

A Response to Walter Wink's *Christian Century* Review of *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*

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A note to the reader: This is a longer version of the 3000-word response published in the August 14-27 issue of the Christian Century, vol. 119, no. 17.

A recent long review of my book in *Christian Century* (June 5-12, 2002, pp. 32-34), written by Walter Wink (professor of biblical interpretation at Auburn Theological Seminary), is very illuminating for assessing the state of liberal (?) American religious thought on homosexuality and sex generally. I can think of at least seven issues that the review raises.

I. The Nasty Side of the Homosexuality Debate

The tone of Wink's review is a disheartening and painful reminder of how mean-spirited the debate about homosexual behavior can get. Perhaps Wink could not get past my criticisms of his work in my book. To be sure, not every scholar who favors homosexual unions writes as he does. Some have even written blurbs for my book and commented on my fairness in representing their views. Wink, however, has chosen an approach that is not helpful in assessing serious work and serious issues.

a. The inflammatory opening.

The nastiness begins in earnest with the review's title: "To hell with gays?" Implicit here is the suggestion that I, by personal fiat, consign homosexuals to hell and enjoy doing so. I, for one, would not read any book that had such overtones.

If the title signals how vitriolic Wink will be, the first sentence underscores how threatened Wink apparently feels. Wink could have said, as do other reviewers who share some of Wink's views on homosexual practice but none of his paranoia: this is an important work that even

those who strenuously disagree can learn from. Instead he writes: "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." One can only guess what was going through Wink's mind. Does he imagine that I was contracted to write this book by a secret order of bunker-dwelling, military-minded conspirators trying to take over the church that Wink owns?

I also find the term "antihomosexual" to be an offensive designation inasmuch as it suggests hatred of persons rather than opposition to behavior that harms people. Wink should find some other, more neutral description of those who disagree with him. Let me make a suggestion. Since "sex" functions as both noun and adjective, there is no good reason why the convenient term "homosex" cannot be used to make clear that behavior is the issue. In fact, I have discovered that I am not the first to use the term. It has

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already appeared in pro-homosex publications, particularly in Europe but also in the United States.

b. Wink's ad hominem slash-and-burn strategy.

Wink carries on his *ad hominem* polemic throughout the article. Still in the first paragraph, he further polarizes the reader: "From the first page [Gagnon] displays his loathing for homosexual behavior." I urge Wink to reread the first page (which incidentally says nothing about my attitude), and subsequent pages. A visceral aversion to homosexual behavior, as to incest, can be a healthy deterrent in society. But it must be tempered by love for those who engage in such behavior. Wink decided that it would not fit the tenor of his review to note the many exhortations in my book to treat those with homoerotic desire with sympathy and compassion. Here is just one example of many that could be cited throughout the book:

I deplore attempts to demean the humanity of homosexuals. . . . The person beset with homosexual temptation should evoke our concern, sympathy, help, and understanding, not our scorn or enmity. Even more, such a person should kindle a feeling of solidarity in the hearts of all Christians, since we all struggle to properly manage our erotic passions. . . . Thus a reasoned denunciation of homosexual behavior . . . is *not*, and should not be construed as, a denunciation of those victimized by homosexual urges, since the aim is to rescue the true self created in God's image for a full life (pp. 31-32).

Later, he says sarcastically in response to one of my arguments: "How could anyone stand up against Gagnon's withering logic here?" He even goes so far as to take the sophomoric approach of trying to demean my family name in a crude play on words, referring to "That 'vague form of love' which Gagnon gags on." And he attacks me, "the unabashed Gagnon," for allegedly engaging in "a cruel abuse of religious power" even though the positions I hold—and not the ones espoused by Wink—cohere with Jesus' understanding, Scripture, ecclesiastical tradition, and the views of the overwhelming majority of Christians throughout the world today.

c. Wink on Christian freedom.

After a series of cartoon characterizations of my views, which will be dealt with below, he ends by assuming the role of prophet for us all. He urges me and others like me to dream of a future church that "no longer is dictated by anxious ecclesiastics terrified of the freedom in which Christ has established us." (Seriously, I'm not making this stuff up.)

I can't help but think that Wink has a truncated view of Christian freedom, particularly in the area of sex ethics. Freedom is not about satisfying our own desires. Freedom is about dying to the life of a sin-controlled self (Romans 6), denying oneself and taking up one's cross (Mark 8:34),

and praying for God's will—not ours—to be done (Matt 6:10). Freedom is sometimes a "no" from God, bringing us to the realization that God's grace is sufficient for us in our moments of human weakness (2 Cor 12:9). Since Jesus himself expanded God's demands for sexual purity at the same time that he reached out to sexual sinners, it is strange indeed that Wink would appeal to "the freedom in which Christ has established us" as a basis for expanding the range of acceptable sex beyond Scripture.

Moreover, by Wink's reasoning, Paul showed himself, the apostle of freedom, to be an "anxious ecclesiastic terrified of the freedom in which Christ has established us." For Paul expressed horror at the Corinthians' toleration of the incestuous practices of one of their own (1 Corinthians 5) and then included participants in same-sex intercourse in a list of offenders to be excluded from God's kingdom (1 Cor 6:9; cf. Rom 1:24-27). The truth is that Wink's interpretation of Christian freedom here approximates the position that Paul warned the Corinthians of rather than the position that Paul himself espoused. We all would do well to remember Paul's qualification of the slogan, "all things are within my authority and power," whose sentiment captured the attitude of the Corinthian "strong" toward idol meat (1 Cor 6:12; 10:23). Sex, says Paul, is not like food.

Not all things are beneficial . . . I will not be placed under the authority and power of anything. . . . The body is not for sexual immorality (*porneia*) but for the Lord and the Lord for the body. . . . Flee sexual immorality! Every (other) sin, whatever a man does, is outside the body; but the one who commits sexual immorality sins into (or: against) the body. (6:12-13, 18)

d. On hell and hypocrisy.

Even in the posture of visionary, Wink can't resist one last zinger. Wink envisions even me joining him and homosexuals in an eventual triumph over the dehumanizing influence of "the principalities and powers"—"That is," he concludes, "unless I am eternally damned for writing this review." Hopefully, this is a case where his rhetoric is sufficient punishment in and of itself.

Wink's rhetoric is particularly striking in view of a comment that he made in "Homosexuality and the Bible," an article in his edited book *Homosexuality and Christian Faith* (Fortress, 1999): "What most saddens me in this whole raucous debate in the churches is how sub-Christian most of it has been" (p. 48). In the "Afterword" (p. 133) he writes:

Wherever we come out on the issue, however, that same spirit of Jesus surely calls us to respect, honor, and be civil toward those with whom we differ. 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.

I submit that there is a big discrepancy between Wink's plea and his own personal behavior.

e. What can be learned from Wink's tone.

We can at least thank Wink for giving us one more clue of what kind of ultra-marginalized existence and demeaning treatment many of us can expect to have under denominational systems that have bent the knee to the pro-homosex agenda. It won't be pretty.

