

Homosexuality and the Bible

Walter Wink

Sexual issues are tearing our churches apart today as never before. The issue of homosexuality threatens to fracture whole denominations, as the issue of slavery did a hundred and fifty years ago. We naturally turn to the Bible for guidance and find ourselves mired in interpretative quicksand. Is the Bible able to speak to our confusion on this issue?

The debate over homosexuality is a remarkable opportunity, because it raises in an especially acute way how we interpret the Bible, not in this case only, but in numerous others as well. The real issue here, then, is not simply homosexuality, but how Scripture informs our lives today.

Some passages that have been advanced as pertinent to the issue of homosexuality are, in fact, irrelevant. One is the attempted gang rape in Sodom (Gen. 19: 1-29). That was a case of ostensibly heterosexual males intent on humiliating strangers by treating them “like women,” thus demasculinizing them. (This is also the case in a similar account in Judges 19-21.) Their brutal behavior has nothing to do with the problem of whether genuine love expressed between consenting adults of the same sex is legitimate or not. Likewise, Deut. 23:17-18 must be pruned from the list, since it most likely refers to male and female heterosexual *prostitutes* involved in Canaanite fertility rites that have infiltrated Israelite worship; whether these males are “gay” or “straight,” a mature same-sex love relationship is not under discussion.

Several other texts are ambiguous. It is not clear whether I Cor. 6:9 and I Tim. 1:10 refer to the “passive” and “active” partners in homosexual relationships, or to homosexual and heterosexual male prostitutes. In short, it is unclear whether the issue is homosexuality alone, or promiscuity and “sex for hire.”

Unequivocal Condemnations

Putting these texts to the side, we are left with three references, all of which unequivocally condemn homosexual behavior. Lev. 18:22 states the principle: “You [masculine] shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination” (NRSV). The second (Lev. 20:13) adds the penalty: “If a man lies with a male as a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.”

Such an act was regarded as an “abomination” for several reasons. The Hebrew prescientific understanding was that male semen contained the whole of nascent life. With no knowledge of eggs and ovulation, it was assumed that the woman provided only the incubating space. Hence the spilling of semen for any nonprocreative purpose—in coitus interruptus (Gen. 38:1-11), male homosexual acts, or male masturbation—was considered tantamount to murder. Female homosexual acts were consequently not so seriously regarded and are not mentioned at all in the Old Testament (but compare Rom. 1:26.) (For rabbinic censure of masturbation, see *b. Niddah* 13a and *b. Sanhedrin* 54b.) But Israelites also affirmed sexual intercourse for pleasure and companionship and permitted it during pregnancy and after menopause, when conception was not possible. Birth control as such is not mentioned in the Bible, but the Talmud lists exceptions when an “absorbent” could be used (by a minor, a pregnant woman, or a nursing wife – *b.*

Yebamoth 100b.) Generally the injunction to “be fruitful and multiply” prevailed (Gen. 1:28.) One can appreciate how a tribe struggling to populate a country in which its people were outnumbered might value procreation highly, but such values are rendered questionable in a world facing uncontrolled overpopulation.

In addition, when a man acted like a woman sexually, male dignity was compromised. It was a degradation not only in regard to himself but for every other male. And the repugnance felt toward homosexuality was not just that it was deemed unnatural but also that it was considered alien behavior, representing yet one more incursion of pagan civilization into Israel’s life. On top of that is the more universal repugnance heterosexuals tend to feel for acts and orientations foreign to them. (Left-handedness has evoked something of the same response in many cultures.)

Whatever the rationale for their formulation, however, the texts leave no room for maneuvering. Persons committing homosexual acts are to be executed. This is the unambiguous command of Scripture. The meaning is clear: anyone who wishes to base his or her beliefs on the witness of the Old Testament must be completely consistent and demand the death penalty for everyone who performs homosexual acts. (That may seem extreme, but there actually are some Christians urging this very thing today. It is unlikely, however, that any American court or religious body will condemn a homosexual to death, even though Scripture clearly commands it.)

For Christians, Old Testament texts have to be weighed against the New. Consequently Paul’s unambiguous condemnation of homosexual behavior in Rom. 1:26-27 must be the centerpiece of any discussion.

