

“God’s will and God’s goodness: A Reply to Harold Porter”

by

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A reply to the Pastor Emeritus of Mt. Auburn Presbyterian Church in Cincinnati, Ohio. Rev. Porter published a Viewpoint in Presbyweb on Nov. 12, 2003, accusing me of Scripture "idolatry," "gravely injurious conduct" to homosexuals, turning the Bible into "nothing more than a legal code," and failing to substantiate Jesus' and the Bible's opposition to all homosexual practice (<http://www.presbyweb.com/2003/Viewpoint/1112-Hal+Porter--Berkley+and+Gagnon.htm>). The following appeared as a Viewpoint in the Nov. 15, 2003 edition of Presbyweb (<http://www.presbyweb.com/2003/Viewpoint/1116-Robert+Gagnon--Hal+Porter+response.htm>). .

I am grateful that Rev. Harold Porter is thankful for the presence of Jim Berkley and me in the Body of Christ, though there is some disconnect between that expression of gratitude and the charge that Jim and I have committed both “idolatry” and “gravely injurious” conduct. [Note: Jim Berkley is the Issues Ministry Director for Presbyterians for Renewal; Porter was responding to a blog written by Berkley on Nov. 10, 2003 at <http://pfrenewal.blogspot.com>.] There are many other contradictions and confusions in Porter’s letter.

Knowing God’s will. Although Porter argues against “thinking we know God’s will,” I do not get any sense of tentativeness in his own remarks about the will of God concerning homosexual relationships. In fact, he is so confident that he knows the will of God that he thinks that his own personal knowledge of God’s will trumps the strong, pervasive, and countercultural will of Scripture. Moreover, he is confident enough to charge others with “idolatry” and with a “gravely injurious” conduct requiring immediate repentance.

Apparently for Porter only claims to knowing God’s will *through Scripture* are problematic. But it is fine to make absolute claims to knowing God’s will through the even more ambiguous source of self-interpreted personal experience, even when that experience is at complete odds with the witness of Scripture and of Jesus. Porter says that we should not base our understanding of the will of God on Scripture because “it is obvious that there are conflicting understandings of the ‘will of God’ in scriptures.” Porter neglects to mention that there are many things in Scripture over which no “conflicting understanding” exists, including the stance on same-sex intercourse.

What would be for Porter a more secure place to pin our understandings of the will of God? “It is far better that our ethics be based on a response to God’s goodness and God’s living presence which is still unfolding before us.” Of course, this begs the question of what in fact constitutes “God’s goodness” and God’s “unfolding presence.” When the biblical witness is discarded, one increases—not decreases—the incidence of “conflicting understandings” over such matters. So, apparently for Porter, Paul should have acknowledged that the Corinthians were responding to God’s goodness and unfolding presence when they tolerated a case of consensual adult incest (1 Corinthians 5). By Porter’s standards, he certainly could not have relied on Scripture’s longstanding witness against man-mother sex, especially if the relationship manifested “fidelity.”

The phrase “will of God” is an interesting one. When Paul began his moral exhortation to new converts in his first extant letter (1 Thessalonians 4), he reminded them of the “commands” that he had given them “through the Lord Jesus,” by which “it is necessary for you to live and to please God.” What is the first topic for discussion? Sex. “For this is the will of God: your holiness (or: sanctification), that you abstain from sexual immorality (*porneia*.)” He goes on to caution them against committing adultery. Given his remarks on sex in 1 Corinthians 5-7, it is clear that, for Paul, the following behaviors also came under the heading of “sexual immorality”: same-sex intercourse, incest, multiple-partner sex, sex with prostitutes, and fornication. Paul undoubtedly instructed his converts at Thessalonica, as elsewhere, not to engage in same-sex intercourse (Romans 1:24-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9). Paul was so sure about what the will of God “through the Lord Jesus” was that he warned his converts that to violate God’s will in these matters meant rejecting “not a human but the God who gives his Holy Spirit to us” and incurring the wrath of the “avenger” God. This way of thinking, which incidentally can be documented for Jesus as well (compare Mark 3:35; Matt 7:21; Luke 12:47), is a world away from the kind of philosophy concocted by Porter. Obviously, what “leads us into idolatry” is not, as Porter alleges, acceptance of the teaching put forward by Jesus and Paul on these matters but rather the rejection of such teaching.

