

THE GREAT
MUDWRESTLE

HOMOSEXUALS IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP—SHOULD IT
BE ALLOWED?

AN ESSAY BY STUART MCGREGOR

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

Up until now my response to homosexuality was derived from a concern for the individual's affected, which I felt, was consistent with the scriptural mandate to love my neighbour. The driving force for this stance was not based on critical analysis of the information at hand, rather on the emotive appeal of not be able to look a homosexual in the eye and say, "the Bible (and therefore God) condemns you because of who you are."¹ For me this manifested itself as accepting homosexual orientation but not endorsing homoerotic acts. And this seemed to be as far as I needed to go on the matter.

But the issue has since proven more complex to resolve than I originally thought. Rather than prove my standpoint as being correct, I have comfortably sat on every point of the continuum of acceptance when watching the cited authors wrestling with this debate.² Consider this essay a journey that I have embarked upon, not really knowing where I will end up, though hoping I will return home. I did make it home — though that is a different place from where I started.

It seems that the biggest problem is that so much is at stake for either side i.e. those who endorse the homosexual lifestyle as a gift from God and those who condemn it as an abomination. And because the debate is so emotionally charged, it seems for those who are emotionally entrenched in their ideas, debate inevitably serves to negatively reinforce their own obtuse opinions. Politics have overshadowed the sensibilities of reason in most public discussions of this issue and I know that documenting my own conclusion will alienate me from at least one side of the debate, if not both.

The aim of this essay is to determine whether or not it is appropriate to endorse homosexual leaders in the Church. Before we begin, we need to determine if homoerotic behaviour and homosexual orientation is sinful.

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Then I will endeavour to appraise some of the problems this raises for the church and, albeit rather optimistically offer a conclusion.

But, first imagine for a moment, that the two sides of the debate are represented by two great hulking men. One is gay, the other is straight. They jump into the arena covered by a layer of mud six inches deep and eyeball each other with fear and hatred. Two champions are pitted against each other in a battle set to rage for decades. The crowd at ringside eagerly awaits the outcome . . . let the battle begin!

I S H O M O S E X U A L I T Y O K ?

SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE

First let us define what we are talking about. Not all people who indulge in homosexual acts and lifestyles are homosexual, some are heterosexuals who indulge in homosexual activity. Derrick Bailey considers such people to be *perverts*³ in the proper sense of the word because they are perverting their intrinsic sexual orientation. These people are to be distinguished from those who are intrinsically homosexual whom he calls *inverts* as they are not “morally responsible” for their condition.⁴ Although this distinction is helpful, for this essay I will sparingly use the words ‘pervert’ and ‘invert’ because of the considerable loading that they carry. Instead for those who are *inverts*, I will refer to them as homophiles.

THE ACTUAL STATISTICS

It is important to understand the actual size of the minority group we are concerned with. The generally popularised figure where “about 10% of the population is gay” comes from the discredited research conducted by Alfred Kinsey in 1948.⁵ A more accurate figure based on consulting a wide range of studies places the actual figure as between 1% and 2%.⁶ Even though the initial Kinsey figures have proved somewhat exaggerated there is no doubt that in the 20 or 30 years they were accepted the Gay Lobby has gained enough momentum from to ‘de-abnormalise’ homosexuality into the mainstream of society.⁷ This does not help in objective discussion of the debate.

NURTURE ARGUMENTS

In 1974 the American Psychiatric Association (APA) omitted homosexual orientation from its DSM.⁸ From this act alone, much public opinion has drawn the conclusion that the majority of medical profession

hold the view that homosexual orientation is not a mental pathology. In other words, it is a normal condition that does not inhibit the subject from having healthy relationships and living a healthy life.

Evelyn Hooker's research into this was a major contributing factor in homosexuality being omitted from the DSM. She conducted Rorschach inkblot tests to produce 60 psychological profiles from 30 gay men and 30 straight men. She then gave the profiles to three independent researchers to identify which were gay and which were not. With the exception of 1 case, the researcher's could not differentiate the gay from the straight.⁹

This is compelling, but there was a serious flaw in her study. All of her selected homosexual sample had never had any therapy . . . ever—they were, for all intents and purposes, mentally healthy individuals. All she proved therefore is not that all homosexuals are mentally healthy, but that homosexuality does not prohibit mental health. She did not demonstrate the prevalence of mental health in the homosexual population.¹⁰ But it seems the results were more important than the method.

In a survey conducted 4 years after the APA's decision, it was found that 70% of mental health professionals disagreed with the omission.¹¹ But in spite of this, the pro-gay impact of this omission on general culture has been huge. The popular opinion directed by the media is pro-homophile and is arguably primarily based on too high an estimation of the label "scientific" without understanding the difference between good science and bad science leaving the generally expounded "scientific consensus" as certainly not universal.¹²

This bias is reflected in an entire chapter devoted to "What does Science Say?" where Mollenkott and Scanzoni are only able to give scant evidence in the midst of emotive rhetoric. The sheer force of their argument is expressed thus:

"Again and again, these studies have indicated that in the overall, homosexual persons are as psychologically healthy and as well integrated into society as heterosexual persons are."¹³

This statement when compared with the chart that Jeffrey Satinover provides on the enormous relationship difficulties that homosexuals have (see appendix A) appears to be in grave error.

Contemporary Christian studies repeatedly claim that homosexual orientation is a pathology. Elizabeth Moberly sees that the "homosexual has suffered from some deficit in the relationship with the parent of the same sex."¹⁴ In the male's case, this is manifested in an exaggerated attachment to the mother caused by a defensive detachment toward the father for whatever

intentional or accidental trauma was inflicted on the child.¹⁵ Her conclusion is that gender non-conformity in childhood seems to be related to adult homosexuality.¹⁶ There are many statements that support this from Christian counsellors who say that invariably the homosexuality results from a fractured relationship with a same sex parent in the early years of childhood.¹⁷ But the contention against this position is that only clients who considered their homosexual inclinations as ‘abnormal’ would seek counselling, (i.e. only *perverts* would seek counselling) thus creating a biased sample for statistical analysis. Even though this an astute observation, other studies conducted separately by Ray Evans¹⁸ and Irving Bieber¹⁹ still confirms the hypothesis in spite of the subjects of his study had never sought therapy.

