

Review Essay

Faithful Conversation: Christian Perspectives on Homosexuality, edited by James M. Childs Jr. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003. Pp. ix + 132. \$9.00.

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Taken as a whole, this book is an imbalanced and not very helpful collection of essays on homosexuality for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. It has one significant essay, by Mark Allan Powell, but this essay is deeply flawed at critical points.

The editor of this slim volume is James M. Childs, professor of theology and ethics at Trinity Lutheran Seminary and director of the discussion of homosexuality currently going on in the ELCA. According to Childs, “the presidents of the eight seminaries of the ELCA, in concert with the Division for Ministry of the ELCA have commissioned this volume as a contribution” to that discussion (p. 2). The book contains five essays ranging in length from 16 to 23 pages. All are written by professors from different ELCA seminaries:

- “The Bible and Homosexuality” by Mark Allan Powell (professor of New Testament at Trinity Lutheran Seminary)
- “The Lutheran Reformation and Homosexual Practice” by James Arne Nestingen (professor of church history at Luther Seminary)
- “Rethinking Christian Sexuality: Baptized into the Body of Christ” by Martha Ellen Stortz (professor of historical theology and ethics at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary)
- “We Hear in Our Own Language: Culture, Theology, and Ethics” by Richard J. Perry Jr. and José David Rodríguez (professor of church and society and urban ministry and professor of theology, respectively, at Lutheran School of Theology)
- “Talking about Sexual Orientation: Experience, Science, and the Mission of the Church” by Daniel L. Olson (professor of pastoral care at Wartburg Theological Seminary)

The book is framed by a seventeen-page introduction by Childs and a twelve-page “Authors’ Forum” in which the authors respond to four questions about the book’s significance, its use, the value of the ELCA’s sexuality study, and the importance of listening to the experience of homosexuals.

Although the book was conceived and written by Lutherans, and addressed to Lutherans, the only essays that give significant attention to Luther and Lutheranism are the ones by Nestingen and, to a lesser extent, Stortz. The essays by Perry/Rodríguez and by Olson make only marginal mention of Luther and Lutheranism. Powell's essay opens with a discussion of "A Lutheran Approach to Scripture" but Powell recognizes that "most Christians" hold to the principles of interpretation expressed therein (pp. 19-20). Later Powell refers briefly to the historic Lutheran stance against "lifelong celibacy requirements" (p. 30). Yet Powell's application of this point to the homosexuality issue is not distinctively Lutheran; many Lutherans would reject the application and many non-Lutherans would accept it. In short, although readers receive periodic reminders throughout the book that the main addressees are Lutherans, the discussion in these essays sounds very much like the discussion taking place in other mainline denominations (note the book's subtitle: "Christian perspectives," not "Lutheran perspectives"). This in turn raises the question of how much value there is to limiting contributors to Lutherans, to say nothing of Lutheran professors teaching at Lutheran seminaries.

Overall the book tilts decisively in the direction of affirming at least some forms of homosexual behavior. The essay by Olson falls in the range of neutral to slightly prohomosex. Childs makes a modest attempt at neutrality in his introduction and in the "Author's Forum" but his sympathies with an affirmation of at least some homosexual unions are apparent at several points. The essay by Perry/Rodríguez repeatedly stresses themes consistent with a prohomosex position. Stortz's article is strongly prohomosex. Powell's leadoff essay, which provides the only extended discussion of Scripture, supports a policy of thousands of "exceptions" to the "normal" biblical prohibition of homosexual practice. Only Nestingen's essay expresses a desire for rejecting homosexual practice per se and even then does so clearly only in the last two sentences of the article.

Given this decisive, prohomosex tilt, the book will do little to allay suspicions that the outcome of the homosexuality discussion in the ELCA is a foregone conclusion against the "traditional" (read: scriptural) view—a perception noted in pp. 129-30 of the "Author's Forum." "Traditionalists"—code for people who uphold the authority of Scripture as decisive and accordingly maintain an other-sex prerequisite for sexual relationships—are given a place at the table but only as a minority witness. Particularly striking is the book's omission of a biblical scholar who upholds Scripture's other-sex requirement—an omission replicated in the ELCA Task Force on Sexuality where the only biblical scholar put on the Task Force, Terence Fretheim, had already published in favor of a prohomosex position. Since Scripture is widely acknowledged as the main obstacle to endorsing homosexual behavior this omission is devastating for a procomplementarity, antihomosex position. This book will be of little help to Lutherans or others seeking a *balanced* Christian presentation on homosexuality.

