

Gays and the Bible: A response to Walter Wink

by [Robert A. J. Gagnon](#) in the [August 14, 2002](#) issue

The tone of [Walter Wink's review](#) of my book *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* is a disheartening reminder of how mean-spirited the debate about homosexual behavior can get. The title is inflammatory. The first sentence smacks of paranoid conspiracy theories: "It was inevitable that the antihomosexual lobby would develop something equivalent to a neutron bomb designed to wipe out the homosexual lobby." He tells readers: "From the first page [Gagnon] displays his loathing for homosexual behavior," ignoring my many exhortations to treat with sympathy and compassion those beset by homoerotic desire. Later he even demeans my family name, referring to "that 'vague form of love' which Gagnon gags on."

As someone once wrote: "What most saddens me in this whole raucous debate in the churches is how sub-Christian most of it has been." "No moral matter should be regarded as so urgent as to permit dehumanizing and demonizing our opponents. . . . God is confronting both sides of this controversy with an opportunity to transcend our verbal violence and put-downs, and to learn how to love, cherish, and value those whose positions are different from our own." Who wrote these comments? Wink himself in the 1999 book he edited, *Homosexuality and Christian Faith*.

One wonders also why the Christian Century would allow such a disrespectful piece to go to press. An editorial in just the preceding issue opined about the need "to treat with dignity others who hold contrary opinions" in the homosexuality debate.

I see six other sets of issues raised by the review:

1) A consensus on Paul: One hears often that Paul opposed only exploitative forms of homosexual behavior. For example, in his edited book, Wink assumes that Paul was unable to conceive of committed adult homosexual relationships. The essay by Ken Sehested that immediately follows claims that Paul is indicting only pederasty and pagan cult prostitution.

It is refreshing to read now of Wink conceding this argument. He admits: “Paul wouldn’t accept [a loving homosexual] relationship for a minute.” He adds: “But that is precisely what is at stake here: a new judgment about the morality of same-sex relationships.” This is some progress. Henceforth we can focus our discussion not on whether Paul was opposed to every form of homoerotic behavior—he was—but on claims to a “new judgment” about sexual morality.

Wink’s 1999 article shows what he thinks this “new judgment” is: that “homosexual orientation” is a “natural” condition “fixed early in life.” Apart from “fixed” being too strong a word, this judgment is neither new nor decisive in considering whether to overturn Paul’s stance. It fails to consider:

- Theories in the Greco-Roman world that some homoerotic attraction was due to congenital conditions, along with some recognition that desires given “by nature” are not necessarily constituted “according to nature.”
- Paul’s own understanding of sin in Romans 5 and 7 as an innate impulse running through the members of the human body, passed on by an ancestor and never entirely within human control.
- Paul’s use of the term “natural” in Romans 1:26-27 to refer to the obvious embodied complementarity of males and females established by God at creation, not to all innate desires.

We can no longer assume that the notion of a sexual “orientation” was beyond Paul’s reach. What we can be confident of is that such a notion would not have caused Paul to change radically his view of same-sex intercourse as sin.

2) The relevance of the creation stories: Although Wink concedes that “the Bible is negative toward same-sex behavior,” he rejects the grounding of my argument in Genesis 1-2. His reasons: 1) “Homosexuality is not mentioned in these chapters”; 2) I allegedly limit my case to the complementary fit of male and female genitals; and 3) “If monogamous heterosexual behavior alone satisfies the will of God”—a claim I nowhere make—“why didn’t Jesus marry? Why didn’t Paul?”

First, homoerotic unions need not be mentioned in the creation stories explicitly to be precluded implicitly. One can work through a series of literary concentric circles, picking up clues from themes within the creation stories; other material in the Tetrateuch from the same authors; other material in early Israelite literature; other

material in the ancient Near East; and the subsequent history of interpretation.

As I argue, each of these literary circles confirms that the Yahwist and the Priestly Writers understood the negative implications of their creation stories for homoerotic behavior. Jesus and Paul accepted this. Paul's indictment of homoerotic behavior contains clear echoes of Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:24. Accordingly, when Jesus applied the same two texts to divorce (Mark 10:6-9), he was not divesting them of their relevance for proscribing homoerotic behavior. He was narrowing further an already closely defined heterosexual ethic.

Second, I make clear that the complementary character of male-female sexual bonds includes a range of features: anatomy, yes, and also physiological and interpersonal traits. Nowhere are male-female differences more significant than in sexual relationships. They contribute markedly to the health and vitality of heterosexual relationships: filling deficiencies and correcting extremes in the sexual "other" while reconciling the sexes. The story of the splitting of a binary human (the adam) into two sexually differentiated beings communicates the "normative" value of heterosexual unions—not just that they are "normal" (*pace* Wink). The establishment of a "one flesh" sexual union requires a re-merger of the two originally joined sexual halves. Far from being incidental, the sex of the partners is essential for achieving a holistic sexual fit.