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

No doubt Paul was unaware of the distinction between sexual orientation, over which one has apparently no choice, and sexual behavior, over which one does. He seemed to assume that those whom he condemns are heterosexuals who were acting contrary to nature, “leaving,” “giving up,” or “exchanging” their regular sexual orientation for that which was foreign to them. Paul knew nothing of the modern psychosexual understanding of homosexuals as persons whose orientation is fixed early in life or perhaps even genetically in some cases. For such persons, having heterosexual relations would be contrary to nature, “leaving,” “giving up,” or “exchanging” their natural sexual orientation for one that was unnatural to them.

In other words, Paul really thought that those whose behavior he condemned were “straight,” and that they were behaving in ways that were unnatural to them. Paul believed that everyone was straight. He had no concept of homosexual orientation. The idea was not available in his world. There are people who are genuinely homosexual by nature (the exact cause no one really knows, and it is irrelevant). For such a person it would be acting contrary to nature to have sexual relations with a person of the opposite sex.

Likewise, the relationships Paul describes are heavy with lust; they are not relationships between consenting adults who are committed to each other as faithfully and with as much integrity as any heterosexual couple. That was something Paul simply could not envision. Some people assume today that venereal disease and AIDS are divine punishment for homosexual behavior; we know it as a risk involved in promiscuity of every stripe, homosexual and heterosexual. In fact, the vast

majority of people with AIDS the world around are heterosexuals; we can scarcely label AIDS a divine punishment.

And Paul believes that homosexual behavior is contrary to nature, whereas we have learned that it is manifested by a wide variety of species, especially (but not solely) under the pressure of overpopulation. It would appear then to be a quite natural mechanism for preserving species. We cannot, of course, decide human ethical conduct solely on the basis of animal behavior or the human sciences, but Paul here is arguing from nature, as he himself says, and new knowledge of what is “natural” is therefore relevant to the case.

Biblical Sexual Mores

Nevertheless, the Bible quite clearly takes a negative view of same-sex sexual relations, in those few instances where it is mentioned at all. But this conclusion does not solve the problem of how we are to interpret Scripture today. For there are other sexual attitudes, practices, and restrictions that are normative in Scripture but that we no longer accept as normative:

1. Old Testament law strictly forbids sexual intercourse during the seven days of the menstrual period (Lev. 18:19; 15:19-24), and anyone in violation was to be “extirpated” or “cut off from their people” (*kareth*, Lev. 18:29, a term referring to execution by stoning, burning or strangling, or to flogging or expulsion; Lev. 15:24 omits this penalty). Today many people on occasion have intercourse during menstruation and think nothing of it. Should they be extirpated? The Bible says they should.
2. The punishment for adultery was death by stoning for both the man and the woman (Deut. 22:22), but here adultery is defined by the marital status of the woman. In the Old Testament, a man could not commit adultery against his own wife; he could only commit adultery against another man by sexually using the other’s wife. And a bride who is found not to be a virgin is to be stoned to death (Deut.22:13-21), but male virginity at marriage is never even mentioned. It is one of the curiosities of the current debate on sexuality that adultery, which creates far more social havoc, is considered less “sinful” than same-sex sexual relations. Perhaps this is because there are far more adulterers in our churches. Yet no one, to my knowledge, is calling for their stoning, despite the clear command of Scripture. And we ordain adulterers.
3. Nudity, a characteristic of paradise lost in the fall, was forbidden in Israel (2 Sam. 6:20; 10:4; Isa. 20:2-4; 47:3). When one of Noah’s sons beheld his father naked, he was cursed (Gen 9:20-27). To a great extent this nudity taboo probably even inhibited the sexual intimacy of husbands and wives. (This is still true of a surprising number of people reared in the Judeo-Christian tradition). There were no doubt exceptions; the rabbis speak of nudity in the public baths, just as many of us grew up swimming nude at the old swimming hole. Attitudes vary widely, but we today are not so likely to regard what we believe to be appropriate nudity as a sin. The Bible itself is not of one mind on the subject; God apparently instigates the nakedness of Isaiah as a prophetic warning of approaching captivity. (20:2-6.)
4. Polygamy (many wives) and concubinage (a woman living with a man to whom she is not married) were regularly practiced in the Old Testament. Neither is ever condemned by the New Testament (with the questionable exceptions of I Timothy 3:2,12 and Titus 1:6). Jesus’ teaching about marital union in Mark 10:6-8 is no exception, since he quotes Gen. 2:24 as his authority (the man and the woman will become “one flesh”), and this text was never understood in Israel as excluding polygamy. A man could become “one flesh” with more than one woman, through the

act of sexual intercourse. We know from Jewish sources that polygamy continued to be practiced within Judaism for centuries following the New Testament period. So if the Bible allowed polygamy and concubinage, why don't we?