There is much weight to the nurture argument for homosexual orientation, but it can (and quite understandably) be threatening for a homosexual and family members to talk about their family as being dysfunctional. Sensitivity is absolutely essential when considering the root cause of their orientation.

NATURE ARGUMENTS

The significance of homosexuality having a ‘natural’ or biological foundation is that it can be seen as defeating suggestions that homophilia is a *wilful* perversion.²⁰ If the orientation is “the way God made them” then who has the right to change it? This question has very far reaching theological implications when redefining the image of God in humanity; or for the discussion of natural and unnatural in the New Testament; or on the issue of the sinfulness of homosexual orientation; and on legitimating the marital status of homophile relationships.

Bailey and Pillard’s research into homosexual biological origins has been a key study for this debate. They demonstrated that there are *signs of* genetic influence. The prevalence of homosexual orientation in monozygotic male twins (twins formed from a single fertilised egg also known as “identical twins”) was 52% as compared with 22% for dizygotic male twins. Interestingly the prevalence was found to be 9. 2% for non-twin brothers and 11% between adoptive brothers. The results of this survey however have not been replicated, as required by scientific method, in fact King and McDonald produced half these values.²¹ All that can be concluded here is that genetics *may* be a factor, but is by no means definitive.

Ironically, Neil Whitehead sees that this research disproves both nature and nurture by arguing that if it were genetic or nurture, both twins should have developed the same orientation.²²

Other studies into the neural differences have been interesting but inconclusive.²³ Genetic identification of possible gay genes, well at least in part, have prompted fantastically optimistic headlines, but are still only preliminary studies, and by no means conclusive.²⁴

So, there is not enough evidence to suggest that homoerotic behaviour is *caused* by biological factors.²⁵ Tom M. Brown concludes

“Scientific evidence thus far simply underlines the complexity of understanding the origins of homosexual orientation.”²⁶

In other words, biological studies are helpful in developing our understanding of triggers but do not constitute as an arguments in themselves. Chandler Burr cautions us, however, that although the research is not compelling, there is enough faith in part of the scientific community that biological origins will be found for homosexual orientation.²⁷

VERDICT

The arguments for or against a biological or psychological origin of homosexuality are inconclusive though definitely more favouring on the nurture as being the primary influence. Strangely though, the current research trend into homosexuality is intensely concentrated in the biological arena, arguably at the expense of historic psychoanalytical research.²⁸ There is still merit to the bio-research because the general opinions of the authors cited seems to strongly suggest biological data is in need of more concrete evidence before it can be taken seriously.²⁹ The debate ignores nurture at its peril.

Ultimately we are left with a ‘yes’ and ‘no’ conclusion for both factors as commented by Stanton:

“There appears to be evidence in favour of both psychological/environmental theories and genetic and prenatal hormonal theories for the origins of same-sex attraction.”³⁰

This is furthered confirmed by Satinover:

“ . . . like all complex and behavioural and mental states, homosexuality is multifactorial. It is neither exclusively biological more exclusively psychological.”³¹

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So Christians still need to be open minded to the possibility of the ‘gay gene’ being located and to be able to reconcile this with their beliefs.³²

But even if a biological origin is found, does that really solve the debate? How much are genetic factors actually going to affect the morality of actions linked to them i.e. if a murder gene was located, would that make murder morally acceptable?

We don’t know for sure what the factors are, but we do know that it is more likely attributed to a fractured family relationship than simply biology.

B I B L I C A L E V I D E N C E

There are only 6 direct references to homosexual behaviour. The primary difficulty is that Biblical writers had no understanding or comprehension of what we call today “sexual orientation.” So because the normative sexual orientation in scripture is heterosexual, they are prevented from writing about homosexual orientations. This is a valid point and must remain in the back of our minds as we read the scripture. But we will try and work out how much this influences what the scripture says.

GENESIS 1. 26–28; 2. 24–25: CREATION

Most conservative scholars conclude from the Creation account that God intended male and female relationship as part of His good creation. The Genesis account of creation is the presupposed definition of ‘natural’ as Bailey concludes:

“The normal and divinely ordained human condition is the heterosexual, and homosexuality, strictly speaking, is an aberration . . .”³³

However, Bailey also concedes that it is incorrect to read back into the text that sexual orientation is part of the concern of this scripture. It is true a concern with what is natural is a very strong theme here, but the polemic is not directly addressing sexuality, rather it addresses function, form and order in the human relationship situated in God’s entire creation.

The main thrust of the Creation account is polemic against the chaos prevalent in other Ancient Near Eastern creation accounts that had humanity created by as utilities for use by a pantheon of capricious and insecure gods. Genesis is contradicting this world view in saying that God specifically created man and woman intentionally and for good. God is endorsing their relationship, but more importantly, He is endorsing the human race. The significance of the male and female characteristics of the image of God are

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not sexual as such, rather they point to God's reflection in the humanness of both male or a female.³⁴

That Adam and Eve were evidently married does not constitute a command for a man to marry a woman or even constitute a normative standard by which humanity should live, it describes the situation that they were in. The Bible is telling us that a man called Adam was married to a woman called Eve (and actually they had no choice anyway!).³⁵ This marriage does not denounce homosexuality, rather it reinforces the union of man and woman. I agree that Adam and Eve represent the archetypal relationship that humans were ultimately intended to enjoy, but does that in itself constitute an anti-homosexual argument? Perhaps the implication is there, but it is to my mind it is by no means compelling.

GENESIS 19. 1-29: SODOM AND GOMMORRAH

Many scholars from both sides of the debate consider this text as being largely irrelevant for determining whether homosexual orientation is a sin. The sin of these two infamous cities is that of inhospitality³⁶ as shown in the summary of the sins in Ezekiel 16:49. Pro-gay scholars are quick to point out that the homosexual acts are not explicitly mentioned here. Others argue that Ezekiel confirms the homosexual act as one of Sodom's sins through his use of familiar phrasing associated with sexual immorality (abomination for example), but consider that the sin is more correctly to be viewed as the inhabitants desiring to have *unnatural* sex with 'strange flesh' or angels.³⁷ This last argument is an interesting idea, but purely speculative. Sherwin Bailey rejects the story outright as a superstitious myth.³⁸

Yet another alternative, and altogether more plausible, is that the men of Sodom desired to gang rape the two guests. The homosexual acts which are incidental to the acute violence of the situation.³⁹ Some weight has to be given to the implication that homosexual acts were degrading, but there are no clear explanations as to why this is so.⁴⁰ There is historical evidence that sodomic rape was often used by conquerors to humiliate those they subdued, but this can only provide a useful insight rather than a direct interpretation.

