

Answers to an AP Reporter's Questions about the Church's Debate of Homosexual Unions

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[On May 26, 2006, an AP reporter asked me some questions in connection with a story about “how divisions over Scriptural authority and homosexuality grew so wide within mainline denominations, why it's so difficult (maybe impossible) to reconcile differing views, and whether schism is inevitable.” The timing of the questions had to do with the then upcoming national assemblies of the Episcopal Church and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The reporter asked me the following specific questions:

- *Did the debate over homosexuality trigger divisions over Scriptural authority among mainline Protestants or did those differences already exist when discussion about ordaining gays started?*
- *Why is it that Protestants with different understandings about Scripture seemed to peacefully co-exist at one time, but appear unable to do so now?*
- *Why has this debate gone on for so long?*
- *Is there any way to reconcile differing views over homosexuality and interpreting Scripture?*

I provided a response. For whatever reason, no part of my response appears to have made it to the light of day. So after a half year more, I have decided to make my response public.]

Debate over homosexual practice among mainline Protestants has both fueled and ignited longstanding divisions over scriptural authority.

Divisions over scriptural authority antedate the debate over homosexual practice. But debate over homosexual practice has provided a decisive concrete test-case for deciding whether Scripture or self-interpreted experience will function as the highest authority in matters of faith and

practice. Not since the period of the Reformation has there been a frontal assault on an ethical standard so deeply embedded in the whole witness of Scripture.

Mainline denominations are being besieged by an inversion of levels of interpretive authority. Historically the church has given Scripture the highest position in deciding issues involving faith and practice, followed by philosophic reason, scientific reason, and experience (no experience is self-interpreting). Proponents of homosexual unions are threatening to overturn that order so that experience is placed at the top, followed inversely by scientific reason (though science does not support affirmation of homosexual unions), philosophic reason, and, last, Scripture.

The Bible's stance for a two-sex prerequisite for marriage and against homosexual unions is pervasive, absolute (without exception), strong (a first-order sexual offense), and countercultural.

It begins already with the story of the **creation** of “male and female” as complementary sexual counterparts in Genesis 1-2. Woman is presented as coming from the “side” (a better translation than “rib”) of a human/man, a beautiful picture of man and woman as each other’s sexual “other half.”

In the Bible **the broad context** for the issue of homosexual practice is that every narrative, law, exhortation, proverb, and poetry that has anything to do with human sexuality presupposes a male-female requirement for sexual relations.

Leviticus 20:10-16 regards male-male intercourse as a first-order offense, along with the adultery, bestiality, and the worst forms of incest. That moral, and not merely ritual, impurity is in view is evident from the fact that the impurity is not “contagious,” is not expunged merely by ritual bathing, is limited to intentional acts, and is associated with the term “abomination” in Lev 18:22 and 20:13.

The **Sodom story** in Gen 19 (and the related story of the Levite at Gibeah) is not limited in its indictment of homosexual practice to coercive forms any more than a story about a rape of one’s father is limited in its indictment of incest to coercive forms (as in the story of Ham’s act against his father Noah in Genesis 9).

A series of texts in the books from Deuteronomy to 2 Kings that speak in a derogatory manner against the **qedeshim**, male cultic figures who serve as the receptive partners in intercourse with other men, primarily have in view their homoerotic activity.

As for the New Testament, **Jesus** in Mark 10 predicated his own distinctive view of marital monogamy and indissolubility—the limitation of

sexual unions to two and only two persons—on the ‘twoness’ of the sexes, or sexual dimorphism, ordained by God at creation in Genesis 1-2.

Paul in Romans 1:24-27 described homosexual practice as an indecent dishonoring of God’s creation of us as “male and female” and a classic instance of the suppression of the truth about our sexual selves visible in material creation. In 1 Corinthians 6:9 Paul lists “men who lie with a male” alongside men who regularly and unrepentantly engage in incest, adultery, and sex with prostitutes as among those who “shall not inherit the kingdom of God.”