5. A form of serial polygamy was the levirate marriage. When a married man in Israel died childless, his widow was to have intercourse with his eldest brother. If he died without producing an heir, she turned to the next brother and, if necessary, the next, and so on. Jesus mentions this custom without criticism (Mark 12:18-27 par.) Jews had virtually ceased to practice this custom by the time of Jesus, replacing it with the *halitzah* ceremony, which freed the woman from the obligation. I am not aware of any Christians who obey this unambiguous commandment of Scripture. Why do we ignore this law and yet preserve the ones regarding homosexual behavior?

6. The Old Testament nowhere explicitly prohibits sexual relations between unmarried consenting heterosexual adults, as long as the woman's economic value (bride price) is not compromised. (A Jewish girl came of age at twelve and a half, after which she assumed control from her father over her sexuality.) There are poems in the Song of Songs that eulogize a love affair between two unmarried persons, though commentators have often conspired to cover up the fact with heavy layers of allegorical interpretation. In various parts of the Christian world, quite different attitudes have prevailed about sexual intercourse before marriage. In some Christian communities, proof of fertility (that is, pregnancy) was required for marriage. This was especially the case in farming areas where the inability to produce children-workers could mean economic hardship. Today, many single adults, the widowed, and the divorced are reverting to "biblical" practice, while others believe that sexual intercourse belongs only within marriage. Which view is right?

7. The Bible virtually lacks terms for the sexual organs, being content with such euphemisms as "foot" or "thigh" for the genitals, and using other euphemisms to describe coitus, such as "he knew her." Today most of us regard such language as "puritanical" or prudish, though as James Forbes notes in his introduction to this book, we in the church continue to show great reticence in public discussion of sex. But do we want to revert to biblical practice?

8. Semen and menstrual blood rendered all who touched them ritually unclean (Lev. 15:16-24). Intercourse rendered one unclean until sundown; menstruation rendered the woman unclean for seven days. "Clean" and "unclean" do not refer to dirt but to a liminal state that recognizes the holiness of sex. Today most Christians treat semen and menstrual fluid from a completely secular point of view and regard them not as ritually "unclean" but only perhaps messy. In short, Christians no longer treat these fluids biblically.

9. Social regulations regarding adultery, incest, rape and prostitution are, in the Old Testament, determined largely by considerations of the males' property rights over women. Prostitution was considered quite natural and necessary as a safeguard of the virginity of brides and the property rights of husbands (Gen. 38:12-19; Josh. 2:1-7). In later Jewish texts, a man was not guilty of sin for visiting a prostitute, though the prostitute (or maidservant) herself was regarded as a sinner. Paul must appeal to reason in attacking prostitution (I Cor. 6:12-20); he cannot lump it in the category of adultery (vs. 9). Today we are moving, with great social turbulence and at a high but necessary cost, toward a more equitable, nonpatriarchal set of social arrangements in which women are no longer regarded as the chattel of men. We are also trying to move beyond the double standard. Love, fidelity and mutual respect replace property rights. We have, as yet, made very little progress in changing the double standard in regard to prostitution. As we leave behind patriarchal gender relations, what will we do with the patriarchalism in the Bible?

10. Israelites normally practiced endogamy—that is, marriage within the twelve tribes of Israel. There were exceptions, however. Joseph married the Egyptian Aseneth, Moses married Zipporah and the Cushite woman, Esther married Ahasueros. Until recently, endogamy prevailed in the American south, in laws against interracial marriage (miscegenation). We have witnessed, within the lifetime of many of us, the nonviolent struggle to nullify state laws against intermarriage and the gradual change in social attitudes towards interracial relationships. Sexual mores can alter quite radically even in a single lifetime.