Orientation is not mentioned at all. The men of the city are quite probably heterosexual, or at least bisexual, because Sodom was a city that existed with a population thus carrying the rather obvious inference of procreation.⁴¹

Furthermore, had the men accepted the offer of Lot's daughters, thereby rendering the story heterosexual, it is obvious that the city would not

have been excused from incurring God's wrath.⁴² Violent rape, which is an abuse of power, points to the key concern of the text, namely, the violence and disrespect for other image-bearing humans generated from godless hearts. For this reason, homosexuality remains incidental to the story as being a mode through which this violence was being perpetrated.

LEVITICUS 18. 22; 20. 13: HOLINESS CODE

Here there is a direct prohibition and an implicit equation of homosexual acts with other sins such as bestiality, incest and adultery.

The immediate purital concern may be for the preservation of Israel's distinctiveness from other surrounding religions by choosing not to resemble in any way the homosexual fertility rites performed by pagan temple prostitutes.⁴³ This argument firmly fixes this law in a specific cultural and cultic context rendering it irrelevant for today's discussion. This argument is bolstered by the fact that contemporary Christians generally do not follow other prohibitions in the Holiness code i.e. intercourse during menstruation, sewing different cloths together. As we have reinterpreted those two statutes, can we therefore reinterpret the others, no matter how abhorrent or deviant to our personal predispositions? After all, everything is permissible, but not everything beneficial, (1 Corinthians 10. 23) begging the question: Could certain homosexual relationships be considered as beneficial to those who are involved in them?

There are a number of responses to this argument. It is speculative to suggest that male temple prostitutes would be available for homosexual acts for two reasons. Firstly, if the motive for performing the rites was fertility what documented symbolism is their for same sex intercourse? Secondly, because of the widespread belief that sodomy was humiliating, what purpose does it serve in worship?⁴⁴ It does not seem reasonable that this prohibition is related directly to the fertility rites of the surrounding nations.

Some read this text as condemning the homosexual activity performed by heterosexuals where a heterosexual man defiles himself by being more like a woman. This is based on the Holiness Code's concern for not mixing things that belong in two different categories.⁴⁵ The question remains, however, why?

Stanley Grenz argues that Leviticus views homosexual activity as an affront to God's ordained natural order.⁴⁶ Bailey confirms this as the Hebrew word for 'abomination' can carry the negative tone of 'the reversal of the

created order'.⁴⁷ This argument brings the relevance of the text back into the present.⁴⁸

At a more simplistic level, what cannot be missed in this text is the significance of how homosexual acts are bracketed negatively by bestiality, incest and adultery—none of which are condoned anywhere in the Bible, in fact each is punishable by death. The texts condemn homosexual activity, but again are not concerned with homosexual orientation.

ROMANS 1. 18–32

Some argue that Paul is talking about voluntary *heterosexual* exchange of natural intercourse for unnatural. He is condemning the stepping out from a person's natural sexual paradigm.⁴⁹ He does not mention homosexual *love*, rather he talks about sexual activity in the context of lust and idolatry resulting in heterosexual perversion.⁵⁰ Therefore, to expect a naturally conditioned homophile to reform is contrary to Paul's teaching i.e. heterosexual acts are unnatural to them. The meaning of these verses depends strongly upon the biological debate and will change significantly if homosexuality is proved to be a totally natural occurrence.

To extricate 26–27 from the flow of the pericope for special treatment is hermeneutically unjustifiable. It doesn't make sense that there is an implicit qualification here of loving relationships. It is impossible to dodge the implications of Paul's tone without creatively defining 'degrading passions', 'natural' and 'unnatural' acts, and 'shameless'. The homoerotic references are immersed in an extraordinarily negative spiral downward to the damning culmination of Paul's social comment: "They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die . . ." echoing Leviticus 20. The first chapters are setting the scene for the rest of the letter by putting everyone in the same state of fallenness. His rhetoric is superb, those who are depraved can be saved by the grace of God.

A further note on the concept of 'natural'. Satinover rightly points out that sin is our natural disposition (Psalm 51. 5) and that God's commands are actually against our nature.⁵¹ Therefore, to argue that whatever is in our nature is righteous is actually a hollow argument.⁵² Satinover considers that in this context Paul's argument is referring to the natural use of genitals for procreation⁵³ which offers support for these verses as condemning homoerotic behaviour in whatever context.

The flow of argument clearly condemns the moral condition of those who practice homoerotic acts, but also many other sins are included in his (by

no means comprehensive list) and Paul's conclusion is plain nasty to open-minded believers.

1 CORINTHIANS 6. 9; 1 TIMOTHY 1. 10

These two texts both employ the words *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi*. The word *malakoi* is literally rendered as "soft ones"⁵⁴ which implies young male prostitutes consistent with the well known and documented pederasty of Greek society.⁵⁵ This word is specific and easily interpreted. Paul is condemning pederasty.

However, the literal rendering of *arsenokoitai* is the conjunction of "male" and "bed" apparently leaving it's meaning somewhat ambiguous.⁵⁶ But recent research suggests that the word has such strong similarities with the Septuagint rendition of the Hebrew conjunction for homoerotic behaviour found in Leviticus⁵⁷, thus the 1st century readers would have found the term to mean, quite unambiguously, homoerotic acts performed between men.

