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Sex and the Bible

To hell with gays?

by Walter Wink

The Bible and Homosexual Practice.

By Robert A. J. Gagnon. Abingdon, 520 pp., \$49.00

It was inevitable that the antihomosexual lobby would develop something equivalent to a neutron bomb designed to wipe out the homosexual lobby without (it is hoped) altogether destroying the church. I refer to a tendentious study by Robert A. J. Gagnon of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. In an exhaustively argued work of over 500 pages he has tracked down most of the views put forward by homosexuals and targeted them for annihilation. Gagnon makes no secret of his convictions. From the first page he displays his loathing for homosexual behavior. In this short review, I can scarcely sift through all his arguments, but I think his case sinks under its own weight.

Gagnon bases his argument on Genesis 1-2: "Scripture rejects homosexual behavior because it is a violation of the gendered existence of male and female ordained by God at creation." Homosexuality is not mentioned in these chapters, so how does he know this? By means of physiology: penis fits vagina, and that's that. Penis only fits vagina? Of course heterosexual coupling is normal. Survival of the species depends on it. But it is not normative. If monogamous heterosexual behavior alone satisfies the will of God, why didn't Jesus marry? Why didn't Paul?

To back up his argument, Gagnon exegetes every biblical text even remotely relevant to the theme. This section is filled with exegetical insights. I have long insisted that the issue is one of hermeneutics, and that efforts to twist the text to mean what it clearly does not say are deplorable. Simply put, the Bible is negative toward same-sex behavior, and there is no getting around it. The issue is precisely what weight that judgment should have in the ethics of Christian life. Imagine the difficulty that abolitionists faced in making their case in the mid-19th century. In the absence of proof-texts, they had to fall back

on the tenor of scripture, the spirit of Jesus, and appeals to compassion and empathy.

Amazingly, enough people understood their case that they were able to carry the day. Today, almost no one still argues that slavery is justifiable because it is biblically sanctioned. Likewise, churches have been challenged to accept the equality of women with men, including holding of church offices, though the majority of Christians in the world still do not honor that equality. And women are kept down by appeals to scripture.

Gagnon, for his part, tries to circumvent the Bible's treatment of women and slaves with arguments intended to bury the real issue, which is whether the Bible's clear rejection of same-sex relationships needs to be reinterpreted today, just as its attitude toward women and slaves has been.

Despite his conservative treatment of scripture, Gagnon does have reservations about the way Paul reaches some of his conclusions. For example, he sometimes finds Paul's exegesis of the Old Testament to be less than compelling. "Paul is still my apostle," he writes, "but he does not (and did not in the first century) have to be inerrant in every matter." In theory, that means Paul doesn't have to be inerrant on the matter of homosexuality as well.

Divorce is another matter that Gagnon slides over. Jesus unequivocally condemns divorce. Gagnon notes that Matthew and Paul each in his own way modified Jesus' words to make them less rigorous. Yet our churches are full of divorced people. Jesus never mentions homosexuality, but he explicitly condemns divorce. Why, then, does Gagnon single out homosexual behavior for censure, while refusing to treat divorce with the same condemnation as homosexual behavior? Does Gagnon believe that divorced people will, like practicing homosexuals, be damned to hell?

My own position is stated best by David Bartlett: “In Christ Jesus, neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality—in themselves—are of any avail, but faith working through love.” Gagnon is incredulous at such a position: Fornicators, persons engaged in incest, pederasts, those engaged in adultery, prostitution and bestiality, could, according to a vague principle of love, justify their lustful and promiscuous behavior. How could anyone stand up against Gagnon’s withering logic here?

Gagnon imagines a request from the Corinthians to Paul for advice, based on 1 Corinthians 5:1-5: “Paul, we have a brother in our church who is having sex with another man. But that other man does not put on makeup or heavy perfume, wear women’s clothing, braid his hair, or otherwise try to look like a woman. And the other male is an adult. The two men really do love each other and are committed to spending the rest of their lives together. Neither are [sic] involved in idolatrous cults or prostitution. When you mentioned that *arsenokoitai* would be excluded from the coming kingdom of God, were you not including somebody like this man, were you?”

Gagnon expects that account to be a knockout blow: No, Paul wouldn’t accept that relationship for a minute. But that is precisely what is at stake here: a new judgment about the morality of same-sex relationships. Of course there are sexual behaviors that are deservedly condemned. But how that judgment is reached is the issue.