11. The law of Moses allowed for divorce (Deut. 24:1-4); Jesus categorically forbids it (Mark 10:1-12; Matt, 19:9 softens his severity). Yet many Christians, in clear violation of a command of Jesus, have been divorced. Why, then, do some of these very people consider themselves eligible for baptism, church membership, communion, and ordination, but exclude gays and lesbians? What makes the one so much greater a sin than the other, especially considering the fact that Jesus never even mentioned homosexuality but explicitly condemned divorce? Yet we ordain and remarry people who have been divorced. Why not ordain and marry gays and lesbians? 12

12. The Old Testament regarded celibacy as abnormal, and I Tim. 4:1-3 calls compulsory celibacy a heresy. Other New Testament texts seem to support it (Matt. 19:10-12; 1 Cor. 7; Rev. 14:3-4; Acts 21:9; and Jesus' own example.) The Catholic Church has made celibacy mandatory for priests and nuns. Some Christian ethicists demand celibacy of gays and lesbians, whether they have a vocation for celibacy or not. But this legislates celibacy by category, not by divine calling. Others argue that since God made men and women for each other in order to be fruitful and multiply, gay people reject God's intent in creation. But this would mean that childless couples, single persons, priests and nuns would be in violation of God's intention in their creation. Those who argue thus must explain why the apostle Paul never married. Are they prepared to charge Jesus with violating the will of God by remaining single? Certainly sexual relations between men and women are *normal*, else the race would die out. But it is not *normative*. God can bless the world through people who are married and through people who are single, and it is false to generalize from the marriage of most people to the marriage of everyone. In I Cor. 7:7, Paul goes so far as to call marriage a "charisma," or divine gift, to which not everyone is called. He preferred that people remain as he was - unmarried. In an age of overpopulation, perhaps a gay orientation is especially sound ecologically!

13. In many other ways we have developed different norms from those explicitly laid down by the Bible. For example, "If men get into a fight with one another, and the wife of one intervenes to rescue her husband from the grip of his opponent by reaching out and seizing his genitals, you shall cut off her hand; show no pity" (Deut 25:11 f). We, on the contrary, might very well applaud her for trying to save her husband's life!

14. The Old and New Testaments both regarded slavery as normal and nowhere categorically condemned it. Part of that heritage was the use of female slaves and captives as sexual objects, concubines, or involuntary wives by their male owners, which 2 Sam. 5:13, Judges 19-21, and Num. 31:18 sanctioned—and as many American slave owners did some 150 years ago, citing these and numerous other Scripture passages as their justification.

The point is not to ridicule Israel's sexual mores. Jews right up to the present have been struggling with the same interpretive task as Christians around issues of sexuality. The majority of U.S. Jewish groups (Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist) have gay-rights policies and have been involved in the same kinds of debates over homosexuality, masturbation,

nonprocreative sexual intercourse, and so forth. The point is that both Jews and Christians must reinterpret the received tradition in order to permit it to speak to believers today.

The Problem of Authority

These cases are relevant to our attitude toward the authority of Scripture. They are not cultic prohibitions from the Holiness Code that have been set aside by Christians, such as rules about eating shellfish or wearing clothes made of two different materials. They are rules concerning sexual behavior, and they fall among the moral commandments of Scripture. Clearly we regard certain rules, especially in the Old Testament, as no longer binding. Other things we regard as binding, including legislation in the Old Testament that is not mentioned at all in the New. What is our principle of selection here?

For example; virtually all modern readers would agree with the Bible in rejecting:

- incest
- rape
- adultery
- intercourse with animals.

But we disagree with the Bible on most other sexual mores. The Bible condemned or discouraged the following behaviors which we generally allow:

- intercourse during menstruation
- celibacy (some texts)
- exogamy (marriage with non-Israelites)
- naming sexual organs
- nudity (under certain conditions)
- masturbation (some Christians still condemn this)
- birth control (some Christians still forbid this).

And the bible regarded semen and menstrual blood as unclean, which most of us do not.

Likewise, the Bible permitted behaviors that we today condemn or have discontinued:

- prostitution
- polygamy
- levirate marriage
- sex with slaves
- concubinage
- treatment of women as property
- very early marriage (for the girl, age 11-13).

And while the Old Testament accepted divorce, Jesus forbade it. In short, of the sexual mores mentioned here, we only agree with the Bible on four of them, and disagree with it on sixteen!

Surely no Christian today would recommend reviving the levirate marriage. So why do we appeal to proof texts in Scripture in the case of homosexuality alone, when we feel perfectly free to disagree with Scripture regarding most other sexual practices? Obviously many of our choices in these matters are arbitrary. Mormon polygamy was outlawed in this country, despite the constitutional protection of freedom of religion, because it violated the sensibilities of the dominant Christian culture. Yet no explicit biblical prohibition against polygamy exists.