Beyond the assessment of the book as a whole, what can be said of the individual articles? I will assess them in descending order of importance. The bulk of my attention will be given over to the first.

I. Mark Allan Powell, “The Bible and Homosexuality”

By far the most important essay in the book, but seriously flawed, is Powell’s. It is not possible in the short compass of this review to give it a complete critique. For that I refer readers to my 20,000-word essay entitled “Does the Bible Regard Same-Sex Intercourse as Intrinsically Sinful?” in *Christian Sexuality* (ed. R. Saltzman; Minneapolis: Kirk House, forthcoming in Oct. 2003), ch. 8, along with additional online material forthcoming at <http://robagnon.net>.

Powell’s essay has material in it that will be disagreeable to some prohomosex positions. For example, his “(limited) focus is on how a Church that *does* accept the relevance of the biblical perspective . . . might interpret the biblical material for contemporary situations” (p. 33). The Bible regards homosexual relations as a “departure” from God’s original design at creation that is “normally” sinful, though “not necessarily” so (pp. 21-22, 29, 32). “The argument that God creates or intends some people to be homosexual . . . finds no warrant in Scripture” (p. 21). To his credit, he does not put forward an absurd notion that has currency in some academic circles today; namely, that Scripture’s opposition to same-sex intercourse can be reduced entirely or primarily to a misogynistic desire to keep women down. Powell believes that “the overwhelmingly negative portrayal of homosexual activity in the Bible places a heavy burden of proof on anyone who wishes to argue for exceptions to what appears to be a unanimous judgment of scripture” (p. 28; similarly, p. 35).

Despite this comment about “a heavy burden of proof,” Powell insists on three key points that lead to his personal advocacy of exceptions at the end of his article:

1. While the Bible depicts homosexual practice as “normally contrary to God’s will” and “intrinsically unnatural,” it does not view such behavior as “intrinsically sinful.” By “not intrinsically sinful” Powell means that *approval* of some homosexual activity is possible, at least hypothetically (pp. 21-22, 26, 28, 35).
2. No one can know whether Paul would have disapproved of same-sex intercourse by a Christian who (a) had a relatively exclusive and fixed homosexual orientation; (b) experienced a deep personal dissatisfaction with celibacy; and (c) acted in the context of a loving and committed “life partnership” (pp. 19, 31, 34-35).
3. To insist on an absolute ban of all homosexual relationships is to “fly in the face of Scripture” because: (a) there are “thousands of homosexual Christians for whom neither therapy nor celibacy appears viable”; and (b) Genesis 2:18 allegedly tells us that it is God’s will “for all people to have the opportunity of sharing life with a partner” (pp. 34, 36).

Given these intermediate suppositions, it is not surprising that Powell reaches the following personal conclusion: “I believe that . . . exceptions to the prohibited behavior

must be granted in some instances to enable homosexual people to experience life as abundantly as possible” (p. 39). Each of the suppositions, however, is erroneous.

* * *

1. Scripture characterizes same-sex intercourse as intrinsically sinful and always contrary to God’s will, not just normally so.

a. Powell himself correctly acknowledges that the Levitical prohibitions of male-male intercourse (18:22; 20:13) treat such behavior as “necessarily” wrong; moreover, that “Paul’s apparent citation of the prohibitions against same-sex activity (through the use of the word *arsenokoitai*) carries those commandments over into the New Testament in a way that *does* make them relevant” (p. 29). Unfortunately, Powell does not draw out the negative implications of this acknowledgement for his thesis.

b. In both Rom 1:24-27 and 1 Cor 6:9 there are clear intertextual echoes back to the creation stories in Gen 1-2. For Paul same-sex intercourse was wrong and sinful first and foremost because of what it was not: the requisite model of a male-female union given in the creation accounts. The only “exceptions” that Paul could possibly have allowed would have been instances of male-male or female-female sexual intercourse between a man and a woman—a complete oxymoron.