That “vague form of love” which Gagnon gags on is the future of the species. We are called, in the name of love, to “choose for ourselves what is right,” as Jesus insists (Luke 12:57). Sexual mores are necessary. We need rules and norms. But rules and norms are easily coopted by the Powers That Be into serving as a form of crowd control.

To get to the point: the Bible has no sex ethic. It only knows a communal love ethic, which must be brought to bear on all the sexual mores of a given society in a given period. This doesn’t mean that anything goes. It means rather that everything is to be critiqued by Jesus’ love commandment in a fellowship of seekers—just what we find in the Fourth Gospel. Such a love ethic is nonexploitative (hence no sexual exploitation of children, no using of another to his or her loss); it does not dominate (hence no patriarchal treatment of women as chattel); it is responsible, mutual, caring and loving. Augustine long since dealt with this in his inspired phrase, “Love God, and do as you please.”

Such a critique rejects any double standards. Gagnon challenges gays and lesbians to the same norms of behavior that guide heterosexuals (but he fails to note that heterosexuals have a pretty poor record themselves). Gagnon cites levels of promiscuity among some gays that soar as high as a thousand sexual partners in a lifetime (but he fails to note that some heterosexuals boast of having matched that number). Gays have too often failed to practice safe sex (so have heterosexuals). Gay men have horrific levels of HIV and AIDS infection (but the vast

majority of HIV and AIDS patients worldwide are heterosexual). And gays and lesbians have greater difficulty in maintaining long-term monogamous relationships (but that may be a function in part of books like Gagnon’s that condemn them for promiscuity yet keep them from marrying; besides, far and away, most failed monogamous relationships are heterosexual).

Persuaded that no biblical or theological arguments for same-sex relations have survived his initial blasts, Gagnon conducts a mopping-up operation using biological and social-scientific data. He insists that genetic and intrauterine factors cannot, by themselves, account for homosexual behavior. He believes that environmental factors are stronger. What is at stake in this nature-nurture debate is whether gays and lesbians can change. Homosexual activists insist that they cannot change their orientation, and that studies purporting to show that some homosexuals are able to change their orientation are largely fraudulent.

Gagnon insists that the lapses of purported “ex-homosexuals” are only to be expected, just as people with other addictions also occasionally fall “off the wagon.” The arguments of both sides are tainted by self-interest. I find it most plausible to think of a continuum from homosexual to heterosexual, with those in the middle (bisexuals) capable of changing their behavior. So yes, some gays and lesbians can change, if they fall in or near that middle range. But those at either end of the continuum may find it impossible. For some homosexual persons, the effort to change can mean years of individual and group therapy, agonized prayers, suicidal depressions, and the constant fear of detection, loss of job and attack by straight men. Many of these gay people are my friends, and I know how they suffer. It is no picnic being homosexual in our society.

Therefore I would affirm any person who has been able to change his or her sexual orientation. But I also affirm all those who, for whatever reason, cannot or do not wish to do so.

So what is the homosexual to do? This is where Gagnon’s position reveals itself for what it is: “a cruel abuse of religious power,” as someone put it. The homosexual who wishes to be Christian is supposed to totally abstain from all forms of sex for the rest of his or her lifetime. There is no other possible choice, given Gagnon’s logic. And not just homosexuals, but single persons of whatever orientation must also remain totally celibate, says Gagnon, till they marry or die. But look at the scores of Catholic priests who have not been able to maintain celibacy even though they took vows to observe it. How much less likely are gays and lesbians to remain celibate when celibacy is imposed on them by others?

Nor are any of these sexually starved victims of a loveless religion permitted to fantasize about sexual involvement with another person.

“‘Change or be destroyed,’ was the staple of Jesus’ teaching,” says the unabashed Gagnon. That’s right:

“believers who do not turn away from participating in homosexual intercourse are among those who will be excluded from God’s kingdom.” (The people who talk about heaven always seem to assume they are going there.) That’s it: a life of permanent sexlessness not even broken by masturbation, in exchange for a heavenly compensation.