Wink's review also presents us with a disturbing picture of *The Christian Century*. Knowing that Wink's work was critiqued in my book, why would *The Christian Century* assign Wink the review? Or, worse still, after Wink wrote the review why would they allow such an obviously abusive piece, with its inflammatory title, to go to press? One would think that a journal priding itself on being a voice for mainline Protestant Christianity would at least want to maintain the pretense of being balanced on such a sensitive issue. It is stunning that an editorial in the immediately preceding issue pleaded with readers to "treat with dignity others who hold contrary opinions," especially in debates over homosexuality:

The world may not be closely watching to see how Christian churches resolve their conflicts over sexual ethics or other issues. But if Christians can't peacefully and respectfully contend with one another on moral issues about which we feel strongly, then how can we hope for—indeed, how can we even pray for—peace in the Middle East?

How the publication of this kind of review coincides with such a concern I know not.

II. A New Consensus on Paul's Opposition to All Homosexual Behavior?

a. Wink's acknowledgement of Paul's absolute rejection of all homosexual practice.

One still hears quite regularly, largely due to the residual influence of Robin Scroggs' two-decades old book, that Paul only opposed certain exploitative forms of homosexual behavior. For example, immediately following Wink's own essay in *Homosexuality and the Christian Faith*, there is an essay by Ken Sehested on "Biblical Fidelity and Sexual Orientation" that claims that the homoerotic vices mentioned in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 refer only to pederasty "rather than...homosexual activity per se"; and, further, that Romans 1:26-27 has in view only "pagan temple cult prostitution."

In view of this, it is refreshing to read of Wink conceding that this is not the case. At the end of my 20-page discussion of the meaning of the word *arsenokoitai* ("men who lie with males") in 1 Corinthians 6:9, I pose a hypothetical. What would have Paul said if the Corinthians, responding to Paul's letter, had asked whether *arsenokoitai* took in a brother in their midst who was having sex with another adult man in a non-idolatrous, non-transvestite, loving relationship? I conclude by saying "Given the context of 1 Cor 5-6 and 11, can anyone seriously propose that Paul would have said, 'That's right, such a man would not be an *arsenokoites*'?" (p. 329).

Wink responds: "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" (my emphasis). Wink distorts my own assessment of the matter. I do not think, and never say, that my discussion of *arsenokoitai* delivers the final knockout blow that nullifies all future hermeneutical engagement. If I did, I obviously would not have followed up this discussion with 150-pages devoted to hermeneutical issues—more concentrated attention than Wink or anyone else has given to such matters.

A more accurate characterization would have been that my study of *arsenokoitai* probably does deal a "knockout blow" to widespread claims that Paul had in view only certain exploitative types of homosexual unions. Wink concedes as much. This seems to signal a partial change in his view, for in his 1999 article he cites as one of his arguments for discounting Rom 1:26-27 Paul's alleged inability to conceive of committed adult homosexual relationships ("Homosexuality and the Bible," 36). Now he admits that Paul would not have accepted even a committed homosexual relationship "for a minute."

If we can now collectively agree on this point, then we have made significant progress in the use of the Bible in the homosexuality debate. Henceforth we can focus our discussion not on whether Paul was opposed to every form of homoerotic behavior—he was—but on claims to possess a convincing "new judgment" about sexual morality that invalidates the strong witness of Scripture.

b. Is the idea of a fixed homosexual orientation a valid "new judgment"?

A look at Wink's previous work, in conjunction with the last page of the review, shows what he thinks this "new judgment" is: our modern understanding of "homosexual orientation" as a "natural" condition "fixed early in life" ("Homosexuality in the Bible," 36). Apart from "fixed" being too strong a word (see section six below), this judgment is neither new nor decisive for overturning Paul's stance. I lay out the arguments in my book, which Wink ignores in his review. These include:

- Theories in the Greco-Roman world that homoerotic attractions in some cases were due to conditions present at birth
- The recognition by Greek and Roman moralists that desires given “by nature,” including some homoerotic desire, are not necessarily constituted “according to nature”
- The existence of exclusive, lifelong homosexuals in the Greco-Roman world of Paul’s day, of which Jewish contemporaries of Paul were aware
- Paul’s own understanding of sin in Romans 5 and 7 precisely as an innate impulse running through the members of the human body, passed on by an ancestor human, and never entirely within human control
- The way in which Paul’s employs the term “natural” in Rom 1:26-27, referring not to all innate desires (compare the vice list in Rom 1:29-31 which includes covetousness and envy) but rather to the obvious embodied complementarity of males and females established by God at creation (Gen 1:27-28), largely unaffected by the Fall, and still transparent in nature

We can no longer assume that Paul had no conception of something akin to the modern notion of sexual orientation. What we can be reasonably confident of is that such a notion would not have caused Paul to change radically his view of same-sex intercourse as sin. For Paul there could be no living for God apart from a daily dying to a whole range of intractable fleshly desires opposed to the revealed will of God.

We should also be careful about the notion of homosexual orientation as a “fixed” and “natural” condition. At least one shift along the Kinsey spectrum of 0 (exclusively heterosexual) to 6 (exclusively homosexual) is the norm for homosexuals in the course of life. Moreover, socio-scientific evidence to date continues to suggest that macrocultural factors (societal attitudes and sanctions) and microcultural factors (family and peer socialization) play the dominant role in the development of homoerotic orientation. Certainly we are not talking about a primary and direct congenital contribution to the development of homosexuality, though in a looser sense nurture can become nature. I explore in “6b.” below whether the involuntary character of an impulse constitutes a good reason for embracing the impulse.

III. Wink’s Regression: The Relevance of the Creation Stories

Although Wink concedes that “the Bible is negative toward same-sex behavior” and calls “deplorable” every pro-homosex effort “to twist the text to mean what it clearly does not say,” he is guilty of some back-pedaling in his

handling of the creation stories. Wink contends that the grounding of much of my argument in Genesis 1-2 and its subsequent interpretation is baseless because: (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 that I nowhere make—“why didn’t Jesus marry? Why didn’t Paul?”

a. A holistic sense of male-female complementarity.

All of his arguments are problematic. With regard to the second point, I make clear enough in my book that the complementary character of male-female sexual bonds includes a whole range of features: anatomy, yes, and also other physiological and interpersonal traits. Let me go out on a limb here: males and females are different in a wide variety of ways. And nowhere are their differences more pronounced than in the way they conduct themselves as sexual beings in sexual relationships. For all the kidding about “men are from Mars and women are from Venus,” these male-female differences contribute markedly to the health and vitality of heterosexual relationships: filling deficiencies and correcting extremes in the sexual “other.” Their absence in “same-sex” unions is a significant contributing factor to the disproportionately high ancillary problems associated with homosexual unions. Most importantly, homoerotic relationships destroy a prime purpose of marital union: the reintegration and reconciliation of the sexes on the level of erotic encounter, balancing intensely self-gratifying sexual desire with an equally intense outreach to a sexual “other.” The sex of the partners is not incidental to the establishment of “one flesh” in an erotic union. It is the basis for a holistic sexual fit. Apart from the intra-human character of the relationship it is the most vital feature.

b. Sex in the image of God.

