

# Rowan Williams' Wrong Reading of Romans (...and John 14:6)

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Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury and titular head of the Anglican Communion, delivered a lecture on Apr. 16, 2007 in which he suggested that the “conservative” case against homosexual practice, based significantly on Romans 1:24-27, has failed to give due weight to the fact that Paul in context is primarily critical of the judgmental attitude of those in the covenant community. Reuters has picked up Williams’ remarks—which constitute only 424 words out of a 6358-word text entitled “The Bible Today: Reading and Hearing”—and has formulated a screaming headline out of it entitled, “Anglican head Williams says anti-gays misread Bible” (<http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSL1767470620070417>).

This imbalance is already a distortion of sorts, especially since Williams also once notes that the “‘liberal’ or revisionist case” is not helped by the fact that “everyone in [Paul’s] imagined readership *agrees* in thinking the same-sex relations of the culture around them to be as obviously immoral as idol-worship or disobedience to parents.” And yet the reporting is not a complete distortion of Williams’ remarks. The dominant point that Williams makes rests with “conservative” misinterpretation of the text’s “movement,” not with the “liberal” reading. Moreover, even when he states that his own reading is “not helpful for a ‘liberal’ or revisionist case,” he carefully couches his language. He does not say that Paul himself fully accepted the view of homosexual practice per se as “immoral” (perhaps, but only perhaps, this can be assumed) but refers instead to what Paul’s readers think and that only with regard to “the same-sex relations of the culture around them,” leaving open the possibility that their opposition to homosexual practice was limited only to common exploitative forms. Then, too, he states that same-sex relations were “as obviously immoral as . . . disobedience to parents,” which is a distortion of Paul’s point in Romans 1:18-32. To indicate, as Paul does, that any form of sin could get one excluded from the kingdom of God if personal merit is the criterion of evaluation is not the same as saying that all forms of sin are equally abhorrent to God (the latter point Paul and Scripture generally deny categorically).

I reproduce below Williams’ remarks on homosexual practice and put in boldface the most relevant portions. A full copy of his address, which he delivered at an event hosted jointly by Wycliffe and Trinity theological colleges in Toronto, can be obtained at the Archbishop’s site at [http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/sermons\\_speeches/070416.htm](http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/sermons_speeches/070416.htm) or, for a better format, [http://www.anglican.ca/news/news.php?newsItem=2007-04-16\\_abc.news](http://www.anglican.ca/news/news.php?newsItem=2007-04-16_abc.news).

My second example [note: the first was John 14:6] is even more contentious in the present climate; and once again I must stress that the point I am making is not that the reading I proposes settles a controversy or changes a substantive interpretation but that **many current ways of reading miss the actual direction of the passage** and so undermine a proper theological approach to Scripture. Paul in the first chapter of Romans famously uses same-sex relationships as an illustration of human depravity -- along with other 'unnatural' behaviours such as scandal, disobedience to parents and lack of pity. It is, for the majority of modern readers the most important single text in Scripture on the subject of homosexuality, and has understandably been the focus of an enormous amount of exegetical attention.

What is Paul's argument? And, once again, **what is the *movement* that the text seeks to facilitate? The answer is in the opening of chapter 2:** we have been listing examples of the barefaced perversity of those who cannot see the requirements of the natural order in front of their noses; **well, it is precisely the same perversity that affects those who have received the revelation of God and persist in self-seeking and self-deceit. The change envisaged is from confidence in having received divine revelation to an awareness of universal sinfulness and need. Once again, there is a paradox in reading Romans 1 as a foundation for identifying *in others* a level of sin that is not found in the chosen community.**