Gagnon thinks the very essence of love is to warn homosexuals that they are doomed unless they repent, change, marry or abandon sex altogether. But everything depends on the prior assumption that motivates his entire study: that homosexual behavior is a sin punishable by everlasting damnation. If we abandon that presupposition, we can envision a different future for the church: a fellowship where homosexuality and heterosexuality scarcely merit discussion any more; where the sufferings and sins of all God’s children are brought to the healing Source; where the excesses of homosexual and heterosexual behaviors are brought under the control of the Holy Spirit, as each and all seek to grow into the maturity that no longer is dictated by anxious ecclesiastics terrified of the freedom in which Christ has established us.

With Gagnon, I look forward to the time when God puts all the principalities and powers under Christ’s feet,

and the humanization of humanity is accomplished. I would hope to undergo that transformation with my heterosexual and homosexual sisters and brothers—and Gagnon himself.

That is, unless I am eternally damned for writing this review.

Walter Wink, professor of biblical interpretation at Auburn Theological Seminary, edited Homosexuality and Christian Faith (Fortress, 1999).

Gays and the Bible

A response to Walter Wink

by Robert A. J. Gagnon

The tone of Walter Wink's review of my book *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* ("To hell with gays?", June 5–12), is a disheartening reminder of how mean-spirited the debate about homosexual behavior can get. The title is inflammatory. The first sentence smacks of paranoid conspiracy theories: "It was inevitable that the antihomosexual lobby would develop something equivalent to a neutron bomb designed to wipe out the homosexual lobby." He tells readers: "From the first page [Gagnon] displays his loathing for homosexual behavior," ignoring my many exhortations to treat with sympathy and compassion those beset by homoerotic desire. Later he even demeans my family name, referring to "That 'vague form of love' which Gagnon gags on."

As someone once wrote: "What most saddens me in this whole raucous debate in the churches is how sub-Christian most of it has been." "No moral matter should be regarded as so urgent as to permit dehumanizing and demonizing our opponents. . . . God is confronting both sides of this controversy with an opportunity to transcend our verbal violence and put-downs, and to learn how to love, cherish, and value those whose positions are different from our own." Who wrote these comments? Wink himself in his 1999 edited book *Homosexuality and Christian Faith*.

One wonders also why *The Christian Century* would allow such a disrespectful piece to go to press. An editorial in just the preceding issue opined about the need "to treat with dignity others who hold contrary opinions" in the homosexuality debate.

I see six other sets of issues raised by the review

1) A consensus on Paul? One hears often that Paul opposed only exploitative forms of homosexual behavior. For example, in his edited book, Wink assumes Paul's inability to conceive of committed adult homosexual relationships. The essay by Ken Sehested that immediately follows claims that Paul is indicting only pederasty and pagan cult prostitution.

It is refreshing to read now of Wink conceding this argument. He admits: "Paul wouldn't accept [a loving homosexual] relationship for a minute." He adds: "But that is precisely what is at stake here: a new judgment about the morality of same-sex relationships." This is some progress. Henceforth we can focus our discussion not on whether

Paul was opposed to every form of homoerotic behavior—he was—but on claims to a "new judgment" about sexual morality.

Wink's 1999 article shows what he thinks this "new judgment" is: that "homosexual orientation" is a "natural" condition "fixed early in life." Apart from "fixed" being too strong a word, this judgment is neither new nor decisive for overturning Paul's stance. It fails to consider:

- Theories in the Greco-Roman world that some homoerotic attraction was due to congenital conditions, along with some recognition that desires given "by nature" are not necessarily constituted "according to nature."
- Paul's own understanding of sin in Romans 5 and 7 as an innate impulse running through the members of the human body, passed on by an ancestor and never entirely within human control.
- Paul's use of the term "natural" in Romans 1:26-27 to refer to the obvious embodied complementarity of males and females established by God at creation, not to all innate desires.

We can no longer assume that the notion of a sexual "orientation" was beyond Paul's reach. What we can be confident of is that such a notion would not have caused Paul to change radically his view of same-sex intercourse as sin.

2) The relevance of the creation stories: Although Wink concedes "the Bible is negative toward same-sex behavior," he rejects the grounding of my argument in Genesis 1-2. His reasons: (1) "homosexuality is not mentioned in these chapters"; (2) I allegedly limit my case to the complementary fit of male and female genitals; and (3) "If monogamous heterosexual behavior alone satisfies the will of God"—a claim I nowhere make—"why didn't Jesus marry? Why didn't Paul?"

