

Deep-rooted Homosexuality and the Power of God's Grace

ETS, midwest, Lincoln, Illinois, March 8, 2013

Richard A. Ostella

westminsterreformedchurch.org

rostella@comcast.net

Introduction

Paul's doctrine of sin and redemption (especially in Romans and Corinthians) is the best place in Scripture to gain perspective on the sin of same-sex sex,¹ its remedy in a definitive (soul saving) way, and its remedy in the life of persons once identified by this sin. This yields three main points: bondage in sin, the break with sin, and freedom for holiness.

I. First: bondage in sin

The sin of same gender sex is a subset of the joint themes of total depravity and moral responsibility.² This means that human beings in the fall are fully responsible for their actions although they are not able to do good, even the good of acknowledging Christ as Lord.³ Much in Scripture supports this claim.⁴ These things may come to us as personal assault because we want the mirror on the wall to speak, but not tell the truth.⁵ Therefore, we need to approach the following considerations cautiously knowing that it is difficult to be true to thine own self. We must begin by understanding what it means to be fallen, for *me* to be fallen.⁶

Fallen man does not have moral ability because, Paul says, **When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness** (Rom. 6.20). Think of a football field with its four boundary lines. Inside is only righteous turf and outside is only unrighteous turf. Being free from righteousness, the non-Christian makes choices everyday roaming around the football field on the path of one

¹ For general reference I am using the terms homosexual and homosexuality but in a limited way because these terms have meanings in the current literature that demand precise definition and sometimes entailed clarification. As Wright put it twenty-five years ago, "In common English parlance" homosexual refers to "those who engage in homosexual activity, irrespective of their known or unknown orientation" but also to "propensity and activity." Then he says, "Indeed, the time may not be far off when 'homosexual' will need some qualifier in order to indicate persons sexually oriented towards their own sex, without reference to conduct" (David Wright, *Vigiliae Christianae* 41 [1987], 396). Today, though blunt and inelegant as a translation, from my perspective it is best to translate the particular sin in view in both OT and NT as same-sex sex, which may be practiced in mind or body.

² Our concern is not with the paradox of divine sovereignty and human responsibility or free will and foreordination. See John Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (P & R Publishing: Phillipsburg, NJ, 2001), 119-141 for a discussion of free will in relationship to foreordination. Instead, it is on this assertion: "Fallen man does not have free will in his moral actions, but he does have full moral responsibility." Here, free will means that fallen man is able to do good or evil.

³ Paul tells us plainly that no one can say, "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:3).

⁴ For some details, see Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, II, 586-88.

⁵ Not wanting to see the reflection of our true ugliness, we deceive ourselves with illusions, and when the conscience is disquieted by God's law, "It begins to fear that it might be living in illusion and untruth, that its values and calculations are unfounded, that it is moving in the wrong direction...this law [is] the great disrupting of the presupposed illusion 'You ought and therefore you can'...a self-entrenching against God...In this illusion man himself is the subject who commands; he is autonomous...refusing to acknowledge God...God makes contact with man at the point where man digs in against him, at the nerve of man's curving in upon himself. The contact is thus a new creation and a new birth...miracle (Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith: Prolegomena, the Relation of Theology to Modern Thought Forms* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974] 144-146.

⁶ One could argue that if man is morally unable in his actions then he cannot be accountable for them and if man is accountable because of the clear reality of Judgment Day, then he must have moral ability. Since questioning belief in responsibility is hardly controversial, our present task is to establish the claim that fallen man is not able to do good despite our *fallen* intuition to the contrary.

sin or another. He may even dream about goodness, but he *never* sets foot on the field of righteousness.⁷

2

You, Paul says, the person, not your will, must be *set free* to become a slave of righteousness (Rom 6.18). Therefore, in Scripture, there is no such “thing” as a free will; there is only a free person who chooses and decides within his freedom in contrast to an enslaved person who chooses and decides within his bondage.⁸ Thus, in a “typical description of a culture’s decline,” and speaking corporately about the human race as communities in Romans 1, Paul indicates how a society declines “from one level of folly (vv. 18-23) into dishonorable lusts (vv. 24-26) and then into dishonorable passions (including same-sex temptations; vv. 26-27) and finally, if there is no repentance, to a ‘debased mind’ (vv 28-32).⁹ The Reformed Presbyterian Study states further on Romans 1: “the human race is a community in which we each bear the scars of others sin, not merely our own” because the sins in one generation may be fruits of the sinfulness of society in past generations.¹⁰ The roots of sin are deep and complex. Hence, Paul can refer to some of the Corinthians as people who were once characterized and marked by a variety of sins including the sin of homosexuality (1 Cor 6.9-11, **such were some of you**).¹¹ Notably, the natural man presented the parts of his body in slavery to impurity and lawlessness (Rom 6.19). In Romans 1.24-26, this slavery includes the *impurity* of same gender sex. Therefore, although some people cannot free themselves from homoerotic desire or practice, that does not excuse them from guilt.¹² Instead, it is an index of their sinfulness as slaves to sin and it points to the depth of their guilt.¹³

