

## **A Rebuttal to "A Reformed Response to Daniel Helminiak's Gay Theology"**

by Daniel A. Helminiak

Understood on its own terms, the Bible does not condemn same-sex acts per se but only if they are manipulative, abusive, or for some other reason unethical. This was my conclusion in *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality* (1994: revised and up-dated edition, 2000) and what I have often said in lectures. Under the name of the Reformed tradition, Derrick Olliff and Dewey Hodges presented counter-arguments (<http://www.reformed.org/social/helminiak.html>). Their response is mostly sweeping rhetoric and ultimately dogmatic assertions, yet to the uninformed their criticisms appear to be serious. For the sake of people who are sincerely seeking the truth, the record needs to be set straight. Thus, I comment on their "Reformed Response."

[In fact, Olliff and Hodges have posted a response to this rebuttal, but I make no further response. As far as I can tell, all the issues have already been addressed. A whirlwind of more words only stirs up more confusion around these emotional issues, and such confusion is to Olliff and Hodges's advantage—because, as I have argued here and show in my book, there is little scholarly substance to their blustering claims. They are simply not able to discredit the historical evidence that I have summarized. Their continued insistence that I am wrong and their name-calling do nothing to change my evidence-based and reasoned conclusion.]

### **PART I: The UnChristian Nature of Biblical Fundamentalism**

Olliff and Hodges's arguments about the Bible texts on homosexuality are not the most important part of their paper. In the end, their arguments are not persuasive. I will leave comment on these for later. Most important is the example they give of the kind of religion they stand for. They claim that my position is not Christian. Were I to accept their definition of "Christian," I would have to agree. We certainly stand in very different places. However, I believe that their position is the one that is not Christian. And my assertion is not just a matter of a name or of name-calling. The matter is substantive, and it deserves detailed attention. At stake is the most important decision of our lives: what kind of people will we be? Or said otherwise, Which God do we reverence, and what kind of religion do we support?

#### **The Many Faces of Fundamentalism**

Olliff and Hodges affiliate themselves with the Reformed Tradition, which in general goes back to the teachings of Luther and Calvin in the Protestant Reformation and specifically is a form of Calvinism. The Protestant Churches share these origins, but most today have moderated their distinctively Reformed beliefs. Just as the Catholic Church has recently emphasized the Bible and thus moved closer to the Protestant tradition, so the Christian Churches -- Lutheran, Presbyterian (Calvinist), Congregationalist and, of course, also Anglican, Methodist, and some Baptists -- have recently emphasized their historical roots in and before the Reformation and thus have moved closer to the Catholic tradition. As the Christian Churches address their differences, they more and more recognize their similarities and value each other's distinctive perspectives. Thus, bit by bit the Christian Churches move closer to one another and begin to form again one Christian Communion.

Olliff and Hodges call their response "Reformed" and thus associate themselves with classical Protestantism. But their stance is far from that of the Protestant churches today. Rather, Olliff and Hodges are more aligned with the contemporary Fundamentalist movement. It claims to be a religion based on the Bible alone (*sola Scriptura*), taken as God's Word, the ultimate authority in all things. Recently, under the astute political leadership of Ralph Reed, the Fundamentalist movement began calling itself "Evangelical," and thus the "Christian" Coalition attempted to associate itself with a more moderate emphasis on the Bible as, for example, in some Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Baptist forms. By use of the term "Reformed," Olliff

and Hodges attempt a similar cosmetic maneuver and appear to belong with the mainline Christian churches.

However, attention to Olliff and Hodges's beliefs and style shows that they represent but another and extreme expression of contemporary conservative Bible religion — “Christian Reconstructionism,” whose goal is establishment of a theocracy, a society governed completely by the laws of the Bible, including the Old Testament laws, a supposed “Kingdom of God” on earth. In this sense, whether one calls their position Reformed or Evangelical or Fundamentalist is of little importance. In the case of Olliff and Hodges, the three are but variations on a theme.

### **God's Word and Interpretations of the Bible**

Rather than any of those terms, Olliff and Hodges would prefer to call themselves "Christian." With this sacred term they claim an ultimate authority -- but here's the kicker: they also appoint themselves as solely qualified to say what Christian means. In the end, they are Christian because they say they are, and others are not because these self-proclaimed "Christians" say they are not. The Biblical Fundamentalists have usurped the name Christian and are attempting to discredit anyone who does not believe as they do. They demean and reject whatever disagrees with their particular interpretation of the Bible and their definition of Christianity. One either believes as they do or, as Olliff and Hodges say repeatedly, one is an "atheist." There is a simplistic either-or proposition, which allows no middle ground. They justify this radical position with the claim that *they* speak for God, and they can do that, they say, because they claim to have God's Word, and they find it in the Bible. Of course, they forget to explain that they are talking about "their particular interpretation of the Bible."

They are interpreting the Bible just as surely as is anyone else who reads and quotes it. No one can make sense of any text without using his or her mind to understand it, and this process is interpretation. Apart from it, one can only parrot back words. But this is the point Biblical Fundamentalists refuse to admit, for if they acknowledge that they are engaged in interpretation, their claim to a pure and unadulterated version of God's Word suddenly depends on how accurately *they* are understanding the Bible. Then it becomes clear that *human beings*, not just God, are playing a part in saying what the Bible teaches. And they, like all human beings, might be mistaken.

### **Christianity: The Union of the Human and the Divine**

The whole Fundamentalist thrust, which Olliff and Hodges represent, wants to get the human out of the picture. Fundamentalists do that by insisting that they speak God's Word rather than their particular interpretation of It and by putting down any challenger who appeals to and values the human intellect. Whereas, according to Christian belief, God became human in Jesus Christ and thus united humanity and divinity, Fundamentalism wages a war on the human in the name of its notion of God. Thus, Biblical Fundamentalism rejects the essence of Christian belief and commitment and has actually evolved into a new religion. At its theoretical core, it is not Christian. It does not really believe in the possible coincidence of the human and the divine.

### **The Literal and the Historical-Critical Approaches to the Bible**

In my book I distinguish between the literal reading and the historical-critical reading of the Bible. The literalists claim to be reading the Bible without interpretation; they claim to be taking it just as it reads. (Of course, they are reading it through their own unacknowledged lenses.) In contrast, the historical-critical approach insists that one must first determine what the Bible texts meant to say in their original ancient contexts, and to do this one must attend to a myriad of historical and cultural details. Then, only after understanding the original intent of the text, as best one can, only then can one apply the lesson of the former age to the questions of the present age. Thus, one searches for the wisdom of God that is preserved in those ancient accounts, and guided by that wisdom, which might be quite challenging to one's own, one determines how to live one's life today.

Of course, this two-part listing, either literal or historical-critical, is a simplification. I am well aware that Christian history shows many different ways of using the Bible. But these two are the ones in conflict today, and these two focus the issues at stake in the present discussion.

Olliff and Hodges belong to the literalist camp. No doubt, they will protest this judgment and insist that they are more sophisticated than to be literalists. After all, they point out that, despite Psalm 91:4, God does not have feathers. Still, it is not their protest or insistence that matters but rather what they actually do. They talk a good game, but their actions reveal where they really stand.

Attend closely to how they argue, and it becomes clear that they are Fundamentalists. Their ultimate appeal in every case is to the authority of God's Word in the Bible (so far, so good), but they are blind to the fact that they are speaking only about their own particular interpretation of the Bible. This *modus operandi* is characteristic of Biblical Fundamentalism. In contrast, the historical-critical -- the Christian -- approach would likewise insist on the authority of God's Word in the Bible, but it would be well aware that human interpretation is ever the conduit of that Word, and the human interpretation might be mistaken. So this approach is humble in claiming God's authority for itself.

To be sure, Olliff and Hodges are sometimes moderate Fundamentalists. They do make some use of historical research. They cite a number of word-studies, they appeal to extra-biblical historical facts now and again, and they effectively use human reasoning to advance their case. (This moderation introduces a serious self-contradiction into their position. More on this below.) But they use historical research only as it suits their needs. For them, it seems, attention to the history behind the Bible is an extra that you can take or leave. And this selectivity is the telling point. This is what tips the scale and aligns them with the Fundamentalists. They do not really believe in the need for historical-critical method. Rather than to accurately understand the Bible, their real goal is to impose their interpretation of the Bible on everybody else. By quoting Bible verses they can conveniently claim the authority of God for their personal beliefs.