First, homoerotic unions need not be mentioned in the creation stories explicitly to be precluded implicitly. One can work through a series of literary concentric circles, picking up clues from themes within the creation stories; other material in the Tetrateuch from the same authors; other material in early Israelite literature; other material in

the ancient Near East; and the subsequent history of interpretation.

As I argue, each of these literary circles confirms that the Yahwist and the Priestly Writers understood the negative implications of their creation stories for homoerotic behavior. Jesus and Paul accepted this. Paul's indictment of homoerotic behavior has clear echoes to Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:24. Accordingly, when Jesus applied the same two texts to divorce (Mark 10:6-9), he was not divesting them of their relevance for proscribing homoerotic behavior. He was narrowing further an already closely defined heterosexual ethic.

Second, I make clear that the complementary character of male-female sexual bonds includes a range of features: anatomy, yes, and also physiological and interpersonal traits. Nowhere are male-female differences more significant than in sexual relationships. They contribute markedly to the health and vitality of heterosexual relationships: filling deficiencies and correcting extremes in the sexual "other" while reconciling the sexes. The story of the splitting of a binary human (the *adam*) into two sexually differentiated beings communicates the "normative" value of heterosexual unions—not just that they are "normal" (pace Wink). The establishment of a "one flesh" sexual union requires a re-merger of the two originally-joined sexual halves. Far from being incidental, the sex of the partners is essential for achieving a holistic sexual fit.

Third, neither Jesus nor Paul would have regarded their singleness as challenging the heterosexual standard in the creation stories. They clearly did not conceive of Genesis 1:27 as requiring sex in order to manifest God's image. Just as clearly they would have understood that, if sexual intercourse were to be had, there were ways of having it that would efface the image of God stamped on humans—including same-sex intercourse.

3) *The use of analogies:* Wink appeals to the church's changing stances on slavery, women and divorce to justify deviating from the Bible's opposition to homosexual practice. Wink claims that I "bury the real issue, which is whether the Bible's clear rejection of same-sex relationships needs to be reinterpreted today."

There is no burial on my part. I deal with the issue of analogies head on. The key question is: What are the best analogies? The analogies of slavery, women, and divorce have great defects. In particular:

- There is tension within the canon itself on these issues. There is no tension regarding homosexual behavior.
- The Bible's stance on slavery and women's roles looks liberating in relation to the broader cultural contexts out of which the Bible emerged. The exact opposite is the case for the Bible's stance on homosexual practice.
- Neither scripture nor the contemporary church celebrates divorce as part of the glorious diversity of the body of Christ. Divorce and same-sex

intercourse share in common the fact that both are forgivable sins for those who repent. The church works to end the cycle of divorce and remarriage, just as it ought to work toward ending the cycle of serial, unrepentant same-sex intercourse.

The best analogies are those that most closely correlate with the distinctive elements of the Bible's opposition to same-sex intercourse: sexual behavior proscribed strongly and absolutely by both Testaments and pervasively within each Testament (at least implicitly), with the proscription making sense. Here one would include the Bible's opposition to incest, bestiality, adultery, and prostitution.

Incest is a particularly good parallel: it is sex with someone who is too much of a same or like. Bestiality is wrong because it is sex with a being that is too much of an "other." Scripture avoids both extremes, and so does the church today.

4) *"The Bible has no sex ethic":* Wink alleges that "the Bible has no sex ethic. It only knows a communal love ethic." In his 1999 article he distinguishes between a sexual ethic and sexual mores, with the Bible containing only the latter. Sexual mores are "unreflective customs" that fail to factor the circumstances of individual cases.

It is interesting to apply Wink's reasoning to Jesus himself. For example, on a communal level, Jesus advocated that all believers should love one another. If Jesus had no separate sex ethic distinct from his communal ethic, wouldn't we have to infer that Jesus was in favor of having sex with as many people as possible? Yet we know that Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage promoted the limitation of lifetime sex partners to one. There are no grounds for such a radical step if Jesus had no distinctive sex ethic or had an aversion to categorical prohibitions.

Jesus had a specific sex ethic, as did all the authors of scripture. He recognized the validity of categorical commandments germane only to sexual activity and transcending cultural convention. What else would a "sex ethic" be? So one can have spiritual partnership with large numbers of people, with blood-related family members, with children, and perhaps in a reduced sense with nonhuman creatures. But one can't have sex with someone other than one's current spouse, or with blood-related family members, or with children, and certainly not with animals—regardless of individual motivation and circumstances.

