

Robert Gagnon on Jack Rogers' Comments: Misrepresenting the Nature Argument

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[See also the following more recent critique of Rogers's work:

Jack Rogers's Flawed Use of Analogical Reasoning in *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality* (Nov. 2006) [HTML](#) [PDF](#)

Does Jack Rogers's New Book "Explode the Myths" about the Bible and Homosexuality and "Heal the Church?" (May-June 2006)

Installment 1: [HTML](#) [PDF](#)

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Installment 3: [HTML](#) [PDF](#)

Installment 4: [HTML](#) [PDF](#)

Response to Rogers's Response, Part 1: [HTML](#) [PDF](#)

"Bad Reasons for Changing One's Mind: Jack Rogers's Temple Prostitution Argument and Other False Starts" (Mar. 1, 2004) [PDF](#) [HTML](#)]

Jack Rogers, emeritus professor of theology at San Francisco Theological Seminary and moderator of the 213th (2001-2002) General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), delivered an address entitled "The Church We Are Called to Be" to the 2001 Covenant Conference (Nov. 2). (The Covenant Network is the key prohomosex lobbying group within the PCUSA.) The address can be read at: <http://www.covenantnetwork.org/rogers3.html>. In the address Rogers made the following comment about my book, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), though citing neither the book nor the author by name:

[1] A recent book, being touted as the definitive study of what the Bible says on homosexuality, is actually not based on revelation, but on natural law. The author declares that we don't need biblical revelation because the Old Testament writers and Paul said what they did because they could see that women and men were "anatomically complementary sexual beings." So we are making assumptions based on our human evaluation. . . . [2] Persons supporting full inclusion of gay and lesbians [*sic*] people predominantly

believe that affection for persons of ones [sic] own sex is for some people a given of their nature. . . . [3] We are not really arguing about the Bible or the Confessions, but about prevailing assumptions in contemporary culture.
(numbers added)

This is an unfortunate, and rather blatant, misrepresentation of my book. My response consists of three elements, corresponding to the inserted numbers above:

(1) Clearly, in my book the authoritative witness of Scripture is primary. A proper concept of nature coheres with this witness.

(2) The kind of nature argument to which Rogers appeals, not the one that I employ, stands in opposition to Scripture.

(3) We really *are* arguing about the Bible's authority. Rogers' appeal to an "accepting Jesus" as a means of countering the biblical stance against same-sex intercourse lies at the root of his misunderstanding of this point.

I suppose that I should not be too surprised by misrepresentation. In November 2000 I had asked Rogers to look over the proofs of my book and see if he could provide a blurb as someone from the "other side" of this issue. One of the main examples that Rogers subsequently gave for why he could not provide a blurb was that I claimed "the incidence of same-sex pedophilic behavior is disproportionately high" (p. 480), whereas the studies cited by me showed that more heterosexuals than homosexuals molested children. I had to remind Rogers that *disproportionately high* is not the same thing as *higher in absolute numbers*. In any given year only about 2% of the population engages in any homoerotic behavior so it is unreasonable to expect that there will be more homosexual molesters, in absolute numbers, than heterosexual ones. He then acknowledged the error but, as it turned out, it was an omen of future misrepresentation to come.

(1) Scripture and Nature as First- and Second-Order Arguments

Even apart from a consideration of the title (*The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, not *Natural Law and Homosexual Practice*), a cursory reading of the first two pages of the conclusion of my book (pp. 487-88) would make evident that the argument from Scripture is the primary or first-order argument. The first two of four reasons that I cite for not validating homosexual behavior are:

(1) Same-sex intercourse is strongly and unequivocally rejected by *the revelation of Scripture*. . . . The biblical proscription of same-sex intercourse, like those against incest, adultery, and bestiality, is *absolute* (encompassing all cases), *pervasive* (by both Testaments and within each Testament), and *severe* (mandating exclusion from God's kingdom). . . .

(2) Same-sex intercourse represents a suppression of the visible evidence in *nature* regarding male-female anatomical and procreative complementarity. Complementarity extends also to a range of personality traits and predispositions that contribute to making heterosexual unions enormously more successful in terms of fidelity, endurance, and health than same-sex ones. Acceptance of biblical revelation is thus not a prerequisite for rejecting the legitimacy of same-sex intercourse. However, *for those who do attribute special inspired status to Scripture at any level*, there is even less warrant to affirm same-sex intercourse. (emphasis added)

Rogers misleadingly frames what is clearly a “both/and” in my book (both Scripture and nature, with stress on the former) as a “not this, but that” (not biblical revelation but natural law). To say that nature itself provides sufficient grounds for rejecting same-sex intercourse (Paul’s point in Rom 1:24-27) is not to assert that Scripture is secondary or, worse, irrelevant. It is simply to assert that even in the absence of Scripture there are ample grounds for disapproving of homosexual behavior so that those who lack (or nowadays disregard) Scripture are still without excuse when they engage in same-sex intercourse and approve of such behavior. My third reason after Scripture and nature, namely the series of negative effects arising from societal endorsement of homosexual practice, further underscores this observation.

