

# The Bible and Sexual Boundaries

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One of the most intensely disputed issues among contemporary Christians concerns the moral boundaries for sexual relations. The traditional norm of the church is that genital sexual relations have their proper place within marriage, that a husband and wife are to be faithful to each other, and that outside marriage abstinence is expected. The relationship between moral norm and pastoral practice is complex, and Christians have often fallen short of the ideal. Rather than altering the standard, however, the church has ordinarily urged people to repent, to receive forgiveness for their sins, and to amend their lives. Current debates over sexual expression gain special intensity because they concern not only the application of the norm to specific cases, but involve arguments that the norm itself should be changed, so that committed relationships between persons of the same sex would be deemed analogous to heterosexual marriage. Norms do not in themselves answer each of the questions arising in the church's life, but they do establish a framework in which particular questions should be considered. Because the biblical and theological bases undergirding the church's understanding of marriage in relation to other forms of sexual expression are not always clearly stated in contemporary deliberations, these will be the focus of our work here.

In formal terms, a definition of marriage must consider both the number and the gender of the partners involved. (a) Historically, disputes have usually revolved around the question of number, that is, whether a marriage can include more than two people. In North America, for example, a significant challenge was posed by the Mormons, who instituted polygamy in the mid-nineteenth century, evoking widespread opposition from the churches.<sup>1</sup> In some parts of Africa, polygamy has long been a common cultural practice, and the conversion of polygamous families to Christianity has generated complex pastoral problems. Nevertheless, African churches have maintained monogamy as the norm. (b) The question of changing the church's traditional stance on the gender of the marriage partners has recently been raised in North America and in parts of western Europe where political advocacy for gay rights has been strongest. Various church bodies have debated proposals that committed homosexual relationships be accepted or blessed, though few churches officially sanction gay and lesbian relationships.

## Law and Gospel

Lutherans recognize that the Scriptures are the norm according to which all doctrines must be judged,<sup>2</sup> and that interpreters of Scripture must rightly distinguish law and gospel. Issues of boundaries for sexual behavior have to do with the first use of the law, which establishes and maintains structures for community life.<sup>3</sup> Boundaries and social structures do not secure salvation; only the saving power of the gospel of Jesus Christ can do that. And these boundaries do not present requirements that people must meet before they can receive God's grace; Christ died precisely for fallen human beings. God redeems people from sin by the gospel, he restrains sin through the law in its first use, and brings about repentance from sin through the law in its second use.<sup>4</sup> We must keep in mind that the law functions for the sake of the gospel and recognize that the law performs its work effectively when it is not collapsed into gospel.

Discussion of sexual boundaries is skewed when law and gospel are equated with condemnation and acceptance. This can leave the mistaken impression that we have two options: either to condemn people and what they do, or to accept people and what they do. Yet reducing the gospel to the notion of acceptance obscures its saving and transforming power, the power of the God who found human bondage to sin unacceptable, and who sent his Son to free women and men from its grasp. Moreover, construing law only as condemnation overlooks its role in establishing structures necessary for community life. Faith in the gospel brings freedom, but it does not immunize Christians against sin and its effects. Christian life is lived where the power of God battles with the power of sin, at the point where the gospel brings liberation and sin seeks to re-enslave. The weak in our communities need protection against the strong, and everyone needs protection against the effects of their own sin and the sins of others. Since sin remains a force to be reckoned with, we need the law to bring about restraint as well as repentance, and community life requires structures and boundaries for its life and well-being.

The role of the Bible in the church's deliberations over the boundaries for sexual expression has been a topic of debate in itself. This is especially evident in treatments of homosexual relations. Some invoke passages from Leviticus and Paul's letters to show that sexual unions between people of the same sex fall outside the moral boundaries, and others insist that these texts are irrelevant to contemporary discussions. Exegetical questions surrounding these and other passages have been repeatedly discussed at length; what we will do here is consider the question of sexual boundaries within Scripture more broadly, before returning to proposals that the boundaries be changed.