Wink insists that "everything is to be critiqued by Jesus' love commandment." Absolute proscriptions are examples of legalistic hypocrisies, even when it comes to prohibiting all sexual activity by young teens (so his 1999 article). The problem with this is that Jesus applied the love commandment in ways that run 180-degrees counter to Wink's application. Jesus went beyond the Mosaic law in limiting sexual activity to one lifetime opposite-sex partner. Since Jesus' view stood in tension with the prevailing ethos of his day, Wink cannot claim that it was an "unreflective custom" that Jesus failed to integrate with his interpretation

of the love commandment. Did Jesus not understand the very love ethic that he promoted?

Wink's only tests for a valid sexual relationship are that the relationship be mutual, loving, and nonexploitative. Why not a loving adult incestuous union? A threesome? Using Wink's tests one could not categorically deny any form of consensual sexual relationship, except perhaps prostitution. Even prostitution might have to be allowed since Wink is appalled by the notion of anyone going through life without sex.

5) *The social-scientific evidence:* Wink alleges that I apply a "double standard" insofar as there are more heterosexuals who manifest promiscuity, failed relationships, and sexually transmitted disease than homosexuals who do so. Yet in a society where only 2 percent of the population engages in homosexual behavior in a given year it is meaningless to appeal to absolute numbers. The key point is that the negative effects attending homosexual behavior are disproportionately high, often grossly so.

Wink blames "books like Gagnon's" for the dearth of long-term monogamous relationships among homosexuals. Yet the rate of nonmonogamy among homosexual males is off the charts even in comparison with lesbians. The disparity largely has to do with male-female differences. Men are more visually stimulated and genitally focused than women; the results of a male-male erotic pairing are predictable. Women, however, generally make greater intimacy demands on relationships, which may explain why on average lesbian relationships are of shorter duration than male homosexual relationships. Furthermore, these problems persist even in homosex-supportive areas such as San Francisco. The main culprit is probably sexual non-complementarity, not societal "homophobia."

On the question of changing orientation, Wink presupposes "a continuum from homosexual to heterosexual" in which "those at either end of the continuum may find it impossible" to change their sexual orientation. He affirms the orientation of all those who cannot change. There are three problems here.

First, more important than the supposition of a continuum is the recognition that the contours of the continuum are fluid. As the cross-cultural studies cited in my book indicate, the greater the societal approval of homosexuality, the greater the incidence. Also, the less intervention to counter risk factors early in life, the greater the entrenchment of homosexual proclivities.

Second, when Wink asserts that some people "may find it impossible" to change, he overlooks multiple meanings for change. Change can run the gamut from ceasing homosexual behavior, to a reduction in homosexual impulses, to the experience of heterosexual arousal. After ticking off a vice list in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 Paul said of the Corinthian believers: "such were some of you." He was not asserting, for example, that former adulterers no longer experienced sexual desire for people other than their spouses. Rather, they no longer lived out of such fleshly impulses but rather out of the power of the Holy Spirit.

Third, Wink argues as if the mere fact of an entrenched impulse not being consciously chosen is grounds for its acceptance. But why should this be a decisive factor? Some alcoholism, criminal behavior, and a whole range of noncriminal vices (e.g., selfishness, jealousy, greed, lust) are connected with entrenched impulses. While some people are content with a single sex partner for life, large numbers find it extraordinarily difficult to limit the number of sex partners to one, or even a dozen. Some people do not grow up with an instinctive aversion to having sex with close blood relations or with children. Have they chosen this condition?

The bottom line is that discerning whether a given disposition is moral has little to do with whether it may become entrenched early in life. Such a consideration should affect the degree of pastoral sensitivity but not whether the behavior arising from it should be condoned. Wink, perhaps unknowingly, appears to concede the point. For he urges affirmation not only of "those who, for whatever reason, cannot" change their sexual orientation but also of those who "do not wish to do so."

6) *Serial, unrepentant sin and its consequences:* Wink reserves his greatest scorn for the view that sexual activity outside of marriage may risk one's exclusion from God's kingdom. For Wink this is intolerable because some people might have to go without sex. He charges me with perpetrating "a cruel abuse of religious power."