With regard to Wink’s third point, neither Jesus nor Paul would have regarded their singleness as challenging the normative and prescriptive quality to heterosexual unions in the creation stories. True, they clearly did not conceive of Genesis 1:27 as requiring sex with somebody of the opposite sex in order to manifest God’s image. But just as clearly they would have understood the creation stories as intimating that, *if sexual intercourse was to be had*, there were ways of having it that would efface the image of God stamped on humans and ways of having it that would enhance that image. The former would have included bestiality, same-sex intercourse, and adultery; the latter, lifelong monogamous unions with someone of the opposite sex.

c. The evidence of literary concentric circles. As to Wink’s first point, obviously homoerotic unions do not have to be explicitly mentioned in the creation stories to be precluded

implicitly. To assess how the authors might have applied these stories to homoerotic unions we can work our way through a series of literary concentric circles, picking up clues from:

- i. Themes within the creation stories
- ii. Other material in the Tetrateuch from the Priestly Writer and Yahwist
- iii. Other material in early Israelite literature
- iv. Other material in the ancient Near East
- v. The subsequent history of interpretation

Take, for example, the Yahwist's version of creation in Genesis 2.

i. *The stories themselves.* To claim that, in Genesis 2, the splitting of a sexually undifferentiated human (the *adam*) into two sexually-differentiated, complementary sexual beings has no implications for the "normative" value of heterosexual unions—not just "normal," pace Wink—is to lose all touch with historical reality. For the Yahwist, valid sexual unions required a "re-merger" of two complementary sexual others. Validation for homoerotic unions would have necessitated a very different kind of creation story—something like Aristophanes' story in Plato's *Symposium* where binary male-males, female-females, and male-females are split in two.

ii. *Other material by the same authors.* The other material from the Yahwist buttresses this supposition. This includes the accounts of Ham's sex with Noah and the incident at Sodom, along with the array of narratives and laws concerning sexual relationships in the Yahwistic corpus. Nowhere are proper same-sex erotic unions distinguished from improper ones. The reason: all same-sex erotic unions were tacitly regarded as wrong.

Similar points can be made for the Priestly Writers' creation story in Genesis 1. Does anyone seriously want to claim that the Priestly Writers (the Priestly Writers!) did not understand his creation story as necessarily precluding homoerotic unions?

iii. *Other ancient Israelite material.* Further confirmation of an implied opposition to all homoerotic behavior can be found in the strong indictments of all homoerotic intercourse elsewhere in ancient Israelite society. Especially significant here are the Deuteronomic and Deuteronomistic proscriptions of homoerotic cultic activity, the Levitical proscriptions, and Ezekiel's commentary on the Sodom story.

iv. *Material from the ancient Near East.* Much of the evidence that can be culled from the ancient Near East suggests opposition to homoerotic behavior per se, though not always as pervasively and unequivocally as in ancient Israel.

v. *History of interpretation: Paul and Jesus.* Paul certainly regarded the creation stories as having normative prescriptive value for the church's stance against homosexual behavior. There are clear intertextual echoes to Gen 1:26-27 (1:27: "God made them male and female") in Paul's indictment of homoerotic intercourse in Rom 1:24-27. And Gen 2:24 ("the two [a man and a woman] shall become one flesh") is cited in Paul's discussion of sexual immorality in 1 Corinthians 6 where the vice of homosexual behavior is listed along with other types of *porneia*.

Not surprisingly, when Jesus wanted to discuss a sexual issue he appealed precisely to these two texts, giving them prescriptive value for sexual ethics. Paul and indeed all first-century Jews, including Jesus, understood the implications of the creation stories for normative human sexuality. When Jesus cited Gen 1:27 and Gen 2:24 back-to-back on the issue of divorce, he was not divesting them of their relevance for eschewing homoerotic behavior. He was narrowing further an already narrowly-defined understanding of normative sexuality, drawn in part from these creation stories, to mandate the indissoluble character of marriage as well.

Jesus' focus on divorce, remarriage, and adultery did not mean, as Wink intimates, that lifelong monogamy was far more important to Jesus than the heterosexual dimension. It means that Jesus, with all Jews of his day, could take for granted Scripture's strong opposition to same-sex intercourse, as also bestiality and incest. This left him free to focus on dimensions of human sexuality over which disputes existed in his cultural context. The most shocking forms of sexually aberrant behavior in Jesus' day were bestiality, same-sex intercourse, and incest (in that order). I know of no biblical scholar who would argue the historically bankrupt position that Jesus prioritized monogamy over the intra-human and non-incestuous character of normative sexual relationships. What credibility is there, then, in arguing that, in relation to divorce and remarriage, Jesus regarded same-sex intercourse as a minor offense or no offense at all?

d. Conclusion.

So on what historical basis can Wink argue that the creation stories do not imply a rejection of all homoerotic behavior? None. It is not because of historical considerations that Wink resists such an obvious conclusion. It is because of ideological considerations—which Wink himself labels as "deplorable." Wink knows that the creation stories have a strong strategic hold on the church's understanding of normative human sexuality. Consequently, he cannot bring himself to concede their import for homoerotic relationships.

IV. On the Use of Analogies

Not unexpectedly, Wink appeals to the church's changing stances on slavery, women, and divorce to justify deviating from the Bible's opposition to homosexual practice. Despite the fact that I give a fair amount of attention to these issues in my book and to the question of what the best analogues are (pp. 441-52; see now also my article in *Theology Matters* 7:6 [Nov./Dec. 2001] and on my web page), 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, just as its attitude toward women and slaves has been."

There is no burial on my part. I deal with the issue of analogies head on. Anyone can attempt an analogy. The key question is: what are the best analogies? The analogies for disregarding Scripture that Wink and others pin their hopes on are poor analogies to the current debate on homosexual practice.

a. On slavery and women's roles:

- There is tension within the canon itself on these issues; there is no scriptural tension on the question of homosexual behavior.
- Moreover, the Bible's stance on slavery and women's roles looks fairly 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. Scripture is far less accommodating to homosexual practice than the surrounding cultures and remains so throughout the history of Judeo-Christian faith covered by the canon. The trajectory is entirely in the direction of countercultural disapproval of all homoerotic dimensions to human sexuality.

Thus the bar for hurdling the stance of Scripture is placed at a significantly higher level for homosexual behavior than it is for slavery and women's roles.

b. As for divorce:

- There is also tension within Scripture. The Old Testament permits divorce and both Matthew and Paul make exceptions to Jesus' teachings.
- Even more to the point, 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 does not seek to perpetuate the cycle of divorce and remarriage with the fewest possible negative side-effects. It works to end the cycle of divorce and remarriage, just as it ought to work towards the goal of ending

the cycle of serial, unrepentant same-sex intercourse. Mainline denominations take a dim view of candidates for ordination who have had a string of divorces. Why, then, should they look the other way when a candidate for ordination not only has repeatedly engaged in same-sex intercourse in the past but also plans to continue such practice on a recurring basis? When Wink charges me with inconsistency for making an issue of homosexual behavior but not divorce he conveniently overlooks the serial and unrepentant character of the homosexual behavior now being promoted.

c. The best analogies.