Now this gives little comfort to either party in the current culture wars in the Church. It is not helpful for a 'liberal' or revisionist case, since the whole point of Paul's rhetorical gambit is that everyone in his imagined readership *agrees* in thinking the same-sex relations of the culture around them to be as obviously immoral as idol-worship or disobedience to parents. **It is not very helpful to the conservative either, though, because Paul insists on shifting the focus away from the *objects* of moral disapprobation in chapter 1 to the reading /hearing *subject* who has been up to this point happily identifying with Paul's castigation of someone else.** The complex and interesting argument of chapter 1 about certain forms of sin beginning by the 'exchange' of true for false perception and natural for unnatural desire stands, but **now has to be applied not to the pagan world alone but to the 'insiders' of the chosen community. Paul is making a primary point not about homosexuality but about the delusions of the supposedly law-abiding.**

As I have said, this does nothing to settle the exegetical questions fiercely debated at the moment. But I want to stress that what I am trying to define as a strictly theological reading of Scripture . . . is bound to give priority to the question that the text specifically puts and to ask how the movement, the transition, worked for within the text is to be realised in the contemporary reading community.

Now I am in full agreement that it is essential to read a specific passage in its broader literary context; that is, to recognize (as Williams' puts it) that the passage in question is "part of a rhetorical process or argument" and must be read "as a full unit," giving due attention to "the actual direction of the passage" and its "movement." In fact, my critique of Williams is precisely that he has not accurately taken into account Paul's "movement" in Romans and in his letters as a whole, which has led him to a misapplication of the text. He similarly misinterprets "the way, the truth, and the life" text in John 14:6, which I will comment on more briefly at the end of this response.

Before I proceed with my response to Williams, a word needs to be said about what Williams was doing and not doing and what I am doing and not doing in this article. What Williams was not doing in his address was settling the question of whether Rom

1:24-27 condemns homosexual relations absolutely, that is, even when such relations are non-exploitative and loving, and entered into by persons homosexually oriented. This is what Williams apparently means when he says that his reading of Romans 1-2 “does nothing to settle the exegetical questions fiercely debated at the moment.” His remark cannot mean that he has nothing to say about the *main* question raised by the passage in its context, that is, its “movement” and “direction” of the text as it leads to Romans 2, because Williams’ precise point in these four paragraphs is to explain what this movement or direction is and how such a movement or direction constrains the church’s application of Rom 1:24-27. Williams’ point is that Paul’s “primary point [is] not about homosexuality but about the delusions of the supposedly law-abiding” who are “happily identifying with Paul’s castigation of someone else” and oblivious to the fact of “universal sinfulness and need,” including their own. Therefore, Williams suggests, *even if* homosexual practice were absolutely rejected by Paul in a way that would include committed homosexual unions—a point that Williams begs off debating here—that would still be secondary to Paul’s use of his remarks in Rom 1:24-27, namely, that one ought not to be judging those who engage in such behavior since we are all sinners. He infers that the church should take note of this primary point and not be judging persons who enter into homosexual unions or making too much of an issue of homosexual relations, at least not to a point where it may lead to a rift between ECUSA and the Anglican Communion generally, for we are all sinners anyway.

It is precisely Williams’ *contextual use* of Rom 1:24-27 that I contest in my article. Because Williams did not address the exegetical question of whether Paul’s indictment of homosexual relations was absolute, I do not address it directly here but presume it on the basis of hundreds of pages of work that I have previously done on the subject.

See especially: *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Abingdon, 2001), esp. pp. 229-395; *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Fortress, 2003), esp. pp. 74-88, 101-2, along with online notes at <http://www.robagnon.net/TwoViews.htm>; “Does the Bible Regard Same-Sex Intercourse as Intrinsically Sinful?” in *Christian Sexuality* (ed. R. E. Saltzman; Kirk House, 2003), 106-55, esp. 128-51; “A Comprehensive and Critical Review Essay of *Homosexuality, Science, and the ‘Plain Sense’ of Scripture, Part 2,*” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 25 (Dec. 2003): 179-275, esp. pp. 206-65 (online at <http://www.robagnon.net/articles/homoBalchHBTReview2.pdf>); “Why the Disagreement over the Biblical Witness on Homosexual Practice?” in *Reformed Review* 59 (2005): 19-130, esp. pp. 62-86, online at: [http://wtseminary.gospelcom.net/pdf/reformreview/gagnon\\_autm05.pdf](http://wtseminary.gospelcom.net/pdf/reformreview/gagnon_autm05.pdf); “Does Jack Rogers’ New Book ‘Explode the Myths’ about the Bible and Homosexuality and ‘Heal the Church?’” Installment 3, pp. 3-15 at <http://www.robagnon.net/articles/RogersBookReviewed3.pdf>; and “How Bad Is Homosexual Practice According to Scripture and Does Scripture’s View Apply to Committed Homosexual Unions?” pp. 17-22, online at <http://www.robagnon.net/articles/homosexWinterResponse.pdf>.

