

Slavery, Homosexuality, and the Bible: A Response

By Robert A. J. Gagnon, Ph.D.

The Rule of Love: “You shall not hate your brother in your heart. *You shall firmly reprove your fellow-countryman and so not incur guilt because of him.* You shall not take revenge and you shall not hold a grudge against any of your people. *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” (Leviticus 19:17-18)

Rev. Krehbiel has written a [“Viewpoint” piece for Presbyweb](#) (Feb. 4, 2004) in which he insists that the Bible’s stance on slavery is analogous to the Bible’s stance on homosexual behavior. It is not. Slavery is a very bad analogue and the use of it as such reflects badly on the hermeneutical acumen of those who employ it. Here are four reasons why slavery analogy is a bridge too far.

1. *No mandate.* There is no scriptural mandate to enslave others, nor does one incur a penalty for releasing slaves. No noble values ever ‘rode’ on the preservation of the institution of slavery. Selling oneself into slavery was seen as a last-ditch measure to avoid starvation—at best a necessary evil in a state with limited welfare resources (Lev 25:39). There *is*, however, a scriptural mandate to limit sexual unions to heterosexual ones, with a severe penalty (in this life or the next) imposed on violators.
2. *Not pre-Fall.* Unlike the opposite-sex prerequisite, Scripture does not ground slavery in pre-Fall structures. Even if one were to contend that this is a dehistoricizing argument, based on myth, the creation story still tells us that the biblical writers viewed heterosexual unions, unlike slavery, as normative and transcultural.
3. *The Bible’s trajectory of critique.* One can discern a trajectory within the Bible that critiques slavery. Front and center in Israelite memory was its remembrance of God’s liberation from slavery in Egypt (e.g., Exod 22:21; 23:9; Lev 25:42, 55; Deut 15:15). Christian memory adds the paradigmatic event of Christ’s redemption of believers from slavery to sin and people (1 Cor 6:20; 7:23; and often). Consequently, Israelite law put various restrictions on enslaving fellow Israelites—mandatory release dates, the right of near-kin redemption, not returning runaway slaves, and insisting that Israelites not be treated as slaves—while Paul in 1 Cor 7:21-23 and Phlm 16 regarded liberation from slavery as at least a penultimate good.

The canon of Scripture shows considerable discomfort with the institution of slavery. Yet there is not the slightest indication anywhere in the canon that same-sex intercourse is anything other than a detested practice to be utterly eschewed by the people of God, Jew and Gentile believer alike, in all circumstances. The discomfort that Scripture shows is not with any opposition to same-sex intercourse but rather with any accommodation to “gender bending.”

4. *The Bible's countercultural witness.* Although the contemporary church has gone beyond the Bible in its total opposition to slavery, the biblical stance was fairly liberating in relation to the cultures out of which these texts emerged. The precise opposite is the case with the Bible's stance on same-sex intercourse. The Bible expresses far greater disapproval of such behavior than do the cultures of its day.

Simply put, *Scripture nowhere expresses a vested interest in preserving slavery, whereas Scripture does express a clear countercultural and creational vested interest in preserving an exclusive male-female dynamic to human sexual relationships.* Rev. Krehbiel ignores this point entirely.

Rev. Krehbiel argues that, regardless of the Bible's actual position on slavery, "biblical" defenses of slavery in the pre-Civil War period sound like biblical critiques of homosexual practice today. Again, this misses the point: Scripture itself does not provide the kind of clear and unequivocal witness *for* slavery that it exhibits *against* same-sex intercourse.

According to Rev. Krehbiel, "the grand sweep of the Bible's message is toward freedom and liberation from bondage, and the emphasis in Jesus' ministry was toward welcome of the outcast." Odd, then, that Jesus should take an already narrowly defined view of sexual ethics given in the Bible and narrow it even further. Did Jesus not understand the very love commandments that he lifted up? Odd, too, that Paul—no slouch on the matter of grace and freedom from the law—did the same. Liberationist ethics, in the sense of release from binding commands, has never worked well for the sex ethics promoted by Jesus and upheld by the apostolic witness.

Rev. Krehbiel says: "Dr. Gagnon's arguments notwithstanding, the Bible is simply silent on the issue of loving, faithful, monogamous relationships between two persons of the same sex." The problem here is twofold. First, the Bible does speak to the issue of loving, faithful, monogamous relationships, just as it speaks to the issue of loving, faithful, monogamous adult incestuous unions. It addresses them by taking up all possible forms under absolute proscriptions, making matters of commitment secondary to larger structural concerns such as prohibiting unions between people who are too much alike. Indeed, employing Rev. Krehbiel's arguments for endorsing homosexual practice, I can make an even better case for committed, adult incestuous unions. What could be a greater case of sexual ostracism than a man and mother, a woman and her father, or two adult siblings wanting to be in a loving, committed, monogamous sexual relationship?

