

# Robert Gagnon on Prof. Beth Johnson's Review: A Witness Without Commandments?

Robert A. J. Gagnon  
January 2002

"One might consider as perhaps the strongest proof of a proposition being evident the fact that even the one who contradicts it finds himself obliged at the same time to employ it. For example, if someone should contradict the proposition that there is a universal statement that is true, it is clear that he must assert the contrary, and say: No universal statement is true. Slave, this is not true, either. For what else does this assertion amount to than: If a statement is universal, it is false?" (Epictetus, a first-century A.D. Stoic philosopher, in *Discourses* 2.20.1-3)

On Sept. 23, 2001, I dialogued/debated about the Bible and homosexuality with Beth Johnson (professor of New Testament, Columbia Theological Seminary) at First Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina. A reporter who was present at the event wrote me later: "I think many went away feeling that you overwhelmed your opponent so much that they wondered, 'Is that the best the other side can offer?' . . . It was like watching a steam roller flatten a road in fast motion."

A short time later Johnson posted a review of my book on the web. It can be found on at least three prohomosex websites: [http://www.witherspoonsociety.org/gagnon\\_review.htm](http://www.witherspoonsociety.org/gagnon_review.htm); <http://www.covenantnetwork.org/johnsonb.html>; and <http://thewitness.org/archive/nov2002/biblerulebook.html>. Unfortunately, as will be shown below, there are several indications that she did not read carefully, or at all, significant chunks of the 466 pages of text.

## Beth Johnson on My Exegesis

Johnson has an occasional nice comment about my book:

This is an impressive volume, encyclopedic in its scope, detailed in its argumentation, and massive in its documentation. It may well be, as its champions have claimed, that *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* will become the standard academic work against homosexuality. . . . There is much to commend the descriptive task Gagnon undertakes.

Despite her own avid prohomosex stance, she acknowledges that the Bible is consistently opposed to homosexual practice. She herself is "skeptical about revisionist [prohomosex] exegesis."

On two exegetical points she does express disagreement. First, she says: “I disagree with his analysis of the *malakos/arsenokaites* debate (1 Cor 6:9).” However, Johnson does not disclose her reasons for disagreeing—nor did she disclose any in her presentation in Charleston. I can understand why. The evidence is overwhelming that the combination of *malakoi* (literally, “soft men,” i.e., effeminate men who play the sexual role of females) and *arsenokoitai* (“men lying with males,” coined from the Septuagint translation of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13) is correctly appropriated for our contemporary context when applied to every conceivable type of male-male intercourse (a similar indictment of female-female intercourse is applied). My book demonstrates this on the basis of the use of the words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* both (1) in ancient literature and (2) in the context of

- the vice list in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11
- the analogous case of incest in 1 Corinthians 5 (still in view in 1 Corinthians 6)
- the citation of Gen 2:24 (“the two [man and woman] will become one flesh”) in the prostitution analogy in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20
- the discussion of man-woman marriage in 1 Corinthians 7
- the particular use of *arsenokoitai* in 1 Timothy 1:10
- the discussion of same-sex intercourse in Romans 1:24-27.

The second point of alleged exegetical disagreement is this: “I am not persuaded that first-century moralists cared as much about procreation as Gagnon does.” This comment suggests that she has not read, or understood, my argument. Apparently Johnson thinks that I try to justify a procreation requirement by appeal to a strong concern for procreation on the part of Greco-Roman moralists. What I actually say is that first-century Greco-Roman moralists critical of homosexual behavior (e.g., Musonius Rufus and, among Jews, Philo of Alexandria; *Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 164-69) generally cared *more* about the necessity of procreation in marriage than Paul (or I). As I point out, procreation among heterosexual unions factors for Paul more as one among several heuristic clues to the unnaturalness of homoerotic unions than as a prescriptive rule (pp. 270-73). I also make clear that even Philo, who is very strong on a procreative prerequisite, does not reject same-sex intercourse exclusively, or even primarily, on the grounds of its inherent sterility (pp. 168-69, 172-76, 272). I actually criticize scholars who pinpoint an absence of procreative potential as the main reason for the Bible’s proscription of same-sex intercourse (pp. 132-34, 270-73). In view of these things, it is quite odd for Johnson to say that she is “not persuaded that first-century moralists cared as much about procreation as Gagnon does.”

## Beth Johnson on My Hermeneutics

Johnson most misconstrues my work in her characterization of my hermeneutics—moving from what the text “meant” in its cultural milieu to what the text “means” for our own day. There are two chief areas where she does this:

- (1) Her attempt at characterizing my views regarding sexual orientation (her second-to-the last paragraph).
- (2) Her attempt at contrasting my hermeneutical approach with her own (her third-to-the-last and last paragraphs).

### *(1) On the Socio-Scientific Literature Regarding Sexual Orientation*

Johnson’s description of my assumptions regarding sexual orientation is badly garbled and suggests a need for a more careful reading of pp. 395-429 of my book.