## The Scriptures

One of the most significant factors in our interpretation of biblical statements concerning sexual expression is the value given to the creation accounts in Genesis 1-2.<sup>5</sup> These texts are basic to a biblical understanding of human life and are cited in discussions of sexuality in the gospels and Paul's letters. The first chapter of Genesis says that God created human beings male and female. The text conveys a sense of equality between the sexes; the differences between the sexes are part of the created order and are good,

and sexual relations between women and men are assumed in God's mandate to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:27-28). The second chapter of Genesis goes further, observing that it was not good for the man to be alone and that God created the woman to be a companion for him. Sexual relations are set within this bond of companionship: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed" (Gen. 2:24-25). According to these passages, marriage is a form of relationship that had its origin "in the garden"; it is uniquely identified with God's purposes for human beings.

The legal materials in the Old Testament established boundaries for life as actually lived "outside the garden."<sup>6</sup> These statutes are consistent with the creation accounts in that they assume that sexual relations within marriage are morally acceptable, and that those outside of marriage are not. The most familiar word is the commandment "You shall not commit adultery," which is part of the Decalogue (Exod.20:14; Deut. 5:18). The commandment "you shall not covet your neighbor's wife" places a restraint upon the inner disposition that lies behind the act of adultery itself (Exod. 20:17; Deut. 5:21). Other statutes in the Pentateuch are designed to curb other types of sexual relations outside of marriage. There are passages dealing with sexual relations between unmarried people (Exod. 22:16), between members of the same family (Lev. 18:6-18), between persons of the same sex (Lev. 18:22), between people and animals (Lev. 18:23), and with the practice of prostitution (Lev. 19:29).

Interpretation of these texts is complex because Christians generally recognize that the laws in the Pentateuch cannot be translated directly into contemporary Christian standards. Laws governing sexual behavior appear alongside regulations which Christians do not observe, such as those concerning kosher slaughter, the offering of sacrifices, cattle breeding, and planting with mixed seeds (Lev.17 and 19). Moreover, the penalty for adultery and many other sexual sins is death (Lev. 21:10-16), a punishment that is not followed by any church of which I am aware. Because of the issues of consistency, many rightly object that these statutes cannot be used as proof texts to oppose homosexual relations. At the same time, however, these passages cannot easily be dismissed. Christians may reject the use of the death penalty for sexual infidelity but that does not mean that they should endorse adultery, incest, or the other types of sexual relations mentioned here. Moreover, the commandment sometimes invoked to support greater acceptance of homosexual relations is "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" which is found in precisely this section of the Pentateuch (Lev. 19:18) and is widely regarded as a standard for Christian life.<sup>2</sup>

An alternative to quoting these passages uncritically or to dismissing them facilely is to consider what they tell us about the human condition. The laws in the Pentateuch remind us that there are people who may be sexually attracted to persons other than their spouses, to members of their own families, to persons of the same sex, and even to animals. If the Old Testament makes clear that sexuality is given by God, it also makes clear that some forms of sexual behavior are out of bounds. No one's sexuality is immune from sin, which means that not all forms of sexual attraction should lead to sexual expression. The prohibition against incest helps make the family a safe place where parents and children, sisters and brothers, can trust each other. Similarly, the prohibition against adultery helps nurture trust within marriages. Christians have not taken the Levitical code as a pattern for community life, yet the presence of this code in our Scriptures confronts us with the challenge to maintain responsible boundaries, taking into account the full range of forms for sexual relations noted in the Pentateuch.

Turning to the New Testament, we find that Jesus spoke of sexual expression in terms of marriage, which he understood to be rooted in God's ordering of the creation. When questioned, Jesus insisted that marriage and divorce be seen in light of the creation passages. He said, "Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?'" (Matt. 19:4-5; cf. Mark 10:6-7; Gen. 1:27; 2:24). Marriage was part of God's design for men and women in a way that divorce was not. Jesus said, "For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so" (Matt. 19:8). God created men and women for relationship, and the breaking down of that relationship is the product of human sin. This text does not rule out divorce altogether, but it does indicate that divorce is at best a tragic option in a broken world. Jesus' statements do not single out divorced persons for special condemnation, nor do they identify divorce as an unforgivable sin. But with an unsettling directness Jesus does focus attention on the human conditions that produce marital breakdown. Christians cannot regard divorce as essentially a legal dissolution of a relationship, but as a matter that involves self-examination, confession, absolution, and amendment of life.