Some argue that although both letters obviously consider these acts as reprehensible, neither of these passages offer explanation as to *why* they are abominable acts, nor in what context they are being performed i.e. nothing is said about the moral integrity of the relationships between the men.⁵⁸ In other words, Paul has nothing negative to say about the orientation. This argument denies the context that the passage is located in Corinthians where later on Paul considers the only paradigm for sexual expression as being within a marriage, which as he understood it, was heterosexual.⁵⁹ It is an argument from silence to suggest that a man who regarded homoerotic activity with the same disdain as extramarital sexual acts would held an explicitly different stance had he known what sexual orientation was.⁶⁰

THE JESUS TRADITION

Jesus has nothing to say on the matter and he is even silent about the homosexual sin of Sodom (Mt 10. 12–15; Luke 10. 10–12). From this, Victor Paul Furnish implies that because Jesus didn't say anything about same-sex practices doesn't mean he had no concerns whatsoever regarding homoerotic behaviour. In fact, *precisely because* he didn't say anything about it means that he had no *special* concern for homosexuality and so obviously endorsed it.⁶¹ In other words, if it really was such a bad thing, surely Jesus would have said something. This argument from silence is used by many 'exegetes' but it raises a number difficult questions. First, based on what Jesus does not say, is it actually fair to conclude that sexual orientation is divinely appointed? Second,

how does Furnish account for the fact that homosexuality was not identified until much later in history? In which case why would Jesus even consider talking about it to people that did not know what it was? Finally, following an argument from silence on incest, can we therefore conclude that Jesus endorsed this practice?⁶²

We must bear in mind that the Rabbinic tradition influenced Jesus' discussion of Sodom as it more or less assumed that homoerotic behaviour was wrong and that historically the Hebrew tradition saw these acts as implicit in the Sodom and Gomorrah stories. Also, the writers of the Gospels were not defending against the Hellenistic influences on their society as strongly as Paul hence their lack of polemic toward Greek social practices in general.⁶³

VERDICT

The statement made by those who affirm homosexual orientation as God-given is that the Biblical writers had no concept of homosexual orientation. Regarding Leviticus, Furnish suggests that “[the text] takes no account of what is ‘good’ or ‘just’ or ‘loving.’ The single concern is for purity . . .” which can also therefore be expressed in the retention of honest sexual expression in committed homosexual relationships.⁶⁴ But it is difficult to sustain this argument given the extraordinary evidence to suggest wholesome committed healthy homosexual relationships are actually far and few between.⁶⁵

Most of the arguments that try to sidestep the scriptural injunctions toward homosexual acts argue that the scriptural interest is in precluding wilful contortion of the heterosexual orientation into homosexual and vice versa. But these arguments are inherently contradictory, if the biblical writers had no idea what sexual orientation was, then it does not follow that they would argue against its perversion. We cannot apply one overarching principle on special occasions. The question then, had the biblical authors known about sexual orientation would they have condemned it? I think that the implication (and I acknowledge my own subjective interpretation here) is that they would. Homosexual activity is *always* considered morally reprehensible and located in negative contexts. In as much as the Bible does not endorse the relationship that two adulterers who are in love, it will not endorse any sexual union outside of the context of marriage.

Mollenkott suggests that the actual acts of homosexuality cannot be judged sinful when the same acts are enjoyed within a marriage state by many heterosexuals.⁶⁶ The implication that this supports gay marriage is unfounded,

because the Hebrew abomination is the distortion of God's natural order. Whether or not those homoerotic acts are emulated within heterosexual marriage is separate issue, and therefore inconsequential.⁶⁷ Christine E. Gudorf, suggests that the church should de-emphasise pro-creation because of a burgeoning world population and so for this reason it is time to see homosexual marriages as part of God's plan for population control. Such an extreme view is easily dismissed by a quick look at the actual statistics of world population growth.⁶⁸ It is a surprisingly weak argument for arguing that the church should recognise homosexual marriages.⁶⁹

To conclude this survey, though I do not consider any of the pro-gay arguments tremendously compelling, some are substantial enough to unsettle a strictly surface approach to the scriptures. Therefore the only honest conclusion I can come to is that, while the Bible seems clear about homoerotic acts as being sinful, there is enough exegetical support to afford a reasonable doubt for maintaining its blanket condemnation of homosexual orientation.

T H E C H U R C H R E S P O N S E

The most important consideration that should be at the forefront of any Christian's thinking on this issue, must be that the pastoral considerations for homosexuality do not rest so much upon scientific evidence and personal exegetical perspective, but on the internal belief of an individual that they are gay.⁷⁰ The weight of strong arguments are interpreted from a inherently biased perspective on both sides. One cannot convince a homophile into heterosexuality in as much as the homophile will not convince the other way.

The history of the Church is littered with traditions that accentuate homophobic attitudes and limited understanding. Even now, the range of Christian opinion is diverse. Christopher Townsend attempts to crystallise four standpoints that a Christian may take in their attitudes to the homophile.⁷¹ They are outlined as follows.

Rejecting Punitive

Rejection of the behaviour and the orientation, some almost to the extent of capital punishment.

Rejecting Compassionate

Both the orientation and the acts are contrary to God's design for humanity, but the sinner is welcome in the church.

Qualified Acceptance

The homosexual is rarely if ever responsible for their condition. Though it is not ideal, stable homosexual unions may be an appropriate outlet for their love and sexuality. Before this though, every effort must be made for repentance.

Full Acceptance

Sexuality is unitive in God's sight whether homosexual or heterosexual in nature. All sexual acts must be evaluated by their relational qualities.

In as much as this chart is helpful as a guideline, it is built upon a slippery slope where the hallowed 'middle ground' is arbitrary and unattainable. Any decision to stand on either side of the middle has a sense of inevitability to tend toward the extremes.

It is impossible to be completely 'rejecting compassionate' as this position separates the homosexual orientation from the identity of the homophile. Rejecting their orientation is interpreted as rejecting their person. Absurd as this may seem to those who hold this position, an uncompromising adherence to this will inevitably reject the homophile outright and therefore to them, will look exactly like position one.