Changing the church's long-standing position against homosexual practice would have far greater negative ramifications for Scripture's authority in the life of the church than it ever had as regards slavery, women's roles, and divorce—to say nothing of its impact for defining sexual deviancy down. 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 by both Testaments and pervasively within each Testament (at least implicitly)
- strongly and absolutely proscribed
- 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 from the standpoint of why Scripture regards it as an egregious wrong: 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. Like incest but on the more telling level of gender, same-sex erotic pairing does serious damage to the complementary otherness mandated by God for appropriate sexual bonding.

d. The intensity of the Bible's opposition.

Wink's case from analogies is the equivalent of saying: the church has changed the Bible's stance on slavery, women, and divorce so let's take a closer look at removing restrictions on committed adult incestuous unions, or committed unions of three persons, or, indeed, non-committed consensual sexual unions (paying or not). We've overridden biblical authority before so why not now? To which I say: not to this degree; not nearly to this degree. In Wink's argumentation, it seems to matter little how much of a core value in the Bible a given standard for behavior is.

It is nearly impossible to overestimate the degree of the Bible's opposition to same-sex intercourse. If Scripture is as unreliable in its view of same-sex intercourse as Wink's view requires us to believe, I see little reason to put any

stock in Scripture, or Jesus, for formulating any but the vaguest ethical positions. For Wink this severe reduction of Scripture's role, and Jesus' teaching, as a norming influence in the church may not mean that much, but I suspect that in the church today most still think that Jesus and Scripture should have greater moral relevance than that.

V. "The Bible has no sex ethic"?

Perhaps the most remarkable statement made in the entire review is Wink's claim that "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." Wink reassures us that "This doesn't mean that anything goes." We continue to be guided by Jesus' love commandment that sexual relationships be "nonexploitative," non-dominating, "responsible, mutual, caring and loving." In his earlier article he also insists on a distinction between a sexual ethic (not clearly defined by Wink but which he claims the Bible lacks) and sexual mores ("unreflective customs," which the Bible allegedly has and only has).

a. Is the distinction between sex ethic and sex mores valid?

Wink's insistence that the Bible has only sexual mores and no sex ethic is maintained by sheer ideological fiat. Without reference to historical evidence he reduces all biblical reflection on sex to something akin to primitive animistic superstition. The biblical writers were opposed to incest and bestiality but had not the foggiest notion what was wrong with these behaviors. Or else their rationale for why these behaviors were wrong was way off the mark.

To be sure, there is some development in sexual ethics within the Bible. Nevertheless, it is not nearly as great as Wink supposes, nor does that development always move in the unrestrictive manner that Wink likes to promote. Jesus actually intensifies, rather than loosens, earlier sex-ethic standards.

Wink also suggests that the Bible's sex standards were mere "mores" because they did not take into account "the rest of a person's life, the patterns of the culture, the special circumstances faced, and the will of God." In other words, they did not consider matters on a case-by-case basis. This is a strange observation from someone who thankfully acknowledges that all sex between adults and children is exploitative and wrong—no exceptions regardless of motives, special circumstances, or cultural patterns.

b. Moral consequences to the view that Jesus had no sex ethic.

It is especially interesting to apply Wink's reasoning to Jesus himself. For Wink and other homosex advocates, Jesus is the great corrector to the legalism not only of the

Old Testament but also of the New Testament. Jesus, Wink implies, had no distinct sex ethic, only a communal ethic for all. Such a supposition creates an interesting series of corollaries.

For example, on a communal level, Jesus advocated that all believers should love one another and exist in common partnership as the one body of Christ. If Jesus had no separate sex ethic distinct from his communal ethic, would we not have to infer that Jesus was in favor of having sex with as many people as possible and with as few boundaries as possible? However logical such an inference would be, it would run smack up against the clear teaching of Jesus on divorce and remarriage that restricts the number of sex partners in the course of one's life to one. There are no grounds for such a teaching if Jesus had no sex ethic distinct from communal ethics, or if Jesus had an aversion to categorical prohibitions.

Wink insists that, "everything is to be critiqued by Jesus' love commandment." Absolute prohibitions are examples of legalistic hypocrisies, even when it comes to prohibiting all sexual activity by young teens (so his 1999 article). The problem with all this—and it is a huge problem—is that Jesus applied his own love commandment to sex issues in ways that run 180 degrees counter to Wink's application. Jesus went beyond the Mosaic law in closing the door on sexual activity with more than one partner. Since Jesus' view stood in considerable tension with the prevailing views of his cultural environment, Wink cannot claim that it was an "unreflective custom" that Jesus failed to integrate fully with his interpretation of the love commandment. Did Jesus not understand the very love ethic that he promoted? With all due respect to Wink, I think the lack of understanding lies with Wink, not Jesus. "Love" has become, for Wink, a cipher for his own post-modernist philosophy. At times it links up with Jesus' understanding but at other times it puts the ax to the root of Jesus' use. So in the end it would be more honest if Wink were to say: Everything is to be critiqued by my love commandment.

c. The necessity of some categorical prohibitions in any sex ethic.

Clearly, Jesus had a specific sex ethic, as did all the authors of Scripture. By this I mean that Jesus and the authors of Scripture generally had rules for sexual activity that were often germane only to sexual activity. These categorical rules, in Jesus' understanding, transcended mere cultural conventions. They were nothing less than the will of God for all people in all circumstances pertaining to life in this body. 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 a lesser but still real communion with God's non-human 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.

In making the above point, I am assuming—and hope Wink can concur—that we do not need to have explicit sayings of Jesus against incest, pedophilia, and bestiality to conclude, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Jesus was deeply opposed to all these practices. The same can be said for his alleged silence about homoerotic behavior. It is curious that Wink does not take on my argument in the chapter on “The Witness of Jesus”; namely, that all the inferential evidence points overwhelmingly in the direction of Jesus’ embrace of early Judaism’s strong rejection of homosexual practice. Perhaps Wink is willing to concede this point but would rather not say so in print.

d. The inadequacy of Wink’s tests for sexual ethics.

For Jesus these sex-ethic proscriptions were broad “category concerns” for which issues of personal motivation were irrelevant. Wink’s only tests are that the sexual relationship be mutual, loving, and non-exploitative. Using such tests one could not *categorically* deny (i.e., in all circumstances) any form of consensual sexual relationship, except perhaps prostitution on the grounds that it does not involve mutual love. Yet even that exception would not hold up. Since Wink is appalled by the notion that someone might have to go through life without having any sex, why should we make an issue about love? Consent should be adequate.

1. Adult-child sexual unions.

Wink states that the “non-exploitative” test would allow us to deny all sex between adults and children. Yet such a conclusion does not follow. How does he know that sex with a child is exploitative in each and every circumstance imaginable? Surely he cannot point to any transcultural principle since some cultures have permitted or even endorsed such behavior. And how does he know that it is always harmful? A recent study published in an APA journal argued that one cannot demonstrate that all children who have sex are harmed in scientifically measurable ways. Most adults who experienced sex as a child are asymptomatic. Wink can surmise exploitation but he cannot prove it in all cases and in ways that will stand up to rigorous scientific scrutiny.

