism, violent aggression). But responsible ethicists and scientists are not claiming that people are born drunks or murderers! Likewise, even if some people are more likely because of their genetic makeup to develop homosexual feelings, this does not mean that people are born homosexuals.

If some people are born homosexuals — which we seriously doubt -- it would indeed not be a sin to be born a homosexual. But even if we were to assume for the sake of argument that there are such persons, it would not follow that it is morally permissible for

those born homosexuals to engage in homosexual acts. We're all born sinners, after all, but that does not mean that it is all right to sin! Many heterosexual men appear to have an instinctive, "natural" desire to be sexually promiscuous; that does not mean that it is morally acceptable to engage in sexual relations with as many persons as possible.

Ironically, at least some homosexuals themselves deny the theory that homosexuals are genetically programmed that way. Some of them worry that the genetic theory of the origin of homosexuality will lead to heterosexuals using genetic engineering to change homosexuals to heterosexuals in the womb. Lesbians in particular often deny or dismiss as irrelevant the genetic deterministic view of homosexuality that is prevalent among gay men. One lesbian writing in *Ms.* magazine commented:

I personally don't think I was "born this way." (In fact, when I'm feeling hostile, I've been known to tell right-wingers that I'm a successfully "cured" hetero.) Until I was in my early thirties, I fell in love with men, took pleasure in sleeping with them, and even married one. . . . Virtually every self-identified gay man I've ever met has been convinced that his sexuality is a biological given, but lesbians are a mixed bag. My own wildly unscientific estimate is that it's a pretty even split between the born lesbians and the born agains.³⁹

If it is true that gay men almost always tend to think of themselves as born that way, and lesbians tend to hold varying opinions on that matter, that would tend to show that how people feel about their sexuality does not necessarily reflect what is biologically natural for them.

One last point should be made here. If a genetic factor that predisposes people to homosexuality is ever discovered, advocates of homosexual rights would definitely not be

satisfied if society agreed to allow biologically natural homosexuals to engage in same-sex acts, but no one else. What they want is sexual freedom for everyone — straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual — to have sexual relations with anyone they want, male, female, or both. Suppose it became possible to test people for the “gay gene.” Would any homosexuals agree to forego same-sex relations if they turned out to “test negative” for the gene? This is a crucial test question for those who predicate homosexual rights on the supposed genetic, biological basis of homosexuality.

Must They Stay That Way?

The third and final argument that we will consider is the claim that homosexuals cannot change their sexual orientation. If this is true, it is reasoned, then Christians are asking the impossible when they tell homosexuals to repent of their homosexual lifestyle.

Usually the claim that homosexuals cannot change is defended at least in part by the prior claim that homosexuals are born that way. Since there is good reason to deny that homosexuality is genetically predetermined, and even reason to doubt yet that any genetic predisposition has been shown, such opinions about the origins of homosexuality serve as a shaky basis for the claim that homosexuals cannot change.

The supposedly fixed nature of homosexual feelings is sometimes compared to a person being left-handed instead of right-handed. Left-handed people appear to be a distinct minority, and they feel that they cannot change to being right-handed, any more than right-handed people could change to being left-handed. But this analogy actually backfires on the argument in defense of homosexuality as a normal alternative sexual orientation.

For one thing, there is nothing wrong with using one's left hand instead of using one's right hand, *even if one was born right-handed*. Thus, the comparison implies that it would be permissible for those born homosexual to form a heterosexual relationship, or vice versa. And most advocates of homosexual rights, when pressed, will admit that they think this is so. But then, as pointed out earlier, it really does not matter whether homosexuality is biologically natural (like being left-handed) or not.

Second, and more devastating, it is a well-known fact that handedness can be taught. That is, *persons who were born left-handed can be taught to use their right hand*, and eventually will even *feel* right-handed. For example, persons who suddenly lose the use of their "natural" hand will at first feel very uncomfortable using the other hand, and may feel that it is "unnatural" to do so. But eventually they will become adept at it. Children who may have been born left-handed are often trained by their parents to be right-handed because the parents prefer that their children be right-handed. The analogy, then, seems counterproductive to the claim that those born homosexual cannot change.

The division of humanity into two neat classes, those born heterosexual and those born homosexual, ignores the sociological facts. A relatively large percentage of people (though still a minority) evidently have on occasion had sexual *feelings* toward a person of the same sex. A smaller percentage of people at any one time find persons of the same sex sexually attractive (about five percent of men and four percent of women). The percentage of people who have engaged in consensual same-sex acts *ever* in their lives is also small (about nine percent for men and four percent for women). The percentage of people who feel themselves oriented *exclusively* to same-sex relations *throughout their life* is much

smaller still (less than two percent). Then there are those who believe themselves to be bisexual (less than one percent).⁴⁰ These statistics present a much messier picture than the simplistic view that people are naturally either homosexual or heterosexual. In fact, they “illustrate how difficult it is to decide who is, and who is not, a homosexual.”⁴¹

There are people whose homosexual feelings run very strong and who find it difficult if not impossible to eliminate such feelings. There is evidence that shows conclusively that homosexual “orientation” can be successfully overcome, though all the evidence suggests that this is rarely easy and that most people who leave the homosexual lifestyle will continue to struggle with homosexual feelings through much of their life.⁴² Throughout America there are now a number of support groups of former homosexuals (the best known of which is Exodus International), both gays and lesbians, who testify that they have left their former lifestyle behind. Homosexual rights advocates who deny that these Christians were ever “really” homosexual, or who claim that such Christians must be repressing their natural homosexual feelings, show by their response that they don’t want to believe that *they* can change.