c. The reference to nature in Rom 1:26-27 also precludes the possibility of exceptions. Powell cannot reasonably claim that for Paul some acts of same-sex intercourse might be unnatural but not sinful. For Paul deduces their wrongness from their character as actions contrary to nature; that is, as actions contrary to male-female complementarity transparent in material creation. Elsewhere Powell appears to admit this, though failing to note the inconsistency: “Paul does not object to what he calls ‘shameless acts’ involving same-sex partners because they are promiscuous or exploitative; he specifically objects to them because they are ‘unnatural’” (p. 27). But if “unnatural” *in the context of discussing homoerotic behavior* does not necessarily mean “sinful,” how could Paul object to such behavior as sinful, “unclean,” self-dishonoring, and indecent? If, too, the question of exploitation is beside the point (as Powell suggests in the quotation above), how then can modern-day committed homosexual unions make any difference to Scripture’s indictment?

d. Powell’s claim that “the condemnations of *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* [in 1 Cor 6:9] . . . do not disallow instances in which men who have sex with each other are not behaving as *arsenokoitai* or *malakoi*” (p. 26) cannot stand up to scrutiny. It runs up against the specifically Judeo-Christian formation of the word *arsenokoitai* from the *absolute* prohibitions of Lev 18:22 and 20:13. It finds no justification in extant usage of the word *arsenokoites* and related forms in antiquity. It ignores what Paul finds wrong about same-sex intercourse in Rom 1:24-27 (i.e., its same-sexness). It overlooks the analogue with the case of the incestuous man that dominates 1 Cor 5-6—a form of sexual immorality that likewise involves structural incompatibility due to too much sameness, regardless of degree of consent and commitment. It disregards the other-sex requirement

for sexual behavior enunciated in Gen 2:24, which Paul cites in the immediate context (6:16). It sidesteps the relevant discussion of marriage in very next chapter (1 Cor 7), which presumes, as everywhere in Scripture, the sole legitimacy of other-sex marriage.

In sum, the Bible clearly regards same-sex intercourse as intrinsically, or necessarily, sinful.

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2. It follows that there is no great mystery about what Paul would have prescribed for the homosexual Christian who continued to experience relatively exclusive erotic desires for persons of the same sex. He would have said: Refrain from all sex outside of marriage to a person of the other sex. A person who engaged in same-sex intercourse, serially *and* unrepentantly, would have been treated precisely like the incestuous man in 1 Cor 5 (cf. the vice lists in 5:10-11 and 6:9-10). If Paul could advise celibacy for women who bore some measure of responsibility for a divorce and who chose not to reconcile with their husband (1 Cor 7:11), he would certainly have proscribed what he regarded as the grossly unnatural act of same-sex intercourse for those who confessed ongoing and relatively exclusive sexual attraction for same-sex persons. Historically, this is a no-brainer. The very fact that Paul could exhort believers in Rom 6:19 to no longer be “slaves of (sexual) uncleanness”—Paul uses same-sex intercourse as “exhibit A” of “(sexual) uncleanness” in Rom 1:24-27—indicates Paul’s recognition of the ongoing power of such impulses in some Christians’ lives. Paul certainly did not believe that becoming a Christian put an end to various immoral sexual impulses of the flesh. What he believed was that the indwelling Spirit could enable obedience to God and right behavior in spite of the power of such impulses (Gal 5:16-25; Rom 6:19-21; 8:12-14; 1 Cor 6:9-11).

Extant evidence indicates that the modern concept of sexual orientation would not have made any difference to Paul. There were a number of theories in the ancient world attributing strong biological influence to one or more forms of homosexual attraction—particularly adult passive/receptive partners in male-male intercourse (Paul’s *malakoi*). Yet some of the very same Greco-Roman doctors, moralists, and philosophers holding such theories could still speak of such biologically induced behavior as wrong and “contrary to nature.” Not everything given “by nature” is constituted “according to nature”—a point that we still recognize today. Are we to suppose that Paul, a Jew beholden to Scripture, would have been more “liberal” on such matters than his “pagan” contemporaries? The concept of a persistent and powerful innate impulse is precisely what Paul defines sin to be in Rom 7. As regards the issue of committed homoerotic relationships, there were enough examples of such in antiquity that Paul could have made exceptions to the biblical prohibition if his main complaint about same-sex eroticism had been the dearth of monogamy and love.