⁷Do we overstate when we say that fallen sinners do nothing good whatever? No, because though people may do some “good” outwardly, the natural man fails to meet three conditions of a good act: the right standard (according to God’s law), the right motive (arising from love for God), and the right goal (aiming at the glory of God). So, Van Til finds the solution to the good act by asking and answering three questions: “(a) What is the motive of human action? (b) What is the standard of human action? (c) What is the end or purpose of human action? *Christian Theistic Ethics* (Philadelphia: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1971), 3.

⁸Therefore, it is interesting to hear that homosexuality is a civil right; that is, a civil *freedom* when it is the action of a *bond slave* of sin or that it is a *God-given inalienable freedom* when it is an act of a slave of *sin against God*.

⁹ *The Gospel and Sexual Orientation: A Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America*, Michael Lefebvre, editor (Pittsburg: Crown and Covenant Publications, 2012), 18.

¹⁰ PRS, 19

¹¹For clarity I summarize in a blunt way; the intent is not dogmatism but efficiency. My goal throughout is irenic though I start from the conclusion that Scripture clearly teaches that homosexuality, i.e. same-sex sex, in all its forms is a sin. For a practically exhaustive defense of the clarity of Scripture on this sinful practice see *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* by Robert Gagnon (Abingdon Press, 2001). Gagnon’s debate with Via in *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Augsburg Fortress, 2003) is a briefer but incisive point for counter point. For a truly helpful explanation of the Biblical texts on human sexuality and homosexuality along with perceptive comments on the larger canonical context see “Homosexuality” in *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, by Richard Hays, 379-400. He carefully grounds his conclusions: for one, “Paul treats all homosexual activity as prima facie evidence of humanity’s tragic confusion and alienation from God the Creator” (389), “it cannot be maintained that a homosexual orientation is morally neutral because it is involuntary” (390), and “As the foregoing exegetical discussion has shown, the New Testament offers no loopholes or exception clauses that might allow for the acceptance of homosexual practices under some circumstances. Despite the efforts of some recent interpreters to explain away the evidence, the New Testament remains unambiguous and univocal in its condemnation of homosexual conduct” (394).

¹² Scientific reports may vary, but the deep entrenchment and the apparent impossibility of change does not alter the fact that homoerotic desires and practices are sinful and fall under God’s condemnation.

¹³This is paradoxical: fallen man has full responsibility and complete moral inability. This paradox is affirmed clearly by the Lord Jesus when, on one hand, He says, because you are evil, you cannot speak good words and, on the other hand, He says, you will give account for every careless word (Mat 12.34, 36). See my paper on paradox, “The Legitimacy of Paradox as a Theological Model: Case in Point, Fallen Man does not have Free Will but He has Full Responsibility” at ETS, Midwest, Ashland, Ohio, March 20, 2009.

Consequently, the biblical teaching on moral inability *refutes* those who argue that their orientation toward the same sex must be acceptable to God because it is inborn and unchangeable. Same-sex sex may have very deep roots in nature and nurture in societal development over generations, and that may make it humanly impossible to overcome; nonetheless, those who practice it do so with full moral responsibility and come under God's condemning judgment.¹⁴

II. Second: the break with sin

Thankfully, the indictments of Scripture regarding our bondage are not the end of the story, but premises of the good news in Christ.

A. On one hand, we are set free by union with Christ in His death and resurrection

No Scripture connects freedom from bondage directly to enslavement in same-sex sin. However, such connection is implicit in Paul's treatment of redemption. By union with Christ in His death and resurrection, sinners (dead bond slaves in sin) are made alive and set free from sin; they are redeemed, *literally released from slavery*. In this context, we should take special note that union with Christ in His death and resurrection occurs in the historical past when Christ died and rose again.¹⁵ Moreover, it occurs experientially in the transition from wrath to grace of those who died with Him.¹⁶ Having died with Christ in His death in the past, you who are Christians have been **set free from sin** (Rom 6.7). Finally, union with Christ will certainly occur in the resurrection of the body at Christ's return.¹⁷ It is crucial to understand that the resurrection of Christ and the future bodily resurrection of those who belong to Him "form the beginning and end of the same harvest."¹⁸ So, our future resurrection has already begun in the resurrection of