### **Characteristics of Olliff and Hodges's Religion**

Thus, the real value of Olliff and Hodges's "Response" is that it shows what kind of close-minded and totalitarian religion their Biblical Fundamentalism really is. I do not mean to sound harsh. I am only trying to describe things as I honestly see them, and there are no nice words to describe what I see. I will support this judgment with evidence. I trust I am not making groundless accusations. Let the reader judge for him- or herself as I point out some disturbing characteristics of their *modus operandi*.

### **Use of Undisciplined Rhetoric.**

Fundamentalism tends to make sweeping statements and to support them with claims of absolute authority. Indeed, they claim to speak for God. Olliff and Hodges reveal this tendency in their "Reformed Response." Consider some examples.

They dismiss my treatment of 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 in these words: "this argument does not have one redeeming aspect." (I never realized I was so totally inept -- nor that anyone could ever be.)

They write, "On the question of homosexual behavior, God's Word is crystal clear." Then why all the scholarly discussion? Are numerous respected scholars all to be dismissed out of hand -- like Victor Furnish of Southern Methodist University or Robin Scroggs of Union Theological Seminary or Bailey, Boswell, Boyarin, Brooten, Countryman, Hall, Hanks, Horner, Miller, Olyan, Petersen, and Wright? They all find serious ambiguities in the Bible regarding homosexuality. Olliff and Hodges conveniently single me out as the target of their "Reformed Response." But in criticizing me, they are criticizing decades of scripture scholarship. After all, my book is only a popularization of other scholars' findings. There is virtually nothing original in my book except its presentation. All too easily do Olliff and Hodges try to discredit my arguments by passing them off as the renegade ravings of some lone "gay theologian" (whatever this is supposed to mean).

Then, there is Olliff and Hodges's ridicule: Anyone who questions their interpretation "should consider the Author of the Bible to be strongly prejudiced against homosexuality."

### **Misrepresentation of My Position.**

Repeatedly, Olliff and Hodges are inaccurate in what they report. They set up a straw figure and then easily knock it down. I never said that "homosexual acts in the first-century Roman Empire were *only* decried because they were abusive" (emphasis added). But abusiveness was certainly one of the things that was widely decried at the time. For a very useful summary with quotes from Philo, Seneca, Dio Chrysostom, and Plutarch, see Victor Furnish's "The Bible and Homosexuality: Reading the Texts in Context" (in J. S. Siker, *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Side of the Debate*, pp. 25-28.)

Similarly, I must vehemently reject their depiction of me as having an "eroto-centric mindset" and as thinking that "love ... must have sexuality at its core." I did not say that love toward children, families, and brothers and sisters in Christ "all have to do with sexuality." What I wrote and what Olliff and Hodges accurately quoted is that "*Attached to sexuality* is the capacity to feel affection..." and that "Sexuality is at the core of ... *being in love*" (emphasis added). I certainly do not believe that romantic love, being *in love*, is the only kind of love there is or that all love is erotic. It is typical of Olliff and Hodges to ignore my words, to focus on only a part of my statement, and to twist my point to fit their own agenda -- even after having just quoted me verbatim.

But further, contemporary social science has understood sexuality to be something far broader than mere genital experience. Masculinity and femininity are also aspects of sexuality, so fathers love their children as men, not as women, and mothers, as women, not as men. Whatever anyone does, she or he does it as a woman or a man, and to this extent "sexuality" is involved. Were Olliff and Hodges more conversant with current social-science research, they would not have mistaken my meaning. Unfortunately, it seems that when they think of sexuality, their minds are fixed on the groin. They project onto me and others their own preoccupation.

When I write and they quote, "*Sensitive to God's Spirit*, we have to rely on our own minds and hearts" (emphasis added), Olliff and Hodges see only "our own minds and hearts" and go on to berate me as a "secular humanist," an "atheist," an "unbiblical autonomous man." It was they who dropped God out of my picture. I am sorry if, allowing both God and the human to stand side by side, my position confuses them. I would have hoped that they'd at least have stopped to ponder what I wrote and to consider that maybe I was saying something that does not fit into the little either-or boxes through which they seem to sift the world.

Similarly, they report about me that "his whole concept [of love] is human centered and self-serving (what I feel, what I delight in, what emotions I feel, what 'passion' I feel in commitment, etc.)" and that "his concept of 'good' is measured by feelings." Yet two paragraphs above they had just quoted me appealing to "openness, intelligence, reasoned judgment, and good will." These qualities are not self-serving emotion and passion. These qualities are self-transcending. They are spiritual. They are the entry point of God's presence in the human heart, the summit of the soul, the *apex animae* (to use the centuries-old, Latin, theological term). To know what I really hold on this matter, read my book in the original. And consult my more recent book, *The Human Core of Spirituality* (SUNY Press, 1996). There I explain the matter in detail, and on this point I rely on one of the Catholic theological geniuses of the twentieth century, Bernard Lonergan, S. J.

Olliff and Hodges's misrepresentation of my position on this point is egregious. This point is a theme that deliberately runs through my book, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*, and is even indexed (at my tardy insistence and, thus, awkwardly in the 1994 edition) under the entry "authentic" (Lonergan's term), which points the reader to my more popular formulation of the same thing, "open, honest, and loving." Strange that Olliff and Hodges recognize nothing of God or Christianity in these words and my repeated use of them and see only vile and despicable things. But they are Fundamentalists, not Christians. They seem not to appreciate the beauty of the human being and the nobility of the human soul,

created good by God, redeemed in Christ, and filled with the Holy Spirit. They seem not to recognize the things of the Spirit. They seem only to respond to particular, approved, sterile, and stereotypical words. Thus, their apodictic literalism shows itself and its deadly consequences.

There are other misrepresentations of my position each time Olliff and Hodges summarize my argument in propositional form. But I will not go into detail. I do not want to write another book here, explaining what I already wrote in plain enough English. Likewise, Olliff and Hodges grossly misrepresent current social-science research on homosexuality. But again, I will not address these matters. I do not intend here to launch into whole other fields, the psychology and sociology of sexual orientation. However, in passing I must go on record as saying that these are diverse fields of expertise, for Olliff and Hodges seem not to understand this fact. Rather, because of their supposed inside track on truth, they freely express their personal opinions on scientific matters about which, it is clear, they are laymen.

### **Uninformed Appeal to Catholic Teaching**

Olliff and Hodges speak as representatives of the Reformed Tradition, but, because of their Reconstructionism, they preserve its theology in its sixteenth-century, polemic form. Thus, following Luther and Calvin, their emphasis on Scripture alone stands in direct contrast to the Catholic emphasis on *both* Scripture *and* Tradition. Similarly, their repeated insistence on submission to God's Word reflects the Reformation insistence on faith alone, which again stands in direct contrast to the Catholic insistence on *both* faith *and* reason. Moreover, their unrestrained belief in predestination -- which would have God, without recourse, condemn all "unrepentant" homosexuals to hell -- is a direct expression of Calvin's novel doctrine. In contrast, Catholicism insists on the necessity of *both* grace *and* free will. Finally, their disdain for anything human reflects the Reformation teaching about the total depravity of the human being. Namely, because of the Fall (the sin of Adam and Eve), and even after redemption in Christ, the human is nothing but sin, incapable of anything good, and is saved only because the righteousness of Christ covers over the underlying rottenness. In contrast, Catholicism teaches that the Fall weakened but still left intact the human capacity for goodness.

A very specific version of Christian theology colors Olliff and Hodges's position. Biblical Fundamentalism has taken this theology and pushed it to its logical limits -- and in the process abandoned Christianity. Calvin himself struggled mightily in the successive editions of his *Institutes* to balance these extreme doctrines. And, as noted above, the Protestant Churches have moved closer to the Catholic "both-and" even as the Catholic Church has appreciated the Protestant emphasis on the sovereignty of God and the centrality of the Bible. In contrast, Biblical Fundamentalism has become the outsider. By deliberate choice, Fundamentalism has embraced one-sided principles and in the process actually created a new religion. It is for this religion that Olliff and Hodges speak. When they claim to rely on the Bible, they are really relying on a very narrow form of sixteenth-century Reformation theology, through which they read the Bible.