Even though I sit reasonably comfortably here myself, I am aware that the 'qualified acceptance' falls into difficulty too though for different reasons. This position is in danger of saying that while they may accept the orientation as being an integral part of homophile's identity, they will on moral and scriptural grounds, deny them any expression of their sexuality. They marginalise through disapproval, which may be helpful for those homosexuals who are genuinely keen to change, but will again be regarded as homophobic by those who consider their orientation as a gift from God. This position will maintain that it is fine for someone to be gay or lesbian as long as they are not 'practicing' proposing that celibacy is a virtue for people to enjoy. But they forget that celibacy is a *calling* and cannot be equated with forced abstinence which to a homophile does seem somewhat of a booby prize.⁷²

So what are their options? If the homophile is accepted and chooses to be abstinent, yet they are "burning with desire" (1 Corinthians 7.9) then are we to permit them to get married?⁷³ To deny them this from *their* hermeneutical basis seems wrong. And this is the slippery slope of relativism. Remember that the most important thing is not where I stand and what my hermeneutical and ethical conclusions are (thought they are important to me, and possibly

to them at some point), but where a particular homophile stands at the time the issue arises. If they have not separated their sexuality from their being, or if they do not see it as a pathology and if they are in every other aspect of their lives healthy, then all the pro-gay hermeneutical dances discussed earlier will be far more compelling to them. They will then not feel the same urge to budge and for us to expect them to conform to a ‘global moral imperative’, as I will now try to show, is erroneous.

THE PROBLEM OF RELATIVISM⁷⁴

Christopher Seitz asks the very potent question:

“If it could be shown that Scripture plainly forbids homosexual acts as an offence to God in Christ, would that be sufficient to constrain the church to proscribe homosexual behaviour among its members today?”⁷⁵

Unfortunately for some, I am confident that this could never happen—an answer that bristles with any who claim to have discovered *the* scriptural truth on the matter. Any truth that is not revealed, is subject to interpretation and therefore not Truth but truth. This is where cultural relativism is posing it’s most significant challenge to our debate.

Os Guinness tries to address the issue of a Christian response to relativism in our society in his symposium ‘Unriddling our times’ where he includes a very powerful essay by a supervisor of a Creative Writing class. She recalls how her students’ responses to Shirley Jackson’s short story ‘The Lottery’ have change in the 20 odd years she has been supervising. The short story is about a town who hold an annual lottery to determine who will be put to death and sacrificed. Until recently it evoked responses of horror from the students, but suddenly the response has changed.

When she asked the class for their response, she found that none of them actually stood strongly opposed to human sacrifice when performed within a particular cultural context. The strong moral high ground of the sanctity of life was now qualified by cultural traditions and expectations. The teacher pushed and pushed for a more definitive response, for someone to make a stand and say “No, human sacrifice is wrong no matter what the circumstances” but chillingly to no avail.⁷⁶ The moral and ethical boundaries of her class had become relative to a cultural situation to such an extent that an outsider could have no meaningful moral opinion about that paradigm. A moral framework drawn from the traditional western meta-narrative was now unacceptable and widely regarded as open for subjective interpretation. No-

one can really judge what is right for any particular individual. Truth whether the Christian likes or not can no longer be presented as universal.

The greatest problem for the contemporary Church establishing moral guidelines is the post-modern environment. It has entered a post-denominational age where denominational loyalty is diminishing. The great defining battles of the faith in history are becoming annoyances and foibles that are genuinely discussed but not really taken serious seriously. The right way of worshipping God has been compromised by a “horses for courses” approach of the new generation—whatever works for you may not work for me. In other words, spiritual experience is relative to the subject who is engaging in them. This is the environment that a contemporary Christian leader needs to work within.

The morality of the church, whether it is political correct say so or not, has always been subject to the movements of the day. A very simple case in point, would be the use of what some would call profane language and others deem ok. In some Christian cultural settings it is inappropriate to say the word “damn” whereas in others it is not. The question is raised whether the actual word is sinful or the intent with which it is said. In which case the word “darned” can carry the same offensive venom if said as a substitute with vindictive intention. Therefore, the offence is an offence against a particular culture if it is simply the word, or against another person if it is destructively intended. The impact of the word ‘damn’ is ultimately subjectively defined.

Similarly, and perhaps more relevantly, some churches find it abhorrent to sing in tongues, others find it essential. Who is right? “Horses for courses” is the most common answer, “it is great that the church can cater for so many different people in different ways.”

The reason for this little excursion is that it raises serious issues for the question at hand. Given the impact of social relativism on our post-enlightenment thinking, does one single overarching denominational institutional structure carry the necessary authority to impose doctrinal limitations on smaller congregations? More pertinently, can the Christian Church really make a globally acceptable doctrinal injunction toward homosexuality? If it can, is it plausible to enforce it?

To deny the inherent relativism in the hermeneutical arguments surrounding keeping the Sabbath, eating unclean foods and contraception seems naïve. To not allow some degree of respect for differing interpretations of the texts surrounding homosexuality would be hypocrisy and indeed some of the pro-gay arguments are respectable enough for me to know that if I was

sitting on the other side of the fence they would be absolutely compelling. I am prepared to say that I may not agree with the pro-Gay hermeneutical conclusions, but I can see that their plausibility structure is stable enough to hold. Conversely, I would expect the same respect from them.

But, whatever our stance on homosexuality the more pressing question is at what point do we draw the moral boundary for determining whether a potential or existing leader is above reproach (1 Timothy 3)?⁷⁷ For all intents and purposes, it appears (perhaps a little cynically) to be up to the individual in question to divulge what they will—integrity is subservient to conscience. If they were homosexual and had no ethical problem with it, then they would not be required by conscience to divulge this fact.⁷⁸

There are many ministers and leaders in our churches that hold quite disparate ethical points of view from some members in their congregation, but they are not *obliged* to tell them of these differences. Are our church leaders who advocate capital punishment above reproach? Is that something that they need to divulge before the church? More importantly can they still bear fruit? Is it possible for a homosexual to be filled with the Spirit and bear fruit? Our distinctly human opinions, though attempting to conform to scripture, construct paradigms of appropriateness on relativist and inescapably subjective interpretations. The problem of not accepting other paradigms of thinking, is historically demonstrated by the many denominational fisticuffs that have taken place over the history of our faith. For example, infant baptism carries some extremely difficult implications that are quite abrasive to some ardent Baptists who could consider it immoral and sinful to grant ‘entry into heaven’ without so much as uttering a confession of faith. Is this debate and others like it dissimilar to the gay debate or to many other doctrinal debates that we have had over time?