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3. Understood both within their historical context and in later interpretation by Jesus and Paul, the Genesis creation stories view sexual intercourse as something more than an activity designed for pleasure or even for establishing durable bonds of intimacy (contra Powell, p. 21). Sexual intercourse is about reemerging with another into a single sexual whole, which requires the two constituent parts—male and female—split off from that whole (Gen 1:27; 2:18-24). Accordingly, the creation stories regard the presence of complementary sexual others, male and female, as an absolutely essential *prerequisite* for acceptable sexual intercourse. While the creation stories may treat being in a sexual relationship with a person of the other sex as merely “the normal state of affairs,” they view the other-sex status of one’s sexual partner as nonnegotiable. Genesis 2:18, “it is not good for the human to be alone,” cannot be used as a crowbar to pry exceptions from this prescriptive biblical norm. At most it offers a *conditional* opportunity for sexual intimacy. The prerequisites for acceptable sexual intercourse, including an other-sex partner, must first be met.

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Toward the end of his article Powell tries to reassure those who might be reluctant to embrace “exceptions” for thousands “what the Church would *not* be doing” if it sanctioned “some relationships between some homosexual persons who meet certain criteria defined by the Church (for instance, public commitment to a lifelong, monogamous union).” The church, Powell claims, would not be: (1) “endorsing homosexuality as an alternative lifestyle,” (2) “redefining marriage,” (3) “condoning any specific sex acts,” or (4) “discrediting the views or efforts of those who encourage celibacy or therapy as ‘first options’ for gay and lesbian persons” (pp. 36-37).

The evidence is overwhelming, though, that the church would be doing precisely these things. (1) If the church adopts the view that homosexual relations are not contrary to God’s will in certain circumstances, then how would the church not be “endorsing” homosexual relations “as an alternative lifestyle” for *some*? The term “exceptions” would become meaningless since the “usual policy” of forbidding homosexual behavior would apply only to those not particularly “oriented” toward violating it. (2) Marriage would certainly be redefined inasmuch as the main scriptural text that Powell employs for justifying such exceptions, Gen 2:18-25, is the chief marriage text of the Bible. (3) If the church is going to sanction some relationships between some homosexual persons, it will inevitably have to turn a blind eye to the practices that typify homosexual relationships. (4) It is also politically naïve not to recognize that even a very limited acceptance of some homosexual unions would merely serve as a transitional stage to a coerced full acceptance. Once in control of a denomination, prohomosex advocates are not going to tolerate in the long term any qualms that “homophobes” might have about “committed” homosexual unions.

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There are other problems with Powell’s essay. His easy dismissal of the Sodom and Gibeah narratives and of the interpretation of Sodom in Ezekiel, Jude, and 2 Peter,

shows no awareness of strong arguments for their relevance (cf. my *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* [Nashville: Abingdon, 2001], 71-110). He fails even to mention the story of Ham's act against Noah (ibid., 63-71). There is virtually no discussion of Jesus' views even though the evidence that Jesus agreed with the prevailing consensus in Scripture and early Judaism against homoerotic behavior is overwhelming (ibid., ch. 3). While showing incomplete knowledge of my work, he leaves out of his short list of "further reading" any reference to the two most important prohomosex treatments: the books by Martti Nissinen and Bernadette Brooten. Due to the aims of the book to which Powell's article belongs there are no notes and no explicit interaction with other scholars.

Powell's essay is worth reading. It is certainly better than the vast majority of prohomosex or prohomosex-leaning pieces on the Bible and homosexuality. However, its overall thesis—that a policy of exceptions for thousands of homosexual relationships is a "biblically consistent view" (pp. 37-39)—is simply untenable. In the end this essay should be seen as one more sincere but failed effort at giving scriptural respectability to the endorsement of homosexual unions. This kind of essay is a dying breed. Soon even the pretense of scriptural respectability will have to be given up.

II. James Arne Nestingen, "The Lutheran Reformation and Homosexual Practice"

James Nestingen's essay focuses on what the Lutheran heritage has to say about sexual ethics. Most of the essay has an "on the one hand . . . on the other hand" feel. The law is not the last word but it is *a* word. Disordered sexual longings are not the prime sin but remain an important area of regulation. Early Lutheranism was realistic about the negative effects of repressed desire and rejected a celibacy requirement for clergy. Yet it also gave no support to the notion of sexual entitlement for those beset by persistent immoral sexual desire. Homosexuals in the church should not be marginalized but cared for and welcomed. Yet the church has a duty to set higher standards for those who hold office in it. Times change but Luther and other early leaders accepted the condemnation of homosexual practice in Scripture and in the broader Catholic tradition.