On true legalism. Porter has to acknowledge that the authors of Scripture, and Jesus, did seek to declare the will of God; but, Porter claims, “we live by faith not by legal principles set in stone.” This is absurd. The concept of living by faith and not by “works required by the (Mosaic) law” is drawn primarily from the apostle Paul. But Paul himself would not have drawn the conclusion drawn by Porter; namely, that adherence to prescriptive and proscriptive norms in Scripture constitutes legalism. Was Paul being legalistic in the text from 1 Thessalonians 4:1-9 that I cite above? Was Paul being legalistic when he declared to the Corinthians, in the context of a lengthy discussion about sexual purity, that what counts is “keeping the commands of God” (1 Corinthians 7:19), or when he lambasted the Corinthians for tolerating a case of man-stepmother incest?

Why does Porter think that Paul spent lengthy portions of all of his letters commanding them to do certain things and not to do other things and warning that to do otherwise would risk their inheritance in the kingdom of God? The only conclusion that one can reach is that Porter thinks that he understands the meaning of grace in relation to moral commands better than Paul, the apostle of grace. Extraordinary. It is not just Porter’s view of homosexual practice that is wrong. His whole understanding of the relationship of grace and transformed behavior is patently anti-Christian.

Of course, Porter does not uphold his position consistently: He is insistent that the church absolutely cannot oppose committed homosexual unions and charges those who do with idolatry and grievous conduct. So Porter is certainly wedded to the concept of absolute commands—he is just not conscious of this commitment.

Legalism does not come when one obeys the clear, consistent, and strongly maintained commands of Scripture accepted by Jesus. Legalism comes when one (like Porter) supplants one’s own rules for the commands of Scripture (see Mark 7:6-8), supposes that obedience earns one’s place in heaven, or elevates matters of indifference

such as diet and calendar—or biologically related predispositions—to defining features of the faith.

Paul clearly rejected any assumption that Christian sexual norms were matters of indifference like dietary practices (1 Corinthians 6:12-20). So did Jesus. Jesus intensified God's demands in sexual ethics rather than loosened them and, in that context, warned people that it was better to go into heaven with limbs cut off than to go into hell full-bodied (Matthew 5:27-32). Grace is not a take-the-money-and-run approach to life. Grace not only delivers us from the penalty of sin but also is at work in delivering us from the controlling power of sin. That is why Paul could say: "Sin shall not have lordship over you; for you are not under law but under grace" (Romans 6:14). If the wrath of God is manifested already in the present time by God's handing people over to the control of their pre-existing, self-dishonoring sexual passions (Romans 1:18, 24-27), then the grace of God can be nothing less than the active deliverance of believers, through the Spirit, from the very same passions to which they had formerly been enslaved (Romans 6:19-23; 7:5-6; 8:1-14). To live by faith is to live by a continual "yes" to God's will for our lives—a will that usually runs counter to the impulses of the "flesh."

Porter apparently believes that an example of legalism is being faithful to a core value of Scripture, while living by faith is best exemplified by denying such a core value. This is bad exegesis, bad theology, and bad logic. When Paul distinguished between "letter" and "Spirit" he distinguished between a law that did not *empower* people to do what it stipulated and the "law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" that provides just such empowerment. Indeed, the whole argument of Romans 6-8 is that the law and the law's moral commands are good and that the law's main problem was its "weakness," its incapacity to enable the right conduct that it legislated.

Porter uses the language of Scripture but he imputes to it a content that is directly opposed to the canonical context. I recommend to him that he stop using the language altogether, inasmuch as it is pure context-less proof-texting that gives the appearance of biblical and spiritual authority while denying its content and power.

Asserting that Scripture contains a number of core ethical norms that remain authoritative in our own cultural context does not, as Porter claims, turn the whole Bible into a "legal code." If it did, then every writer of Scripture, and Jesus, would be guilty of turning the Bible into nothing more than a "legal code." Imagine if the disciples of Jesus had responded to every command or warning of Jesus with the words: You are turning our faith into a legal code! Or if every one of Paul's churches responded to his moral exhortation and warnings with the words: You have forsaken grace for legalism! How ridiculous and spiritually immature such a response would be. Here I encourage Porter to read my rebuttal of Elizabeth Johnson's review of my book ("Gagnon on Prof. Beth Johnson's Review: A Witness Without Commandments?" at <http://www.robagnon.net/Reviews/homoBethJohnsonResponse.pdf>).

There is so much more that could be said here. I recommend to Porter that he read pp. 50-56 of my essay in *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Fortress, 2003)—the section entitled "Love and Grace from the Perspective of Jesus and Paul," along with the online notes at <http://www.robagnon.net/2Views/HomoViaRespNotesRev.pdf>.