The first problem with Wink's argument is that this is not *my* position. It is the position of all New Testament writers, the virtually unanimous position of the church for almost two millennia, and still the majority position in the church today. Indeed, Wink's view makes Jesus Christ himself the main perpetrator of this "cruel abuse." For it was Jesus himself who, with his teaching on divorce/remarriage and adultery of the heart, limited further the range of permissible sexual activity. It was Jesus who, with a primary reference to sex, spoke of removing body parts that threaten one's downfall lest one be thrown into hell (Matt 5:29-30). Jesus was not schizophrenic when he integrated this vision with an aggressive outreach to sexual sinners.

In the name of Jesus Wink blames me, and implicitly the church as a whole, for advancing the teaching of Jesus. We face, then, the dilemma of choosing between Wink's understanding of eternal destiny in relation to sexual conduct and the understanding of Jesus and scripture. Wink is also incredulous that I could say that sinful sexual behavior involves not just the actual act of illicit intercourse but also illicit sexual fantasies. Yet how else is one to apply Jesus' statement about adultery of the heart (Matt. 5:27-28)? If Wink finds this position to be outrageous, his complaint lies with Jesus, not with me.

The second problem is that Wink presents only one side of my position. I frequently set the warnings about sin in a broader context of God's marvelous grace and love in Christ Jesus as the primary warrant for ethical conduct. Wink even misquotes me, claiming that I say that "'Change or be destroyed,' was *the* staple of Jesus' teaching" when in

fact I say “‘Change or be destroyed,’ was a staple of Jesus’ teaching.” He conveniently leaves out the fact that I stress scripture’s primary concern with a pattern of repetitive and unrepentant sinful conduct, not isolated acts of backsliding. I also state that I take seriously Jesus’ emphasis on “holy gullibility” with respect to accepting the genuineness of someone’s professed repentance (Luke 17:3-4).

The third problem is that Wink’s insistence on everyone having a right to sex fails to consider the following:

- *Scripture nowhere makes sex an idol*, or an absolute necessity of life like food and sleep. Oftentimes God uses unfulfilled desire to form Jesus in us, as Paul discovered with his “thorn in the flesh.”
- *Why is sex a necessity for us but not for our spiritual ancestors?* Were the authors of scripture, Jesus, and church leaders over the last two millennia insensitive to the fact that they were creating legions of “sexually starved victims of a loveless religion”?
- *Hope exists for individual homosexuals.* For any given homosexual person hope exists for forming a heterosexual union that brings some satisfaction of sexual urges. Even apart from therapeutic intervention the vast majority of self-identified homosexuals (nonbisexuals) have experienced some sexual attraction for the opposite sex at some point in their lives.
- *How far do we extend the principle of a right to sex?* There are twice as many people in the U.S. today who have had no sex partners since age 18 as there are people who classify themselves as (nonbisexual) homosexuals. How many New Testament

commandments must we violate to insure that the right to a sexual union is available to all heterosexuals? What if one can only get sex by soliciting prostitutes? What if one is sexually attracted only to one’s sister? How long does one have to put up with just one sex partner when one is not wired for monogamy?

Wink believes that it is cruel to develop sexual standards that might leave some people “sexually starved.” Yet every sexual rule risks denying sex to some. Unless Wink wants to advocate complete sexual libertinism, he will either have to give up this view of entitlement to sex or else describe himself as someone who engages in a “cruel abuse of religious power.” The very concept of “sexual starvation” holds God’s will hostage to the sexual desires of human flesh.

Wink’s sexual ethic does not promote freedom in the positive biblical sense. Rather it moves dangerously close to promoting the wrong kind of freedom, summarized in Judges as “all the people did what was right in their own eyes.”

Robert A. J. Gagnon is associate professor of New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. A longer version of his response to Walter Wink and a continuing discussion of the issues can be found at <http://www.pts.edu/gagnonr.html>.

A Reply by Walter Wink

Robert Gagnon's treatment of my own work in his book *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* is anything but irenic. "Wink's analysis has all the theological sophistication of a math test or football game: sixteen sexual policies in the Bible we no longer heed versus just four that we do. One may half wonder why Wink does not take his logic full circle and disregard the other four mores, particularly incest and bestiality." Thus he tries to make me say the very opposite of what I have said.

My point, which is quite serious and, I believe, persuasive, is that biblical sexual mores changed over time, so much so that only four of 20 biblical sex mores are still in place for Christians today. This simple observation is enough to dash the notion of absolute sexual precepts universally valid in every time and place. Gagnon makes no attempt to deal with my argument, which is, I believe, unanswerable.