In the last page-and-a-quarter of his article Nestingen briefly mentions four issues that "require examination as the church debates its policy of homosexual practice": (1) the effect of a change in policy on ecumenism with the majority of the world's Christians; (2) the legal ramifications that might arise from ordaining practicing homosexuals (cf. pp. 49, 52); (3) Christian opposition to thinking of sex as a right, entitlement, or private matter; and (4) the possibility that homosexual sex uses another as an object for sexual self-gratification (pp. 55-56). Nestingen concludes: "Having examined the Lutheran heritage . . . it is impossible to avoid the conclusion drawn by Wolfhart Pannenberg. . . . that a church that rejects the traditional teaching on homosexual practice can be neither evangelical nor Lutheran, no matter what it calls itself" (pp. 56-57).

While I agree with Pannenberg's view, I am not sure that Nestingen has made the case *in his article* that this conclusion is "impossible to avoid." The four issues mentioned in the preceding paragraph do not lead, either singly or collectively, to an inevitable conclusion that same-sex intercourse is wrong. At best they raise concerns, especially the effects on ecumenism (1) and claims to sex as a right (3). Legal ramifications (2) may soon cut *against* the scriptural perspective as secular culture becomes increasingly intolerant of alleged "discrimination" against homosexual unions. Nestingen does not develop the fourth point. Prohomosex interpreters like Stortz could simply respond that some homosexual unions exhibit greater love than some heterosexual unions. Where the argument needs to be pressed, in addition to appeal to Scripture itself, is over the sexual dysfunction of being erotically attracted to what one *is* as a sexual being: male for male, female for female. Nestingen might have argued more clearly that the attempt to find sexual completion with a sexual same is a narcissistic or delusional endeavor that ignores the necessity of the other sex. The benefit of Nestingen's essay is not so much in establishing why same-sex intercourse is wrong as in showing, in part, that the Lutheran tradition is compatible with a strong stance against homosexual behavior.

From a Pauline perspective, the matter of grace and law has to be taken further than Nestingen's essay goes. Although Paul rejected human merit as a basis for salvation and regarded the jurisdiction of the Mosaic law as abrogated for those "in Christ," he continued to maintain that serial and unrepentant immoral conduct, including sexual misconduct, could lead to the perpetrator's exclusion from God's kingdom (1 Thess 4:3-8; Gal 5:18-21; 6:7-10; Rom 6:15-23; 8:12-14; cf. Eph 5:3-5; 1 Tim 1:8-11). Only those who were being *led* by the Spirit of Christ were free from the Mosaic law's jurisdiction and curse (Gal 5:18; Rom 7:5-6; 8:1-14). This is the whole point of the discussion of the incestuous man in 1 Cor 5-6 (compare 5:9-11 with 6:9-10). Precisely because the incestuous Christian man was running the risk of not inheriting God's kingdom Paul recommended temporary suspension from the life of the community. Paul's intent was pastoral: to stimulate in the offender a repentance that would lead to restoration and salvation. Paul puts *serial, unrepentant* participants in incest, male-male intercourse, adultery, and prostitution in the same boat. Nestingen's apparent acceptance of a membership policy that grants automatic and complete immunity from ecclesiastical discipline to practicing, self-affirming homosexuals is in tension with this Pauline view, as is Nestingen's inference that salvation is not at stake.

III. Martha Ellen Stortz, "Rethinking Christian Sexuality: Baptized into the Body of Christ"

Martha Stortz contends that the church needs to take primary Christian identity in baptism as the starting point for discussions of sexuality. Her essay has two parts.