2. Various plural unions, etc.

Certainly he cannot prove that every instance of polygamous unions—presupposed as forbidden in Jesus’ and Paul’s statements on divorce and remarriage—or every instance of modern “threesomes” produces scientifically measurable harm to all participants in each and every circumstance and in each and every way in which these relationships can be done. He cannot even demonstrate it for loving adult incestuous unions. And, if we allow the

chair of the ethics department at Princeton to be our guide, he cannot say it for all animal-human sexual contact.

Apparently, then, Wink’s tests for what passes for acceptable sexual conduct are inadequate. There exist in biblical sex ethics valid category considerations involving blood-relatedness, number of partners, age, and species that trump “love” as defined by Wink. Why, then, should Wink be so shocked that the sex of the participants be treated as one of these many distinctive sex-ethic concerns that transcend Jesus’ communal love ethic? He doesn’t explain.

As with these other category proscriptions we cannot demonstrate scientifically measurable harm to all participants in homoerotic relationships in all circumstances. Yet there are strong indications that participants in homoerotic relationships experience a disproportionately high rate of debilitating problems for reasons other than societal homophobia. Also, as with these other category proscriptions, we can surmise generic problems; for example, being sexually attracted to the body parts and other features that one shares in common with a person of one’s own sex.

e. Why Wink must argue that the Bible has no sex ethic.

The reason why it is important for Wink to dismiss any biblical sex ethic is transparent. It enables him to claim that biblical authority is not seriously affected by a radically different view on homosexual behavior. However, since the Bible obviously does have a sex ethic, so radical a departure from the scriptural view cannot help but have enduring repercussions for any meaningful place of Scripture in the life of the church.

f. Wink’s flawed use of proof-texts.

Wink tries to utilize Augustine’s phrase, “Love God, and do as you please,” to support his attempt to overhaul radically biblical sexual standards. In the process he ignores the wider context of Augustinian thought. Undoubtedly, Augustine would have been appalled. One cannot be said to “love God” when one violates the strongly and pervasively expressed will of God in Scripture. Love of God entails keeping the commandments of God (John 14:15; 1 John 2:4-6; 5:2; 1 Cor 7:19; Matt 5:17-48; Mark 10:17-22).

Equally untenable is Wink’s appeal to Luke 12:57: “And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?” Wink mistranslates this as “choose for yourselves what is right.” In the broader context of Jesus’ sayings, Jesus is not giving his audience more latitude to arrive at their own sincerely-held conclusions. Rather, he is urging his audience to accept the one obvious conclusion about appropriate behavior.

VI. Reading the Socio-Scientific Evidence

There are two basic issues here: the negative effects of homosexual behavior and the question of whether homosexuals can change their orientation.

a. The negative effects of homosexual behavior and its endorsement.

Wink alleges that I apply a “double standard” when talking about typical, adverse side effects to homosexual activity: ignoring the downside of heterosexual behavior while playing up the problems in homosexual behavior. However, the double standard lies in Wink’s own mind, not in the data that I report. I repeatedly make comparisons between homosexuals and heterosexuals but Wink ignores this. For example:

- *On monogamous, long-term relationships.* Wink says that I am good at citing homosexual promiscuity but “fail to note” that heterosexuals also are promiscuous. What Wink chooses not to tell the reader is that I do in fact compare the former with the latter and, in so doing, show that promiscuity occurs at much higher *rates* among homosexuals, particularly male homosexuals. This is one of the most assured results of sociological studies on homosexuals. Wink also states: “far and away, most failed monogamous relationships are heterosexual.” Wink seems oblivious to the meaning of percentages, averages, means, and the phrase “disproportionately high.” Heterosexuals in the United States account for 97-98% of the total population. If heterosexuals averaged ten sex partners lifetime, homosexuals would have to average four hundred sex partners, or forty times the heterosexual average, just to attain parity in absolute numbers.
- *On health problems.* Wink contends that, while homosexual men “too often” fail to practice safe sex, “so have heterosexuals.” Again, Wink does not seem to appreciate significant rate differences. He can hardly dispute the fact that in the United States HIV and AIDS infection rates are astronomically high for homosexual males as compared with heterosexuals. Yet he counters again with an appeal to absolute numbers rather than rates of infection: “but the vast majority of HIV and AIDS patients worldwide are heterosexual.” I know of no evidence that indicates parity in infection rates between homosexuals and heterosexuals in a given population group. Homosexual males always and everywhere fare badly when compared to heterosexuals.
- *On where to place the responsibility.* Wink blames “books like Gagnon’s” for the dearth of long-term

monogamous relationships among homosexuals. The explanation is convenient but hardly fits the facts. The rate of non-monogamy among homosexual males is off the charts even in comparison with lesbians—this despite similar levels of cultural disapproval for both groups. The disparity has to do with basic male-female differences. Men, including homosexual men, are more visually stimulated and genitally focused than women. Men have ten times more testosterone, the key hormone for sexual desire, than do women. Women, on the other hand, generally place greater intimacy demands on relationships, which explains in part why lesbian relationships are of shorter duration than male homosexual relationships on average: greater demands mean greater stresses on the relationship. Furthermore, the disproportionately high ancillary problems associated with homosexual behavior—not only in relational dynamics but also in terms of disease and mental illness—persist even in homosex-supportive areas such as San Francisco. The main culprit is probably sexual non-complementarity, not societal “homophobia.”

One other point that Wink misses from my book needs to be underscored. Even when homosexual relationships are done as well as they can be done, they still exhibit the most basic problem of all: sex with someone who is a sexual same or like. Incest is not wrong in the first instance because it tends to be done across generations or to result in birth defects. Incest is always wrong because of its incestuous character: it is, as Leviticus 18 and 20 state, sex with “one’s own flesh,” sex with someone who on a familial level is too much of a like or same. Similarly, first and foremost, homosexual intercourse is wrong precisely because of its homosexual character, sex with someone who on the sexual level is too much of a like or same. There is something developmentally deficient, “unnatural,” about a person being erotically attracted to the body parts and other sex traits shared in common with another of the same sex. God intended sex to be a reunion of complementary sexual “others,” a celebration of sexual diversity and pluralism in the best sense.

b. On whether homosexuals can change their orientation.

This is probably the least polemical part of Wink’s review, both in rhetoric and content. Wink wants to argue for “a continuum from homosexual to heterosexual” in which “those at either end of the continuum may find it impossible” to change their sexual orientation. “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.”

There are at least three points at which Wink’s understanding is deficient.