¹⁴ The working assumptions of this paper are that Scripture is clear in denouncing all same-sex sex as sin, and the biblical doctrine of marriage requires opposite-sex sex. As Gagnon puts it: "Every narrative, law, proverb, exhortation, metaphor, and poetry that has any thing to say about sexual relations at least implicitly presupposes a male-female requirement...it is a core value of biblical sexual ethics" ("Scriptural Perspective on Homosexuality and Sexual Identity" in *JPC*, 2005, Vol 24, No. 4, 297). In conditions subsequent to the fall, the original design that a human family be produced through marital intimacy is now altered in such a way that that design is still realized, according to God's will, though some marriages may not result in offspring (with barrenness as a reality) and some people may properly remain single (with the duty of celibacy). Regarding singleness, Hays speaks of the demythologizing of our cultural obsession with sex: we can live lives of freedom, joy, and service without sexual relations; the celibate life is commended; in Scripture sex appears as a matter of secondary importance. Granted, the sexual drive has a valuable place but it must be constrained "either through marriage or through disciplined abstinence" (Moral Vision, 390-91). Moreover, "Sexual gratification is not a sacred right, and celibacy is not a fate worse than death" (401). Thus, "The New Testament tells us the truth about ourselves as sinners and as God's sexual creatures: marriage between man and woman is the normative form for human sexual fulfillment, and homosexuality is one among many tragic signs that we are a broken people" (400). See his brief yet comprehensive treatment of the few but decisive references to homosexuality in the Bible (381-389) and his conclusion: "Though only a few biblical texts speak of homoerotic activity, all that do mention it express unqualified disapproval...The biblical witness against homosexual practices is univocal" (389).

¹⁵ Our old self was crucified with him (Rom 6.6) and if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his (Rom 6.5). Verse 5 confirms the point of v. 4: "we shall walk in newness of life for the reason that, having become identified with Christ in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection. The underlying thought is again the inseparable conjunction of Christ's death and resurrection, and the inference drawn from this conjunction is that if we are united with Christ in his death we must be also in his resurrection. Disjunction in our case is as impossible as disjunction in his" (Murray, *Romans*, I, 218).

¹⁶ For one who has died has been set free from sin (Rom 6.7).

¹⁷ For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. 23But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ (1Cor 15.22-23).

¹⁸ Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight*, 61

Christ with whom we were united *when* He died and arose from the dead. Its outworking includes our resurrection from death in sin to newness of life.

4

Therefore, in our former state without spiritual life (Rom 6:13), and unable to submit ourselves to God (Rom 8:7), we presented our very bodies in obedience to sin unto death.¹⁹ The former presentation of the members of the body as slaves to impurity is “a rubric that Paul used earlier in the letter to refer to same-sex intercourse as a prime instance of sinful sexual practices (1.24, 26-27).” Accordingly, by contrast to this former bondage, those who have been raised to newness of life (Rom 6.4) are no longer enslaved to this sin, or any other sin, because they have died with Christ in His death on the cross, were raised with Him in His ascent from the tomb, and having been raised to newness of life they have been **set free from sin** (6.7) and therefore set free from bondage to the sin of homoerotic sexual activity.

B. On the other hand, we are set free by God’s effectual call

Per Romans 8:30: all who are called will be justified and glorified.²⁰ God’s call explains the sanctification of 1 Corinthians 6.11. Early in his letter (1 Cor 1.2, 9), Paul speaks of the church as sanctified in Christ and called *to be* saints by being called *into* fellowship.²¹ According to 2 Corinthians 4, God’s call is strikingly put on a par with His command that light shine in our hearts where formerly there was only darkness and blindness.²² Before this effectual call, God was unknown to us as a stranger and alien, but by His creative command, He introduced us to Himself by calling us into fellowship, so, by the Spirit we know the glory of the gospel in the face of Christ and we confess, from the heart, that He is Lord (1 Cor 12.3).

Therefore, the break with a former sinful identity as a homosexual is not something that the former bond slave to sin did in fulfillment of an imperative. In his fallen state, it is not something that he chooses since he is unable to do anything good including the good of turning away from sin in submission to God (in the flesh we do not and cannot submit to God or His law, Rom 8.7). Rather, the break with homosexuality is something that *happened*: **And such were some of you. But...you were sanctified** (1 Cor 6.11). In context, same-sex sex is one of the sins by which some of the Corinthians were formerly identified, while others were marked and known by other sins. Conversion for them meant that they were once people who practiced same gender sex but who no longer do so.²³

¹⁹ Paul says, you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness (Rom 6.19) and the end is death (v. 21).