It is peculiar, then, that Olliff and Hodges would invoke the teaching of the Pope and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* to criticize my position when these Catholic sources are so at odds with all that Olliff and Hodges stand for. In my October 29, 1996, lecture at Georgia Tech University, to which Olliff and Hodges refer, I appealed to Pope John Paul II's endorsement of evolutionary biology as an alternative to Fundamentalist "creationism." I proposed John Paul II as a representative of Christianity and concluded that creationism could simply not be the single correct and official Christian understanding of the matter -- to which hecklers in the audience shouted in reference to the Pope, "Antichrist! Antichrist!" I believe that Olliff and Hodges are of the same school of thought as those hecklers. Their theologies are certainly compatible. Then, how peculiar that Olliff and Hodges should fault me for not following Catholic teaching!

It appears that Olliff and Hodges will invoke any argument whatsoever if it furthers their cause. I have seen such behavior among other Fundamentalists. Believing that they advocate God's truth, they also seem to believe -- oh, what a dangerous lot -- that their righteous end justifies any means. I have borne the brunt of such behavior.

But Olliff and Hodges are also quite naive in their understanding of Roman Catholicism. First, Catholicism holds no ethical teaching infallibly, not even that regarding homosexuality. Second, Catholic "communicants" do not "vow to accept as inerrant" the official Catholic position. Third, my approach to the Bible is in complete accord with Catholic teaching. Catholicism absolutely and solemnly endorses the historical-critical method -- even though, as I sympathetically explained in my book, the Churches are often wary of the results of that method on a whole array of issues, of which homosexuality is but one. Fourth, the Catholic Church has a long and noble history of profound theological scholarship. Catholicism believes that the use of human reason is one valid way of knowing God and God's truth (see Romans 1:19-20). So I am acting fully within my Catholic tradition when, as a theologian, I study other scholars and responsibly present their findings for the consideration of others.

Finally, in no way does the conclusion in my book reject the ethical teaching of the Catholic Church regarding homosexuality. Now, this fact may come as a surprise to Olliff and Hodges, though, once again, they quote the very lines in which I explain the matter, but preoccupied with their own version of biblical inerrancy, they miss the point. When I wrote, "As a Roman Catholic ... I do not presume the Bible provides the last word on sexual ethics" (p. 13), I was not rejecting the inerrancy and authority of the Scriptures. I was merely standing by Catholic teaching, which determines sexual ethics (and other matters) on a whole array of considerations (like the ones regarding homosexuality that Olliff and Hodges actually quoted from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*). My book was a study of the Bible alone. My only and limited conclusion, highlighted again in my final paragraph (1994, p. 109; 2000, p. 133), was that *the Bible* does not condemn same-sex acts per se. I did not consider the possibility that maybe same-sex acts should be condemned on some other basis. I deliberately left open the bottom-line question as to the morality of same-sex acts. Evidently, Olliff and Hodges read my words through their Fundamentalist lenses. While I wrote that the Bible does not condemn, they read that homosexuality is therefore not to be condemned, period. But I am not Fundamentalist, nor is the Catholic Church. According to Catholic teaching, my conclusion about the Bible alone does not settle the ethical question. Olliff and Hodges only show how uninformed -- and boorish -- they are when they fault me on my Catholicism.

Of course, we could go on to consider other bases on which to judge the morality of same-sex acts -- like Christian tradition, natural law theory (reasoning), social science, and the personal experience of lesbian and gay Christians -- and on the basis of them all, draw some ethical conclusions. I did that in my pamphlet, *Catholicism, Homosexuality, and Dignity* (Dignity, Inc., 1996). Considering that evidence, Olliff and Hodges might begin to have a case against me. But even then they would fail, for if anything, through and through that pamphlet reveals a Catholic way of grappling with the ethics of homosexuality, and even the Pope would defend the pamphlet's final appeal to conscience.

### **Rejection of the Christian Churches**

It seems disingenuous that Olliff and Hodges would appeal to the authority of the Pope to discredit my position. Their own beliefs are in major conflict with Catholic theology. Moreover, their beliefs are also in conflict with those of the other Western Christian Churches. And there is reason to believe that Olliff and Hodges are aware of this conflict.

Criticizing my way of using the Scriptures, Olliff and Hodges make a sweeping comment: the same kind of thinking, "not Christian in any sense, ... has infiltrated (and adulterated) *many one-time Christian churches* in this century" (emphasis added). In light of what I explained above and of what I know about Fundamentalism, I believe that, with this comment and in line with the Christian Reconstructionism movement, Olliff and Hodges are writing off all the churches except those that adhere to their extreme version of Biblical Fundamentalism. On my reading, Olliff and Hodges believe that their position alone is Christian. If pushed on the matter, as their comment suggests, they would hold that all the other churches have abandoned genuine Christianity.

Though shocking, that position is understandable. It would merely be a twentieth-century version of sixteenth-century Reformation Protestantism. What is ironic, however, is that in its twentieth-century version that position indicts the Protestant churches as well as the Catholic. Evidently, in Fundamentalism, Protestantism has become so Protestant that even the Protestant Churches no longer qualify as Protestant

Christian. This is precisely what I take Olliff and Hodges to mean when they call their position "Reformed." Supposedly, none of the Christian churches are Christian any more except those that hold to Olliff and Hodges's brand of religion.

I find that stance preposterous, and it is for this very reason that I highlight it. It suggests how far over the edge Biblical Fundamentalism has really moved. And apart from consideration of any other evidence, it raises a red flag about the credibility of anything Olliff and Hodges say.

### **Commitment to Political Domination**

Not only preposterous, the suggestion that only the Biblical Fundamentalists are Christian is also frightening. If correct -- and other have arrived at the same conclusion -- my analysis reveals a religious movement that is so sure of its unique agenda that it will stop at nothing to achieve it. That this is the case is supported by evidence in Olliff and Hodges's "Reformed Response." (Unfortunately, the Internet presentation of their paper is partially garbled in both places where they discuss this matter. One wonders why.) Approvingly, they cite Greg Bahnsen's vision in *Homosexuality: A Biblical View*. Supposedly, the Fundamentalists have a "mandate" from God, and it promises them "dominion" over the whole of society. They are to work for the "reformation of society so that its laws are in conformity with Biblical [i.e., Fundamentalist] " views. The laws are "to punish homosexual acts and help keep homosexuality 'underground.'"

Olliff and Hodges and their Fundamentalists cohorts are deliberately waging a campaign of repression against homosexual people and, presumably, against any one else with whom they disagree. In line with Christian Reconstructionism, they intend to take over the American government and to replace democracy with theocratic rule, and religion, their religion, will again control the state. Their agenda is frightening, for they could well succeed or at least cause considerable havoc. They are a determined, focused, well-organized, and well-financed contingent, and I fear that many of their leaders are unscrupulous.

### **Intolerance to Other Religions**

While covert in their rejection of the Christian Churches, Olliff and Hodges are outspoken in their rejection of other world religions. Supposedly, sincere and loving Hindus and Muslims "are nonetheless sincerely wrong. Surely there are idol worshippers and cat burglars who are both religious and 'loving.'"

More and more the Christian Churches appreciate the goodness that is inherent in other religions and understand that goodness to be the work of the one God of the Universe, the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ. This way of thinking squares with Peter's stunning realization: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34-35). In the meantime, Biblical Fundamentalism is drawing a tighter and tighter circle to exclude anyone who does not believe as it does.

### **Blindness to Goodness**

I have argued that the Biblical Fundamentalist position is a radical departure from Christianity, and I have provided a list of considerations that all converge on this same conclusion. Central to my argument is this realization: whereas in Christ, God became human and the core of Christian faith is the acknowledgment of God in human form, the Fundamentalism that Olliff and Hodges represent is unable to recognize the things of God in any human format. If this assessment is correct, it means that Biblical Fundamentalism does not really know the things of God. A mother could identify her children even if she were blindfolded. A lover would recognize his or her beloved come even in disguise. Those who know God recognize the things of God in whatever form they appear, for not the form but the substance is what counts. Not the letter but the spirit is what gives life (2 Corinthians 4:6). But Fundamentalism is committed to letters and words and particular formulas, so it seems unable to recognize the Holy Spirit at work in all the world. In this, Fundamentalism is profoundly unChristian.

Olliff and Hodges fault me for this line of thinking. They correctly quote me at Georgia Tech saying, "I don't give a damn what you believe as long as you're a good person." They do not understand "how a professing Christian could make such a remark."