- *A fluid continuum.* More important than the supposition of a continuum in sexual orientation—with which no one, including myself, would disagree—is the recognition that the contours of the spectrum are fluid. The incidence of homoerotic desires, behavior, and self-identification is primarily dependent on environmental and familial influences. The greater the societal approval of homosexual behavior, the greater the incidence—along with the attendant negative effects outlined above. The less intervention to counter risk factors for homosexual orientation at an early stage in development, the more likely homoerotic attraction is to become entrenched in a person’s life. Nurture can become nature because the brain can be rewired in response to life’s experiences and/or incremental choices occurring within a society’s spectrum of tolerated or promoted behavior. Someone who engages in same-sex intercourse early and often in life is more likely to create an entrenched orientation than someone who does not act on such urges. Wink’s assumption that there is a fixed number of homosexuals not susceptible to change, a number impervious to outside influences, is not borne out by cross-cultural studies. He also appears to assume, wrongly, that people exclusively attracted to the same sex (a Kinsey “6”) invariably remain so throughout life.
- *The meaning of change.* When Wink asserts that some people “may find it impossible” to change, he overlooks multiple meanings for the word *change*. Change can include:
 - a reduction or elimination of homosexual behavior
 - a reduction in the intensity and frequency of homosexual impulses
 - an experience of some heterosexual arousal
 - reorientation to exclusive or predominant heterosexuality

Paul says of the Corinthian believers as regards the vice list in 1 Cor 6:9-10 that “such were some of you.” He is not necessarily asserting that former adulterers no longer experience any sexual desire for people other than their spouses; or that former thieves and greedy people are never again tempted by material possessions. Rather, the point in the first instance is that they no longer live out of such impulses in the main but rather out of the regulating agency of the Holy Spirit.

- *Affirming the behavior arising out of an unchanging sexual ‘orientation’?* Wink implies

that anyone who has an unchanging sexual orientation should be affirmed. Since I too would affirm all persons as recipients of God’s love, Wink must mean something else. Wink argues as if the mere fact of an entrenched impulse not being consciously chosen by some is grounds for its acceptance. But why should this be a decisive factor?

- Some alcoholism, criminal behavior, and a whole range of non-criminal vices (e.g., selfishness, jealousy, greed, lust) can be described along these lines.
- While some people are quite content with a single sex partner for life, large numbers of men and some women find it extraordinarily difficult to limit the number of sex partners lifetime to one, or even a dozen. Have they chosen this condition?
- Indirect congenital factors and early childhood experiences can also significantly affect a person’s potential for entering into committed, long-term sexual unions. We do not all enter marriage on a level playing field.
- Most of us grow up with an aversion to having sex with close blood relations. “The common childish phrase that something is as unappealing as ‘kissing your own sister’ reflects a real, cross-cultural, psychological phenomenon” (Linda Mealey, *Sex Differences* [Academic Press, 2000], 244). Yet some do not have such an “instinctive” aversion. Did the latter just wake up one day and say, “I think I’ll choose not to have an aversion to incest”?
- Dr. Fred Berlin, founder of the Sexual Disorders Clinic at Johns Hopkins and leading specialist on pedophilia, said in a recent interview (*People Magazine*, 4/15/02) that:

Sexual abuse during childhood is not the cause, but it is a risk factor. . . . The biggest misconception about pedophilia is that someone chooses to have it. . . . It’s not anyone’s fault that they have it, but it’s their responsibility to do something about it. . . . Biological factors play into [the development of pedophilia]. . . . We’ve learned that you can successfully treat people with pedophilia, but you cannot cure them.

The bottom line is that discerning the morality of a given disposition has little to do with whether it is “fixed early in life.” The latter should affect the

degree of pastoral sensitivity but not whether the behavior 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.”

VII. On Serial, Unrepentant Sexual Sin and Its Consequences

Wink reserves his greatest scorn for the view that serial, unrepentant sexual misconduct, including heterosexual sex outside of marriage and homosexual intercourse, can lead to exclusion from God’s kingdom. Sexual intercourse is acceptable only within the confines of marriage between one man and one woman, even if the byproduct of this is that some people may have to go without sex. “This is where Gagnon’s position reveals itself for what it is: ‘a cruel abuse of religious power,’ as someone put it.”

a. “*Gagnon’s position*”?

The first point to be made cannot be overly stressed: this is not just *my* position. It was the position of all New Testament writers, the virtually unanimous position of the church for almost two millennia, and remains the majority position in the church today—even among American mainline denominations. In view of this, Wink’s personal attack of me looks foolish. Maybe he has lived in a left-of-center seminary context for so long that he has forgotten that most of the Christian world does not think the way he does.

b. *Jesus’ “cruel abuse of religious power”*?

Once again the main problem with Wink’s scorn for this view is that it makes Jesus Christ himself the main perpetrator of this “cruel abuse of religious power,” along with Paul. For it was Jesus himself who, with his teaching on divorce/remarriage (Matt 5:32//Luke 16:18; Mark 10:11-12; 1 Cor 7:10-11) and adultery of the heart (Matt 5:27-28), took the step of narrowing even further an already carefully circumscribed vision for permissible sexual intercourse. 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; Mark 9:43-48).

Yet we know that no one ever understood the meaning of love better than Jesus, or practiced love to sinners, including sexual sinners and the worst economic exploiters of his culture (tax collectors), better than Jesus. Jesus reached out aggressively in love to those who had egregiously transgressed the will of God, inviting himself into their homes, eating with them, fraternizing with them, and proclaiming the message of God’s coming kingdom to them. His aim was to find the lost and heal the sick, to

recover the maximum number possible for God’s kingdom. At the same time, he intensified God’s ethical demand on the lives of his hearers in matters of sexual purity and use of resources.

This is not a schizophrenic Jesus. If anything, it is we who are schizophrenic, torn between the desires of self and the will of God. This is not a Jesus who at one time grossly abused his religious power when he warned people of the eternal consequences of sinful sexual lifestyles; and at another time demonstrated extraordinary love and concern for the plight of sexual sinners. Nor are parents schizophrenic when they warn the children that they dearly love of the serious consequences of certain forms of behavior. If one’s child is about to touch a hot stove, it is not abusive or unloving for the parent to say “If you do that you will burn yourself.”

In the name of Jesus Wink blames me and, implicitly, the church as a whole for putting forward Jesus’ own teaching. We face, then, the dilemma of choosing between Wink’s understanding of eternal destiny in relation to sexual conduct and Jesus’ understanding on such matters. Or, succinctly put, whether Wink or Jesus understands love best.

c. *Paul’s “cruel abuse of religious power”*?

Of course, Paul’s view on the matter is also quite clear: immoral sexual conduct (*porneia*)—including incest, solicitation of prostitutes, adultery, and same-sex intercourse—can get one excluded from the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9-10; ch. 5; 6:12-20). Moreover, in the same context Paul stressed that, although the believers at Corinth used to engage in such behavior, they did so no longer: “but you washed yourselves off, but you were made holy (sanctified), but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor 6:11). This is the same Paul who later in the same letter wrote a hymn of praise to the power of love (1 Corinthians 13) and insisted on the superiority of love in handling disputes around idol meat and spiritual gifts (1 Cor 8:1-3; 14:1). This is the same Paul who repeatedly emptied himself, experiencing unimaginable hardships for the sake of his converts to Christ (1 Cor 4:8-13; 2 Cor 6:4-10; 11:23-33).