For Christians overcoming a homosexual past, what enables them to change is the transforming power of the love of God given to them through faith in Jesus Christ. These Christians struggle with sexual temptation and sometimes fall into sexual sin, just as do Christians who have never had homosexual feelings. But the constant which gives their lives stability and hope is the knowledge that they are loved by a God who created them for love and who will sustain them as they seek to love other human beings according to his

divine design and intention as revealed in Scripture. That, and not the reckless indulgence of one's feelings or the fulfillment of one's passions, is the true meaning of love.

Notes to Chapter 15: All That Heaven Allows

¹John Shelby Spong, *Living in Sin? A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality* (New York: HarperCollins — Harper San Francisco, 1990), 135-36.

²The argument here is similar to that developed by Thomas E. Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow? Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 39-45.

³Cf. Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow*, 87.

⁴This is the view favored by Spong, *Living in Sin*, 139-40; cf. Mel White, *Stranger at the Gate: To Be Christian and Gay in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 38.

⁵Spong, *Living in Sin*, 141.

⁶By quoting verse 49 and ignoring verse 50, White misses the reference to the “abomination” done by the Sodomites; White, *Stranger at the Gate*, 38.

⁷E.g., Spong, *Living in Sin*, 139.

⁸*Ibid.*, 39.

⁹J. Gordon Melton, *The Churches Speak On: Homosexuality; Official Statements from Religious Bodies and Ecumenical Organizations* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1991), xxii.

¹⁰Spong, *Living in Sin*, 145-46.

¹¹The latter approach is attempted by John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 100.

¹²White, *Stranger at the Gate*, 237. Notice how White refers to the child as “her,” a subtle way of appealing for more sympathy.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., emphasis added.

¹⁵Spong, *Living in Sin*, 147; cf. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 101 n. 32.

¹⁶White, *Stranger at the Gate*, 237-38.

¹⁷Spong, *Living in Sin*, 144; William N. Eskridge, Jr., *The Case for Same-Sex Marriage: From Sexual Liberty to Civilized Commitment* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 99.

¹⁸Spong, *Living in Sin*, 145.

¹⁹Ibid., 147.

²⁰Ibid., 149, 150.

²¹Ibid., 150.

²²David F. Wright, “Homosexuals or Prostitutes? The Meaning of *Arsenokoitai* (1 Cor. 6:9, 1 Tim. 1:10),” *Vigiliae Christianae* 38 (1984):125-53, cited in Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow*, 95.

²³Spong, *Living in Sin*, 67, 68.

²⁴Ibid., 77.

²⁵Marcia Baringa, “Differences in Brain Structure May Cause Homosexuality,” in *Homosexuality: Opposing Viewpoints*, ed. William Dudley; Opposing Viewpoints series (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 1993), 19. This article originally appeared as “Is Homosexuality Biological?” in *Science* 253 (Aug. 30, 1991):956-57. Baringa’s article centers on the research of Simon LeVay; cf. his later book, *The Sexual Brain* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), excerpted in “Sexual Orientation and Its

Development,” in *Homosexuality: Debating the Issues*, ed. Robert M. Baird and Katherine M. Baird (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1995), 62-70.

²⁶Michael Bailey and Richard Pillard, “Are Some People Born Gay?” *New York Times*, Dec. 17, 1991, reprinted in *Homosexuality: Debating the Issues*, ed. Baird and Baird, 83-84.

²⁷William A. Henry III, “The Hamer Study,” in *Homosexuality: Debating the Issues*, ed. Baird and Baird, 92; the article originally appeared as “Born Gay?” in *Time*, July 26, 1993.

²⁸E.g., Richard A. Isay, “Psychotherapy Should Help Gay Men Accept Their Homosexuality,” in *Homosexuality: Opposing Viewpoints*, ed. Dudley, 133-39.

²⁹Alfred C. Kinsey, et. al, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1948).

³⁰The definitive critique of Kinsey’s studies and their use in American society and politics is J. H. Court and J. G. Muir, eds., Kinsey, *Sex and Fraud: The Indoctrination of a People* (Lafayette, LA: Huntington House, 1990). See also the discussions in William Dannemeyer, *Shadow in the Land: Homosexuality in America* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 59-61; Robert T. Michael, et. al., *Sex in America: A Definitive Survey* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1994), 173-74.

³¹For the details of these studies with references, see Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow*, 102-3.

³²Henry, “The Hamer Study,” 92.

³³Michael, et. al., ed., *Sex in America*, 175-76.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 177-78.

³⁵LeVay, “Sexual Orientation and Its Development,” 62, 70.

³⁶Cf. Darrell Yates Rist, “Are Homosexuals Born That Way?” in *Homosexuality: Debating the Issues*, ed. Baird and Baird, 73-76; Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow*, 137-38.

³⁷Bailey and Pillard, “Are Some People Born Gay,” 83.

³⁸Cf. Steven Goldberg, “What Is Normal?” in *Homosexuality: Debating the Issues*, ed. Baird and Baird, 85-87, reprinted from *National Review* (1992). Goldberg makes these same points, but his analysis is hampered by an uncritical acceptance of the claim that ten percent of all males are gay.

³⁹Lindsay Van Gelder, “The ‘Born That Way’ Trap,” in *Homosexuality: Debating the Issues*, ed. Baird and Baird, 80, 81; reprinted from *Ms.* (May/June 1991).

⁴⁰Michael, et. al., ed., *Sex in America*, 175-76.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 177.

⁴²See Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow*, 153-58, and especially Jeffrey Satinover, M.D., *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books — Hamewith Book, 1996).