Gagnon faults me for slighting the compassion he shows toward those beset by homoerotic desire. But that compassion, for him, is conditional on gays and lesbians being willing to change their sexual orientation or to not live that orientation out. I am certain that many homosexual Christians will find his assertion that they will otherwise be excluded from the Kingdom of God a heartless and cruel judgment.

On the question of analogies, Gagnon says that the issues of slavery, divorce and the suppression of women are not analogous to the issue of homosexuality. His treatment of divorce contains some helpful insights, as does his exegesis generally (this is not a "concession," but an acknowledgement of the value of some of his arguments). But Gagnon misses the key point. Moses allowed divorce. Jesus categorically rejected divorce. Paul moderated Jesus' position by allowing a believer to divorce an unbelieving spouse if the spouse wishes to have the marriage dissolved (1 Cor. 7:12-16). The Gospel of Matthew liberalizes Jesus' saying on divorce by adding an exception for adultery. Thus we see the church already altering Jesus' commands in the light of new situations. If Gagnon sanctions this modulation of ethical demands within the canon, why shouldn't we today feel authorized, in the light of new knowledge and the prompting of the Holy Spirit, to "judge for yourselves what is right" (Luke 12:57)?

Missing in Gagnon's remarks is any sense of what it might have cost slaves, divorcees, and women to be ground under foot by the thought police of Christianity. We can no longer simply submit to scripture without asking whether new light is needed to interpret it. I for one do not abandon scripture, but neither do I acquiesce. I wrestle with it. I challenge it. I am broken and wounded by it, and in that defeat I sometimes encounter the living God. I will not concede the field, therefore, to a putative orthodoxy that dodges the hermeneutical task.

On the issue of a sexual ethic, my distinction is not between a sex ethic and sexual mores, but between sexual mores, which change from time to time in every society, and a communal love ethic, which we must apply to whatever sexual mores are current. This demands a critique that involves not only the individual, but also the community of accountability, which is the church. Apparently Gagnon does not approve of Augustine's injunction, "Love God and do as you please," but I regard it as one of the most inspired ethical statements ever penned.

Gagnon tests my position by arguing that on my terms one could not categorically deny any form of consensual sexual relationship, except perhaps prostitution. What has become of the community of accountability? Is the church likely to regard such behavior as upbuilding? And if the community were to lapse into promiscuity, would it not come under the kind of censure that Paul had to exercise in Corinth? I believe the Holy Spirit in the community of believers can lead us to make responsible decisions. My disagreement with Gagnon is itself a manifestation of that effort.

A third major issue is whether gays and lesbians can change, and, if so, to what degree. A gay person cannot be asked to repent for being gay unless one holds that sexual changes are really possible. I showed in my review that only people in the middle of the continuum from hetero to homo have any real chance of change. Gagnon's case depends heavily on the possibility of change, and much of the data he uses are from the conservative Intervarsity Press.

Gagnon unfortunately failed to note that I said, I would affirm any person who has been able to change his or her sexual orientation. Only then did I add, but I also affirm all those who, for whatever reason, cannot or do not wish to do so. Those in the last category, who don't or won't (or can't) wish to change are damned to hell, according to Gagnon. (Hence the title of my article, which was added by the editors, and which I rather like.)

Gagnon notes that the idea of damnation is "the virtually unanimous position of the church for almost two millennia." "Wink's view makes Jesus Christ himself the main perpetrator of this cruel abuse of religious power." Once again, the issue is hermeneutical. There are other passages where Jesus (or the early churches in his name) does speak of hell. But most such passages have been added by Matthew. Look in any concordance for the words hell, hell of fire, eternal punishment, unquenchable fire, gnashing of teeth, eternal torture, and so on, and you will discover that almost all of these words are found only in Matthew. Apparently Matthew had some unresolved anger at the persecutors of his church, and he wanted revenge.

More to the point, belief in a place of eternal torments is unworthy of the highest forms of Christian faith. Gagnon is

certain that the Jesus he worships will exclude from God's everlasting presence those who are unrepentant for sexual sins. He is welcome to such beliefs, but I find them reprehensible.

The homosexual Christians I know are indistinguishable from heterosexual Christians. If they are to be sent to hell, true Christianity requires, I believe, that we join them there, on the principle that the God we worship is a God of love and mercy who will see that no one is ever lost.