Well, Jesus said something similar: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). What ultimately counts is not words but deeds, not what is professed but how one lives. Jesus made the same point repeatedly when he criticized the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and praised the good-heartedness of the Publicans and the "sinners." He made the same point when he spoke about false prophets and said, "You will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:16). Jesus illustrated his point in his depiction of the judgment scene in Matthew 25: 31-46. Neither the righteous nor the wicked knew that they were responding to Jesus in their manner of responding to the least of his brothers and sisters, but according to Jesus, what they knew and professed was irrelevant. They were judged according to how they fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, and visited the imprisoned. On the momentous occasion of the last judgment, Jesus appears to be a humanist. Evidently, for Jesus, how people act, not what they believe, is what ultimately matters.

Not just Jesus, but also Paul, recognizes the continuity between humanism and Christianity. Paul writes to the Philippians (4:8), "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." Paul speaks here in fully humanist terms, he never once mentions Jesus or God or the Scriptures. Still, in the following verse, without missing a beat, he can connect these things to God: "Keep on doing [these] things ... and the God of peace will be with you."

Similarly, when Psalm 15 describes the ones who "abide in the Lord's tent," a list of natural virtues follows: do what is right, speak the truth, do not slander, stand by your oath, take no bribe. Or when Isaiah (1:17) names the things that God really wants from people, instead of offerings, prayers, rituals, and protests of faith, a similar non-religious list follows: avoid evil, do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

The Bible sees no conflict between human goodness and the things of God. In fact, awareness of the identity of the two is a major facet of the biblical mindset. This teaching runs like a thread through the whole of the Bible. How could anyone miss it?

Olliff and Hodges miss it, I believe, because of their allegiance to unmitigated Reformation doctrines, Reconstructionism, which they read into the Bible. Belief in total depravity could never imagine that there could be true goodness in a humanist form or that this humanist goodness could be identical in substance with the will of God that Jesus advocates (Matthew 7:21). But if in good will a non-believer feeds the hungry and if a believer also feeds the hungry, what difference is there in the charity that they both perform? Should the humanist's charity be written off because it does not carry the label "Jesus"? Even more, shouldn't a genuine Christian be able to recognize Jesus in good acts that lack the label? (I have treated the nuances of these far-reaching questions and specified the distinctiveness of Christianity in my books, *Spiritual Development*, *The Human Core of Spirituality*, and *Religion and the Human Sciences*.)

I must turn Olliff and Hodges's comment back onto them and ask how they, who so strongly profess to be Christian, could have misunderstood this biblical teaching when I proclaimed it at Georgia Tech. The answer I have suggested is that their religion is far from Christian. Biblical Fundamentalists have taken over the name *Christian* but have apparently lost its substance. It's high time that the name be taken back.

### **The Use of "Depraved" Reason**

I have portrayed the kind of religion that Olliff and Hodges's represent, and I find it unworthy of the sons and daughters of God. Before considering their arguments about the Bible texts on homosexuality, I need to make one more general and summary observation.



Olliff and Hodges are very good at analyzing my arguments, questioning my evidence, criticizing my logic, and proving my stupidity. Evidently, they really do believe in the value of reason, argument, and human thought. However, their performance is at serious odds with what they say in words. In no uncertain terms, they reject the authority of human reasoning -- or at least my human reasoning. But if human reasoning is so ungodly, atheistic, secular humanistic, why do they themselves engage in it? If human thinking is no path to truth, why do they use their minds? And why would they expect any of their fellow believers, who know the folly of original thinking, to listen to them?

The Fundamentalist beliefs, which they advocate, if followed out logically, would prevent Olliff and Hodges and everyone else from ever questioning or thinking or speaking. If "our own minds and hearts" are so utterly depraved that we cannot rely on them -- as Olliff and Hodges argued so forcefully in my case -- then Olliff and Hodges should, like dumb animals, just bow in silence before God's Word and desist from all human thought. Of course, being human, they cannot possibly do so. And that is my point. Their position is profoundly self-contradictory; it is incoherent to the core. Full consistency within that position would result in the obliteration of itself. So to some extent self-contradiction is bound to seep in.

Taking the Reformation's doctrine of human depravity to its logical limit, Biblical Fundamentalism professes a radical opposition between humanity and God. But unless they blind themselves to the very essence of their God-given nature, people cannot embrace and live this doctrine. To do so, they would need to blot out the very force, their awareness and personal freedom, that is supposed to do the embracing of that doctrine.

Exposed at this level, Fundamentalism shows itself to be a perverse a form of religion. It functions by debilitating the very soul of the person believing it. While promising salvation, wholeness, and redemption, in practice it aborts the human being. Rather than the life-giving "both-and" of Christianity, Fundamentalism demands an either-or choice between God and self, yet only the self, which is to be rejected, could make the choice for God.

Calvin tried to get around this problem in his theology by introducing the doctrine of predestination. It makes human freedom and personal responsibility irrelevant. But he was aware of the social problems this doctrine caused, and he found ways to neutralize its force in everyday living. In contrast, today's Biblical Fundamentalism builds on the reformation doctrines without their counter-balances. Thus, there emerges a religion that claims naively but absolutely to speak for God and will broach no discussion on the matter. Across the board human reasoning is dismissed as irrelevant -- depraved, godless, atheistic.

Now, Olliff and Hodges might claim an exemption from the logical implications of their own position. They might claim that their own reasoning is valid because they are Christian, because they have "the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16) -- and they are Christian, of course, precisely because they themselves say that they are. But unless they claim this obviously self-serving and groundless exemption, according to their own criteria, their opinions, like mine, are not worth consulting.

They have proposed their opinions nonetheless, and I will honor those opinions. I do not believe as they do. As I value my own mind, I also try to respect theirs. Trusting in God's Spirit, committed to personal integrity, I seek wisdom wherever I might find it. So despite their own self-disqualification, I now briefly consider Olliff and Hodges's specific criticisms of my study of the Bible on homosexuality.

## **PART II: The Bible on Homosexuality**

In summary, I am not convinced by any of Olliff and Hodges's arguments, and I do not believe any reasonable person considering the evidence would be. They may raise questions about my interpretation, but they never do clinch their own case. These matters are simply not as black-and-white as they try to make them. They do a lot of nit-picking, they stir up a lot of dust, but they do not refute the arguments I presented.

## Genesis 19: The Sin of Sodom

I argued that the fundamental sin of Sodom was "inhospitality" -- that is hard-heartedness, lack of compassion, hatefulness: the core biblical sin -- and not homosexuality. Ancient desert societies -- like some Semitic cultures today -- revered hospitality as a sacred and holy duty. The people of Sodom violated that duty.

In contrast, true to their position on the total depravity of humanity, Olliff and Hodges dismiss the possibility that there could be anything worthwhile in the world's cultures and their mores, so a cultural requirement of hospitality is meaningless to them. The arrogance and obtuseness of this opinion leave me dumbstruck. Their opinion is that only "biblical moral law" -- that is, the opinion of their own Fundamentalist subculture -- matters. So they see nothing good in a cultural requirement of hospitality.

Yet, in blatant self-contradiction, they bend their principles when homosexuality is in question. They allow that, *without biblical revelation*, people, like Lot, could recognize the supposed evil of homosexuality. They appeal to a universal sense of right and wrong, a law "written" in the human heart (see Jeremiah 31:33; Romans 2:14-15) -- the very basic human goodness (sustained by the gift of the Holy Spirit) that I argued for above, that which a centuries-long Christian tradition has spoken of as "natural law." Thus, regarding the validity of the human conscience, they shift from one side to the other whenever it serves their purpose. At one time they disqualify people's innate moral sensitivities; at another time they absolutely insist on them.

Even worse, it is revealing that Olliff and Hodges vehemently deny that hospitality is an aspect of charity. In contrast, Jesus makes it a criterion of judgment: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matthew 25:35). How very sad that, in their narrow legalism and their determination to condemn homosexuality, Olliff and Hodges pull out eleven biblical passages to argue their case. They use the Bible to refute the core biblical teaching. Because the word "hospitality" does not occur, supposedly the Bible does not require it. Literalism reigns -- except, again, when *homosexuality* is in question: neither does this word ever occur in the Bible.

Similarly, to suit their purpose, they dismiss the outright teaching of Ezekiel 16:48-49 regarding the nature of the sin of Sodom. They point out that the word "abomination" occurs in verse 50, and in it they see the abomination of Leviticus 18:22, "You shall not lie with a man as with a woman." But throughout the Hebrew Scriptures the word *abomination* is used to refer to many things (see below). As the whole of Ezekiel 16 makes clear, the abominations in question here are Jerusalem's "adultery" and "harlotry," that is, idolatry. Even though verse 50 mentions "abominable things" and is referring to Sodom, verse 49 says exactly what those abominable things were. It says outright what the wickedness of Sodom was. But Olliff and Hodges read into Ezekiel their own preoccupation. The "abomination" of male-male sex is not what was on Ezekiel's mind.