Relativism is eroding the foundations of our historic institution and our traditional scriptural interpretation. I am not saying that there is no absolute truth, but that this truth is actually less accessible than we thought it was. The essence of our ecumenical growth is drawing together the countless possibilities as expressed in the diversity of our people without the need to reconcile them into a big melting pot, perhaps we are actually throwing together a salad bowl.⁷⁹

T H E W A Y F O R W A R D

The sexual standard for acceptance into ministry leadership is the same for heterosexual or homosexual applicants—neither side should seek acceptance outside of what their community is prepared to accept.⁸⁰

In Acts 15 there is a story that illustrates community concessions between two parties who are at hermeneutical odds with each other. At the Jerusalem Council, an example of relative approaches to Christianity is discussed. The Messianic Jews hotly contested that the Gentiles were welcome to the faith but must immerse themselves fully in the Mosaic laws of the historic faith, specifically in circumcision⁸¹ (proscription of homoerotic activity would have been one of these laws). At the end of the debate this restriction was lifted and the Gentiles were formally accepted on three conditions. The question I want to pose is how far can we apply the nuance of this first century dilemma to our current debate. I would suggest the implication is not that we concede victory to the Gay lobby, but that we accept that the conditions for acceptance into the church is not subjectively defined moral adherence, but a desire to worship God through Christ. Ecumenical responsibility is not us centred, it is Christ centred. The community will only mould when it embraces.

Gerard Kelly expresses the underlying ethos of this well. He considers that what Paul did on Mars Hill in Acts 17 was break down the divide between ‘us’ and ‘them’. He is not inviting people to be like ‘us’, rather he is asking them to interpret their questions from within Christians people accept that there is *no* difference between them in the bigger picture of redemption will both sides can begin to engage meaningfully with each other. We are all journeying home together.⁸²

Therefore, given the significant variations in attitude toward homophiles that we see within individual church communities, I cannot see any way forward other than to look at the responsibility of each individual ecclesiastical community to decide how they will approach the issue. Each church needs to come to a conclusion on its own. This is, whether we like it or not, the environment that we live in, postmodernity is not going to accept definitive answers from institutional authorities.⁸³ It requires decision making processes at a micro-level. The advantage of the micro-ecclesiastical responsibility is that the community will determine as a collective the outcome. The community will be empowered to be self-censoring and self-endorsing.⁸⁴ Dangerous for some perhaps, but whether or not it is more dangerous than what we have now, I am not so sure.

The church needs to educate its members about the homosexual issues⁸⁵ in order to facilitate informed dialogue.⁸⁶ This is best not done from the pulpit, because there is in general no interaction with a sermon, and so no clarification on potential offensiveness, once something ugly is said in a sermon it is difficult to recover. My gut feeling is that anything that is said for or against in the pulpit will be met with resentment by someone in the congregation. It is probably better to initiate discussions within smaller group settings and between individuals, or by offering broad reading at varying levels on the subject for discussion in a church forum. Ultimately people have to make up their own mind, and from their informed decisions, helpful discussion will ensue. The tensions that exist in the informed environment are far more flexible and understanding than the inherently prejudiced tensions of untamed ignorance.⁸⁷ Just like two rubber bands that are of the same circumference, though one is thicker than the other, the thicker one will stretch further and be stronger at full tension because it has more substance.

Ironically, the question of whether the Church as a body of believers can sustain itself in this moral pluralism is, though a thoroughly reprehensible idea to some, actually proved by the history of the Church. It could be argued that the most damaging aspect of the modern church has been its rigorous and tersely expressed moral determination in a subjective and pluralist society. There are few issues that demonstrate this ecumenical distress better than the homosexual debate.

The church does seem to forget the magnitude of the miracle that a violently marginalised member of society would seek redemption in the folds of an organisation that represents the greatest oppressor. It is shameful that this miracle can be quashed by rigorous and so-called universal institutional injunctions.

There is a fundamental prerogative that the church as a whole must adhere to. That is the unity of diversity. The Council of Jerusalem is a story not of compromise, but concession. The Jews had to concede that their law was their culture, but the new community of believers had to embrace other cultures. They did not necessarily endorse the Gentiles not being circumcised, rather, they came to an understanding that broadened their plausibility structure. They conceded, that if the Gentile could be filled with the Holy Spirit, then, who were the Jews to say they were not part of the body of Christ? This became the one of the most significant acts of ecumenical love that we have ever seen.

Michael Kinnamon suggests that the defining component of the Church is not its dogma, but its love.⁸⁸ He concludes that

“[he has] tried to hold together (1) the importance of being a community that proclaims Christ’s Lordship with conviction to an idolatrous world, and (2) the importance of being an open community which knows that its knowledge of Christ is never complete and, therefore, that it needs to include people who see from different perspectives.”⁸⁹

It is not *our* singular prerogative to define the edges of ecumenical acceptance, but it is our responsibility to try to find them. We can argue all we like that someone’s actions are immoral, but to expect them to change because of what *we* have merely said is arrogant. A person who sees no problem will not attempt to fix it. The church cannot spurn them, but must afford them the unconditional grace that Jesus has afforded us in spite of our desperately natural fallenness. How our church responds to each other is our single most important countercultural distinction. As Kelly confirms:

“Our culture is less and less interested in what the church *believes* and more and more concerned about the way it *behaves*.”⁹⁰

If our behaviour prohibits anyone from entering the embrace of our arms, we are chopping off at the knees the transforming power of the gospel—our faith becomes a torso of immobile dogma. This is a hard teaching for both the homophobe and the homophobe-phobic alike. The homophile must also embrace the heterosexual who fundamentally disagrees with their lifestyle. They too must respect that there are differences.

Stuart Lange is pin point accurate in seeing that ordination is not a right to be fought for, it is a calling.⁹¹ The problem is that the God’s calling rests upon human interpretation. Within the accountability of the priesthood of all believers (straight or gay), the calling needs to be ratified. Ideally, human rights should have no place in callings, but sadly human’s play too much of a part in determining what God’s calling on them might be (which is precisely why Paul had to explain what constituted a leader of the Church).