The coherence of Scripture and nature is hardly surprising in view of the fact that the God who communicates in Scripture the limitation of sex to opposite-sex partners is also the Creator who designs males and females for complementary sexual pairing. If Scripture itself makes an appeal to creation/nature, it can hardly be contrary to a revelation-based approach to make a similar appeal (within limits—see pp. 256-57 of my book, and my point two below). But the witness of Scripture is, of course, primary and its witness against homosexual practice is even more unequivocal and binding than the testimony of nature.

Again, at the conclusion to my ch. 4 on the Pauline witness I state:

With regard to Rom 1:24-27, both idolatry and same-sex intercourse are singled out by Paul as particularly clear and revolting examples of the suppression of the truth about God accessible to pagans in creation and nature. People who engage in homosexual intercourse do so in spite of the self-evident clues implanted in nature by God; specifically, male-female anatomical, physiological, psychological, and procreative complementarity. . . . *To be sure, Paul and other Jews derived their own opposition to same-sex intercourse, first and foremost, from the creation stories in Genesis 1-2 and the Levitical prohibitions, both of which have intertextual echoes in Rom 1:18-32.* Yet, Paul contended, even gentiles without access to the direct revelation of Scripture have enough evidence in the natural realm to discern God’s aversion to homosexual behavior. (p. 337; emphasis added)

The point is clearly stated: the direct revelation of Scripture is primary, but even the indirect revelation of nature provides sufficient grounds for holding accountable those who engage in same-sex intercourse.

(2) *On Not Confusing the Meaning of Nature*

Rogers himself makes an appeal to natural law when he alludes, apparently approvingly, to the dominant belief of pro-homosex apologists that homoerotic desire is “for some people a given of their nature.” Unfortunately, this is precisely the kind of appeal to natural law that the authors of Scripture would not have approved of—a fact that puts it at odds with scriptural revelation.

Paul distinguished between innate passions perverted by the Fall and exacerbated by idol worship (including the array of vices listed in Rom 1:29-31) on the one hand and material creation that was still relatively intact from its pre-Fall condition on the other hand (male-female *sexual* complementarity). To argue for the innateness of homosexual passions does not subvert Paul’s view of them as “contrary to nature” since by “*nature*” Paul means *God’s intended design for creation untouched by the introduction of sin into the world*. Within a system of thought that does not presuppose that whatever exists in nature is “natural” in the truest sense, an appeal to the anatomical and procreative complementarity of male-female sexual bonds is more secure than an appeal to innate passions.

Indeed, Paul viewed *sin* precisely as an *innate* impulse operating in the human body, transmitted by an ancestor human, and never entirely within the control of human will (Romans 5:12-21; 7:7-23). This sounds a good deal like the characterization of homoerotic impulses given by most who approve of homosexual practice. Consequently, regarding homoerotic passions as innate, inborn, and strong is quite compatible with the Pauline view of sin. Yet even here we should be careful. Socio-scientific evidence to date suggests that congenital factors in the development of homosexual desires are at most indirect and subordinate to familial and cultural factors (see pp. 395-429 of my book).

So the difference between Rogers’ appeal to a natural-law argument and my own is the difference between, on the one hand, an appeal that is very shaky as regards socio-scientific assumptions and that has no biblical support and, on the other hand, a more reliable appeal that has full biblical support. It is Rogers, not myself, that is appealing to a version of natural law argumentation that contravenes the revelation of Scripture. The natural law argument that he makes is no more credible than contending that, because men are more visually stimulated and genitally focused than women, society should be more permissive of short-term sexual unions or plural marriages for males (and all the more so in cases of homoerotic male relationships). Rogers does not advocate such permissiveness but that is nevertheless where the logic of his argument leads.