The first part (pp. 60-71) asks what Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience tell us about homosexuality. Her discussion of Scripture is quite confused. She states, "the Bible has nothing to say about ordaining homosexuals or blessing their

relationships,” failing to note that the Bible’s strong condemnation of homosexual behavior makes obvious an implicit rejection of such things (p. 61). She alleges that the Sodom story is relevant only in warning us not to have “impolite conversations” about homosexuality (p. 62). She does not bother contemplating the historical evidence that the Yahwist—as with the Deuteronomistic Historian in the parallel story in Judg 19:22-25—regarded any attempt at a male being penetrated by another male, coerced or consensual, as a revolting denial of a male’s maleness. She also makes the far-fetched claim that the gender of one’s sex partner did not matter much to Paul in Romans 6 and in 1 Cor 6:12-20 (pp. 63-64). She ignores the reference in Rom 6:19 to turning away from “sexual uncleanness” (*akatharsia*), which clearly alludes to the “sexual uncleanness” of same-sex intercourse strongly abhorred in Rom 1:24-27. She glosses over the fact that the example in 1 Cor 6:12-20 of not soliciting prostitutes illustrates the fact that sex matters, not only in terms of fidelity and exclusivity but also as regards structural compatibility. Hence, sex between a man and his [step]mother, which is the governing case of chs. 5-6, is prohibited, as is sex between two males, mentioned by extension in 6:9. According to Stortz, the citation of Gen 2:24 in Eph 5:31-32 ostensibly shows that Paul moves the mention of “one flesh” in Gen 2:24 “out of the realm of human sexuality *entirely*” (p. 64; my emphasis). Yet, while the author of Ephesians does interpret Gen 2:24 as a mystical reference to Christ and the church, the text provides no support for Stortz’s overstatement. Indeed, the overarching context of earthly husband-wife relationships (5:22-30, 33) and the preceding warning against “sexual immorality” (*porneia*) and “sexual uncleanness” (*akatharsia*; 5:3-14) all demonstrate conclusively that the author of Ephesians continues to ground the concept of “one flesh” in human male-female marriages; that is, in a requisite *structural* otherness-within-likeness. The same is obviously true for the citation of Gen 2:24 in 1 Cor 6:16, made in close proximity to the prohibition of male-male intercourse in 1 Cor 6:9; and for the clear intertextual echoes to Gen 1:26-27 in Paul’s repudiation of same-sex intercourse in Rom 1:24-27.

Stortz fares no better in discussing tradition and reason. With respect to tradition, Stortz emphasizes Luther’s rejection of celibacy requirements and his emphasis on sexual relationships as a “basic human need” (p. 65). Stortz does not delve into the difference between a celibacy requirement (which Luther rejected) and prerequisites for valid sexual unions (which Luther accepted). Nor does she give attention to statements such as the following from Martin Luther (here commenting on Rom 6:19 in his *Lectures on Romans*): “The person who serves uncleanness, that is, dissipation and carnal uncleanness, is already becoming more and more unrighteous, for sin now rules over him, and he has lost faith and has become an unbeliever.” As for reason, Stortz finds the current scientific evidence on homosexuality “confusing.” Instead, she turns to “the importance of promise-making” in the work of philosopher Hannah Arendt, not stopping to consider whether “promise-making” is a *sufficient* prerequisite for valid sexual unions (pp. 67-69). Stortz’s treatment of experience is better. While advocating for the importance of experience, she cautions (with Nestingen) that sexuality is not a right and that “it is not the case that anything goes as long as two adults give their mutual consent and no one gets hurt” (pp. 70-71).

In the second part of her essay Stortz tries to develop “a sexual ethic shaped by baptism” (pp. 72-77). She declares that baptism makes fidelity to Christ primary, turns sexuality into a public matter, and shows that legitimate sexual expression requires faithful promise-making (pp. 73-75). So far, so good. But is that *all* that baptism—which transfers believers into the sphere of Christ’s ownership—asks of sexual relationships? Differently put, doesn’t the lordship of Christ have something to say about the gender of the participants? The entire witness of Scripture says it does. Yet, in Stortz’s view, if sexual relationships are characterized by “fidelity” (which Stortz defines as “sexual exclusivity and long-term commitment”), “service” to neighbors, and “generativity” (investing in the next generation, with or without procreation), “they should be supported by the church” (pp. 76-77). Of course, if these were the sole criteria, then the church would have to approve of all adult incestuous unions exhibiting such traits, to say nothing of some adult-child unions.