(a) Where she indicates that I attribute all homosexual development to “bad parenting” (a misleading and poorly worded expression that I nowhere use), I actually argue in my book that there are multiple causation factors for the development of homoerotic impulses, even within the familial-cultural realm.

(b) Where she refers to my alleged belief in an “infinitely malleable free will,” I in fact state:

The best hope for change in the sexual orientation of homosexuals comes not in attempts to treat homosexuals after years and years of homosexual behavior but rather in limiting the options that young people have in terms of sexual experimentation. . . . So perhaps a better question to ask than “Can homosexuals change?” is “Can the numbers of self-identifying homosexuals in the population be affected by cultural attitudes toward homosexual behavior?” The answer to that question, I would contend, is “Yes, significantly so.” (p. 429)

Johnson’s critique seems to work with a concept that sexual “orientation” is in all circumstances and cases a fixed monolithic reality that no amount of environmental influences (familial, peer, macro-cultural, etc.) over the course of an entire lifetime can ever affect, not even so much as a single shift along the 0-6 Kinsey spectrum (“my colleagues in pastoral theology have taught me . . . to take with some salt claims that orientation can be permanently altered”). This concept—one which incidentally Kinsey himself did not share—is not borne out by the evidence from identical twin studies, cross-cultural and intra-cultural studies, and various surveys, often conducted by strong advocates for the homosexual agenda (pp. 401-23).

(c) Johnson states that I think “the biblical writers had no concept of sexual orientation.” This is news to me. I refer her to pp. 384-95 of my book where I argue the reverse of what she claims that I argue. In the Greco-Roman world exclusive erotic attraction to one sex was known to exist and a number of theories were floated that attempted to explain this, including theories that suggested at least a partial congenital causation. Paul may well have entertained such views. The wording in Rom 1:24-27 does not preclude this. In fact, Paul describes homoerotic desire in a manner that suggests innate, exclusive, and controlling desires. Likewise, the reference in 1 Cor 6:9 to *malakoi*, “soft men” who served as the passive/receptive partners in male-male intercourse throughout adulthood, coheres with it the idea of lifelong homosexual desire. Certainly the concept of a homosexual “orientation” is compatible with Paul’s general view of sin in Romans 7. If Paul could be transported into the twenty-first century and told that homoerotic desires have (at most) a partial and indirect connection to congenital or early childhood causation factors, he doubtless would have said either “I could have told you that” or, at very least, “That fits well into my own understanding of sinful impulses.”

## *(2) On “Rules” In Relation to the Descriptive and Hermeneutical Tasks*

The biggest misrepresentation is her attempt to characterize me as someone who is mired in the “static” historical/descriptive task, while she soars ahead to the “dynamic” work of applying the gospel creatively to our contemporary setting. The Bible is allegedly for me a dead rulebook, for her a living compilation of “truth telling” witnesses. I must confess that, faced with those stark alternatives, I myself would probably side with Johnson. However, her alternatives are little more than straw dummies of her own making.

She says:

For Gagnon, the descriptive task--what the Bible said in its original historical context--is sufficient to determine what contemporary believers should do. . . . The historical task is for me the beginning rather than the end of the theological task, and I think we encounter the Bible's authority not in its static content but in its dynamic power to shape and reshape us as the people of God in the world for which Christ died. . . .

The question for Gagnon boils down repeatedly to what did or did not constitute sin in the eyes of our ancestors who produced the Bible. The Bible is thus a rule book in which to find the boundaries of acceptable behavior rather than a collection of what my colleague Walter Brueggemann calls "truth-telling" texts, witnesses to God in the midst of God's people. So long as these two profoundly different perceptions of the Bible itself continue to divide us, we will continue to read and interpret it differently.

Johnson’s analysis is not only a tad too self-laudatory but also somewhat confused. If I had been content with the historical/descriptive task as an end in itself, I would not have bothered to devote the last third of my book to the

hermeneutical challenges (pp. 341-486). I am not aware of any biblical scholar or theologian who has dealt with this area in a more extensive fashion, including Johnson. Johnson acknowledges the thoroughness of my work on this matter but fails to see the logical inconsistency between that admission and the claim that my theological vision, unlike hers, never moves beyond the descriptive and historical. The only way that such a claim can be maintained is by wrongly assuming that a valid hermeneutical move requires a 180-degree about-face away from the stance of the biblical texts.

The scandalous truth is that there are indeed rules in the Bible, often called “commandments,” that are meant to be obeyed and that continue to have normative force in our contemporary context. This does not mean that the whole of the Bible is a rulebook, for there are many genres of literature in the Bible, some of which are not conducive to rule formation. Moreover, there are many rules in the old covenant that believers in the new covenant are no longer required to follow, though there is also considerable continuity between the two covenants and the very fact of a covenant relationship implies kinship *obligations* (duties, commandments). There are even instances of internal tensions between rules within Testaments, occasions where some commands must be prioritized over others (Scripture itself teaches this), and places where New Testament rules may not be relevant for our contemporary context or only relevant when creatively reapplied to new circumstances. I state as much in my introduction to the chapter on “The Hermeneutical Relevance of the Biblical Witness” (pp. 341-46).