(3) *Arguing about the Bible and a Truncated Image of the “Accepting Jesus”*

When Rogers contends “We are not really arguing about the Bible or the Confessions,” he could not be more off target. Not only is the biblical opposition to same-sex intercourse absolute, pervasive, and severe, it was all those things in relation to the cultural contexts out of which it emerged. So Jews and Christians were not naively imbibing from the cultural well but rather operating in a distinctly countercultural and subversive manner. If such a core position in biblical sexual ethics can be disregarded, it is difficult to see what kind of ethical appeal could be made to Scripture on any behavioral issue—beyond, that is, the most general of platitudes and slogans. If Scripture is this unreliable in its moral claims, the Presbyterian church might as well revamp its entire self-identity and find its primary authoritative source elsewhere. Claiming that “We are not really arguing about the Bible” is a nice way of deflecting criticism away from a position that clearly contradicts Scripture. People should not be misled. We really are arguing about whether the Bible will carry any meaningful authority over the church’s moral decision-making.

At the root of much of Rogers’ misunderstanding appears to be his truncated portrait of an “accepting Jesus” as a lever against those who appeal to Scripture for moral standards. In his speech Rogers paints a picture of a Jesus whose primary opponents were “people who were determined to uphold the law”; a Jesus who “accept[ed] and include[d] those who [*sic*] the religious leaders rejected as unclean.” “That accepting Jesus is the Jesus of the Bible. We need to read it, and preach it, and share it with everyone that feels excluded by our self-righteous, religious culture.”

One problem with Rogers’ analysis is that our cultural context, even within most conservative churches (let alone broader secular society), is almost libertinistic by comparison with Pharisaic views of law observance. It is surely misguided to assume that Jesus would have focused on the “self-righteous religious” in such a new context. A still greater problem for Rogers’ analysis is that even within Jesus’ own cultural setting Jesus intensified God’s ethical demand in a number of areas. He fraternized with tax collectors, who had a notorious reputation for robbing their own people, while emphasizing the grave evils of economic exploitation. He reached out in love to sexual sinners while intensifying sexual ethics in the areas of divorce/remarriage (Mark 10:2-12; Matt 5:31-32 par. Luke 16:18; cf. 1 Cor 7:10-11) and adultery of the heart (Matt 5:27-28), even charging that violation of God’s sexual demands, among other demands, could get a person’s “whole body” thrown into Gehenna (hell) (Matt 5:29-30; cf. Mark 9:43-48). What Rogers and others mask in their image of an “accepting Jesus” is a figure who could aggressively seek to find “the lost” and heal “the sick” while *at the same time elevating* both the ethical demand and the apocalyptic repercussions for violators.

With respect to self-affirming participants in homoerotic behavior, Rogers would have us not only reach out in love to the people involved but also provide ecclesiastical and cultural incentives for the practices that Scripture unequivocally declares to be sin of an egregious sort—the very thing that Jesus would never have done. An examination of the sayings of Jesus in their first-century context provides overwhelming inferential evidence that, had Jesus encountered homoerotic behavior as a problem in Israel, he would have expressed unequivocal opposition to it (ch. 3 of my book). The same applies to incest and bestiality, neither of which Jesus spoke a direct word against. As a matter of fact, there are good grounds for arguing that in both the Bible and early Judaism *only* bestiality was regarded as a more severe instance of consensual sexual immorality than same-sex intercourse.

There is a great (unintended) irony in Rogers' thinly-veiled comparison between the Pharisees and those in the church today who resist any endorsement of homoerotic behavior. Some Pharisees referred to Jesus as “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Matt 11:19 par. Luke 7:34) because they could not get their theological system around the notion that Jesus could be both a friend to sinners and an intensifier of God's ethical demands. Since Jesus was a friend of sinners, they reasoned, he had to be cutting moral corners. Rogers' portrait of Jesus likewise fails to get around both elements of Jesus' ministry, though from the other side. In failing to integrate his description of Jesus' message and ministry with his discussion of holiness (Rogers only talks about the latter after leaving behind the former), Rogers gives the impression that the first-order good is to accept the broad strokes of what people do, and only then tinker with the whole question of holiness. The New Testament model, however, is to love people by encouraging radical transformation into the image of Christ: a dying to self and a living for God.

In conclusion, any attempt to portray my book as focusing on something other than the authority of biblical revelation amounts to a flagrant misrepresentation—especially grievous if that attempt is made by one who, in partisan fashion, exploits the distinguished office of moderator. The fact that I also document in my book additional grounds for not approving homosexual practice, based on arguments from nature and the disproportionately high rate of problems attending homoerotic behavior, is not evidence that my book “is actually not based on [biblical] revelation” or that “we are not really arguing about the Bible.”