Moreover, Rev. Krehbiel has little basis for holding onto a monogamy prerequisite. Polygamists—whether in the "traditional" mode or in a non-patriarchal mode such as "threesomes"—arguably are greater outcasts in today's society than persons who engage in homoerotic intercourse. The case from Scripture and nature for supporting polyamorous unions is far stronger than the case for homosexual behavior—though, it is true, Jesus' pronouncement on divorce and remarriage effectively eliminated the concession to male hardness of heart given in the Mosaic allowance for polygyny. Why, too, should Rev. Krehbiel be insistent about the sacredness of number "two" with regard

to sexual relationships while cavalierly discarding the even more essential other-sex prerequisite given in Scripture? Finally, let's not forget that the conjunction of "monogamy" and "homoerotic unions," at least with respect to male-male relationships, is largely a fiction. As J. Michael Bailey—chair of the department of psychology at Northwestern, perhaps the most prominent researcher of homosexuality, and a strong advocate for "gay rights"—has written: "Because of fundamental differences between men and women . . . [and] regardless of marital laws and policies . . . gay men will always have many more sex partners than straight people do. . . . Both heterosexual and homosexual people will need to be open minded about social practices common to people of other orientations" (*The Man Who Would Be Queen* [Joseph Henry Press, 2003]). Similarly, Marvin Ellison, professor of Christian Ethics at Bangor Theological Seminary and also a homosexual man and ordained minister of the PCUSA, has questioned the limitation of marriage to two persons at any one time: "How exactly does the number of partners affect the moral quality of a relationship?" (*Same-Sex Marriage* [Pilgrim, 2004]).

Nor should we think that bestowing marriage to homosexual couples will somehow be a boon for the institution of marriage generally when well over 90% of such unions will not be of twenty-year duration or more (let alone lifelong) *and* monogamous *and* free of disease. As Stanley Kurtz has shown, granting something equivalent to "gay marriage" in Scandinavian countries has contributed to the decline of marriage generally (go [here](#) and [here](#)).

A second problem with Rev. Krehbiel's claim that the Bible is silent about committed homoerotic unions is that committed homoerotic relationships were known in the ancient world. Why Rev. Krehbiel pretends to be oblivious to this fact is a mystery to me. The evidence is clearly laid out in my work. Rev. Krehbiel's claim that the Bible is "silent" on the question of committed homoerotic relationships simply underscores that Rev. Krehbiel has not read (or understood) my arguments—which, I suppose, is why he can say "Dr. Gagnon's arguments notwithstanding."

Scripture does not reject same-sex intercourse in the first instance because homoerotic unions lack commitment any more than Paul rejected the case of a consensual adult incestuous union in 1 Corinthians 5 because of commitment issues. It rejects same-sex intercourse because same-sex erotic mergers represent a false attempt to complete one's sexual self with a sexual same. A sexual counterpart is required for reconstituting the sexual whole of an original, sexually undifferentiated human. Erotic desire for what one already is as a sexual being is sexual narcissism or sexual self-deception: an erotic attraction either for oneself or for what one wishes to be but in fact already is: male for male, female for female. As with consensual adult incest, issues of commitment and monogamy are simply beside the point and come into play only *after* the prerequisites for a valid sexual union are met.

As for Rev. Krehbiel's claim that only a "handful of biblical texts" speak negatively against homosexual practice, the reality is that every biblical text that says anything about

sexual behavior presumes as an essential prerequisite that proper merger requires the two sexes.

Rev. Krehbiel would have us believe that Jesus and the united witness of Scripture were wrong in lifting up the male-female/man-woman prerequisite for sexual relationships established at creation. I prefer to side with Jesus and the united witness of Scripture and see little evidence from socio-scientific evidence that the church should think otherwise. What Rev. Krehbiel lifts up as a new move of the Holy Spirit is in fact an old move of the flesh that Jesus and the authors of Scripture did find, and would find, appalling. Promoting such behavior—which can also increase the incidence of homosexuality in the population—does not come under the rule of love, whatever Rev. Krehbiel or others may think.

© 2004 Robert A. J. Gagnon