Yet, with these caveats in place, it nevertheless remains true that the Bible contains normative commands and rules—not just suggestions—that often need little or no creative revision for our contemporary life as Christians. This is the case with commands not to commit adultery, have sex with near kin or animals, have sex with members of the same sex, solicit prostitutes, steal, bear false witness, worship idols, and a host of other negative behavioral proscriptions. Among numerous New Testament texts holding up the importance of adhering to commandments are the Markan account of Jesus’ response to the rich young man (“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” . . . “You know the *commandments*. . .,” Mark 10:17-19), the Matthean account of the words of the risen Christ (“teaching [the nations] to keep all things, *whatsoever I commanded you*,” Matt 28:20), and Paul’s declaration that what truly counts is “keeping the *commandments* of God” (1 Cor 7:19). (By the way, I assume that Johnson, a Presbyterian woman teaching at a Presbyterian seminary, is not opposed in principle to the “static” and inflexible application of some “rules,” especially the polity ordinance that PCUSA candidates for ordination who refuse to accept the validity of women’s ordination be denied ordination.)

In cases where the biblical opposition to a specific behavior is pervasive, absolute, and severe, and developed as such in contradistinction to the prevailing cross-cultural ethos, the burden of proof is entirely on those who would

argue for a radical departure in practice. Such is the burden incumbent upon those who contend for the acceptance of homosexual behavior. In my book I treat extensively all the main arguments that have been adduced for discounting the massive scriptural witness against homosexual practice. In particular, I show that the biblical rejection of same-sex intercourse is not predicated (a) on the relative rarity of committed, monogamous homoerotic unions in antiquity (the exploitation argument; pp. 347-61), or (b) on a desire to keep women “down” (the misogyny argument; pp. 139-42, 361-80), or (c) on the assumption that there are no indirect congenital or early socializing factors to homoerotic desire (the orientation argument; pp. 380-95, 430-32).

Neither in her review nor in our debate did Johnson provide any evidence that Scripture’s categorical rejection of homosexual behavior is predicated on these assumptions. She has not refuted a single hermeneutical argument of mine. The only argument that she puts forward for why Scripture’s witness should be circumvented (found in the first paragraph of her review) is that homosexual persons show evidence of the grace of God in their lives. The truth is, however, that most people constantly show such evidence even as they compartmentalize their lives to do things that ought not to be done. It would be patently impossible to demonstrate that all participants in various forms of immoral activity are void of such grace. Johnson does not explain, for example, why *all* committed participants in incest or in threesomes (or other “plural” arrangements), who otherwise show evidence of the grace of God in their lives, should be denied the church’s blessing.

The Bible rejects same-sex intercourse because sexual intercourse was intended by God to be between two complementary sexual others, an otherness imbedded in creation itself: “male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27); “a man shall . . . become attached to his woman/wife and the two will become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). Genesis 2:18-24 provides a beautiful image of a sexually binary, or undifferentiated, human who is split down the “side” into two parts, male and female. Thereafter, the creation of “one flesh” from a sexual union requires the two constituent parts split off from the sexual whole (Genesis 2:18-24). Scripture treats this complementarity of the two sexes as a more important dimension of intercourse than even the number of partners involved, the non-kinship of the participants, or the non-commercial nature of the activity. Ignoring altogether this transcultural, complementary otherness of the sexes (anatomical, physiological, and interpersonal) leads to a high incidence of negative effects, as regards health (physical and mental), problematic relational dynamics (in terms of the number of sex partners and the longevity of the relationship), and gender-identity development. For the great tragic irony is that, even when males and females suppress the truth about God’s design for human sexual expression evident in nature by engaging in intercourse with a non-complementary sexual same, they continue to behave as males and as females—only without the salutary moderating and enriching effects that a complementary sexual (re)union brings.

At stake here is not the abandonment of a marginal value of Scripture but a distinctly countercultural core value. In the end, for all Johnson's rhetoric about encountering "the Bible's authority not in its static content but in its dynamic power to shape" and about letting the Bible serve as a "truth-telling" witness to God, the Bible is so undercut by the promotion of a behavior that it strongly rejects that it ceases to be, in any meaningful sense, both a witness to the truth and a dynamic power to shape the lives of God's people. Or at least this is the case so long as Johnson chooses to be consistent in her approach.

Johnson entitles her review of my book: "The Bible: Rule Book *or* Witness to God." The absurdity of this title is clear: an integral part of the Bible's witness involves commandments to be heeded. Jesus, every writer of Scripture, and church tradition right up to the present have affirmed this—including the PCUSA to which both Johnson and I belong. In discarding completely that element of the Bible's witness, Johnson has, in effect, discarded the Bible's witness. She claims that the church should support a form of behavior that Jesus and all the writers of Scripture would have found appalling because to do otherwise would deny the witness of Scripture. The illogic is breathtaking.