Third, neither Jesus nor Paul would have regarded their singleness as challenging the heterosexual standard in the creation stories. They clearly did not conceive of Genesis 1:27 as requiring sex in order to manifest God's image. Just as clearly they would have understood that, if sexual intercourse were to be had, there were ways of having it that would efface the image of God stamped on humans—including same-sex intercourse.

3) The use of analogies: Wink appeals to the church's changing stances on slavery, women and divorce to justify deviating from the Bible's opposition to homosexual practice. Wink claims that I "bury the real issue, which is whether the Bible's clear rejection of same-sex relationships needs to be reinterpreted today."

There is no burial on my part. I deal with the issue of analogies head on. The key question is: What are the best analogies? The analogies of slavery, women and divorce have great defects. In particular:

- There is tension within the canon itself on these issues. There is no tension regarding homosexual behavior.
- The Bible's stance on slavery and women's roles looks liberating in relation to the broader cultural contexts out of which the Bible emerged. The exact opposite is the case for the Bible's stance on homosexual practice.
- Neither scripture nor the contemporary church celebrates divorce as part of the glorious diversity of the body of Christ. Divorce and same-sex intercourse share in common the fact that both are forgivable sins for those who repent. The church works to end the cycle of divorce and remarriage, just as it ought to work toward ending the cycle of serial, unrepentant same-sex intercourse.

The best analogies are those that most closely correlate with the distinctive elements of the Bible's opposition to same-sex intercourse: sexual behavior proscribed strongly and absolutely by both Testaments and pervasively within each Testament (at least implicitly), with the proscription making sense. Here one would include the Bible's opposition to incest, bestiality, adultery and prostitution.

Incest is a particularly good parallel: it is sex with someone who is too much of a same or like. Bestiality is wrong because it is sex with a being that is too much of an "other." Scripture avoids both extremes, and so does the church today.

4) "The Bible has no sex ethic": Wink alleges that "the Bible has no sex ethic. It only knows a communal love ethic." In his 1999 article he distinguishes between a sexual ethic and sexual mores, with the Bible containing only the latter. Sexual mores are "unreflective customs" that fail to factor the circumstances of individual cases.

It is interesting to apply Wink's reasoning to Jesus himself. For example, on a communal level, Jesus advocated that all believers should love one another. If Jesus had no separate sex ethic distinct from his communal ethic, wouldn't we have to infer that Jesus was in favor of having sex with as many people as possible? Yet we know that Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage promoted the limitation of lifetime sex partners to one. There are no grounds for such a radical step if Jesus had no distinctive sex ethic or had an aversion to categorical prohibitions.

Jesus had a specific sex ethic, as did all the authors of scripture. He recognized the validity of categorical commandments germane only to sexual activity and transcending cultural convention. What else would a "sex ethic" be? So one can

have spiritual partnership with large numbers of people, with blood-related family members, with children, and perhaps in a reduced sense with nonhuman creatures. But one can't have sex with someone other than one's current spouse, nor with blood-related family members, with children and certainly not with animals—regardless of individual motivation and circumstances.

Wink insists that “everything is to be critiqued by Jesus' love commandment.” Absolute proscriptions are examples of legalistic hypocrisies, even when it comes to prohibiting all sexual activity by young teens (so his 1999 article). The problem with this is that Jesus applied the love commandment in ways that run 180 degrees counter to Wink's application. Jesus went beyond the Mosaic law in limiting sexual activity to one lifetime opposite-sex partner. Since Jesus' view stood in tension with the prevailing ethos of his day, Wink cannot claim that it was an “unreflective custom” that Jesus failed to integrate with his interpretation of the love commandment. Did Jesus not understand the very love ethic that he promoted?

Wink's only tests for a valid sexual relationship are that the relationship be mutual, loving and nonexploitative. Why not a loving adult incestuous union? A threesome? Using Wink's tests, one could not categorically deny any form of consensual sexual relationship, except perhaps prostitution. Even prostitution might have to be allowed since Wink is appalled by the notion of anyone going through life without sex.

5) The social-scientific evidence: Wink alleges that I apply a “double standard” insofar as there are more heterosexuals who manifest promiscuity, failed relationships and sexually transmitted disease than homosexuals who do so. Yet in a society in which only 2 percent of the population engages in homosexual behavior in a given year it is meaningless to appeal to absolute numbers. The key point is that the negative effects attending homosexual behavior are disproportionately high, often grossly so.

Wink blames “books like Gagnon's” for the dearth of long-term monogamous relationships among homosexuals. Yet the rate of nonmonogamy among homosexual males is off the charts even in comparison with lesbians. The disparity largely has to do with male-female differences. Men are more visually stimulated and genitally focused than women; the results of a male-male erotic pairing are predictable. Women, however, generally make greater intimacy demands on relationships, which may explain why on average lesbian relationships are of shorter duration than male homosexual relationships. Furthermore, these problems persist

even in homosexual-supportive areas such as San Francisco. The main culprit is probably sexual noncomplementarity, not societal “homophobia.”