If we insist on placing ourselves under the old law, as Paul reminds us, we are obligated to keep every commandment of the law (Gal. 5:3). But if Christ is the end of the law (Rom. 10:4), if we have been discharged from the law to serve, not under the old written code but in the new life of

the Spirit (Rom. 7:6), then all of these biblical sexual mores come under the authority of the Spirit. We cannot then take even what Paul says as a new Law. Christians reserve the right to pick and choose which sexual mores they will observe, though they seldom admit to doing just that. And this is as true of evangelicals and fundamentalists as it is of liberals and mainliners.

Judge for Yourselves

The crux of the matter, it seems to me, is simply that the Bible has no sexual ethic. There is no biblical sex ethic. Instead it exhibits a variety of sexual mores, some of which changed over the thousand-year span of biblical history. Mores are unreflective customs accepted by a given community. Many of the practices that the Bible prohibits, we allow, and many that it allows, we prohibit. The Bible knows only a love ethic, which is constantly being brought to bear on whatever sexual mores are dominant in any given country, culture, or period.

The very notion of a “sex ethic” reflects the materialism and splitness of modern life, in which we increasingly define our identity sexually. Sexuality cannot be separated from the rest of life. No sex act is “ethical” in and of itself, without reference to the rest of a person’s life, the patterns of the culture, the special circumstances faced, and the will of God. What we have are simply sexual mores, which change, sometimes with startling rapidity, creating bewildering dilemmas. Just within one lifetime we have witnessed the shift from the ideal of preserving one’s virginity until marriage to couples living together for several years before getting married. The response of many Christians is merely to long for the hypocrisies of an earlier era.

I agree that rules and norms are necessary: that is what sexual mores are. But rules and norms also tend to be impressed into the service of the system of domination and to serve as a form of crowd control rather than to enhance the fullness of human potential. So we must critique the sexual mores of any given time and clime by the love ethic exemplified by Jesus. Such a love ethic is nonexploitative (hence no sexual exploitation of children, no using of another to his or her loss); it does not dominate (hence no patriarchal treatment of women as chattel); it is responsible, mutual, caring, and loving. Augustine already dealt with this in his inspired phrase, “Love God, and do as you please.”

Our moral task, then, is to apply Jesus’ love ethic to whatever sexual mores are prevalent in a given culture. This doesn’t mean everything goes. It means that everything is to be critiqued by Jesus’ love commandment. We might address younger teens, not with laws and commandments whose violation is a sin, but rather with the sad experiences of so many of our own children who find too much early sexual intimacy overwhelming, and who react by voluntary celibacy and even the refusal to date. We can offer reasons, not empty and unenforceable orders. We can challenge both gays and straights to question their behaviors in the light of love and the requirements of fidelity, honesty, responsibility, and genuine concern for the best interests of the other and of society as a whole.

Christian morality, after all, is not an iron chastity belt for repressing urges, but a way of expressing the integrity of our relationship with God. It is the attempt to discover a manner of living that is consistent with who God created us to be. For those of same-sex orientation, as for heterosexuals, being moral means rejecting sexual mores that violate their own integrity and that of others, and attempting to discover what it would mean to live by the love ethic of Jesus.

Both Paul Egerton and Morton Kelsey argue that homosexual orientation has nothing to do with morality, any more than does left-handedness. It is simply the way some people are configured.

Morality enters the picture when that predisposition is enacted. If we saw it as a God-given gift to those for whom it is normal, we could get beyond the acrimony and brutality that have so often characterized the unchristian behavior of Christians toward gays.

Approached from the point of view of love rather than that of law, the issue is at once transformed. Now the question is not “What is permitted?” but rather “What does it mean to love my gay neighbor?” Approached from the point of view of faith rather than works, the question ceases to be “What constitutes a breach of divine law in the sexual realm?” and becomes instead “What constitutes integrity before the God revealed in the cosmic lover, Jesus Christ?” Approached from the point of view of the Spirit rather than Christian legalism, the question ceases to be “What does Scripture command?” and becomes “What is the Word that the Spirit speaks to the churches now, in the light of Scripture, tradition, theology, and, yes, psychology, genetics, anthropology, and biology?” We can’t continue to build ethics on the basis of bad science.