Olliff and Hodges see no similarity between God's sending messengers to Sodom and Jesus' sending disciples to the towns of Israel. Well, what can one say? Their narrow agenda excludes recognition of the obvious. Nonetheless, as it suits their purpose, they suggest that there is an *a fortiori* argument at stake in the passage. Well, such argument only works when there is something similar in both cases to begin with.

Olliff and Hodges's argument, that Genesis 19 mentions homosexual rape precisely because it is a worse sin than heterosexual rape (the *a fortiori* argument again), begs the question. The argument only holds if one presumes from the beginning that male-male sex is the worse sin. But that it is a sin at all is precisely the point that Olliff and Hodges need to demonstrate. Repeatedly, their "arguments" hold only if one presumes their conclusion beforehand.

By the same token, their thinking in this case is anachronistic. In a patriarchal society, like ancient Israel, it is highly dubious that male rape would be a worse offense than female rape. Only for the victim would it be a bad thing. It would include insult as well as injury, forcing the man, so it was thought, into the

inferior role of a women. But in thus humiliating another man, the rapist would surely win the acclaim of all his fellows. Homosexual rape would be a much more prestigious act than mere run-of-the-mill heterosexual rape. The abuse of other men, and not the sex act itself, is the point behind ancient male-male rape, and such cruelty is precisely the offense in the story of Sodom. Olliff and Hodges are really off base to treat male-male rape as just another instance of male-male sex under other circumstances.

Finally, Olliff and Hodges — and Bahnsen, whom they quote — evacuate the Scriptures of their core sacred message. In their minds it was only Sodom's sexual interest that merited God's punishment, and apart from the sex, Sodom could have rebelled against God all it wanted, and it would not have been worthy of devastation. It is hard to believe that Olliff and Hodges actually said that. What a distortion of values! What a misrepresentation of the Bible! What ignorance of Jesus' own example! In the face of such thinking, what can one say? There can be no reasoning with the obtuse mind.

Olliff and Hodges's treatment of Sodom is a smokescreen. It distorts the biblical teaching. Whereas the Bible is concerned about justice, compassion, and love -- and Sodom is the supreme counter-example -- they want to focus on sex acts. These are simply not the concern of Genesis 19.

### **Romans 1:18-32**

I skip to Romans because its meaning clarifies that of Leviticus 18:22.

Olliff and Hodges badly misrepresent my position. I do not "[define] the words in verses 24-27 so that they have no ethical implications, and then ... [use] those word definitions to determine the context of the passage." What I do is check to see what *Paul* means when *he* uses those particular words elsewhere, and then I interpret the passage in light of *Paul's* general usage. This is no circular argument. On the contrary, Olliff and Hodges's naive insistence on "context" constitutes a circular argument: their recurrent presupposition (seen already regarding Genesis 19) is that same-sex acts are sinful in themselves and, therefore, they insist, any reference to same-sex acts must be condemning, and, therefore, any words used to describe them must have a negative ethical meaning. Circular reasoning controls Olliff and Hodges's arguments, not mine.

Regarding "nature": Paul was a Christian Jew, not a Greek philosopher. He did not use the term "nature" in the abstract sense of "essence." The suggestion that he did is a gross anachronism. The research reported in Bernadette Brooten's *Love Between Women*, reported in my 2000 edition, provides even more evidence on this point. The historical evidence continues to mount, and it all points in the same direction. Like trying to convince those who deny that the Holocaust ever happened, there is no possibility of arguing this point. It is a matter of historical fact. Olliff and Hodges read their own mind into Paul.

As for *para physin*, mistranslated "unnatural": It is a technical term borrowed from Stoic philosophy, wherein it would be correctly translated "unnatural." But Paul, not a philosopher but a popular preacher, uses the technical term in its current popular meaning. Brooten's work shows that the popular understanding of *para physin*, evident in Romans, was widespread in Paul's day. Romans 11:24 shows indubitably that Paul meant "atypical" by those Greek words. And, if he means atypical in one place, he means atypical in another; that is how he understood this term. Appeal to context in this case is but another example of Olliff and Hodges's recurrent subjectivism. Their blatantly self-serving argument is this: In Romans 11 the term refers to God, so it could not have a negative ethical meaning; but in Romans 1 it refers to same-sex acts, so it must have a negative meaning. But why must it have a negative meaning in Romans 1? Only because Olliff and Hodges presuppose from the beginning that same-sex acts are to be condemned. They beg the question again. So sure are they of their "biblical" (read: Fundamentalist) teaching, they simply do not allow for the possibility that Paul may have been thinking differently.

In its root meaning, the word *atimia* refers to social repute and not to ethical standing. Olliff and Hodges confuse the matter by not sorting out the difference between the ethical status of someone's act (good or evil) and the reputation that may accrue to them (praise or condemnation) because of the act. Depending on the audience, the reputation might be positive or negative regardless of the good or evil of

the act. The good would hold a good act in high esteem and an evil act in disrepute. But just the opposite for the wicked: They would hold a good act in disrepute and an evil act in high esteem. Repute does not necessarily equate with ethical standing. Keep these two considerations clear and it is obvious that *atimia* is not a term of ethical judgment but a term of social repute. This assessment holds in every single place that Paul uses *atimia*. Olliff and Hodges's arguments to the contrary simply confuse these two considerations.

And there is worse. Olliff and Hodges argue that the Jews held Paul in dishonor because they thought his actions were wrong, and therefore, they insist, being held in dishonor means being judged to be wrong. Well, obviously. But the telling question is, *Was he wrong?* Sort out the ethical status of his actions from his reputation among the objecting Jews and it is obvious that in itself the term *atimia* carries no ethical weight. Not only do Olliff and Hodges miss the point. In this argument, they also violate their own principles again. Recall that they reject all cultural norms except their own "biblical" (i.e., Fundamentalist) ones. Yet here they are perfectly willing to allow that the Jews' cultural norms determine what is right and wrong. Take them seriously and Paul is, indeed, to be condemned for preaching Christ. Here is another instance in which they speak out of both sides of their mouth. Their treatment of *atimia* is really out of line.

Or again, regarding 1 Corinthians 11:14, that men should not wear long hair: Olliff and Hodges insist that this is not "an arbitrary cultural decree." Supposedly, it has to do with keeping clear who is a woman and who, a man. Sorry. I did not realize that it was the length of one's hair that made the difference. And I did not know that, along with the ten commandments, God also decreed what hair styles are allowed and forbidden. If Olliff and Hodges really believe that God did so decree, well, excuse me, I beg out of the discussion on this one. But note the implications of Olliff and Hodges's Reconstructionism.

Or again, even if we were to read Olliff and Hodges's extreme predestination theology into Romans 9:21, Paul is using a metaphor. He is literally speaking of a potter and clay and pots. And the pot "made for dishonor (*atimia*)" would supposedly stand for the damned soul. But bringing the damned souls into the discussion does not take away from the fact that some kind of actual clay pots are in question. Otherwise there is no basis for comparison, and there can be no metaphor. Then what pots were these? Is the suggestion of chamber pots unreasonable? And though they are distasteful, there is nothing unethical about them. Q.E.D. Olliff and Hodges's argument is a smoke screen. 2 Timothy 2:20 uses the very same image, and this time it applies fully to those within the household of God. Predestination to hell is out of the question.

Finally, the fact that I did not site in my 1994 edition every single place in the New Testament in which *atimia* occurs does not take away from the conclusion that follows even if one were to consult every single occurrence. I have consulted them, and they are reported in my 2000 edition. The word simply does not have an ethical meaning; it refers to reputation. Paul's parallel phrasing in 2 Corinthians 6:8 makes this perfectly clear: "in honor or dishonor (*atimia*), in ill repute and good repute."

The same must be said for *aschemosyne*, though this word is rare in the Christian Testament. Making the usage in 1 Corinthians 7:36 ethical requires reading sexual perversions into the text, and such a reading is not called for. As for 1 Corinthians 15:5, love is not rude or unseemly: *rude* is a term that regards social etiquette. Just because the passage is on love does not mean that everything in it stands on the same ethical level. (Besides, wouldn't turning your back on someone in need be rude, if not worse. But Olliff and Hodges argued strenuously that hospitality is not a part of love.)