When we compare Jesus' statements concerning divorce and remarriage with the Old Testament we find that, if anything, he advocated greater restraint rather than greater latitude in matters of sexual expression. Those who questioned Jesus pointed out the Mosaic stipulation that a man had to give his wife a certificate when he divorced her (Deut. 2-4:1-4). This statute gave the woman some legal protection, since the certificate allowed her to marry again without being charged with committing adultery against her former husband. In a similar way, Jesus' statements help to protect women, since in Jewish circles divorce was the husband's prerogative, and divorcing a wife could be tantamount to abandoning her. His rigorous stance concerning divorce held men to their marital responsibilities. According to Matthew 19:9, Jesus did not rule out remarriage altogether, but he made an uncomfortably small provision for it, saying that whoever divorced his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and married another, committed adultery.

Alongside this understanding of marriage, Jesus gave a greater place to intentional abstinence than we find in the Old Testament. In an interchange with the disciples, who had reacted to Jesus' demanding stance toward divorce and remarriage, Jesus spoke favorably of those who were "eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:12). He observed that some "eunuchs" could not engage in sexual relations because of birth defects or castration, but there were some who were voluntarily celibate in order to carry out service on behalf of God's kingdom. Although marriage was normally expected of Jewish people, Jesus here acknowledged the value of a single life that includes abstinence, without making celibacy the norm for Christians.<sup>3</sup> The church in subsequent centuries moved toward an increasingly ascetic understanding of Christian life, so that many began to consider celibacy superior to marriage and to denigrate the body. Although such an ascetic emphasis certainly distorts the teaching of Jesus (see Matt. 11:18-19), it does recognize the rigor apparent in his statements about sexual expression.

The Gospels do not tell us what Jesus said about most other forms of sexual expression, but it is useful to consider the range of issues addressed by the Old Testament legislation in light of what Jesus did say. Adultery is mentioned a few times in passages other than those noted above, making it clear that Jesus did not condone it even though he did not discuss it at length.<sup>2</sup> Incest is not treated at all in the Gospels, but this silence does not suggest that Jesus considered sexual relations among family members to be morally acceptable. He did expect that a man would "leave his father and mother" to be joined to his wife, which is consistent with the idea that sexual activity should take place outside close kinship circles. There is also a silence about the prospect of sexual relations between human beings and animals, something that was proscribed by the Old Testament. Jesus' emphasis on God's

creation of humankind as male and female, however, suggests that human beings should select sexual partners from their own species.

Perhaps a more significant test case concerns the shape of marriage itself. First there is the question of number. The Mosaic law did not prohibit polygamy, and the Old Testament relates that marriages sometimes included more than two partners: Abraham had a wife, Sarah, and a concubine, Hagar; Jacob married Leah and Rachel (Gen. 29:21-30); David married Abigail, Ahinoam, and others (1 Sam. 25:43-44; 2 Sam. 5:13); and Solomon was said to have had seven hundred wives (1 Kings 11:3). Jesus did not specifically address the question of polygamy; but his insistence that God provided that "two" human beings might become one, and his comments that even remarriage following a legal divorce could constitute adultery, give little reason to think that multiple marriage partners would be acceptable. Second, there is the question of gender. The Old Testament ruled out sexual activity between persons of the same sex; Jesus did not address the matter. Yet the rigor of Jesus' statements on other matters of sexual expression and his emphasis that God created people male and female give little reason to think that he would have affirmed sexual unions between persons of the same sex.

Jesus' statements on matters of sexual expression set some of the most stringent standards in the Scriptures. Interpreters do well to acknowledge that, while considering how his norms relate to his actual dealings with people, Jesus exhibited an astonishing freedom to associate with sinners of all sorts without legitimating behavior of all sorts. His calls to repentance were coupled with acts of mercy (Mark 2:15-17; Luke 5:30-32). He associated with a prostitute and defended an adulteress, without thereby legitimating prostitution and adultery. Infidelity remained a sin, but one that could be dealt with through receipt of forgiveness and amendment of life (Luke 7:37, 47; John 8:11).

Many of the most vigorously discussed passages concerning sexual matters are in Paul's letters. Like other biblical writers, Paul understood marriage to be the proper context for sexual relations, and when discussing matters of sexuality he made explicit reference to the biblical creation accounts and to Jesus' teachings (1 Cor. 6:16; 7:10-11; cf. Rom. 1:20, 25). We begin with 1 Corinthians, where Paul made statements about marriage that were egalitarian to the point of monotony. He said, "each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give his wife her conjugal rights and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does" (1 Cor. 7:2-4). He acknowledged that those who are married should not feel they must abstain, except for periods of time mutually agreed upon (7:5). Concerning sexual activity among single people, Paul affirms the value of intentional abstinence, as Jesus had done, and advised the unmarried and widows to remain single; if they did not feel this was possible, they should marry (7:8-9, 36). He addressed the question of divorce by quoting what Jesus had said (7:10-11), encouraging people to remain even in marriages with non-Christians, but acknowledging that divorce was possible in some cases (7:12-16).