The Bible and Jesus on homosexual practice. Porter states that he does not agree with my view that Scripture—even Paul—regards same-sex intercourse *per se* as sin. Yet Porter

nowhere shows how my “case” is in error, so there is nothing that I can respond to. If Porter has a strong argument to make for his position that Scripture does not proscribe same-sex intercourse absolutely, he should make the argument. Otherwise, his declarations are meaningless. Anyone can claim anything about Scripture. Substantiating such claims is another matter entirely.

Porter tacitly acknowledges the weakness of his contention by devoting most of his attention to telling readers that Scripture carries no significant weight of authority or constraining influence on freedom of interpretation; moreover, that to regard any of its commands as binding is legalism. As he says: “Even if the Bible declares same-sex behavior an abomination that is not to say God does.” How about, Rev. Porter, if the Bible declared it to be so in a manner that could be described as pervasive, strong, absolute, and countercultural? From what I can gather, Scripture for Porter carries roughly the same amount of divine inspiration and moral authority that Shakespeare or Bruce Springsteen or Porter himself has. So why should he care what Scripture says about this or any other issue?

Porter thinks that my case for asserting that Jesus accepted Scripture’s strong proscription of same-sex intercourse is weak. Yet what convincing arguments does he bring forward to rebut my stance? Only that Jesus was not a “defender of the status quo” and that Jesus “did override many of the cultic practices of his own religious community.” Actually, historically speaking, it is not likely that Jesus abrogated the law of Moses, even on so-called cultic matters. Paul, however, did refer to the abrogation of the Mosaic law and viewed temple, dietary, and calendar regulations as outside the enduring norms of God’s will. Yet Paul obviously regarded the main sexual prohibitions as still in place, only intensified.

So what chance is there that Jesus, a much less vigorous critic of the law, held a “secret” affirmation of homosexual practice that no one else in early Judaism is recorded as holding and that none of his closest followers ever picked up? Furthermore, we know that the way in which Jesus served as a critic of the “status quo,” so far as sexual ethics was concerned, was to intensify God’s demand (adultery of the heart, prohibition of divorce/remarriage). It never seems to occur to Porter—despite the fact that it is stressed in my chapter on Jesus in *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*—that change for Jesus often meant tightening moral requirements in the Bible and closing loopholes, especially in the area of sexual ethics (see, for example, the six antitheses in Matthew 5:17-48).

In addition, Jesus made back-to-back citations of Genesis 1:27 (“*male and female* he made them”) and Genesis 2:24 (“For this reason a *man* shall . . . be joined to his *woman* and the two shall become one flesh”) as definitive prescriptive norms for defining human sexual behavior. Clearly Jesus accepted the male-female prerequisite for sexual unions—the pairing of “male/female” or “man/woman” stands out. One of the main points of Genesis 2:21-24 is to show that a woman, and a woman alone, is a man’s sexual “counterpart.” When a man and woman unite in a sexual union they restore or remerge the sexual whole split apart from the originally undifferentiated human. Jesus obviously understood this when he made the further point regarding the indissolubility of marriage. Jesus’ remarks about “sexual immorality,” adultery, Sodom, and the *qedeshim* (homosexual cult prostitutes) provide further confirmation regarding Jesus’ views. All the evidence points in the direction of Jesus’ opposition to same-sex intercourse.

Porter appears to concede this when he says “It may be true that Jesus never [would have?] defended same-sex [erotic] practice.” But Porter goes on to say that Jesus “would not denigrate homosexual persons whose sexual practices reflected fidelity to the grace of God.” No one is talking about “denigrating homosexual persons.” Porter confuses affirmation of human worth and dignity with affirmation of all human impulses and the behaviors that proceed from them. To denigrate those experiencing homoerotic proclivities is to consign them to the self-degrading practices that deny their true embodied existence as the sexual “other halves” of persons of the other sex rather than of the same sex.

As for the remark “. . . whose sexual practices reflected fidelity to the grace of God,” the very act of same-sex intercourse does not reflect “fidelity to the grace of God.” Obviously, Porter is thinking of committed homoerotic unions. He repeats this claim when he says that Jesus would have lifted up the same sexual standards for heterosexuals and homosexuals (actually Jesus did: the standard for both is an other-sex sexual partner, if a sexual partner is to be had). What Porter does not realize is that Scripture does not reject homoerotic behavior, at least not in the first instance, because it tends toward relational infidelity—any more than Scripture rejects man-mother sex because it tends toward instability. Scripture rejects same-sex eroticism because it is erotic attraction for what one already is as a sexual being rather than for what, on an erotic level, would complete the sexual self.