Stortz insists that “sexual unions should be contoured along lines suggested by the ‘most perfect marriage’ in the body of Christ” (p. 77). Presumably this is what leads her to advocate for “sexual exclusivity.” But if two people can “promise to be faithful to one another” (p. 69), why not accept a faithful union of three or four (three = the Trinity; four = the Trinity + the church)? After all, Stortz deviates from the model of Eph 5:21-22 in other ways. Not only does she ignore the pervasive biblical image of “bridegroom” and “bride” on which it depends (cf. Mark 2:19-20; Matt 25:1-10; Rom 7:4; 2 Cor 11:2; Rev 19:7; 21:2, 9; 22:17), but also she is content with commitment to a “long-term” union rather than to a lifelong one. In addition, Stortz never explains to us why “fidelity” is important to maintain—albeit in her watered-down “long-term” version—but not standards of structural complementarity that Scripture deems to have precedence. Concessions to non-monogamous unions are made in the Old Testament, but not for sex with one’s mother or with a person of the same sex. Making an incestuous or homoerotic relationship “long-term” or “exclusive” does not improve it. Indeed, the point is to cease and desist from the union immediately, not to continue it. Both incest and same-sex intercourse are judged by Scripture to be wrong because they attempt to conjoin or merge persons who are too much alike (familial or gender). Why insist on fidelity when Scripture’s essential prerequisites for acceptable sexual unions have been ignored? If there is no intrinsic link between baptism and an other-sex prerequisite, then there is certainly none between baptism and monogamy or between baptism and a “long-term” commitment. Stortz has not thought through the ramifications of her position.

IV. Daniel L. Olson, “Talking about Sexual Orientation: Experience, Science, and the Mission of the Church”

Olson’s essay is the most neutral essay in the book, although Olson leans in the direction of making “new responses to new situations” and not treating the Bible “as merely a repository of timeless propositions” (“Authors’ Forum,” 128-29).

Consistent with his expertise in pastoral care he devotes the first part of his essay (pp. 97-111) to the dynamics of listening and anger avoidance in the discussion of

homosexuality. He contends for both “empathetic listening” of one another and “critical listening” of scientists instead of “vigilant listening” (the listening of one guarding a camp in a war zone)—begging the question of whether the church is under siege (pp. 97-98, 103). Olson emphasizes that feelings of betrayal, contempt, and exclusion inculcate intense anger and destroy relationships (pp. 108-109). For Olson, the main mission of the church in the sexuality discussion is to model to the world a vigorous dialogue without attacking one another or turning away in disgust; in short to maintain unity (citing John 17; pp. 98-102, 110).

Olson’s approach, while helpful at points, also truncates the biblical perspective. It gives little attention to matters of truth, boundaries, scriptural standards of sexual purity, and the eternal fate of offenders. I doubt whether Paul’s handling of the case of adult incest would have complied with Olson’s guidelines. Even so, it was the Corinthian stance that was schismatic, not Paul’s compassionate recommendation of temporary suspension of the offender from the life of the community. Would Olson have recommended that Paul stay in dialogue and not be so dismissive and exclusionary? Granted that truth should be spoken in love (Eph 4:15), are there some forms of behavior that Scripture regards as so extreme as to transcend concerns for unity? Ephesians 4-5 stresses a unity that is constructed on adherence to apostolic teaching (4:13-14) and even recommends disassociation from serial unrepentant participants in immoral behavior (5:3-14). Condoning a form of behavior that is categorically, strongly, and pervasively condemned in Scripture is already a schismatic act. Christian unity cannot be defined merely as agreement among believers. It requires, first and foremost, agreement with the core values of Scripture, one of which is the definition of acceptable sexual intercourse as the (re-)merging of two sexual others into a sexual whole.

The second part of Olson’s essay (pp. 111-17) focuses on the scientific evidence. Olson tries to steer a middle course: we do not know what causes homosexual orientation or higher rates of mental health problems among homosexuals. Nor do we know whether sexual orientation can be changed or whether homosexual parenting adversely affects child development. Only in two instances does Olson cite explicit research. Olson adeptly shows the strengths and weaknesses of recent studies showing a mild correlation between handedness or fingerprints on the one hand and homosexual orientation on the other (p. 115). In his other specific reference, Olson gets it wrong: “In twin studies, if one identical twin is gay, the likelihood that the other one will be gay is about fifty percent” (p. 111). It is true that three of the four major identical-twin studies published from 1991 to 1993 found such a concordance rate (the other major study found a concordance rate of only twenty-five percent). However, in a study published in 2000, J. Michael Bailey, co-author of two of the previous “fifty percent” studies, found a way to eliminate much of the sample bias of earlier studies. This time he found that only twelve percent of the identical twin pairs with at least one self-identified nonheterosexual had a co-twin who likewise self-identified (reported in my book, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* [Abingdon, 2001], 404-405 and in Stanton Jones and Mark Yarhouse, *Homosexuality* [Intervarsity, 2000], 75-78). Olson should have been aware of this study, although he could not have known an even more recent identical twin study, published by researchers from Columbia and Yale, which concluded that “less gendered socialization” in childhood, not genetic or