Paul's negative judgments on other forms of sexual relations are the corollary to his views on marriage. When addressing the Corinthians, he emphasized that Jesus Christ brings people freedom **from** sin, not freedom **for** sin. Two passages are especially significant since they deal with questions of voluntary sexual relations outside of marriage. One issue was that some of the Corinthian men sought sexual satisfaction through prostitutes. Their rationale was apparently that they were free from the law, and that their sexual behavior was analogous to eating, which also satisfied a physical appetite (1 Cor. 6:12-13). Paul reaffirmed Christian freedom, but insisted that the body "is not meant for immorality, but for the Lord" (6:13). The death of Christ and working of the Spirit brought them into a relationship with God that was as intimate as a marriage bond, and those who engaged in immoral behavior were violating this relationship.<sup>10</sup> The second problem was that one man in the congregation had established a sexual relationship (*porneia*) with his stepmother, a type of incestuous relationship considered immoral by Jews and pagans alike.<sup>11</sup> The Corinthian congregation at least tolerated the practice and Paul says they were actually arrogant about it, which suggests that they may have viewed it as another instance of freedom from the law (5:1-2). Paul insisted that the Corinthians take disciplinary action for the sake of the congregation's own well-being and in hope that the man himself might eventually be saved. In this same section Paul uses one and perhaps two expressions for homosexual relations. The word *arsenokoitēs*, translated as "sodomites" in the NRSV (6:9; cf. 1 Tim. 1:10), is a compound word that brings together the two words used in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 for homosexual relations: *arsen* ("male") and *koitē* ("bed"). The compound word is not attested before Paul's time and it could have been a new coinage on his part, since coining new compounds from familiar roots was a common rhetorical practice.<sup>12</sup> The more ambiguous term is *malakos*, which literally means "soft." The NRSV translates it "male prostitutes," since other sources from this period sometimes used the term for a man who assumed an effeminate role in a homosexual relationship, and the connection with *arsenokoitēs* suggests that it may be used in that way here.<sup>13</sup> In Romans 1:26-27, Paul's comments on homosexual relations include those between women as well as those between men. Paul identified same-sex relations as behavior "contrary to nature," echoing a judgment on homosexual relations that was shared by many in the Greco-Roman world.<sup>14</sup> Two aspects of this passage concern us here; others will be considered later. First, Paul's comments on homosexual relations are congruent with a biblical theology of creation. Paul began his letter to the Romans by explicitly correlating his message with the Old Testament scriptures (1:1-6, 16-17), and he spoke of the human condition in terms of the relationship between the Creator (*ktisas*) and the creation (*ktisis* 1:20, 25), using language that recalls the creation accounts in Genesis, where God created people male and female.<sup>15</sup> Paul mentioned homosexual relations at this point in the letter because for many readers it would have been a vivid illustration of humanity's broken relationship with the Creator. His statements do not finally depend on the notion - now often disputed - that homosexual relations are more lustful than heterosexual ones. Paul's comments reflect a scriptural understanding of who God created people to be as male and female. Second, Paul did not single out homosexual behavior for special condemnation, but extended his argument to proclaim a judgment on all humanity. By including covetousness, malice, envy, and other common forms of sin in his list, Paul showed that all are "without excuse" before God (2:1).<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, those who accept Paul's judgments on homosexual relations must be prepared for the judgments that fall on other sins as well.

At this point we should summarize what we have said concerning the biblical material, then consider the implications for current church discussions. The opening chapters of Genesis say that God created people male and female, and provided that the marriage relationship be one of companionship in which sexual relations have a proper place. Heterosexual marriage is the only form of sexual relationship identified in this way. The Scriptures recognize that people are subject to a wide range of sexual attractions and that not all of these forms of attraction should issue into behavior. Appropriate boundaries are basic to maintaining community life, and heterosexual marriage is understood to be the boundary for genital sexual relations in both Old and New Testaments. Marriage

practices did not remain static, but the tendency reflected in the biblical writings is to advocate greater restraint rather than greater latitude: the polygamy which was practiced by some of Israel's ancestors eventually give way to monogamy, with Jesus and Paul stressing that marriage consists of two people becoming one, each man with his own wife and each woman with her own husband (Matt. 19:5; 1 Cor. 7:2). Jesus took an uncomfortably rigorous stance on marriage and divorce, and ascribed new dignity to abstinence.