²⁰ “And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.” Clearly, a general call or invitation is not in view since that call is rejected by many. In view is a special call because everyone who is confronted with this call is saved by it and their glorification is certain. Thus, the Westminster Shorter Catechism gives this definition of effectual calling: “Effectual calling is the work of God’s Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel” (31). In paraphrase: God’s effectual call is His immediate and direct action overcoming our resistance and bringing us to faith and thus to the salvation that is received by faith. God’s effectual call is His making Himself known to someone and by that establishing a line of communication. When God is intent on fellowshiping with someone who does not notice Him, He will call out to that person, get his or her attention, make Himself known and thus establish conversation and fellowship.

²¹To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints (1.2) and called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord (1.9).

²²In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God...For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 4.4, 6).

²³ He says, you *were* among the unrighteous and you are not to be deceived: those who practice same-sex sex (characteristically as a way of life) will have no inheritance in the kingdom of God. Therefore, when converted, a person that practiced this sexual sin ceases to practice it; he or she is no longer known as such a person.

Consequently, a decisive break with the bondage of sin and with particular manifestations of sin (as those on the sin lists) is a work performed by the sovereignty of God in spiritual renewal. With man it may be impossible, but with God all things are possible (Lk 18.27). Accordingly, this transition is effected by God's call that makes the change from unbelief to belief, from blindness to sight, from ignorance to knowledge, from darkness to light, from alienation to fellowship, and from being a homosexual to being a saint.²⁴

III. Third: freedom for holiness

Because God sets sinners free from sin *for* righteousness, the truly free are able to grow in holiness for the glory of God as **slaves of righteousness** (Rom 6.18). However, both Scripture and experience testify to the challenges with temptation and sin that Christians face continually. Still, hope abides because sanctification is certain and deliverance from homoeroticism is sure.

First, growth in sanctification is certain for Paul says, **now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life** (Rom 6.22). Its end implies its process; being fruitful indicates progress in sanctification until the ultimate fruit of eternal life is attained. So, certainty applies not only to the redeemed sinner's ultimate attainment of perfect holiness, but also to the process of sanctification that *God will complete* according to His faithfulness: **Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely...²⁴ He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it** (1 Thess 5.23-24).²⁵

Second, because God's efficacious call causes the break with sin and produces lifelong growth in holiness, we must conclude that deliverance from the sin of same-sex sex is sure. Accordingly, what God has done, is doing and what God certainly promises to do is expressed by Paul *in the language of the indicative*, a statement of fact.²⁶ It is a fact that God has made sinners into saints or holy ones, He will continue to grow them in holiness, and He will perfect them.²⁷ At the same time we must also take note of Paul's *language of the imperative*, the giving of authoritative command. Newness of life does not remove our duty to take up God's appointed

²⁴Although possession of the Spirit of resurrection life is God's promise and guarantee of the redemption of the body for the freedom of eternal glory (Rom 8.11, 21), saints must travel from conversion to glorification over rough terrain with many pitfalls. Now able to live righteously, they are also able to sin, but this ability to sin is not essential to the newly found freedom in Christ. Their ability to sin shows that they have freedom partially and not yet fully. It is not evidence that they are free; instead, it is evidence that their freedom is incomplete. Thus the road to glory traverses a battlefield with sin. The war is real and serious on all fronts, but, as we shall see, the battle with past and deeply rooted sinful patterns may be especially challenging.

²⁵ Some parallels with "by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor 6.11b) are: He that has begun the work in you will complete it, Phil 1.9, and He is working in you to will and to do of His good pleasure, Phil 2.13b. In the language of "lust" it is a great comfort to know that the Holy Spirit lusts against the flesh, Gal 5.16-19, so that we cannot live in sin as we formerly did; what advances we make in holiness are by the sovereign working of the Spirit in spiritual renewal. The indicative is that the Spirit leads those that are not under the law and over whom the law of sin and death no longer has dominion (Gal 5 with Rom 6); therefore, our duty is to walk in the Spirit knowing the promise that we will not gratify the desires of the flesh (Gal 5.16); knowing the Spirit's lustful drive that prevents us from doing the things we want to do (Gal 5.17). Thus, in 1 Corinthians 1.7-9, Paul tells us that our Lord Jesus will faithfully sustain us to the end by the same power by which He called us into fellowship.