Instead, with Williams, I focus on the literary context for Rom 1:24-27. My own point is that, contrary to what Williams claims, the context for Rom 1:24-27 does not suggest to the Roman Christians (or to us) that we should stop judging sexual immorality in the midst of the community of faith. Now one might argue that contextual analysis of a passage in Scripture is still part of exegesis. I would agree. But the context of Williams’ own remarks makes clear that he means by “not settling the exegetical questions fiercely

debated at the moment” only the exegesis proper of the Rom 1:24-27 itself, namely, whether it rejects homosexual unions absolutely.

Let me also say that I respect the Archbishop as a caring person and able theologian (though he is not a biblical scholar). There is much in his address as a whole that is commendable, which makes his misinterpretation in these two specific examples that much more regrettable.

### *Paul’s own application of Romans 1:24-27 to believers later in Romans*

Williams implies in his remarks that leaders of the church err in opposing the affirmation of homosexual practice in the church too strongly, not necessarily because homosexual practice can be a moral act (whether it is or not Williams does not say in this article though in previous work he has said that it can be), but rather because Paul’s primary point at the beginning of Romans 2 was to criticize persons who judge those engaging in the sins cited in Rom 1:18-32. So Williams:

- “It is precisely the same perversity that affects those who have received the revelation of God and persist in self-seeking and self-deceit.”
- It is a misuse of Rom 1:24-27 to use it as a “foundation for identifying *in others* a level of sin that is not found in the chosen community.”
- “Paul insists on shifting the focus away from the *objects* of moral disapprobation in chapter 1 to the reading/hearing *subject* who has been up to this point happily identifying with Paul’s castigation of someone else.”
- “Paul is making a primary point not about homosexuality but about the delusions of the supposedly law-abiding.”

In short, Williams appears to be saying that so-called “conservatives”—let it be known that opposing strongly the affirmation of homosexual practice in the church hardly makes one a theological “conservative” (more a centrist)!—should stop making such an issue of homosexual practice and attend to their own sins, which are just as great. Hence, Reuters’ headline, “Anglican head Williams says anti-gays misread Bible,” is not likely to be far off the mark. Indeed, the headline accurately captures the primary substance and focus of his remarks on homosexuality.

Let us begin by affirming what Paul in his letter to the Romans was emphatically not telling believers in Rome. **Paul was *not* telling the Roman Christians to avoid passing judgment on fellow believers who actively engage in sexual immorality of an extreme sort, including homosexual practice.** To the contrary: When Paul next used the term “sexual impurity” (*akatharsia*) in his letter (6:19), a term that he used elsewhere in Romans only in 1:24-27 to describe homosexual practice, he did so in direct address to the Roman believers. He reminded them that believers in Christ are *no longer* “slaves to sexual impurity,” for to continue in such behavior was to engage in acts of which they should now be “ashamed” (echoing the shame language that dominates Rom 1:24-27 regarding homosexual practice). Such acts, he says, lead to death and the loss of eternal

life (6:19-23; compare 1:32). Indeed, Paul's entire argument around the question "Why not sin?" since we are "under grace and not under the law" (6:15; cf. 6:1) culminates in 8:12-14 with the response:

If you continue to live in conformity to (the sinful desires operating in) the flesh you are going to die. But if by means of the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For only those who are being *led* by the Spirit of God are children of God.