I would suggest that the homophile who wishes to be in church leadership needs to consider one important thing. Whilst *they* may have no problem with their orientation and have good reasons for that, they need to accept that others do have a problem with their orientation and have good reasons for that too. Consider therefore the facts. If a church is 80% convinced that homophilia is reprehensible, then even if the homophile managed to win the fight for their leadership, it is very questionable how successful their ministry would be. Perhaps, that church is not the right place for them.

T H E G R E A T M U D W R E S T L E

AND AT LAST, MY CONCLUSION

I approached this essay with a completely open minded point of view. I was ashamed of the historic animosity that Christians have nurtured between themselves and minority, ‘immoral’ groups. I have found the un-stated red-neck undercurrents of many Christians who claim moral superiority over homophiles, repugnant and reminiscent of the Pharisees who said “At least I am not like one of those.” (Luke 18. 11) I did not want to be associated as being Christian to any homophiles I have been in contact with, precisely because I carry the burden of the Church’s irresponsibility. In the end I was, though highly politically correct, ultimately ignorant and riding the wave of popular culture.

As I worked through the debate, I could see the political volatility of the issue. I have moved uncomfortably through all the different stages of the debate and landed squarely at the conservative end and I find it difficult not to feel ashamed and sad because of the prejudice I will experience if ever pushed for my views. But as far as the evidence is concerned, the arguments from biology do not outweigh the arguments for homophilia being a psychological abnormality, the pro-gay hermeneutical arguments are not entirely un-compelling, but they are unconvincing. The only conclusion is that anthropologically and scripturally, homosexual activity and orientation are not endorsed by God, and it tears me to pieces to say so.

The issue is ultimately about identity—identity in Christ for both sides of the argument. I believe that the homosexual orientation is a distortion and therefore can be transformed through Christ by being treated at both the psychological and spiritual level. But I do not see this as a prerequisite for being a Christian.

With regard to homosexual leadership in the church, I conclude that homosexual orientation and church leadership are a fragile combination. But I hesitate to prohibit. My cynicism has possibly got the better of me but I admit that, unless stated otherwise, I have no way of knowing the sexual orientation of any leader in the church—past, present or in the future—unless they tell me otherwise. It is a secret. In fact, secrecy is probably the only reason that most people are approved for leadership in the first place. If we knew everything about everyone, would anyone be above reproach? Could we ordain anyone? Furthermore, should we expect that a homophile admit their orientation any more than we expect that a minister should admit to covetousness?

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Probably, in an ideal world, but pragmatically, no. Such a request dissolves the fundamental truth that we are all the same—perhaps some are more righteous (I bet it's not the ones we think!), but we all fall short. The limits of allowed sinfulness is not something I am prepared to define, I believe that responsibility belongs the micro-ecclesia.

If a community has no problem with a homophile leader then so be it. In my mind it is no worse than having a leader who preaches the prosperity doctrine. This is not a copout, it is the result of watching a prolonged mud-wrestle with two sides claiming righteous superiority. Maybe someone will win one day, but my feeling is that we won't be able to distinguish the winner from the loser—they will both be covered in equal amounts of mud.

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F O O T N O T E S

¹ And of course, I do have homophile friends and co-workers. It is precisely these real people that I could not say this to.

² It is no small feat for me to arrive at my conclusions as I am sure you are aware especially considering that this was supposed to be a 2,500 word essay that is now 8,500.

³ DEFINITION: “somebody whose sexual activities are considered abnormal.” —*Encarta® World English Dictionary* (1999 Microsoft Corporation. Developed for Microsoft by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.)

⁴ Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd. , 1955), xi

⁵ Stanton L. Jones & Mark A. Yarhouse, *Homosexuality: Scientific Research* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 34

⁶ The details are quite outstandingly presented in the book Jones & Yarhouse, *Homosexuality*, 34

⁷ Furthermore, if it is true that even 1% of the world population is gay, as would be concluded by those who say it is nature not nurture, then the total world population of homosexuals would be around 60,000,000—twenty times the size of New Zealand. In New Zealand the population would still be 35,000.

⁸ Jones & Yarhouse, *Homosexuality*, 97

⁹ Chandler Burr, “Homosexuality and Biology”, an article in, Jeffrey S. Siker, ed. , *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 119

¹⁰ Jones & Yarhouse, *Homosexuality*, 100–101

¹¹ Jeffrey Satinover, *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Hamewith Books, 1996), 35

¹² Satinover, *Homosexuality and Politics*, 37

¹³ Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbour? Another Christian View* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1978), 85

¹⁴ Elizabeth Moberly, *Homosexuality: A New Christian Ethic* (Cambridge, England: James Clarke & Co. Ltd. , 1983), 2

¹⁵ Moberly, *Homosexuality*, 8

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¹⁶ Moberly, Handout from class: *Counselling the Homosexual* (Reprint from the Expository Times, June 1985)

¹⁷ Jones & Yarhouse, *Homosexuality*, 54

¹⁸ Jones & Yarhouse, *Homosexuality*, 55

¹⁹ Stanton L. Jones and Don E. Workman, "Homosexuality: Behavioural Sciences and the Church", an article in, Jeffrey S. Siker, ed. , *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 100

²⁰ Jones & Yarhouse, *Homosexuality*, 50

²¹ Stanton L. Jones and Don E. Workman, "Homosexuality: Behavioural Sciences and the Church", 110

²² Neil Whitehead, *My Genes Made Me Do It!* (Stimulus, Vol. 8, No. 2, May 2000), 25

²³ Satinover, *Homosexuality*, 79

²⁴ Jones & Yarhouse, "*The Use, Misuse and Abuse of Science*" an article in David L. Balch, *Homosexuality, Science and the "Plain Sense" of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing House, 2000)94

²⁵ Jones & Yarhouse, *Homosexuality*, 180–181

²⁶ Tom Brown, "A Psychiatrists' perspective" an article in Timothy Bradshaw, ed. , *The Way Forward: Christian Voices on Homosexuality in the Church* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997), 144

²⁷ Burr, *Biology*, 131

²⁸ Jones & Yarhouse, *Homosexuality*, 91

²⁹ Neil Whitehead, *Genes*

³⁰ Jones & Yarhouse, *Homosexuality*, 91

³¹ Satinova, *Homosexuality*, 77

³² Unless of course they want to join the list of the great faithful who believed in a flat earth or terra-centric universe.