²⁶ We *have been restored* from carrying out the desires of the body (Eph 2.3), from practicing impurity (Eph 4.19), which includes same-sex sin (Rom 6.19; 1.24), and from corruption through deceitful desires (Eph 4.22).

²⁷ At no point along the way is this new life explained by Paul to be dependent on man in any sense. As bond slaves to sin, we were unable to submit ourselves to God, but now as those released from sin, we are on a path of new obedience that is the product of God's faithful and powerful working in us.

means.²⁸ Also, it is extremely important to note how “the imperative rests on the indicative and that this order is not reversible. For in each case [where Paul speaks of them together] the imperative follows the indicative by way of conclusion” (thus, *because* God works in you to will and do His will, therefore, work out your salvation, Phil 2.12).²⁹ 6

Final thoughts and applications (for individuals, the church and academy)

A. Individual wrestlings with sin

We may now inquire about the struggles that persons formerly in the grip of same-sex sex may have. Because of freedom by union with Christ, when converted, a person that practiced the sin of homosexuality becomes someone who *used to* practice it; he or she is no longer known as such a person.³⁰ Therefore, a Christian who was once dominated by this sin *cannot properly identify himself as such any longer*, and he has no right to say, “I cannot conquer this or any other sin; I cannot free myself from its rule; I cannot escape the temptation to live this way under its authority over me.” No free man can say, “I cannot escape the clutches of x, y, or z.”³¹

Still, the battle with past and deep-rooted sinful patterns may be extremely difficult. As Edwards states it, “Change of nature is an abiding thing: if one returns to the old and former ways, he is a dog that has returned to its vomit, a swine to its mud; washed, the swinish nature remains,” however, “a cleanly nature may be soiled *but it remains*.”³² The soiling of a washed

²⁸ This is a *process* in which we are *being restored* (Col 3.10), *being renewed* in knowledge after the image of the Creator (Col 3.5). Thus, as Ridderbos puts it, “...the new life is not to be understood as a transcendent stream of life that pours into man from the outside...and whereby there would no longer be any place for human responsibility and decision” in *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* by H. Ridderbos (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 253.

²⁹ *Outline*, Ridderbos, 254-55. See also, Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, 241-259 where he gives perspective on the indicative and imperative in the teaching of Jesus: “Jesus not only posits the doing of God’s will as a condition and a preparation for entry into the kingdom, but also preaches it as a gift belonging to the salvation of the kingdom proclaimed by him” (246). So, “It is the salvation of the Lord for his people that *he makes them different human beings and writes his commandments in their hearts*, and, because of this, obedience to God’s will can be effectively asked” (247, italics mine). Thus, Edwards can say, “The transformation continues to the end of life, until it is brought to perfection in glory,” *Religious Affections*, 3.7, 270.

³⁰ Thus, all those who are on the sin lists are people marked in their bondage to sin by the grip of some particular sin. They are slaves to sin generally and to some particular sin in which they found themselves utterly helpless. Granted, this needs to be qualified in some way because persons in slavery to sin may exchange the dominant practice of one sin for another without being washed, sanctified, and justified. In 1 Cor 6, persons in the grip of sin, practiced some particular sin, and their release from the bondage of sin gave them release from the bondage of that particular sin. To be reformed by the substitution of one sin for another, say by giving up adultery due to social pressures, but taking up pornography, involves a cessation of overt and identifiable adultery. Thus, being in the grip of sin does not necessarily mean that it is impossible for a drunkard, for example, to be rehabilitated without saving grace. Of course, such rehabilitation is difficult. Thus, it is conceivable that those who practice same-sex sex may reach a point in life when they cease that practice. They may or may not experience a change in their desire for same-sex sex (they may or may not continue to practice it in their minds), but if they abandon homosexuality, they can no longer be identified by other human beings as people guilty of same-sex sin. It is possible, though much experience testifies otherwise, that the exchange of one sin for another may affect even the orientation toward same-sex sex. This does not mean that they have escaped the bondage of sin; it means that sin has taken another form in the rule of their lives, whatever that form may be. Thus, the direction of the Cor text is that persons who were x, y, or z are no longer such in their practice and habit of life because they have been washed, sanctified, and justified. Something happened (an indicative) so that they are no longer characterized in their bondage in sin by some particular sin. What happened is not something they did but something that happened to them. They were set free from sin by being washed, sanctified, and justified. This put them on the path of freedom and holiness.

³¹...the cross marks the end of the old life under the power of sin (Rom 6.1-4). Therefore, no one in Christ is locked into the past or into a psychological or biological determinism (*Moral Vision*, Hays, 393). Also, God promises the way of escape from every temptation, 1 Cor 10.13.