This quotation makes it clear, if it were not already, that mouthing a few words of confession that Christ is Lord does not exempt Christians from leading a life consonant with that confession, nor even from the dire eternal consequences that would arise from failing to do so. For Paul the outcome for a *believer* who lives under the primary sway of sin in the flesh is no different from the outcome for an unbeliever who so lives. Both alike face the prospect of exclusion from God's eternal rule.

Again in Romans 13, Paul makes clear that sexual impurity is definitely *not* one of the matters of ethical indifference, like diet and calendar issues, that later in 14:1-15:13 Paul will warn believers against judging fellow believers for. Paul insists in 13:13-14 that, in view of the coming day of salvation and judgment, believers "lay aside works of darkness" such as "immoral sexual activities and licentious acts" and thereby to "make no provision to gratify the sinful desires of the flesh." The Greek word for "immoral sexual activities" is *koitai*, which literally means, "lyings" or "beds," a term that obviously links up with *arsenokoitai*, "men *lying* with a male," in 1 Cor 6:9 as a particular instance of an immoral "lying." The Greek word for "licentious acts" is *aselgeiai*, which refers to a lack of self-restraint with respect to refraining from prohibited sexual behaviors. This takes us back to the discussion in Rom 6:19-22 where Paul insists that believers stop putting their bodily members at the disposal of the kind of "sexual impurity" cited in 1:24-27, which makes them slaves of sin and lacking in sexual self-restraint. If Paul had wanted his converts to stop passing judgment on fellow converts who were engaged in unrepentant sexual immorality then he would have been a monumental hypocrite, inasmuch as he himself regularly made such judgments (we'll see more in a moment). It is far more likely, though, that Williams has misinterpreted Paul than that Paul was a monumental hypocrite, in my opinion.

### ***The immediate context of Romans 1-2***

Indeed, nothing in the immediate context of Romans 1:24-27 suggests that Paul would have been opposed to believers making the judgment that homosexual practice puts the offender at dire risk of facing God's wrath, warning in the most earnest terms those who engage in such practice, and insisting that a church puts its status as church in jeopardy when it affirms or tolerates such immorality (this last point, incidentally, is not limited to Paul in the New Testament; see, for example, the risen Christ's warnings to the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira in Revelation 2). For Rom 1:24-27 depicts homosexual practice as a particularly egregious instance of "sexual uncleanness," grossly "contrary to nature," and an "indecent." In fact, Paul treats homosexual practice as

analogous on the horizontal dimension of life to the vertical offense of idolatry since in both cases humans suppress the truth about God and his will for our lives that ought to have been self-evident in creation structures still intact in nature (1:19-23, 25).

Does Williams think that Paul would have chastised believers as “self-righteous” for speaking vigorously against Christians who worshipped gods other than the God of Jesus Christ? I would hope not since Paul clearly regarded belief in Christ as absolutely antithetical to idol worship. For example, he described the conversion of the Thessalonians as a turning from idols to serve the living God (1 Thess 1:9-10). Moreover, he severely chastised the “strong” among the Corinthian believers just for eating in a idol’s temple, to say nothing of worshipping an idol, because it could provoke God to jealousy and wrath (1 Cor 10:14-22). Yet, if Williams would concur with this point, then he would have to give up his point about Paul being opposed to “judging” persons who engage in unrepentant homosexual practice. For Paul’s remarks in chap. 2, where Paul allegedly says, “don’t judge” (incidentally, he *doesn’t* say this, as we shall see), as much follow the indictment of idolatry as they do the indictment of homosexual relations.

Since we noted above Paul’s stern opposition to idolatry in 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians as illustrations of his opposition to idolatry in all his letters, it bears mentioning that we see in these letters an equally stern opposition to any continuance in sexually immoral behavior. When Paul begins his moral exhortation in his first extant letter, he starts off by warning his converts not to engage any longer in the forms of “sexual impurity” (*akatharsia*) that once characterized their lives as Gentiles; and that failure to heed such a warning would leave them prey to an avenging God (1 Thess 4:1-8). Similarly, in 1 Corinthians Paul’s couples idolatry and sexual immorality as the two main offenses that led God to wipe out the wilderness generation (10:6-12) and focuses an additional three chapters of his letter (5-7) on the paramount importance of sexual purity for believers. One need only compare Paul’s command to “flee from idolatry” in 1 Cor 10:14 with his equally urgent command to “flee sexual immorality” in 1 Cor 6:18.