## Questions of Changing Norms

The question of changing the boundary for sexual relations is essentially a question of changing the church's understanding of marriage. Proposals for change in the North American context are generally selective, focusing only on the question of the gender of the partners. The consistency of the biblical understanding of marriage as a relationship between a man and a woman have rightly made most church bodies resist making this change, but a number of issues have been raised in the discussion that need to be addressed biblically and theologically.

First, there are questions about the relevance of the biblical material. Some have argued that "Biblical judgments against homosexuality are not relevant to today's debate" because they do "not address the issues involved."<sup>17</sup> According to this view, Scripture specifically condemned demeaning types of same-sex behavior, such as male prostitution, but can tell us nothing about committed relationships between partners of the same sex. For example, one can make a case that 1 Corinthians 6:9 was written about the Greek practice of pederasty, in which an older man took a younger man or boy as a sexual partner, creating a relationship that may have endured over a period of time but usually lacked mutuality. Since current proposals seek the church's endorsement only for relationships of mutual commitment, some would say the Pauline material is irrelevant. We do well, however, to recall that the Old and New Testaments were composed over a long period of time in widely differing cultural contexts: pederasty was common in the Greco-Roman world of Paul's time, but it was not so in the Semitic culture in which Leviticus was written centuries earlier. The view that marriage was to be heterosexual was maintained in Israel despite the passage of time and dramatic cultural shifts. Moreover, if Paul had wished specifically to condemn pederasty he could have done so clearly. Instead of using the standard vocabulary for pederasty, however, he spoke in language reminiscent of the biblical tradition (1 Cor. 6:9) and extended the scope of his comments to include sexual relations between women as well as men (Rom. 1:26-27), something that was not part of pederastic practice.<sup>18</sup> Paul's objections to same-sex relations cannot be confined to the abusive features of pederasty; they must be read in light of the biblical view that God created people male and female, and that marriage was a bond between a person of each sex.

Second, there are questions about the relationship of contemporary understandings of sexual orientation to the biblical materials. Many people today understand homosexuality to be an orientation that is a given part of a person's makeup rather than a personal choice. Some also maintain that it is as natural as heterosexual orientation, and that homosexual relationships should therefore be considered analogous to heterosexual ones. Those who argue that sexual orientation provides grounds for endorsing sexual relations between partners of the same sex frequently take issue with Romans 1:26-27, first because Paul says homosexual relations are said to be "contrary to nature" rather than natural, and second because Paul says that same-sex relations occur when people "exchange" the natural for the unnatural, which suggests homosexuality is a choice rather than a given. Debates about these issues frequently turn to the scientific community, which itself remains uncertain about the origins of homosexual orientation: some think that it is biologically determined and others emphasize the role of social factors in shaping sexual orientation. What we must do here, however, is to consider the theological aspects of the question.

Theologically, Lutherans have long recognized that people are subject to a wide range of inclinations which they have not freely chosen and which they may experience as natural, but which they are obliged to control. The other items Paul mentions alongside homosexual relations - covetousness, malice, envy, and so forth (Rom. 1:29) - manifest persistent tendencies in the heart which are "natural" in the sense that people everywhere experience them, even though they have not chosen to do so. Paul included homosexual relations in his description of the human condition since these actions were viewed negatively by Jews and many others in the Greco-Roman world; but he casts his net broadly enough to show that all sin and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). Because sin affects everyone, we cannot say that those who have a proclivity to do something therefore ought to do it, even if it would seem natural to do it.

The implications of this become clearer when we consider the spectrum of sexual orientations. Heterosexuals may be persistently attracted to more than one person. This type of attraction is not something that many people choose to feel and it is in many respects natural, so that in some cultures people are allowed to form committed relationships with two or more partners. Yet Christians have traditionally insisted that monogamy is the norm even for those who would not consider themselves monogamous by nature. Bisexuals, who are statistically more numerous than people with an exclusively homosexual orientation, are attracted to people of both sexes and may find it natural to form committed relationships with a partner from each sex. Monogamy of any sort means that bisexuals must suppress an integral part of their sexual identity, yet the church has no biblical or theological warrant for accommodating multiple mixed-sex partnerships among those who might consider these to be a natural means of sexual expression.