³² *Religious Affections*, 3.7, 268 (italics mine).

nature means that although the war is won, many battles may be lost along the way. In this regard, Edwards makes the following empathetic comment, “Allowances must be made for the natural temper, which conversion does not entirely eradicate: those sins which a man by his natural constitution was most inclined to before his conversion, he may be most apt to fall into still.”³³ Edwards then makes an important counterbalancing observation: “But yet conversion will make a great alteration even with respect to these sins” and the alteration takes the form of enmity: “he may be still in most danger of these sins, yet they shall no longer have dominance over him, nor will they any more be properly his character...*repentance does in some respects especially turn a man against his own iniquity*, that wherein he has been most guilty and has chiefly dishonored God.”³⁴ So, conversion involves “Turning from sin to God, not just restrained from sin but turned unto holiness and now an enemy to sin, as he was formerly an enemy to God.”³⁵ To be sure, being “against his own iniquity” does not remove all temptation and sin, but it does draw a deep line in the sand for the spiritual battle that he *must* engage.³⁶

B. The part the church is to play

A vital side of battling spiritually is the part that the church is to play as a community of brothers and sisters because, as Hays puts it, “The biblical strictures against homosexual behavior are concerned not just for the private morality of individuals but for the health, wholeness, and purity of the elect community.”³⁷ This perspective is clear in 1 Corinthians 5.9-11, which presents the church with no small challenge for practical application: **I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people...now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler--not even to eat with such a one** and 5.13, **Purge the evil person from among you.**

Purging is necessary, applicable to homosexuality, and difficult

The challenge here is striking in the contemporary context of our culture’s obsession with sex and the prevailing pressures of that culture to squeeze the church into its mold. Notably, the apostle exhorts the church to maintain its corporate purity by casting out the leaven that contaminates the entire lump (5.6-7). Paul’s major concern is with the sexual sin of incest (5.1), which has its definition in the Holiness Code of Leviticus 18.³⁸ Therefore, the precise disciplinary words of Moses to Israel (Deut 22.21, **So you shall purge the evil from your midst**) are addressed by Paul to the Corinthians as the new Israel (1 Cor 5.13, **Purge the evil person from**

³³ *Affections*, 268; consider how relevant this is to us all! Cf. *Reformed Presbyterian Testimony*, 19-20.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 269

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 267

³⁶ Again, this is simply the reality of the imperative that rests on the indicative. What God has done and will certainly do is the ground on which the necessary duties of the Christian life rest. Pointedly, it is precisely because the saint will persevere that he must do so. The perseverance of the saint is both an essential duty and a certain promise. Foundationally, the saint does battle by arming himself with the helmet of salvation and the sword of the gospel. Thus, He has a new self-understanding and must count himself to be free from sin (Rom 6.11, “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus”) embracing the promises that sin no longer has rule over him (Rom 6.14. “sin will have no dominion over you”) and that every temptation has a way of escape (1 Cor 10.13). He must also embrace the Father’s corrective discipline that will keep him on the path of righteousness regarding the degree of progress each of His children shall make for their good and His glory according to the will of God.

³⁷ *Moral Vision*, 391.

³⁸ See J. Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, 49-55.

among you).³⁹ Moreover, the sexual immorality in view in Paul's imperatives of disciplinary purging (5.13) and dissociation (5.11) includes same-sex sex because a) the list in 6.9-11 where homosexuality is specifically cited is simply a parallel expansion of the list here in 5.9-11 (both lists are selective and representative; all sexual sins along with all other types of sin are in view representatively) and b) chapter five is deeply imbedded in Leviticus 18 where incest gets the most attention, but where same gender sexuality is *explicitly condemned* as defilement of the family of God (18.24-26). We cannot avoid the conclusion that the commands to purge and dissociate from any brother that is a sexually immoral person extend by implication to those who claim the name of Christ but who practice same-gender sex.⁴⁰

This demand is clear but perplexing.⁴¹ Emotionally, it is difficult to apply the text given that the number of people within the church coming out of the closet steadily increases, and given the strong claims of the culture that Christians who identify same gender sex as sin are guilty of homophobia.⁴² Nevertheless, the text is plain in its insistence that the sacred community has moral responsibility for the conduct of its membership, and that the sinful conduct of the individual members, even if loving and between "consenting adults" negatively affects the entire community. Corporate responsibility has its roots in the stipulations of the Holiness Code where those who commit various sexual sins are to be "cut off" from the people or the land will vomit out the people of Israel *as a whole* (Lev 18.24-30; 20.22-24). Similarly, purging out the old

³⁹ So Hays, *First Corinthians Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: WJK, 2011), "Drive out the evil person from among you," is presented as a word spoken directly to the Corinthians. There is no appeal here to analogy ("Just as God told Israel to drive out the evil person, so you should do the same"); rather, Paul in effect addresses the Gentile Corinthians as Israel. God's word to Israel has become God's word directly to them. The scriptural command with which Paul closes the chapter culminates his treatment of the incest problem and discloses the fundamental theological basis for his directions to the Corinthians. Sinful behavior of this sort cannot be allowed to corrupt God's elect covenant community, 88.