Porter talks glowingly of the “unbounded love of God” revealed in Jesus. Yet Porter has turned “Jesus” into little more than a cipher or symbol for his own anti-scriptural thought, with little connection to the figure of Jesus that lived in history and gave concrete commands to be obeyed. Nor does he acknowledge the wide array of Jesus sayings about the threat of judgment that awaits those whose lives do not conform to the will of God. Porter and those who concur with him have difficulty stretching their theological imaginations around the notion that Jesus could *both* intensify God’s ethical demand in matters of sex and money *and* reach out aggressively in love to those who most violated such demands.

Hermeneutics. Porter’s overriding hermeneutical principle comes across as: If it’s new, go for it. Alluding to Matthew 13:52 (the scribe for the kingdom of God brings forth new and old), Porter says that he disagrees with my views because I allegedly “bring out little that is new on this subject.” I suppose that we should be grateful that we are not talking about man-mother incest, threesomes, adult-child sex, or bestiality—otherwise, I would be accused of not bringing out much that is “new on this subject.”

Once more, Porter uses Scripture in a way that really abuses it. For in the larger context of Matthew’s Gospel (this saying, incidentally, is found only in Matthew’s Gospel), the saying alludes, in part, to the “newness” of Jesus’ insistence that the loopholes in the Mosaic law were now being closed by Jesus. The newness as regards sexual ethics is to *add* to the sexual prerequisites already in place (*viz.*, incest, adultery, same-sex intercourse, bestiality, prostitution) a requirement that marriage be monogamous and indissoluble, not only for women but also for men.

Again, Porter is tone deaf to the intratextual (and intertextual) echoes of the biblical witness. He seems unable to fathom that change can involve intensifying God’s ethical demand. For Porter, in order for Scripture to be a living word, we have to violate

it. Porter does not give consideration to the fact that Scripture is most a living word when we not only read it but also submit ourselves to it by doing it. As Jesus made clear in the parable about the houses built on rock or sand, one must not only hear Jesus' words but also do them, or else one faces destruction (Matthew 7:24-27; Luke 6:47-49). Jesus does not commend those who hear his words but then come up with a different view of the matter.

Porter also gives no consideration to the notion of "core values" in Scripture and consistent methods for determining what constitutes core values. For him it is all the same whether one holds on to head coverings for women or one maintains the biblical witness against man-mother sex. In his view, to say that some proscriptions in Scripture remain normative is to say all must be normative, even though Scripture itself makes a distinction between some absolutes (which it affirms) and all absolutes (which it does not affirm). He brings up women and slavery as appropriate analogies to homosexuality but never deals with my arguments as to why these analogies are inferior by far to the analogy of adult, consensual, and committed incest. He constantly talks about "God's goodness" as if he knows—and knows better than Jesus—what the goodness of God is.

Conclusion. According to Porter, the church's "treatment of homosexual persons as less created in God's image than heterosexuals just doesn't fit with *my* understanding of God's goodness." Porter's first mistake is in concluding that, by withholding approval of homosexual behavior, the church treats homosexual persons "as less created in God's image than heterosexuals." Does Porter also want to characterize those who have intense difficulties with monogamy "as less created in God's image than" those who do not, just because the church upholds monogamy? Are men who experience exclusive attractions for children "less created in God's image" because the church will not condone loving erotic adult-child relationships?

Humans are created in God's image "male and female." That image is effaced not by withholding affirmation of homosexual behavior but by endorsing such behavior. We are not the sum total of our fleshly desires. We are what God has created us to be and re-creates us to be in the image of Christ. If Porter's reasoning were applied to a host of biologically related impulses—and let's acknowledge the scientific fact that no one is ever, in a deterministic way, "born" a homosexual—then every scriptural injunction would have to be thrown out when it conflicted with a person's contrary biological predisposition. The stance of Scripture is the opposite of what Porter is promoting:

We ourselves all once lived in the desires of our flesh, doing the will of the flesh and of its thoughts, and we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest. But God who is rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, . . . made us live together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him. . . . For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works. . . .

You should no longer live as the Gentiles live. . . . (You were taught) to put away . . . the old human that is being corrupted in conformity with its self-deceiving desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your mind and to put on the new human that is created in conformity to God in true righteousness and devoutness. . . . But sexual immorality and sexual impurity of any kind . . . must not even be mentioned among you, as is proper among the saints. . . .

Be sure of this, that no sexually immoral person or sexually impure person . . . has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be associated with them. For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light. (Ephesians 2:3-6, 10; 4:17, 22-24; 5:3-8)

It is my hope that Rev. Porter will renew his own mind in accordance with the teaching of Jesus and of Scripture generally, as indeed we should all be doing—always reforming in the direction of Scripture and putting to death the old human. Then he will not commit his second mistake: Thinking that *his* moral understanding is superior to the united testimony of Scripture and of our Savior.

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