Basically, Olliff and Hodges claim to show that the three descriptive terms in Romans 1 — *paraphysin*, *atimia*, and *aschemosyne* — imply ethical condemnation. Their case is not convincing. It does not stand up to a careful examination of Paul's usage elsewhere. Olliff and Hodges seem to be grasping at straws. They emphasize any conceivable angle that might introduce ethical condemnation into these words. The ethical condemnation they find is only what they themselves have imported into the texts. These words are not of ethical import in Paul's standard usage, so it is absolutely legitimate to understand them to be free of ethical condemnation in Romans 1.

Then the other terms in Romans 1 are not telling. They all depend on those three descriptors. For,

even as Olliff and Hodges admit, the other terms are ambiguous. They "can go either way." Their intent depends on their context. My argument is that those three descriptor terms set the context, and those terms are not ethically condemning. So impurity or uncleanness (*akatharsia*) should be understood in the Jewish sense of the word, referring to ritual impurity, and not in the Christian sense, referring to inner moral corruption. When the Jewish Law is in question, other places in the Christian Scriptures also continue to use the word *impurity* in the Jewish sense (Matthew 23:27, Acts 10:14, 28, 11:8). Similarly with desire (*epithymia*), passion (*pathos*), and sexual desire (*orexis*): in the context of Romans 1:24-27, there is no reason to take these words negatively.

It follows, then, that the passage does fall into two distinguishable sections. Olliff and Hodges's assertion that "there is not the slightest hint of discontinuity in the passage" simply glosses over the facts. 1) Different topics are explicitly announced in verses 24 and 28: impurity and real wrongs. 2) A deliberate contrast in terminology is maintained: social disapproval versus moral evil. 3) Sexual issues occur in verses 24-27 but not one in verses 28-32 (except in the King James Version, which relies on the corrupted Greek *Textus Receptus*, as is commonly known). 4) Rhetorically, a theme phrase, "God gave them up," indicates a deliberate division of sections. 5) The "And" of verse 28 emphasizes that division. 6) Intending to draw a second conclusion, verse 28 summarizes the overall argument of verses 18-24 before introducing the new point. And 7) the perfect participle, *pepleromenous*, in verse 28, locates the time of "already having been filled" as prior to the time of the main verb in God's "giving them up," so the evils in verses 28-32 have occurred before the sexual acts in verses 24-27, and the sexual acts cannot to be lumped together with the evils. Olliff and Hodges never even addressed points 1), 3), 6), and 7).

To Olliff and Hodges it seems foolish that, because of idolatry, God would deliver up a people to something as comparatively trivial as ritual impurities, "ethically neutral cultural taboos." (Again, Olliff and Hodges speak out of both sides of their mouth. They conveniently forget that here they are talking about the "cultural taboos" of the Bible. Why do they insist on them so forcefully at one point -- like the length of one's hair -- and then dismiss them as trivial at another point?) They fail to recognize that Paul is mounting an argument regarding the Jewish Law, and it includes ritual requirements as well as matters of justice and morals. Paul is merely suggesting that, because the Gentiles do not worship the God of Israel, they do not know the Jewish Law and — well, of course — they indulge in "dirty" practices forbidden by the Jewish Law as well as in real sins. Paul will quickly point out to the Jews that, by committing real sins themselves, they are guilty before the whole Law, both ritual and ethical, so they would do well to abandon their reliance on their self-righteous adherence to the Law — and in the process realize that the ritual requirements are not relevant in Christ Jesus.

Anyone familiar with the Letter to the Romans will recognize in that last sentence a major theme in the Letter. The suggestion is that Paul began his letter with a reference to same-sex acts because it was an effective way for him to introduce his major points. Olliff and Hodges question this interpretation. They wonder why Paul would not jump right into the major controversial issues of circumcision and dietary laws. Well, Paul was no fool. Despite the fact that Paul "did not ... dance around controversial issues," he was very shrewd about how he approached them. Why he would be circumspect in writing to the Romans, I already explained in my book. Rome is not Jerusalem nor Galatia nor Corinth. Olliff and Hodges's appeal of these other cases is irrelevant — unless, fundamentalist-like, we insist that Paul have only a one-act show and never tailored his preaching to his particular audience. Of course, even a cursory comparison of Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, and Philipians makes clear that he did tailor his preaching to his audience.

Olliff and Hodges can see no connection between Paul's treatment of circumcision and dietary rules, on the one hand, and sexual mores, on the other. First, Olliff and Hodges misunderstand the term *mores* when they claim sexual mores are no part of ritual purity. Unless they simply lack understanding of this English word, I suspect their Fundamentalist mindset is again the culprit. It seems they can imagine nothing having to do with sex (or anything else, for that matter) that is not strictly ethical. Recall that they outright reject the validity of all custom, convention, courtesy, cultural requirements — all mores. For them such things are irrelevant. Rather, supposedly, all social requirements are God-given and universally required practices — like driving on the right rather than the left side of the road, measuring in feet rather than meters, and wearing one's hair a certain length. (Again, their Reconstructionism projects frightening

prospects.) But the Jewish Law indisputably included purity requirements regarding menstrual flow, seminal emission, circumcision, and childbirth. If these are not sexual mores, what are they? Examining Romans 1:18-32, I argued that Paul believed male-male sex fell into the same category, that it was merely a matter of impurity (1:24). One may agree or disagree. But whether or not purity rules governed sexual practices is not up for debate. The fact is that they did. The Jewish Law included sexual mores. Olliff and Hodges's mention of adultery, incest, fornication, and lust involves morality, not mores, and is just another red herring in this discussion.

Second, then, there is an obvious connection between food, circumcision, and sexual mores: They all fell under the purity rules. So the discussion of conscience in Romans 14, though it focuses on dietary laws, is also relevant to these other matters of Jewish purity requirements, including the proscription of male-male sex: Paul wrote, "*Nothing* is unclean in itself." That the word *akatharsia* of Romans 1:24 does not occur in Romans 14 is not telling. Both these places are clearly talking about the same thing, purity requirements. The language of purity is patent in these two passages. There are many ways of making the same point. Meaning, not verbiage, is what ultimately matters. Apparently, once again, the verbal literalism, of which Olliff and Hodges accuse me, appears to be their own problem: "All is yellow to the jaundiced eye."

Besides, there is even good reason why *akatharsia* does not occur in Romans 14. By that point in his letter, probably turning the corner at 6:19, Paul is unfolding his fully Christian understanding of purity and conscience. So the term "impurity" (*akatharsia*) would no longer carry the Jewish ritual meaning but now the Christian ethical meaning, as is common elsewhere in Paul's writings. Paul, the teacher, presented his instruction step by step. He moved from one point to another, from Judaism to Christianity. The continuity throughout the journey is his focus on purity requirements, whether regarding male-male sex (Romans 1), circumcision (Romans 2), or dietary laws (Romans 14). His conclusion is clear: None of them matters. In Christ impurity means corruption of the heart, violation of conscience, disregard for one's fellows — not specified external behaviors. And, if Romans 1 actually does portray male-male sex as an impurity, not an ethical issue, then it, too, in and of itself, does not matter in Christ.

Olliff and Hodges only support my argument when they substitute "eating certain foods" for "engaging in male-male sex" in my text and realize that the substitution works perfectly. But of course. That was my point. Purity issues are purity issues. Requirements that apply to the ones apply to the others, as well. But Romans is in part about the irrelevance of Jewish purity laws for Christians. And the prohibition of male-male sex is one of those purity laws.

I am well aware that this conclusion is at odds with the standard interpretation, but careful attention to Romans 1:18-32 supports this conclusion and suggests that the standard interpretation is wrong. Besides, this conclusion squares with Paul's thinking overall.

Coming at the matter from a completely different direction and apparently unaware of Countryman's liberating interpretation of Romans 1, which I am defending, B. Barbara Hall ("Homosexuality and a New Creation," in Charles Hefling's *Our Selves, Our Souls & Bodies*, pp. 142-156) argues that Paul would not be concerned about differences in sexual orientation today. Paul's vision of Christianity was revolutionary. Galatians 6:11-16 and 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 present a picture of a new order in Christ in which all standard polarities and categories are superseded and become irrelevant. Galatians 3:28 gives a specific listing and shows how radical Paul's thought is: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ." 1 Corinthians 7 illustrates that in Paul's mind there is no one right way for Christians to live their sexuality. Paul is open to all the options of his day. Not one's specific lifestyle, but the Christian virtue one expresses through it, is what matters.