Obviously, then, **in Romans 1-2 Paul is *not* telling his readers to stop passing judgment on severe and obvious cases of idolatry and sexual immorality.** For Paul states that idolatry and same-sex intercourse, among other offenses, are already and in themselves manifestations of God’s *wrath* (not grace). The wrath appears initially in the form of God stepping back and not restraining humans from engaging in self-dishonoring behavior that arises from gratifying innate desires to do what God strongly forbids. Such behavior degrades the human being who has received the imprint of God’s image. The continual heaping up of such sins, Paul says, will ultimately lead to cataclysmic judgment on the eschatological Day of Wrath (1:32; 2:3-9). Thus to accept homosexual practice in the church would be to consign persons who engage in such behavior to the ongoing wrath of God with the ultimate prospect of exclusion from God’s kingdom (compare also 1 Cor 6:9-10; Gal 5:19, 21; Eph 5:3-8). This is not grace but wrath. This is not love but hate. This is not the absence of judgment but the substitution of one’s own verdict of acquittal for God’s verdict of wrath.

Paul in Romans 2 is debating, in the first instance, with a *non-Christian*, imaginary Jewish dialogue partner or interlocutor. Despite what Williams suggests, Paul does not tell the interlocutor to stop judging pagans for committing idolatry, sexual immorality, and an array of other sins (including murder, 1:29), as if by doing so the interlocutor could escape God's judgment of his own sins. Rather, Paul maintains *both* that God's judgment is indeed coming on those who do such things *and* that the interlocutor, when he does these or similar things, will likewise face God's wrath if he does not repent (2:3-4). The interlocutor as a righteous Jew may sin less quantitatively and qualitatively than Gentiles but he knows more about God's will through Scripture and so the culpability level for suppressing what truth he does suppress rises. Essentially Paul is moving the interlocutor to the view that mere possession of the Jewish law of Moses does not exempt him from responding to the offer of salvation in Jesus Christ, an offer equally accessible to sinful Gentiles (3:3-26). Everybody is in want of the atoning, amends-making death of Jesus and the indwelling Spirit of Christ that makes possible a life lived "for God" (compare Gal 2:19-20).

Yes, Paul has laid a trap for the Jewish interlocutor who evaluated God's judgment against the Gentile world as "just" and "righteous" (3:3-8). However, it is not a trap designed to preclude judgment of immoral behavior within the Christian community. Instead, it is a trap designed to convince moral unbelievers that they too need the grace of God manifested in the atoning death of Christ and the attendant moral transformation that comes with being a recipient of such grace: "For sin shall not exercise lordship over you, for you are not under law but under grace" (Rom 6:14). There is also a layered trap for Christians at Rome who judge one another over matters of moral indifference such as diet and calendar (14:1-15:13). As we have seen, though, sexual immorality, like idol worship, does not fall for Paul in the category of moral indifference.

Williams thus confuses his own context with the context for Paul's remarks in Romans. There is a big difference between, on the one hand, Paul chastising a non-believing Jew for using his sense of moral superiority to consign unbelieving Gentiles to hell while exempting himself from the need to receive Jesus as Savior (Rom 2:12-29) and, on the other hand, Williams chastising some in the church today for regarding the institutional affirmation of sexual immorality of an extreme sort among its leaders by some ecclesiastical bodies a problem for ongoing institutional affiliation.