hormonal influences, plays the dominant role in the development of same-sex attraction (Peter S. Bearman and Hannah Brückner, “Opposite-Sex Twins and Adolescent Same-Sex Attraction,” *American Journal of Sociology* 107:5 [2002]: 1179-1205). We now know enough from science to say that congenital influences play a role in some homosexual development but they are not a direct cause and require the medium of specific socializing influences (*Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 395-429). There is also ample evidence that disproportionately high rates of negative side effects associated with homosexual behavior are due in large measure to the same-sexness of the behavior; that is, to the absence of a gender complement that might temper the extremes of each sex (*Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 452-60, 471-85). Olson’s five-page description of what science tells us could be much worse but it could also be much better.

V. Richard J. Perry Jr. and José David Rodríguez,
“We Hear in Our Own Language: Culture, Theology, and Ethics”

The least insightful essay is the one by Perry and Rodríguez. The aim of the authors was to show that a “multicultural perspective”—meaning primarily an African-American and Latino-American perspective (the ethnicity of the authors, respectively)—is essential for a church study of homosexuality. Yet running counter to this aim is the authors’ candid admission that, “when it comes to the issue of homosexuality, these communities’ attitudes and beliefs appear to be the same as the dominant culture’s” (p. 90). If there is any difference, it is a difference that favors the “traditional” view: African-American and Latino-American Christian perspectives on homosexuality are generally more *conservative* than Euro-American Christian perspectives (*pace* Perry and Rodríguez, p. 92).

Although Perry and Rodríguez do not advocate explicitly for homosexual unions, the generalizations that they make favor such unions. For example: According to the authors, “surely one of the crucial *absent* voices [in the ELCA’s study of homosexuality] is one representing the homosexual community” (p. 94; my emphasis). The reality is the exact opposite: no group has greater proportional voice and input on this issue. Perry and Rodríguez also speak about the diversity of cultures as a basis for being open to new sexual standards (pp. 83, 86, 93). No thought is given to the fact that Paul rejected every cultural perspective on same-sex intercourse in his own day that was at variance with Scripture’s witness. Perry and Rodríguez compare the present ELCA position on homosexuals with racial discrimination (pp. 91, 92, 94) when probably most African-American and Latino-American Christians would be offended by such an analogy. Perry and Rodríguez make no attempt to discern critical points at which the comparison breaks down (e.g., “skin color is a benign, non-behavioral characteristic,” sexual orientation is not [Colin Powell]; the New Testament embraces ethnic difference but strongly rejects many innate sexual desires and behaviors, especially homoerotic manifestations). The authors select only prohomosex books and articles “for further reading.”

Overall, Perry and Rodríguez adopt the standard prohomosex clichés employed by many Euro-Americans, with little or no critical reflection. Their essay represents a

minority view within African-American and Latino-American Christian communities and yet it is presented as the multiculturalist voice of the book.

VI. On Faithfulness

A final word about the context of ecclesiastical discussion is in order. Powell tells us: “Discussions of *application* of Scripture. . . . are matters on which good and faithful Christians will disagree” (pp. 33-34; cf. the book’s title: *Faithful Conversation*). I am afraid, however, that as regards the issue of homosexual practice and a number of other core biblical concerns, the statement is presumptuous. Yes, good and faithful Christians have leeway to disagree about various important, yet nonessential, applications of Scripture (e.g., as regards mainline denominational differences over baptism and the Eucharist). But no, not every disagreement about the application of Scripture can be described as a dispute within the circle of “good and faithful Christians.” If it were otherwise, Luther would never have initiated the Protestant Reformation. Faithfulness is not decided merely on the grounds of the interpreter’s intent. Some applications can be grossly unfaithful, despite the best intentions of the interpreters, and can lead to catastrophic results for the community of faith.

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