³³ Cited by David Atkinson, *Homosexuals in the Christian Fellowship* (Oxford: Latimer House, 1979), 63

³⁴ God is not a hermaphrodite rather, He is androgynous and so consequently distinctive from the other Ancient Near East deities that had gender.

³⁵ Victor Paul Furnish, “The Bible and Homosexuality” an article in Siker, *Homosexuality in the Church*, 22–23

³⁶ Scanzoni, *Neighbour*, 55

³⁷ Furnish, *Bible And Homosexuality*, 20

³⁸ Bailey, *Homosexuality*, 28

³⁹ Stanley Grenz, *Welcoming but not Affirming* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster Knox Press, 1998), 38

⁴⁰ Grenz, *Affirming*, 40

⁴¹ Scanzoni, *Neighbour*, 56

⁴² Scanzoni, *Neighbour*, 57

⁴³ Scanzoni, *Neighbour*, 60

⁴⁴ Grenz, *Affirming*, 42

⁴⁵ Grenz, *Affirming*, 43

⁴⁶ Grenz, *Affirming*, 44

⁴⁷ Bailey, *Homosexuality*, 29

⁴⁸ It also leaves us with a challenge, “What other reversals of the natural order are we engaging in today?”

⁴⁹ Furnish, *Bible and Homosexuality*, 26

⁵⁰ Scanzoni, *Neighbour* 63

⁵¹ Satinover, *Homosexuality and Politics*, 154

⁵² Satinover, *Homosexuality and Politics*, 159

⁵³ Satinover, *Homosexuality and Politics*, 152

⁵⁴ Furnish, *Bible And Homosexuality*, 24

⁵⁵ Richard B. Hays, “Awaiting the Redemption of our Bodies” an article in Siker, *Homosexuality and the Church*, 7

⁵⁶ It is also the earliest recording of this particular word, implying that Paul may have coined it.

⁵⁷ Jones & Yarhouse, *Homosexuality*, 21

⁵⁸ Furnish, *Bible And Homosexuality*, 24

⁵⁹ Grenz, *Affirming*, 59

⁶⁰ My argument from silence is that Paul probably knew some close friends of his who were living in a committed and loving homosexual relationship (given the 1–3% statistical chances), but he was at great pains to have to condemn their relationship.

⁶¹ Furnish, *Bible And Homosexuality*, 23

⁶² Grenz, *Affirming*, 61

⁶³ Grenz, *Affirming*, 61

⁶⁴ Furnish, *Bible And Homosexuality*, 20

⁶⁵ Refer Appendix A

⁶⁶ Scanzoni, *Neighbour*, 65

⁶⁷ Appeals to hypocrisy and double standards are not actually forceful arguments.

⁶⁸ Bjørn Lomborg, *The Skeptical Environmentalist: Measuring the Real State of the World* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 46–47

⁶⁹ Christine E. Gudorf, “The Bible and Science on Homosexuality”, an article in Balch, *Homosexuality, Plain Sense*, 140

⁷⁰ Stanton and Yarhouse, *Homosexuality, Science and the Plain Sense of Scripture*, 116

⁷¹ Christopher Townsend, “Homosexuality: Finding the Way of Truth and Love”, *Cambridge Papers*, Vol. 3, No. 2, June 1994.

⁷² Thomas E. Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow: Compassion and Clarity in the homosexuality debate* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1995), 168

⁷³ Gudorf, *Science and Sexuality*, 140

⁷⁴ Though this may seem to be a digression, I feel it is important for the debate because we are now in a post-modern age and for this whole document to be enduring, consideration must be afforded for this climate.

⁷⁵ Christopher Seitz, “Sexuality and Scripture’s Plain Sense”, an article in Balch, *Homosexuality, Plain Sense*, 181.

⁷⁶ Os Guinness, *Unriddling our times* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 141

⁷⁷ “Husband of but one wife” (3. 2, RSV) is not an instruction for the leader to *be* married, rather that they exhibit a committed and loving relationship with their wife. The idea is to preclude the church from employing a womaniser.

⁷⁸ CAUTION! Emotive footnote follows:
For example, I do not have a conscience about ripping music CD’s into MP3’s whilst

writing this essay, but the penalties for music piracy could see me in jail for a time and face a very hefty fine. To have this on my CV when applying for ministry would be disastrous as it would exclude me from being above reproach. It may not be directly hurting anyone, but indirectly it is hurting the artists. Can I be ordained?

Or what about moderately exceeding the speed limit, getting a little tiddly on wine, or swearing and the list goes on. What if I was too controlling of my partner, or violently strict with my children, or copied computer software or did many things that were secret. I could be so motivated by doing work for the church because it strokes my ego, maybe I preach because I like the attention—all of these fall short of the glory of God and certainly do not classify me as above reproach. So how is the Church going to determine the qualifications of a minister without violating their privacy?

⁷⁹ Gerard Kelly, *Retrofuture: Rediscovering Our Roots, Recharting Our Roots* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 132

⁸⁰ D. J. Atkinson, *Homosexuals in the Christian Fellowship* (Oxford: Latimer House, 1981), 121

⁸¹ Which, as an adult, is not an appealing thought at all.

⁸² Satinover, *Homosexuality and Politics*, 250

⁸³ See another essay of mine (if you want) on the problems that the post-modern society presents to the contemporary church.

⁸⁴ On the new shape of the church in a pluralist context see Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 227–224

⁸⁵ Actually why restrict the debate to homosexual issues? Why not any ethical issue: cloning, euthanasia, cyborgs etc.

⁸⁶ Johannes Van der Ven, *Ecclesiology in Context* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, English translation 1996) 261

⁸⁷ Van der Ven has a very good summary of the community of the Church, *Ecclesiology*, 248–278

⁸⁸ Michael Kinnamon, *Truth and Community: Diversity and its Limits in the Ecumenical Movement* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co. , 1988), 112–113

⁸⁹ Kinnamon, *Truth*, 116

⁹⁰ Kelly, *Retro*, 130

⁹¹ Stuart Lange, *Homosexuality and the Church* (Auckland, New Zealand: Affirm Publications, 1998)