### ***The parallel case of the incestuous man in 1 Corinthians 5***

Just how far off the mark Williams' theological analysis of Paul's views on the matter is becomes clear when one looks at how Paul deals with the case of the incestuous man in 1 Cor 5-6. There an exasperated Paul asks the Corinthian believers the rhetorical question: "**Is it not those inside (the church) that you are to judge?**" (5:12). Williams' address suggests that his response to such a question would be "no," at least as regards the comparable case of homosexual practice. For a "yes" for Williams would mean that one has not given sufficient attention to "universal sinfulness and need." But from Paul's standpoint "no" is the wrong answer. "No" is the answer that the "tolerant" Corinthian

believers would give, but not the answer Paul wants them to give. Far from tolerating the case of incest, Paul advocated temporary removal of the offending member from the life of the community and did so not only for the sake of the purity and holiness of the community but also for the sake of the offender who needed to be recovered for the kingdom of God (5:3-11; 6:9-11). Paul did not take the approach adopted by Williams, namely to caution the Corinthians against self-righteously passing judgment on the incestuous man's behavior. Paul also, in the broader context, explicitly rejected any attempt to view the morally significant issue of sexual immorality as comparable to morally indifferent issues surrounding dietary practices (6:12-20).

Clearly when Paul spoke of judging those "inside" the church he qualified that judgment in many ways. Judgment should be implemented (1) in a spirit of gentleness and an awareness that one's own self is vulnerable to temptation (Gal 6:1); (2) in a mournful manner (1 Cor 5:2) and with regard for the offender as a brother and not an enemy (2 Thess 3:15); (3) out of a desire to reclaim the offender for God's kingdom rather than punitively condemn the offender to hell; (4) with a zeal to restore him quickly and enthusiastically to the community following repentance (1 Cor 5:5; 2 Cor 2:5-11; 7:8-13); and (5) in proportion to the recalcitrance of the offender and the severity of the offense (1 Thess 5:14; 1 Cor 5:1-2). Yet, equally as clearly, Paul insisted that the church do its job of judging those within the community of faith who have deviated into serious sexual immorality. Anything less would be unloving.

Perhaps Williams would respond that a loving and consensual relationship between a man and his mother or stepmother is far more serious than a loving and consensual relationship between persons of the same sex. And yet I don't see how Williams could demonstrate such a point from Paul, taken in his historical context. For all the evidence from ancient Israel and early Judaism, as well as Paul's own description in Rom 1:24-27, indicates that Paul regarded homosexual practice as comparable to or worse than a case of man-mother incest, even of a consensual and loving sort. There is no evidence that Jesus' view of the matter would have been any different since Jesus predicated his view on marital 'twoness' on the 'twoness' of the sexes: "male and female he made them" (Gen 1:27) and "for this reason a man may . . . be joined to his woman and the two shall become one flesh" (Gen 2:24; both cited in Mark 10:6-8; Matt 19:4-6). Both incest and homosexual practice are instances of immoral sexual relations between persons too much alike on a structural or formal level (one as regards kinship, the other as regards the sex or gender of the participants). The only difference between the two is that a two-sexes prerequisite for sexual relations is more strongly grounded in the creation texts and is more absolutely sustained in Scripture generally and in the traditions of early Judaism (i.e. with no exceptions) than is even a prohibition of incest. Moreover, the issue of too much structural sameness, of a narcissistic arousal for what one already is, is if anything more keenly felt in the case of same-sex intercourse than in the case of consensual, adult incest. Of the two, the prohibition of incest and the prohibition of same-sex intercourse, the prior and more foundational analogue is clearly the prohibition of same-sex intercourse.

Partly what this boils down to is this: Williams does not regard homosexual practice as a particularly significant sexual offense, if even an offense at all. (I have read in the press that he may have moderated or even changed some of his earlier strong support for homosexual practice but the evidence for such a change is at best conflicting.) For I can't imagine Williams arguing that it would be inappropriate for the church to split over the issue of, say, ordaining bishops who were in committed sexual bonds with a parent, full sibling, or adult child. I suspect that in such a context he would never introduce issues such as 'judgmentalism' or self-righteousness or divisiveness on the part of those who opposed ordination of such. Yet neither he nor anyone else who talks in this way has made a convincing case that *Paul* would have viewed loving and committed same-sex intercourse involving people "oriented" to such behavior as a significantly lesser offense than adult, consensual, and loving incest of the first order. Until he or anyone else makes such a convincing case, no basis exists for arguing that severing ties with a schismatic Episcopal Church of the United States of America would be an unfaithful, self-righteous, and *anti-Pauline* act. Indeed, the truly anti-Pauline act would be a business-as-usual approach to a renegade body that endorses sexual immorality among its leaders.