Similarly, in his letter to the Roman believers Paul designated same-sex intercourse as a prime example of “uncleanness” (filthy or dirty conduct; 1:24, 26-27), deserving of divine judgment or death (1:32). Then later in the letter, in the context of answering the question, “Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace” (6:15), he could give thanks to God that, “just as you presented your members as slaves to uncleanness . . . , so now present your members as slaves to righteousness” (6:19). This thanks was genuine and heartfelt. Paul recognized that enslavement to the sinful impulse leads to spiritual and physical death, even for believers, while

enslavement to righteousness/God leads to eternal life (6:16, 20-23). In his concluding answer to the question in 6:15, namely, should we sin because there are allegedly no eternal repercussions for sinning, Paul says:

So then, brethren, we are debtors not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh, for if you live according to the flesh, you are going to die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are being led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons (children) of God. (8:12-14)

So, clearly, Paul believed that serial, unrepentant sexually immoral behavior, such as same-sex intercourse, could lead to one's spiritual death—the forfeiture of eternal life. Now possibly Paul misunderstood the true nature of grace and love, while Wink and those who share his view have pointed the way to what grace and love really mean. Personally, I think that possibility is extremely remote and all the more so since Paul's views here are consistent with those of Jesus, indeed with the whole of Scripture.

d. How Wink misrepresents my view of Jesus and judgment.

To be sure, the entire message of Jesus and of Paul is broader than the theme that serial unrepentant sin leads to death. It certainly includes this as a significant theme and a theme that coheres with everything else that each says. But the message includes more: including a focus on how good and marvelous God's grace and love in Christ are to redeem us for a glorious inheritance while we were yet sinners. Our primary motivation for conforming our lives to God's will is this incredible love and grace of God, exemplified most in the amends-making death of Christ on our behalf. Nevertheless, both Jesus and Paul have a bottom-line ethic, namely, that if the grace and love of God are not enough to motivate moral conduct, then reflecting on the eternal consequences of one's actions may be necessary. This is no manipulative scare tactic. It is reality as defined by Jesus and the whole of the New Testament. It is part of the broader message of love, though again not the whole.

What Wink tries to do is to give the impression of imbalance on my part. He does so by ignoring those parts of my book that put the message of warning in this broader context (see, among many places, my "Final Word" on pp. 491-93). He even goes so far as to misquote me—whether by intent or by subconscious ideological design I do not know—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" (emphases added). Indeed, when the statement is quoted in its broader context the careful balance of my remark is apparent:

Jesus was willing to relax some elements of the law in favor of intensifying others and did so in ways that troubled some of his contemporaries. . . . However, the former were far from being abolished. Jesus also

displayed extraordinary generosity and compassion to sinners in order to win them over to the kingdom. At the same time he intensified the law's demand in a number of areas. . . . [here I list seven such areas, including sexual ethics] In most of these areas, we have sayings of Jesus indicating that failure to comply leads to exclusion from the kingdom of God. Given these intensified demands and the eschatological penalty attached to violators, it is difficult to agree that Jesus [as E. P. Sanders claims] "was not a repentance-minded reformer." The specific vocabulary of repentance *may* not have been as prominent in Jesus' teaching as it was in that of John the Baptist; and John *may* not have cozied up to the wicked as much as Jesus did. Nevertheless, to characterize Jesus' message as "God loves you," in contrast to John's proclamation of "change or be destroyed" is a tremendous oversimplification. There are plenty of sayings in the Jesus tradition, many of them multiply attested [a number of which I cite on p. 220 n. 48], which make quite clear that the latter view, "change or be destroyed," was a staple of Jesus' teaching. (pp. 221-22)

Showing this balance, however, would not serve Wink's ultimate aim to paint me as some kind of extremist.

There are other elements of my presentation that Wink conveniently leaves out. For example, I make clear throughout my book that Scripture does not refer so much to isolated acts of sin when it warns of judgment but to a pattern of repetitive sinful conduct and, moreover, of serial unrepentant conduct. I also state that I take seriously Jesus' emphasis on "holy gullibility" with respect to accepting the genuineness of someone's professed repentance—even to the point of forgiving seven times a day someone who says "I repent" (Luke 17:3-4; cf. Matt 18:21-22: "seventy-seven times" or "seventy times seven"). So we are not talking about occasional backsliding per se.

e. On lust of the heart and masturbation.

Wink is also incredulous that I could say that sinful sexual behavior involves not just the actual act of intercourse with someone other than one's spouse but also illicit sexual fantasies about doing such. 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. I'm perfectly happy to permit myself, and others, unlimited sexual fantasies without any negative fall-out in my relationship with God and Christ. But it is not up to me to give such permission. I cannot play the role of judge by acquitting others, and myself, of behavior that God does not acquit apart from repentance. Wink apparently thinks that he knows the will of God better than Jesus does and can thereby assure us, when Jesus does not, that God does not care if we satisfy ourselves in this way. At the same time illicit sexual fantasies, like all sins, can be forgiven when accompanied by genuine repentance. Driving away from one's mind all sinful sexual fantasies is much more difficult than abstaining from actual acts of

illicit sexual intercourse with another person and therefore requires greater pastoral sensitivity and understanding. Furthermore, who is going to know about someone's private sexual fantasies anyway, unless one broadcasts it to others? It is another thing entirely, however, to begin recommending to others the positive benefits of illicit sexual fantasies, as Wink appears to be doing.

Wink finds intolerable that this abstinence from illicit sexual activity is "not even broken by masturbation." In a 500-page book I refer to masturbation once, in a four-word phrase: "the hand to masturbation" (p. 208). Here I note a rabbinic parallel to Jesus' saying about taking or cutting out the eye, hand, or foot if it threatens one's spiritual downfall (Matt 5:29-30; Mark 9:43-48). That is all I say about masturbation. Jesus may well have had masturbation in view, though one cannot be certain. In any case, masturbation usually involves illicit sexual fantasies and such is tacitly forbidden by Jesus' adultery-of-the-heart statement. Again, masturbation is more difficult to abstain from than sexual intercourse with another person, precisely because of its private nature. Pastoral sensitivity is needed in any counseling situation that might arise when one confesses sins to another. It is probably not a good thing, though, for the church to be celebrating and promoting masturbation.

f. Does everyone have a right to sex?

Wink cannot hurdle the notion that someone, especially homosexuals, might have to go through life without sex. There are many ethical problems with Wink's expectation that we all have a right to sex.