Hall's understanding of Pauline teaching squares perfectly with the interpretation of Romans 1 that I have presented. My point is this: My interpretation of Romans 1 is not the propaganda of the lunatic fringe but a careful unearthing of Paul's profound understanding of the freedom to which God has called us in Christ. I invite others at least to consider this possibility. I encourage others to ponder Paul's liberating vision.

### Leviticus 18:22, 20:13

I argued that the prohibition of male-male sex in Leviticus was a matter of ritual purity and not of ethics. Olliff and Hodges disputed the matter.

First, I outright reject and vehemently protest their simplistic misrepresentation of my position. On page 53 of my (1994) book (2000, p. 65), I explicitly allow for the fact that some of the proscriptions in the Holiness Code of Leviticus are ethical and not merely cultural, "not just a ritual impurity but a real wrong or an injustice." Similarly, on page 46 (2000, p. 54) I wrote that "a main concern of the Holiness Code was to keep Israel different from the Gentiles." I did not even write "the" main concern, let alone "the only" concern. I indicated one concern among others. So Olliff and Hodges are either careless or dishonest or both when they say I "attempt to dismiss the entire section [the Holiness Code]" and that I claimed "its point was to separate Israel from its neighbors, not to identify intrinsically immoral acts" and that I tried "to classify this word [*toevah*] in strictly nonethical terms" and that I "stamp words with only one definition." Again and again, Olliff and Hodges show themselves incapable of discerning nuance. The mistake they react to is theirs, not mine.

However, Olliff and Hodges do raise some interesting considerations about the term *abomination* in Leviticus 18:22, and these deserve comment. In the end, they amount to nothing, but Olliff and Hodges's rhetoric sounds impressive and clouds the discussion, so I must respond to their challenge.

In my book (p. 48; 2000, p. 56) I quote Leviticus 20:25-26, explaining that it "suggests what abomination means." I was contrasting ritual impurity with ethical evil. Again inattentive to what I actually wrote, Olliff and Hodges make a big point of the fact that this passage uses the Hebrew word *shaqats* (a verbal form), and not *toevah*, which occurs in 18:22. Well, I was not using this quote to illustrate the word *toevah* but to suggest the sense of the word "abomination," which translates both *sheqets* (the nominal form) and *toevah*, for the sense can be the same for both of them. Olliff and Hodges attempt to suggest that *toevah* does not carry this same sense. They list quote after quote in which *toevah* clearly has an ethical meaning. I never denied that it can have an ethical meaning. I am happy to note that they finally also admit that "toevah is sometimes used in nonethical terms." But this "sometimes" is bigger than they let on.

*Toevah* -- along with its Greek equivalent *bdelygma* -- is undeniably and repeatedly used in the Old Testament to refer to mere ritual impurity. The root meaning of the word is disgust, dislike, and not evil or wickedness or sinfulness. The word takes on an ethical meaning only via its root meaning. For example, in Genesis 43:32 and 46:34, *toevah* refers to cultural aversions among the Egyptians: eating bread or being a shepherd. In Deuteronomy 14:3, 22:5, 23:18, and 24:4, *toevah* refers to forbidden foods, prescribed clothing, "tainted" money, and restrictions on remarriage. In Psalm 88:8 *toevah* refers to being disliked or shunned by others. In Proverbs 13:19 and 29:27 *toevah* refers to the fool's feelings for the behavior of the virtuous (sounds like *atimia* all over again). And so on and so on. Moreover, *sheqets* occurs eleven times in the Old Testament (Leviticus 7:2, 11:10, 11, 12, 13, 20, 23, 41, 42; Isaiah 66:17; Ezekiel 8:10) and consistently refers only to ritual impurity. All eleven occurrences are translated *bdelygma* in the Greek Septuagint. This is the very same Greek word that is most often used to translate *toevah* (70 times out of the 117 occurrences). Clearly, the meanings of *toevah* and *sheqets* are closely related and in many cases identical — which is to say, *toevah* undoubtedly carries a meaning of mere ritual impurity, and quoting a verse that contains the word *shaqats* does not misrepresent the basic meaning of *toevah*. (By the way, the Septuagint's Greek translation was made centuries before Jesus and centuries before anyone was reconsidering the implications of homosexual orientation.) What is more, in the cases in which *toevah* indicates something forbidden, many of those things have to do with ritual: worship, sacrifice, rites. That is to say, many of these are mere ritual requirements and not strictly ethical, even though they have to do with liturgical laws that govern the worship of God. On the other hand, of course, some of the things called *toevah* are clearly unethical, as Olliff and Hodges pointed out and I also acknowledged.

The bottom line is that the word *toevah* is ambiguous in its wide range of occurrences. It "can go both ways." But since this is so, *toevah* does not have to imply the unethical, on which Olliff and Hodges insist in the case of male-male sex. Indeed, the weight of the evidence suggests that, all things being equal, *toevah* should not be understood to carry an ethical implication. When the case is uncertain, the benefit of

the doubt falls on the side of mere ritual impurity.

Therefore, it would be perfectly correct to understand the *toevah* of Leviticus 18:22 to be a mere ritual condemnation, one without ethical implications. This conclusion would especially be supported if there were, indeed, reasons to believe that no ethical condemnation were originally intended. I summarized those reasons in my book. One reason that should not be overlooked is the authority of the Apostle Paul. If Countryman's interpretation of Romans 1 is correct, as argued above, then Paul himself understood Leviticus 18:22 to be a matter of mere ritual purity.

In view of all the evidence, the hoopla that Olliff and Hodges made over *toevah* and *shaqats* and *bdelygma* amounts to nothing. Once again it appears that they are begging the question, reading their presupposed condemnation into the Leviticus text, never once allowing that the intent to the text is simply not so clear as they want to believe. Still, this discussion has been useful to clarify my interpretation, borrowed from John Boswell, and to confirm its legitimacy. Personally, the more the Fundamentalists have challenged me and made me reexamine my argument, the more confident I have become that the scholars I summarized had indeed done their homework and that my book is right on target. I have no reservations about having the book go into further printings and be translated and published in other languages. The 2002 edition presents an even stronger argument for what I wrote in the first edition. In fact, recent research (by Boyarin and Olyan) makes clear beyond doubt that Leviticus and the Old Testament were simply not concerned about same-sex acts in themselves. Only one act between men was forbidden, penetrative anal sex, and the grounds on which it was forbidden, Jewish purity rules, have no bearing on today's discussion.

I do not expect Olliff and Hodges to agree with my conclusion, nor do I expect to easily persuade many others on the spot. But by this point in the discussion, I would expect that any reasonable and good-willed person would *at least* recognize that the biblical teaching on homosexuality is highly debatable. Olliff and Hodges's repeatedly insist that the Bible's teaching on this subject is "crystal clear" — as if saying it's so "in Jesus' name" again and again will make it so. The reality is otherwise. If anything is crystal clear, it is that there are serious arguments on both sides of the question and my argument is *at least* as weighty as theirs. I cannot imagine how a reasonable person, if perhaps not fully agreeing with my interpretation, would not at least recognize that, on the other hand, there are serious questions surrounding Olliff and Hodges's interpretation.

I would consider it a major advance if we could agree on only that much, if we could agree that there are legitimate differences of opinion. Then I could believe that I am at least dealing with reasonable and honest people. Moreover, to have achieved only this much agreement would constitute a major contribution to our society. We would have at least agreed that merely quoting the Bible resolves nothing about the ethics of homosexuality. Then we could open real discussion on the matter and begin forging an ethics that fits the know facts and that fosters the common good. Is the common good not what ethics is about? In contrast, my sense is that hard-core Bible religion is a major obstacle to social cohesion. Indeed, the explicit agenda of Olliff and Hodges and their cohorts is to force all such discussion underground and to have their unquestioned opinion reign.

Such thoughts were behind my statement at Georgia Tech: We need to neutralize the Fundamentalists' appeal to the Bible so that people of good will in a pluralistic society can get on with the business of wholesome living. Once again, my statement and what Olliff and Hodges heard and reported are significantly different. It is precisely for this reason, because of repeated misrepresentation and distortion of facts, that I believe it imperative to neutralize their teaching and their political force in our society. Their agenda of theocratic domination is dangerous. My hope is that reasonable people of good will might grasp what Scripture scholars are saying and in response to Fundamentalism start protesting out loud, every time Fundamentalists simplistically quote the Bible, that the Bible's teaching on homosexuality is highly debated. Then we might get the totalitarian biblical arguments out of the discussion. Then we might get down to the serious business of responsibly addressing our society's real needs.