**To sum it up, then,** Williams' point in his discussion of Romans was to urge "conservatives" who have been staunch in their opposition to homosexual practice to back off in judging those who engage in homosexual behavior, given the immediately ensuing context in Rom 2:1-3. He is not merely suggesting that in the very process of judging—which the church certainly should do in cases where believers are engaged in unrepentant idolatry and sexual immorality—we should be careful not to be self-righteous. There is a difference. The latter is an acceptable read of Paul generally; the former is not. Williams begs off discussing whether Paul's prohibition is absolute but suggests that even if it is absolute the larger point in the context is "don't judge." As I have argued above, Paul never tells the Jewish interlocutor in Romans 2 "don't judge idolatry and sexual immorality" (can anyone locate for me the text where Paul allegedly says this?). Paul himself judges idolatry and sexual immorality in Rom 1:18-32, where he indicts all Gentiles in preparation for his point that all need Christ. Moreover, Paul himself, as I have shown, repeatedly in his letters, including the letter to the Romans, warns *believers* against engaging in sexual immorality (which for him included homosexual practice as a particular egregious form of "sexual impurity") because such will not inherit the kingdom of God. So Paul can hardly be criticizing the Jewish interlocutor here merely for the act of judging Gentiles who engage in such acts. No, the issue here is that the *unbelieving* Jewish interlocutor is using his sense of moral superiority to exempt himself, ultimately, from the necessity of believing in Christ. The issue is not that of the community of believers warning another offending believer to stop engaging in sexual immorality lest it lead to exclusion from God's kingdom and the community even going so far as to put such an offender on discipline. Paul affirms, not rejects, precisely this kind of warning and disciplinary action in the case of the unrepentant incestuous man in 1 Cor 5 and 6:9-10. Williams wrongly understands the overarching issue or "movement" of the text of Romans 1:24-27 as denying just such a reaction to homosexual practice. Williams ought to have targeted the bulk of his remarks on the subject against "liberal revisionists" seeking to validate homosexual practice rather than to have aimed his main volley against "conservatives."

This is not the first time that I have addressed these context issues. Much (though not all) of the material above in a different form can be found in works of mine already published (for full citations see above), such as *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, pp. 277-84: “Does Romans 2:1-3:20 Condemn Those Who Condemn Homosexual Practice?” and pp. 240-46: “Romans 1:18-3:20 Within the Sweep of Paul’s Letter and the Situation at Rome”) and a more recent article, “Why the Disagreement over the Biblical Witness on Homosexual Practice?” ([\*Reformed Review\* 59:1 \[2005\]: 19-130](#), esp. pp. 83-90: “Addendum: Does Paul reject judgment of homosexual practice?” and “Is Homosexual Practice the Diet and Circumcision Issue of Today?”). It would be nice in the future if persons making the kinds of claims about Paul that the Archbishop has made could at least acknowledge the counter-arguments already made and attempt to respond to them.

If I have misunderstood the particulars of Archbishop Williams’ remarks in any way, then I would be happy to be corrected. I respect him and nothing said here should be interpreted otherwise. Of course, I would be delighted to discover that the Archbishop actually does not believe, or has now changed his mind, that Paul warned his converts against judging believers who were actively engaged in sexually immoral behavior of a severe sort such as homosexual practice.

### ***Williams’ Misreading of John 14:6: Way, Truth, and Life***

A final short word needs to be given about Williams’ other illustration of the need to understand a passage of Scripture in its full literary context. Williams suggests that Jesus’ words in John 14:6, “I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me,” do not mean in context that “salvation depends upon explicit confession of Christ,” nor do they refute “any attempt to create a more ‘inclusive’ theology of interfaith relations.” Rather,

the actual question being asked is not about the fate of non-Christians; it is about how the disciples are to understand the death of Jesus as the necessary clearing of the way which they are to walk. . . . It is about the move from desolation in the face of the cross . . . to confidence that the process is the work of love coming from and leading to the Father.