In a little-remembered statement, Jesus said, “Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?” (Luke 12:57 NRSV). Such sovereign freedom strikes terror in the hearts of many Christians; they would rather be under law and be told what is right. Yet Paul himself echoes Jesus’ sentiment when he says: “Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, matters pertaining to this life!” (I Cor. 6:3 RSV). The last thing Paul would want is for people to respond to his ethical advice as a new law engraved on tablets of stone. He himself is trying to “judge for himself what is right.” If now new evidence is in on the phenomenon of homosexuality, are we not obligated—no, free—to reevaluate the whole issue in the light of all the available data and decide what is right, under God, for ourselves? Is this not the radical freedom for obedience in which the gospel establishes us?

Where the bible mentions homosexual behavior at all, it clearly condemns it. I freely grant that. The issue is precisely whether that biblical judgment is correct. The Bible sanctioned slavery as well, and nowhere attacked it as unjust. Are we prepared to argue today that slavery is biblically justified? One hundred and fifty years ago, when the debate over slavery was raging, the Bible seemed to be clearly on the slaveholders’ side. Abolitionists were hard pressed to justify their opposition to slavery on biblical grounds. Yet today, if you were to ask Christians in the South whether the Bible sanctions slavery, virtually everyone would agree that it does not. In the same way, fifty years from now people will look back in wonder that the churches could be so obtuse and so resistant to the new thing the Holy Spirit was doing among us regarding homosexuality.

What happened to bring about such a monumental shift on the issue of slavery was that the churches were finally driven to penetrate beyond the legal tenor of Scripture to an even deeper tenor, articulated by Israel out of the experience of the Exodus and the prophets and brought to sublime embodiment in Jesus’ identification with harlots, tax collectors, the diseased and maimed and outcast and poor. It is that God sides with the powerless. God liberates the oppressed. God suffers with the suffering and groans toward the reconciliation of all things. Therefore, Jesus went out of his way to declare forgiven, and to reintegrate into society in all details, those who were identified as “sinners” by virtue of the accidents of birth, or biology, or economic desperation. In the light of that supernal compassion, whatever our position on gays, the gospel’s imperative to love, care for, and be identified with their sufferings is unmistakably clear.

In the same way, women are pressing us to acknowledge the sexism and patriarchalism that pervades Scripture and has alienated so many women from the church. The way out, however, is not to deny the sexism in Scripture, but to develop an interpretive theory that judges even

Scripture in the light of the revelation in Jesus. What Jesus gives us is a critique of domination in all its forms, a critique that can be turned on the Bible itself. The Bible thus contains the principles of its own correction. We are freed from bibliolatry, the worship of the Bible. It is restored to its proper place as witness to the Word of God. And that word is a Person, not a book.

With the interpretive grid provided by a critique of domination, we are able to filter out the sexism, patriarchalism, violence, and homophobia that are very much a part of the Bible, thus liberating it to reveal to us in fresh ways the inbreaking, in our time, of God's domination-free order.

An Appeal for Tolerance

What most saddens me in this whole raucous debate in the churches is how sub-Christian most of it has been. It is characteristic of our time that the issues most difficult to assess, and which have generated the greatest degree of animosity, are issues on which the Bible can be interpreted as supporting either side. I am referring to abortion and homosexuality.

We need to take a few steps back and be honest with ourselves. I am deeply convinced of the rightness of what I have said in this essay. But I must acknowledge that it is not an airtight case. You can find weaknesses in it, just as I can in others' arguments. The truth is, we are not given unequivocal guidance in either area, abortion or homosexuality. Rather than tearing at each others' throats, therefore, we should humbly admit our limitations. How do I know I am correctly interpreting God's word for us today? How do you? Wouldn't it be wiser for Christians to lower the volume by 95 percent and quietly present our beliefs, knowing full well that we might be wrong?

I know a couple, both well-known Christian authors in their own right, who have both spoken out on the issue of homosexuality. She supports gays and lesbians, passionately; he embraces them as persons but opposes their behavior. So far as I can tell, this couple still enjoy each other's company, eat at the same table, and, for all I know, sleep in the same bed.

We in the church need to get our priorities straight. We have not reached a consensus about who is right on the issue of homosexuality. But what is clear, utterly clear, is that we are commanded to love one another. Love not just our gay sisters and brothers, who are often sitting beside us, acknowledged or not, in church, but all of us who are involved in this debate. These are issues about which we must painfully agree to disagree. Surely we don't have to tear whole denominations to shreds in order to air our differences on this point. If that couple I mentioned can continue to embrace across this divide, surely we can do so as well.