The following letter was sent to the *Christian Century* as a rejoinder to Wink's reply. It was published, without the first and the last paragraphs, in the Oct. 9-22, 2002 issue (vol. 119, no. 21, p. 67). For the full (30,000 word) response not only to his reply but also to the case that he makes in his article, see "No Universally Valid Sex Standards? A Rejoinder to Walter Wink" at <http://www.pts.edu/gagnonr.html>. Wink chose not to respond to this letter, though he was given the opportunity.

A Brief Rejoinder by Robert Gagnon

The *Christian Century* has allowed me a letter to respond to Walter Wink's reply in the August 14-27 issue.

Of note is what Wink does *not* say in his reply. Although allowed 3000 words, Wink took only 1000 and chose not respond to most of my critiques. Yet they go to the heart of his case. In view of this and the 150 pages in my book devoted to hermeneutical concerns, it is ironic that Wink should insinuate that he engages in the hermeneutical task while I "dodge" it.

I stand by my statement that his counting method lacks "theological sophistication." Wink gives no attention to developing criteria for discerning the closest analogues to the Bible's core proscription of same-sex intercourse. He claims that I try to make him "say the very opposite of what [he] said." Actually, his reply suggests that he is more extreme than I previously thought. For he insists that there are *no* "absolute sexual precepts universally valid in every time and place." This will be good news for practitioners of bestiality, incest, adultery, pedophilia, prostitution, or rape. Wink also claims: "Gagnon makes no attempt to deal with my argument, which is, I believe, unanswerable." On the contrary, I have been answering him. He can now see 18 more pages of documentation on my web page.

Wink also misses the key point about the divorce analogy: the "modulation" he speaks of falls far short of a precedent for completely overhauling a pervasive, absolute, and strong prohibition in Scripture. He assures us that in the absence of any absolute sexual standards "the community of accountability" will guard against "promiscuity," or come under "the kind of censure that Paul had to exercise in Corinth." Ironically, "promiscuity" wasn't the problem in 1 Corinthians 5. The problem was adult, consensual incest—sex between familial likes. A relationship of this sort flies under the radar of Wink's tests for invalid sexual relationships.

Another irony: Wink applies his two favorite prooftexts—"judge for yourselves what is right" (Luke 12:57) and "Love and do as you please" (Augustine, *Homilies on the First Epistle of John* 7.8)—to say the opposite of what they say in their original contexts. The former urges people to recognize the need for repentance before the Day of Judgment comes; the latter extols reproof done in love as superior to tolerance of bad behavior.

Wink says: "A gay person cannot be asked to repent for being gay unless one holds that sexual changes are really possible." Yet I never said that a person with homosexual proclivities must repent for the mere experience of such proclivities. Where Wink and I differ is over the following statement: "A person who experiences homoerotic urges cannot be asked to repent for engaging in homosexual behavior." Wink believes this; I do not. If the statement were true, then I suppose a pedophile, a person sexually attracted to a family member, a person unfulfilled by one sex partner, and a person stimulated by coercive sex could not be asked to repent for acting on their impulses. Wink simply ignores each of the three main points that I make about *change* in my response. Moreover, most of the data about change in my book comes from pro-homosex researchers, not conservative presses.

He contends that Jesus did not link serial *unrepentant* immoral behavior with exclusion from "God's everlasting presence." Wink blames judgment talk on Matthew's "unresolved anger." His claim about Jesus is historically untenable. Even if one eliminated all Matthean special material, one would still have to contend with over a fourth of all sayings material in Q, Mark, and Luke's special source. The bottom line: the view that Wink slanders as "reprehensible," "a cruel abuse of religious power," and "unworthy of the highest forms of Christian faith" was a consistent and significant theme of Jesus' message. Jesus' understanding of love was deeper and more complex than Wink's. For Jesus love included caring enough to warn about the eternal consequences of serial unrepentant sin.

Wink does not love more than those who want to withhold incentives for homosexual behavior. He may love less. He simply starts with a different set of premises, including disregard for core values in the teaching of Jesus and Scripture and disregard for the harmful effects of promoting homosexual behavior and other extramarital sexual activity.

I am grateful to the *Christian Century* for the opportunity to respond to Wink. Still, this letter does not even begin to scratch the surface of Wink's logical and historical inconsistencies. I refer interested readers to my extensive rejoinder to his reply and article posted at <http://www.pts.edu/gagnonr.html>.