Third, some would argue that morally acceptable sexual relationships should be defined by love and commitment rather than form, which would allow the church to endorse both heterosexual and homosexual unions that were loving and committed, while maintaining a strong stand against promiscuous and abusive behavior. In response, it is clear that love and commitment are basic to healthy sexual relationships, but it is also clear that communities inevitably must maintain additional standards regarding the form of these relationships. Even those who endorse committed same-sex relationships generally assume that other formal criteria would remain in place. For example, those who wish to change the requirement that marriage partners be of opposite sexes, so that persons of the same sex could form a committed sexual relationship, usually assume that the number of persons in the relationship would be formally limited to two, as in monogamous marriage. Given only the requirement of love and commitment,

however, there is no clear reason why multiple partnerships would not also be acceptable. Another formal requirement, which is universally assumed, is that sexual partners must be taken from outside one's immediate family. The kinship boundary was tested by a Corinthian man and his stepmother (1 Cor. 5:1-2) who entered into a heterosexual and apparently monogamous relationship. Paul censured the couple not for a lack of love and commitment, but for violating kinship boundaries. The criteria of love and commitment are valuable but cannot be used without consideration of the basic formal structures of the relationship. Theologian Robert Benne rightly observed that the Jewish and Christian traditions have insisted that "there is form to the creation" and that men and women are meant to complement each other. Accordingly, moral sexual relations are set within heterosexual marriage.<sup>19</sup> Although discussions of sexual boundaries frequently concern the validity of the Bible's negative judgments on certain types of behavior, the most basic issue is the abiding significance of its positive statements about the uniquely heterosexual character of the marriage relationship itself (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:4-5; Mark 10:6-8).

Fourth, some object that when church bodies hold closely to biblical teachings on marriage they are acting inconsistently, since other church practices are contrary to Scripture. A common analogy is drawn between the endorsement of homosexual practice and the matter of women speaking in the church. Some point out that Paul specifically says that women should remain silent in the church (1 Cor. 14:34; 1 Tim. 2:12), yet in many churches worldwide women now have voice and vote, and in some they are ordained into the ministry of Word and sacrament. The argument is that if a church does not hold to the letter of Scripture on women's silence in the church it need not do so in matters of homosexual relations.

There are two flaws to the argument. (a) The Scriptures are univocal in their view of homosexual relations, but they are not univocal in their view of women's roles within the community of faith. There are passages that enjoin women to be silent but there are also passages in which women pray and prophesy in worship along with men: praying means bringing a word to God and prophesying means bringing a word from God, not something that is done in silence. Paul did not object as long as basic standards of decorum were observed (1 Cor. 11:4-5). Moreover, Paul's colleagues included Priscilla and Aquila, who both served as evangelists and together instructed Apollos in the faith (Acts 18:18, 24-26), and there were apparently women who served in positions of leadership in the church (Rom. 16:1-3, 6) and as prophets (Acts 21:9). Further evidence of the importance of women's spoken testimony in the early church appears in the accounts of a Samaritan woman bringing her townspeople to Jesus (John 4:29, 39), and of Jesus sending Mary Magdalene to bear the news of his resurrection (John 20:17-18). When commenting on the directive that women should keep silence, Luther himself noted that Huldah the prophetess, Deborah, and Jael were important exceptions to this. He concluded that silence might help maintain harmony in worship, but remarked that if "the Lord were to raise up a woman for us to listen to, we would allow her to rule like Huldah."<sup>20</sup> (b) When Paul enjoined women to be silent, he was addressing a question of church order. He did not, however, state that behavior contrary to his directive was sinful. We must make a critical distinction between essential and negotiable matters at this point. The Scriptures consistently rule out homosexual relations but offer a range of perspectives on the role of women in the faith community. A church's decision to expand the leadership roles of women cannot be invoked as a precedent for endorsing committed sexual relationships between people of the same gender. These issues are not of the same order.