This is a misreading precisely of the context that Williams wants us all to uphold. This “I am” saying is part of a much broader witness of “I am” sayings and identifications made throughout the Gospel of John. Jesus compares himself to the ladder of Jacob (he is the link between heaven and earth, especially at the moment of the cross), the well of Jacob (with Jesus giving ‘living water,’ the Spirit, after the drinking of which one will never thirst/die), the bronze serpent of Moses (when people ‘look on’ or believe in him they live, eternally), the manna or “bread from heaven” associated with Moses (people must ‘eat’ Jesus or die; that is, they must believe on him, especially as the atonement for their sins on the cross when he offers his flesh for the life of the world), the Passover sacrifice (who alone takes away the sins of the world), not only the Good Shepherd but also the Gate itself (through which the sheep must pass if they are to have eternal life), the vine (people must abide in him and bear fruit or they will be thrown in the fire), and so on.

Moreover, throughout John's Gospel insistence upon believing in this specific being is mandated in order to receive eternal life (John 3:16 is only the most famous of many examples). There are also various places where those who do not believe in him are said to be facing destruction; for example, John 3:17-19 and 36-37, which states that those who do not believe in him are condemned already, before the Day of Judgment, the wrath of God now remaining on them. The whole point of the Gospel of John, in its context, is that even good Jews who believe in God and follow Moses cannot avert God's coming wrath apart from believing in Jesus. If Moses doesn't suffice, what other religious tradition would?

Although Williams states that his analysis of the context for John 14:6 "certainly does not suggest in any direct way a more inclusive approach to other faiths," the key phrase in Williams' remark is "in any direct way," which does not preclude "any indirect way." Williams is clearly arguing for interpreting the text in such a way that believing in Christ is not necessary for salvation: John 14:6 "is (to say the least) paradoxical if it is used as a simple self-affirmation for the exclusive claim of the Christian institution or the Christian system." The comfort-factor of the text that Williams cites as the context is not to the exclusion of the affirmation of Jesus as the sole "the Way," not just "a way" as Williams suggests with his statement that Jesus' death "is itself the opening of *a way*" (emphasis added; was this a slip on Williams' part?). Even Williams admits (paradoxically, to say the least!): "The text in question indeed states that there is no way to the Father except in virtue of what Jesus does and suffers." Although Thomas' question is limited to the matter of where Jesus is going, Jesus redirects the question to an affirmation of his unique identity as "the Way." The way to God, in other words, is not something that Jesus points us to. It is rather something that he embodies uniquely. Thus the immediately ensuing conversation revolves around the importance of recognizing that Jesus is the unique revelation of God (14:7-10). This is the approach of John's Jesus throughout the Gospel, not just here in the context of 14:6.

Williams' problem here—as with Rom 1:24-27 where he stops the "movement" of the text at 2:1-3—is that he doesn't look at the *broad* movement of the whole of the Gospel of John. The broader context of the Gospel as a whole gives further context for the statement "No one comes to the Father except through me." Everywhere in John's Gospel this is elucidated as requiring believing in him and so John 14:6 cannot be interpreted apart from that larger context. If there is eternal life apart from believing in Christ, since the days of Christ's death and resurrection, God hasn't told us about it in the pages of the New Testament—and certainly not in the Gospel of John. We cannot assure anyone of salvation apart from explicit confession of Jesus. Perhaps God has something else up the proverbial sleeve that God has chosen not to tell us about for those who do not believe in Jesus Christ. Yet it would be wholly unwarranted to use such speculation as a substantive basis for interfaith dialogue. When Williams claims that John 14:6 is misused when it is "regularly used to insist that salvation depends upon explicit confession of Christ," he is wrong. This is not a misuse of John 14:6 but rather a correct use, understood in the broad movement of the Gospel as a whole.