⁴⁰ Of course, the church must know that someone within the body is practicing such sin. In the current climate, many who practice same-sex sex intentionally, and quite vocally, make their conduct known claiming that their form of the practice is not sinful. Those who practice premarital sex do not typically make such public claims in the context of the church, even though it is acceptable behavior in the public domain between consenting adults. The "secular" drive for acceptance of all "consenting" forms of homosexuality influences people in the church to vie for acceptance, especially those who seek acceptance not of all consenting forms of homosexuality but of loving and monogamous forms without promiscuity, even though homosexuality is typically polysexual. Given that the condemnation of all forms of same-sex sex is univocal in Scripture and exists explicitly side by side with the condemnation of incest in both Leviticus 18 and 1 Corinthians 5-6, the church has the obligation to exercise tough love with moral courage and purge out the corrupt leaven from her midst. To be sure, the ultimate goal of such toughness is repentance and restoration; it is the exercise of tough *love*.

⁴¹ Surprisingly (or should we not be surprised), individual commentators such as Richard B. Hays omit explicit reference to the application of 1 Cor 5.9-11 to homosexuals (in both his book *Moral Vision* and in his *Commentary on 1 Cor*). Similarly, the *Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America on the Gospel and Sexual Orientation* (Crown and Covenant, 2012) omits reference to 1 Cor 5.9-11 in its otherwise quite complete treatment of all the relevant passages on homosexual behavior. Both Hays and the RPC study defend same gender sex as sinful and both do so with fairness and empathy. Perhaps, they err where error best occurs, namely, on the side of empathy and compassion. However, in his commentary on 1 Cor, what Hays says regarding the sexual immoral applies to the homosexually immoral. Therefore, in much of what I have yet to say in this paper I take from Hays' commentary (82-92), but I paraphrase and orient it to homosexuality. I do this because homosexuality is my present subject. The same could be done *mutatis mutandis* with any other sin on the lists in Corinthians.

⁴² According to an article in the Detroit News (Feb 9, 2013), 62 percent of young people between the ages of 18 and 29 support gay marriage and 69 percent agree that religious groups are alienating young people by being too judgmental about gay and lesbian issues. This affects church leaders regarding how they approach these issues causing some to embrace a new ethical theology that welcomes practicing homosexuals or at least to work hard at finding better ways to love the sons and daughters of the church that come out of the closet. Justin Lee, the founder of Gay Christian Network, is a child of the church. In this article, he suggests that the more you listen to people and ask about their lives and stories, the more you are able to show grace and love, even if you do not agree with their conduct. This is a worthwhile suggestion to which the purging and dissociating requirements of 1 Corinthians 5 must be integrated with loving wisdom. That must be case specific and nuanced.

leaven with its corrupting influence does not tell individuals to clean up their lives. Rather, it tells the church to purify itself by expelling the offender (a little leaven leavens *the whole lump* of dough, so clean out the old that you may be *a new lump*, 5.6b-7). Thus, the example of incest opens the door to the larger theme of sexual immorality including same gender sex. Purging and dissociating of those who practice homosexuality (and any of the sins listed) is necessary for community discipline and purity because as Hays puts it, “we have within the church people claiming that their newly attained enlightenment or wisdom sets them free *precisely as Christians* to disregard the teachings of Scripture and tradition on moral issues...they boast in their liberated transgression of what they regard as outmoded norms.”⁴³ In response, Paul says to us what he says to the Corinthians: we should mourn (5.2).⁴⁴

Purging is practical

Therefore, purging the evil doer out of the church takes the practical form of *not even eating with such a one* (5.11). Table fellowship with professing Christians living immoral lives, blurs the identity of the church as God’s holy family. God will judge outsiders, but the apostle tells us that it is the church’s responsibility to exercise discipline over its own members (5.12-13).⁴⁵ At the least, exclusion from local church membership is clearly implied.⁴⁶ Thus, discipline calls the church to challenge the individualism of Western culture with its “I’m okay, your okay” principle of enlightened tolerance. The church’s failure to discipline in the name of tolerance can therefore be euphemistic for indifference and lack of moral courage.⁴⁷

Removing and excluding from church membership are inescapable implications but not to the neglect of a process to communicate the grounds of such censure. This call may be conveyed in a nuanced way with firm trust in the sovereignty of the Spirit in spiritual renewal by patiently instructing those who oppose the truth waiting on God to give them repentance by His efficacious call (2 Tim 2.24-25).