- *Scripture nowhere makes sex an idol*, or an absolute necessity of life like food and sleep. The view that sexual intercourse is a God-given right reflects much of our contemporary culture's sentiment (and much of the sentiment of the cultures out of which biblical texts emerged) but it was not the view of Jesus or of the authors of the Bible. The will of God takes precedence over human desire of whatever sort. God's answer to Paul's request to remove the "thorn in the flesh" is applicable to sexual desire: "My grace is sufficient for you, for [my] power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). This is not to be flippant but rather to set the issue of sexual gratification within the wider spectrum of life's difficulties and disappointments. Quite frequently God does not give us what we think we need in order to have a full and meaningful life. We say: "God, you must give me a sexual relationship with someone that I find sexually appealing." The Spirit of God within us translates: "God, please change this person into the image of Jesus by any means necessary. Use this heartfelt desire for sex to teach the all-sufficiency of your grace and power" (compare Rom 8:26-29).
- *What change makes sex a necessity for us but not for our ancestors?* Were the authors of Scripture and church leaders over the last two millennia not aware that by having a narrow definition of acceptable sexual intercourse they were creating legions of "sexually starved victims of a loveless religion," as Wink puts it? Were they all simply insensitive and uncaring abusers of religious power? What are the new circumstances that make it acceptable for us to disregard the early church's standards for sexual purity and fidelity?
- *Hope for individual homosexuals and heterosexuals.* For any given individual that experiences homoerotic impulses of an exclusive sort it is impossible to say whether, even under scriptural guidelines, such a person will be forever denied an opportunity to have sex. Hope for change through therapeutic intervention exists, with *change* being defined as any movement from a "6" on the Kinsey spectrum (exclusive homosexual desire). Therapeutic intervention for homosexuals can be as effective as the therapeutic intervention that alcoholics receive in AA programs. Even apart from therapeutic intervention three-quarters of self-identified homosexuals (non-bisexuals) have experienced some sexual attraction for the opposite sex at some point in their lives. (As the homosexual writer Tom Hanks once put it to me: the vast majority of gays and lesbians are capable of experiencing sexual desire for members of the opposite sex; but it is like a right-handed person playing tennis left-handed.) To put the sexual intimacy needs of homosexuals in perspective, there are twice as many people in the United States today who have had no sex partners since the age of 18 as there are people who classify themselves as (non-bisexual) homosexuals (so the 1992 NHLS study by Laumann et al.). How many New Testament commandments must we violate to insure that this right to a sexual union is available to all heterosexuals desirous of sexual intercourse? And why didn't Jesus make provision for this? In the end God calls on us all to exercise faith amidst difficult times and not to take matters into our own hands when we do not see a solution in God-sanctioned channels.
- *A sexual orientation field day?* Wink's principle that every human being has a right to sex consistent with one's sexual "orientation" creates an alarming principle that not even Wink could apply universally. For example, some pedophiles find sexual satisfaction exclusively from having sex with children. This is their "orientation." Is it fair to deny them forever the one avenue of sexual expression that they have? Yes, of course, even though one cannot prove that all children who have had sex as children are harmed in scientifically measurable ways. Wink, incidentally, uses as an argument the fact that "scores of Catholic priests . . . have not been able to maintain celibacy even though they took vows to observe it." So, Wink

contends, who can impose celibacy? Wink must be aware of the huge scandal that the Catholic church is facing primarily with homosexually-inclined pedophiles and especially “ephebophiles” (attraction to post-pubescent teenagers). As Dr. Fred Berlin, noted specialist on pedophilia, has stated: “Celibacy won’t cause someone who doesn’t have pedophilia to develop it.” How will we as a culture allow such urges to be satisfied?

- *How far do we extend the principle of a right to sex?* Wink never addresses how far the church must go in accommodating biblical standards to this right to sexual satisfaction. It raises a number of problems.

- *How long to wait?* If a person has a right to sexual intercourse, how long must s/he wait in life before giving up on biblical standards by having sex in an unmarried relationship? Judging from Wink’s comments in “Homosexuality and the Bible,” not very long since Wink allows for pre-marital sex by younger teens. According to Wink, “We might address younger teens, not with laws and commandments whose violation is a sin, but rather with the sad experiences of so many of our own children who find *too much* early sexual intimacy overwhelming” (my emphasis). Too much? Wink seems to suggest that some amount of sexual intimacy between younger teens would be fine. I suspect most Christians would find such a sex ethic severely deficient: waiting a year or two or three from puberty. How about waiting five years? Ten years? Twenty years? Precisely when is the cut-off point? There are probably no answers for Wink because even to give an answer is to set up a law, which would be a non-Christian approach for him. But it soon leads us to absurdity. Would one month after the onset of puberty not be too soon to have sex? Or are we being too legalistic even in drawing that rule?
- *How much sex is enough?* How many times must a person have had sexual intercourse in his/her life before it can be said that a person has had enough opportunities and that it is time for the person to stop circumventing biblical standards for sexuality? One sexual relationship for one year? Three sexual relationships for a total of fifteen years? Twelve sexual relationships for a total of thirty-five years?
- *How long to put up with one sex partner?* Large numbers of men—surely far larger numbers than the total number of exclusive

homosexuals—find it extraordinarily difficult to maintain adequate sexual satisfaction with one partner for many years. Some experience strong desires for other women almost immediately after the start-up of a sexual relationship. If they cannot be happy with a long-term committed relationship to just one woman, shouldn’t the church accommodate its sexual standards to allow for multiple partners? After all, a person’s sexual happiness is at stake.

- *What if you are sexually attracted to your sister?* Let’s suppose a man falls in love with his sister and the two want to establish a committed relationship. Shall the church bless this too? Wink might argue: no, because such a person would have other options with other women. Not necessarily. This one relationship may be the person’s best hope for a loving sexual union, at least for many years to come. Even more to the point, this man loves his sister, not some other woman. We don’t find sexual satisfaction with a generic entity but with a specific individual. So who is Wink to deny that person sexual satisfaction—that is, if sexual satisfaction is a right?
- *What if you can only get sex by soliciting prostitutes?* What if a man has tried for years to enter a loving, committed sexual relationship with a woman but has had no success. Should the church bless, or at least condone, his commercial partnership with a prostitute? It is unclear to me whether Wink thinks intimacy itself is the basic need or sexual intercourse, or both. Certainly intimacy can be obtained without having sexual intercourse or other erotic behavior; and sexual intercourse can be had without intimacy. If a person can develop close non-erotic friendships, can the church at that point hold the line on denial of sexual relationships that fall outside of New Testament parameters? Or is the act of sexual intercourse itself so paramount that it must be permitted in non-committed relationships when committed sexual relationships cannot be had? And how long must a man wait before it is permissible to seek sex with a prostitute? One month? One year? Ten years?

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 group of people. 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.

The bottom line is that 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 “everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”

Conclusion

Wink states that his own position is summed up best in David Bartlett’s adaptation of Paul’s statement in Gal 5:6: “In Christ Jesus, neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality—in themselves—are of any avail, but faith working through love” (cited in my book). There is a slight problem with displacing “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision” with “neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality.” No New Testament writer, and certainly not Paul, treated the parameters of sexual desire and intercourse as matters of indifference. Neither did Jesus. And, frankly, neither do we.

Recently I participated in an ELCA (i.e., Lutheran) synod meeting where people on both sides of the homosexuality debate were manipulated to recite collectively a prayer of thanks to God for “the variety of sexual orientations” in the church. Well, I could think of quite a few “sexual orientations” that even the person leading the prayer—a member of a homosexual advocacy group—would be opposed to: orientations toward pedophilia, incest, bestiality, promiscuity, voyeurism, sadomasochism, and necrophilia for starters. When I noted this, he “reminded” the audience that we were only talking about two forms of sexual orientation: heterosexuality and homosexuality. Ah, but if we are going to thank God for the *variety* of sexual orientations then it will hardly do to limit the broad range of sexual orientations to two.

The underlying assumption of the phrase “neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality” is that sexual orientation, the directedness of one’s sexual desire, is irrelevant in Christ. The witness of Scripture, church tradition, reason, and love tell us otherwise.