## **1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10**

My book presents a long discussion of these two texts. The discussion centers around the meaning of an obscure Greek term *arsenokoitai*. Nothing that Olliff and Hodges writes on this matter inclines me to reconsider the conclusion in my book. For the most part, what they write leaves me feeling insulted. They call me names and preach at me and others. Their treatment is filled with personal attack. They make me and not my argument the focus of attention.

Two brief comments. First, Olliff and Hodges are badly mistaken when they deny that there was any concern about exploitative and abusive male-male sex in the Roman Empire. I documented this assertion above.

Second, I argued that Paul borrowed the lists of sins in these texts from the culture of the day. Olliff and Hodges outright reject such a possibility. But only in this case. So again we catch Olliff and Hodges standing simultaneously on both sides of an issue. At one point they take the trouble to discern where Paul's terms come from. They report (actually quoting me) that *arsenokoitai* is a literal Greek translation of a Hebrew phrase from rabbinic Judaism. Paul borrowed this term from his culture. He did not receive it intact through direct inspiration from God. Yet a few paragraphs later Olliff and Hodges rage against "a culturally and democratically conditioned theory of ethics" and "ethical pronouncements from the uninspired men around [Paul]." Cultural influences are allowed in one case but not in another, and the only criterion seems to be whether or not Olliff and Hodges agree with the cultural forces. This is typical of Fundamentalism. Olliff and Hodges feign following historical critical method, but they take it only so far. Whenever it challenges their own ideas, they change the rules.

## **Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve**

In my book I argued that the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 do not advance an opinion on homosexuality. Olliff and Hodges disagree, but they never engage the biblical material. Instead, they present a theology of marriage. They speak of Paul's view of nature, the relationship of husband and wife as an image of Christ's union with the church, and the unity in diversity that is the Trinity. These are inspiring thoughts. They present an up-lifting understanding of marriage. But Pauline theology and trinitarian theology are not in Genesis 1 and 2.

Olliff and Hodges likewise appeal to the theory of complementarity, the notion that man and woman are uniquely made for one another (as if all people, men and women, on various levels, were not able to complement one another). As I recall, this theory was first developed in early Protestant theology. It is hardly the elaborated teaching of Genesis.

Again, and quite blatantly this time, Olliff and Hodges read their own theology into the biblical text. They are not following historical-critical method. This method restricts itself to determining what the texts themselves say in their original historical contexts, whereas Olliff and Hodges read the texts in light of their own current theology. For them the texts just provide an occasion to expound their personal views. Now, Olliff and Hodges are free to use the Bible in that way, if they so choose, but if they do, they should not pretend that they are representing what the Bible actually says.

## **The Centurion's Servant**

In my lecture at Georgia Tech (and elsewhere), I summarized an interpretation of Matthew 8:5-13 and Luke 7:1-10, which James E. Miller shared with me. The 2000 edition of my book includes this material. Again in this case, Olliff and Hodges misrepresent my argument and, of course, they disagree with it. In addition to attending to my argument, the reader might also notice how different my presentation is from what Olliff and Hodges say that I said. Once again, they malign me when, on the basis of this material, they attribute to me sweeping opinions like "it is almost surely the case that Jesus did not think that homosexuality is sinful."

Both Matthew and Luke reproduce the words of the centurion who asked Jesus to heal his slave boy. The centurion refers to the slave as *pais* (boy, son, slave [and, in some places, male lover: see John Boswell, *Same Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*, pp. 89, 93 n. 198]), but he refers to his other slaves as *doulos* (slave). Moreover, Luke refers to the slave as *doulos*, so it is clear that the boy was a young slave, not a son. Moreover, Luke recounts that the boy was "dear" (*entimos*) to the centurion and that the centurion built a synagogue for the Jews — from which we can assume that the centurion was wealthy.

The telling question is this: Why was the centurion so concerned about his slave boy? Miller points out that the Greek word *entimos*, "dear," could refer to financial cost, but if the centurion was wealthy, cost would be irrelevant. It could refer to the slave's importance in running the household, but if the slave was young, it is unlikely he would be highly skilled and trusted. And finally, it could refer to an emotional bond, and this reference is the most likely meaning in the case of the centurion.

What, then, was the relationship between the centurion and the slave boy? We have no way of knowing for certain. But given what we know about sexual practices among the Romans and especially about officers on patrol in the far reaches of the empire, it is highly likely that the boy was the centurion's sex partner and that the centurion fell in love with the boy. Hence the centurion's extreme concern over what would otherwise be a mere slave. If this interpretation is accurate — and the likelihood is high, and Jesus was undoubtedly aware of Roman same-sex practices — then in the case of the centurion, Jesus knowingly encountered one partner of a male-male romance. Jesus' reaction is instructive. He said nothing about the man's relationships with the boy but only commended the centurion's faith, healed the boy, and restored him to the centurion.

Did Jesus think homosexuality was okay? We do not know what Jesus thought. All we know is what he said and did. In the very least he gave us a lesson on compassion: Times of sickness and death are not times for preaching hellfire and brimstone at people. In the era of AIDS, many religious leaders could benefit from this lesson.

But the incident of the centurion's servant boy does seem to have broader implications. On the basis of the evidence, one could argue that Jesus was not disturbed by the homosexuality of his day. It is striking that we have not one recorded word of Jesus about homosexual love, which, according to the Fundamentalists, is the greatest of all sins, the sin that supposedly merited the destruction of Sodom (Genesis 19) and that is supposedly the prime instance of outright rebellion against God's plan for creation (Romans 1). But Jesus never mentioned it. Moreover, neither did Matthew and Luke make an issue of the relationship between the centurion and the slave boy. They did not even provide the historical evidence needed to characterize with certainty what was very likely a homosexual relationship. Their only concern was to provide later generations a lesson on faith and good will.

Olliff and Hodges object to the reasoning behind that interpretation. They suggest with horror that, on parallel reasoning, given Jesus' encounter with slave owners, one could argue "it is almost surely the case that Jesus did not think that slavery is sinful." Well, yes, of course, and one would be right. The reasoning is absolutely consistent, and we have no reason whatever to believe that Jesus thought slavery was wrong. On the contrary, he uses slave-and-master motifs in so many of his parables that it is obvious that he simply took this practice, ingrained in his culture, for granted.

What is revealing is the Olliff and Hodges think Jesus did oppose slavery. They don't say why, and I can't imagine why, except that they must think of Jesus as somehow not completely human. But if Jesus really was human, he certainly lived with the limitations that all human beings have. That the culture in which he lived would limit his judgment is absolutely to be expected. Indeed, we have evidence that Jesus made blatant mistakes in other cases. The Gospels document Jesus' ignorance. "He did not know who touched him in the crowd (Mark 5:30-33). He confused Old Testament figures: Ahimelech, not Aviathar, was high priest when David entered the sanctuary (Mark 2:26); Zechariah, who was killed between the sanctuary and the altar, was son of Johoiada, not son of Barachiah (Matthew 23:35)" (D. A. Helminiak, *The Same Jesus: A Contemporary Christology*, p. 198). Is it scandalous that God could become one of us and as one of us make honest mistakes? If one cannot accept the real humanity of Christ, can one really call oneself Christian?

## CONCLUSION

My "Rebuttal" to Olliff and Hodges's "Reformed Response" ends on the same note on which it began. The contrast between their and my understanding of Jesus is very revealing of the difference between their brand of religion and mine. I have no problem affirming a Jesus who was like us in all things but sin (Hebrews 4:15) or biblical authors who wrote under the inspiration of God but in their own idiom and from the perspective of their own place and time. As a Christian, I embrace both the human and the divine, and I believe in the eventual coincidence of the two in God through the redemptive work of Christ and the sanctifying gift of the Holy Spirit. The religion of Olliff and Hodges is a very different thing. It does not allow openness to the human or to changing history. It cannot be fully open to what the Bible texts actually teach in their own places and times. No wonder Olliff and Hodges are not open to the actual teaching of the Bible on homosexuality.

I would hope that the contrast between these two positions is clear. I would further hope that people reading this Rebuttal would be challenged to make a choice. Finally, I would hope that those making the choice would have enough knowledge of the Christian tradition to recognize which position is "Christian" and which is not.