Purging is important

Of course, the goal of church self-discipline is repentance, but that goal is sacrificed when there is no clear public confrontation, purging, and dissociation.⁴⁸ Thus, Hays says, “We delude ourselves when we think that the caring thing to do is to be infinitely nonjudgmental and

⁴³ *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* by Richard Hays, 92 (italics mine).

⁴⁴ In this context, the holiness of the church regarding the sexual sins of incest, homosexuality, adultery, and so forth is a matter of its internal discipline and integrity for Paul speaks of anyone who bears the name of brother (5.11). To avoid all contact with the sexual immoral, you would need to go out of the world (5.10). Hence, Paul’s concern is with those who bear the name of a brother or sister and who practice various sins including the sin of homosexuality. The immoral conduct brings discredit to the family of holy ones.

⁴⁵By closing the chapter with the call to purge out the evil one, Paul is clear that the sinful sexual behavior of incest, and by clear implication homosexuality cannot be allowed to corrupt God’s elect covenant community. The church is a holy nation and therefore the members have a call to take active loving responsibility for each other.

⁴⁶ Of course, persons who practice adultery, homosexuality, etc. ought not to partake at the communion table.

⁴⁷Furthermore, we should consider if 2 Thess 3.14-15 helps us balance ourselves in the practice of dissociation: If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother. It seems that we may literally eat with professing Christians who practice sexual immorality, while having nothing to do with them except to warmly warn them (in a brotherly way) by calling for their repentance. This suggests that in 1 Corinthians, the point of not associating is that we are to avoid fellowship at the meal table, but we can meet with them to warn them seeking their good.

⁴⁸ Each individual member needs the mutual exhortation of one anothering love to overcome the deceitfulness of sin generally (Heb 3.12-14) and the deceitfulness of sexual sin specifically (Eph 3.22; 1 Cor 6.9).

inclusive. This is quite simply a demonic lie that allows terrible cancerous abuses to grow unchecked in the church. We should know that a little cancer corrupts the whole body, so, surgery is necessary. We must cut out the cancer so that the body may be healthy and whole.⁴⁹ To do this, the church needs bold wisdom from above.⁵⁰

10

C. A word for the academy

Finally, a word is needed regarding Christian higher education. Purging and dissociation are disciplinary measures of the church not the academy. So, on one hand, the principles of 1 Corinthians 5-6 must be applied judiciously in Christian institutions. On the other hand, Christian education ought to be marked by academic freedom without discouraging debate among students or between students and outsiders, even those outside the institution claiming to be Christian homosexuals. Surely, a code of campus ethics serves good order for institutions aiming to develop holy character as well as healthy minds. Even more surely, strong principles of academic freedom such as open-minded humility, critical thinking, question with counterquestion, and meaningful contact with “living” opponents are the servants of truth that promote godly wisdom.⁵¹ Significantly, this perspective on academic freedom reflects a philosophy of education that springs from belief in the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit in sanctification.

Therefore, the sin of same-sex sex may be deeply rooted but it is overcome efficaciously by the power of God’s gracious call. Our confidence, then, is in God no matter where it is that we must fight the battle with sin as individuals, institutions, and as the body of Christ called to be saints.

⁴⁹ *1 Corinthians*, Hays, 90.

⁵⁰ Much wisdom is necessary when the rubber meets the road in the fellowship of the saints. No one knows the heart and censoriousness is as unjust as it is unloving. Here, we might wonder when it is appropriate to inform the church so it can purge and dissociate with obedience to God and love for the neighbor. Same-sex sin may be practiced in mind or body (the mind affecting the body and the body involving the mind), but the church does not see the mind and people who side with inclusivism may be confused, even deceived, without being properly identified as homosexuals. The church must bend over backwards in charity to act in discipline only when the identity of being homosexual is clearly known. Then, the evil one must be purged out from the church.

⁵¹ For “A Christian Philosophy of Logic” that includes open-minded humility, presuppositional awareness, acceptance of paradox, and so forth, see *Journal of Biblical Apologetics*, Vol 11, Number 1, Spring, 2008 by Richard Ostella, 23-47.