In short, there is no getting around the fact that *Scripture consistently treats unrepentant homosexual activity as one of the most serious sexual offenses to God’s will.*

Some claim that Scripture only condemns exploitative or coercive homosexual unions (men who have sex with boys, slaves, or male prostitutes) *but there is no credible evidence supporting this view.*

The best scholars among those who support homosexual unions recognize that the **scriptural prohibitions against homosexual practice are framed absolutely.** In Romans 1:26-27 Paul indicts both female and male homosexual practice and female homosexual practice in the ancient world is not known for coercion. Moreover, he refers in 1:27 to men “inflamed in their yearning for one another,” which certainly doesn’t sound like a coercive relationship. The fact that in Paul’s major indictments of homosexual practice here and in 1 Cor 6:9 there are clear allusions to the creation texts indicates that Paul would have opposed all sexual unions that did not involve a male and female. The same is true of Paul’s nature argument in Rom 1:26-27, which alludes to the embodied complementarity of men and women as a clue to God’s intent for sexual relationships.

In addition, **the conception of caring homosexual unions was well known in the ancient world.** Had Christians wanted to distinguish between caring and non-caring homosexual unions, they could easily have done so. That they didn’t is further evidence that they were indicting all homosexual unions. In fact, some Greek and Roman moralists already condemned all homosexual acts, even those that were entered “willingly” and were characterized by “tenderness” (see, for example, the speech of Daphnaeus in Plutarch’s *Dialogue on Love*).

Early Jewish interpretation of the Levitical prohibitions makes clear that “the law recognizes only sexual intercourse that is according to nature, that which is with a woman . . . abhors the intercourse of males with males”

(Josephus) and is inclusive of sex between men and men, not just men with boys (so the rabbis in the Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Sanhedrin* 54a).

Some claim that modern knowledge of homosexual orientation makes obsolete Scripture's indictment of homosexual relations. Yet there is no reason for drawing this conclusion. There were a number of **theories in the Greco-Roman world positing at least a partial congenital basis for some homosexual attraction** and some of those holding such theories still rejected the homosexual behavior arising from such impulses. Paul viewed sin as an innate impulse running through the members of the human body, passed on by an ancestor, and never entirely within human control. Since all behavior is at some level biologically caused, the moral acceptability of a behavior cannot be deduced from biological causation. Again, some of the top scholars among those supportive of homosexual unions recognize that knowledge of a homosexual "orientation" would not have changed Scripture's indictment of homosexual unions.

As regards the use of *analogical reasoning*, some appeal to changing Scripture's stance on **slavery** as an analogy for changing its stance on homosexual practice. This is a bad analogy. There is no scriptural mandate to enslave others; indeed, many texts in Scripture are critical of the institution of slavery. But Scripture does have a very clear mandate for a male-female prerequisite for sexual unions, from creation on. From the standpoint of countercultural witness there is no comparison: While Scripture moves in the direction of critiquing the culturally accepted institution of slavery, it also moves in the direction not of greater tolerance toward homosexual unions but of greater rejection as compared to what prevailed in the surrounding cultures.

Nor can homosexual impulses be likened to **ethnicity or gender**, conditions that are totally heritable, absolutely immutable, primarily non-behavioral, and intrinsically benign.

Can there be long-term reconciliation within the mainline denominations—an agree-to-disagree approach—over issues such as the ordination of persons engaged in serial, unrepentant homosexual practice and the blessing of homosexual unions? My opinion is: *Only if the standards of the church against homosexual activity by officers of the church remain enforceable.*

The homosexuality debate is ultimately a debate about ethics in general: whether innate, biological urges or Jesus will be lord and master of our lives. Because so much is at stake, I do not think that there is a compromise

position that will avert major church divisions. It is like asking whether the mainline churches can agree to disagree on man-mother incest or polyamorous practices or adultery.

Persons supporting homosexual unions won't give up on the issue because they wrongly regard it as a "social justice" issue. They will not be content with a local option, much less with demoting a national requirement to a nonessential standard. Any accommodation made by a mainline denomination to ordaining persons in homosexual unions will serve as a transitional stage to an inevitable foisting of homosexual endorsement on the denomination as a whole.

Abraham Lincoln in 1858 declared—borrowing from Jesus' rebuttal of charges that he cast out demons by Beelzebul (Mark 3:20-27)—that "a house divided against itself cannot stand" and that, in time, the United States "will become all one thing [i.e., all slave states], or all the other [all free states]." This is similar to the current decision faced by each mainline denomination on the homosexuality issue: They will operate either under the motto that innate biological urges are Lord, and we their slaves, or under the motto that Jesus is Lord even of such urges.