## Concluding Reflections

We have tried to show that there are good theological and biblical grounds for the church's norm that sexual relations have their proper place within heterosexual marriage and that outside marriage abstinence is expected. This norm guides many, both married and single, who seek to live by it and to teach it to their children. The church must also minister to those whose lives do not conform to this ideal, in situations that are often painful and complex. Several years ago New Testament scholar Richard Hays wrote of his extended conversations with a good friend who was homosexual. He observed that in our culture's current confusion about gender roles and our own propensity for self-deception, we should grant that the Scriptures "tell us the truth about ourselves as sinners and as God's sexual creatures."<sup>21</sup> He affirmed that marriage between a man and a woman is the normative form for human sexual relationships even as he continued to show his support as his gay friend died of AIDS, understanding himself to be one sinner ministering with and to another. Recognizing that "law" has its proper place in Christian life and community, while insisting upon the unconditional grace of the gospel, provides the framework in which the church must discern how to carry out its ministry with the compassion, firmness, and wisdom requisite for such a calling.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> In 1848, John Humphrey Noyes and others established the Oneida community in New York state. They experimented with "complex marriage," in which members of the sect did not form permanent marriage bonds, but exchanged partners periodically. Public opposition led the sect to abandon the practice in 1880.

<sup>2</sup> *Formula of Concord*, Part I: "Epitome" §1. *The Book of Concord*, Theodore Tappert, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 464.

<sup>3</sup> On this and what follows I am especially indebted to Donald H. Juel, "Homosexuality and the Christian Tradition," *Word & World* 10 (1990): 166-169.

<sup>4</sup> *Smalcald Articles*, Part III, Article II, "The Law." Tappert, 303.

<sup>5</sup> The words "And the two shall become one flesh" from Gen. 2:24, quoted in Mark 10:8 preface the discussion by Robert Benne, *Ordinary Saints: An Introduction to the Christian Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 129. Note also the attention given to Genesis 1 in Richard B. Hays, "Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies," *Sojourners* 20 (1991): 20. Their overall approaches are congruent with mine. Contrast the well-known work by L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, & Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988). Countryman does not limit himself to the New Testament, but ranges widely in the Scriptures and extra-biblical sources in his opening chapters. Nevertheless, Gen. 2:74 does not appear until it receives passing mention in his discussion of "Women and Children as Property in the Ancient Mediterranean World," 152.

<sup>6</sup> See Fred J. Gaiser, "Homosexuality and the Old Testament," *Word & World* 10 (1990): 161-165.

<sup>7</sup> Matt 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27; Rom. 13:9. Cf. *The Church and Human Sexuality: A Lutheran Perspective* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1993), 15. In the ELCA report only the Romans passage is quoted, but the commandment itself comes from Lev. 19:18.

- <sup>8</sup> For further discussion see Robert H. Smith, *Matthew* (Augsburg New Testament Commentary; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 229-230.
- <sup>9</sup> See Matt. 5:27-32; 15:19; Mark 7:22; Luke 16:18; 18:20. Cf. John 8:3-4.
- <sup>10</sup> For further discussion see Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 251-266.
- <sup>11</sup> For source material see Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 200-201.
- <sup>12</sup> Cicero, *De Oratore* 3.38 §154; 3.43 §170; 3.52 §201.
- <sup>13</sup> See Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 106-109; Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 242-244. This interpretation is rejected by Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, & Sex*, 117-120, but he can offer no plausible alternative explanation. Interpreters have generally overlooked the way speakers in the first century coined new words based on old roots, which may be what is happening here. See the references to Cicero above.
- <sup>14</sup> See Richard B. Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response, to John Boswell's Exegesis of Romans 1," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 14 (1986): 184-215. The article includes other pertinent literature.
- <sup>15</sup> Note especially, the echoes of Genesis 1-3 in Rom. 8:19-22. See also Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural," 191.
- <sup>16</sup> On Paul's use of a rhetorical strategy that effectively condemns all humanity see Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural," 195.
- <sup>17</sup> Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 127.
- <sup>18</sup> See David F. Wright, "Homosexuality: The Relevance of the Bible," *Evangelical Quarterly* 61 (1989): 291-300. The usual Greek words for pederastic relations were *paiderastēs* ("lover of boys"), *erastēs* ("lover"), and *erōmenos* ("beloved"). See Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 95.
- <sup>19</sup> Robert Benne, *Ordinary Saints*, 150.
- <sup>20</sup> *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., eds. Pelikan and Lehman (St Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff), 28:280. See also 28:276 on Huldah, Deborah, and Jael.
- <sup>21</sup> Hays, "Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies," 21.