On the question of changing orientation, Wink presupposes “a continuum from homosexual to heterosexual” in which “those at either end of the continuum may find it impossible” to change their sexual orientation. He affirms the orientation of all those who cannot change. There are three problems here.

First, more important than the supposition of a continuum is the recognition that the contours of the continuum are fluid. As the cross-cultural studies cited in my book indicate, the greater the societal approval of homosexuality, the greater the incidence. Also, the less intervention to counter risk factors early in life, the greater the entrenchment of homosexual proclivities.

Second, when Wink asserts that some people “may find it impossible” to change, he overlooks multiple meanings for change. Change can run the gamut from ceasing homosexual behavior, to a reduction in homosexual impulses, to the experience of heterosexual arousal. After ticking off a vice list in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Paul said of the Corinthian believers: “such were some of you.” He was not asserting, for example, that former adulterers no longer experienced sexual desire for people other than their spouses. Rather, they no longer lived out of such fleshly impulses but rather out of the power of the Holy Spirit.

Third, Wink argues as if the mere fact of an entrenched impulse not being consciously chosen is grounds for its acceptance. But why should this be a decisive factor? Some alcoholism, criminal behavior, and a whole range of noncriminal vices (e.g., selfishness, jealousy, greed, lust) are connected with entrenched impulses.

While some people are content with a single sex partner for life, large numbers find it extraordinarily difficult to limit the number of their sex partners to one, or even a dozen. Some people do not grow up with an instinctive aversion to having sex with close blood relations or with children. Have they chosen this condition?

The bottom line is that discerning whether a given disposition is moral has little to do with whether it may become entrenched early in life. Such a consideration should affect the degree of pastoral sensitivity but not whether the behavior arising from it should be condoned. Wink, perhaps unknowingly, appears to concede the point. For he urges affirmation not only of “those who, for whatever reason, cannot” change their sexual orientation but also of those who “do not wish to do so.”

6) Serial, unrepentant sin and its consequences: Wink reserves his greatest scorn for the view that sexual activity outside of marriage may risk one's exclusion from God's kingdom. For Wink this is intolerable because some people might have to go without sex. He charges me with perpetrating "a cruel abuse of religious power."

The first problem with Wink's argument is that this is not just my position. It is the position of all New Testament writers, the virtually unanimous position of the church for almost two millennia, and still the majority position in the church today. Indeed, Wink's view makes Jesus Christ himself the main perpetrator of this "cruel abuse." For it was Jesus himself who, with his teaching on divorce/remarriage and adultery of the heart, limited further the range of permissible sexual activity. It was Jesus who, with a primary reference to sex, spoke of removing body parts that threaten one's downfall lest one be thrown into hell (Matt. 5:29-30). Jesus was not schizophrenic when he integrated this vision with an aggressive outreach to sexual sinners.

In the name of Jesus Wink blames me, and implicitly the church as a whole, for advancing the teaching of Jesus. We face, then, the dilemma of choosing between Wink's understanding of eternal destiny in relation to sexual conduct and the understanding of Jesus and scripture. Wink is also incredulous that I could say that sinful sexual behavior involves not just the actual act of illicit intercourse but also illicit sexual fantasies. Yet how else is one to apply Jesus' statement about adultery of the heart (Matt. 5:27-28)? If Wink finds this position to be outrageous, his complaint lies with Jesus, not with me.

The second problem is that Wink presents only one side of my position. I frequently set the warnings about sin in a broader context of God's marvelous grace and love in Christ Jesus, which is the primary warrant for ethical conduct. Wink even misquotes me, claiming that I say that "'Change or be destroyed' was *the* staple of Jesus' teaching" when in fact I say "'Change or be destroyed' was *a* staple of Jesus' teaching." He conveniently leaves out the fact that I stress scripture's primary concern with a pattern of repetitive and unrepentant sinful conduct, not isolated acts of backsliding. I also state that I take seriously Jesus' emphasis on "holy gullibility" with respect to accepting the genuineness of someone's professed repentance (Luke 17:3-4).

The third problem is that Wink's insistence on everyone having a right to sex fails to consider the following:

- Scripture nowhere makes sex an idol or an absolute necessity of life like food and sleep. Oftentimes God uses unfulfilled desire to form Jesus in us, as Paul discovered with his “thorn in the flesh.”
- Why is sex a necessity for us but not for our spiritual ancestors? Were the authors of scripture, Jesus and church leaders over the last two millennia insensitive to the fact that they were creating legions of “sexually starved victims of a loveless religion”?
- Hope exists for individual homosexuals. For any given homosexual person hope exists for forming a heterosexual union that brings some satisfaction of sexual urges. Even apart from therapeutic intervention, the vast majority of self-identified homosexuals (nonbisexuals) have experienced some sexual attraction for the opposite sex at some point in their lives.
- How far do we extend the principle of a right to sex? There are twice as many people in the U.S. today who have had no sex partners since age 18 as there are people who classify themselves as (nonbisexual) homosexuals. How many New Testament commandments must we violate to ensure that the right to a sexual union is available to all heterosexuals? What if one can only get sex by soliciting prostitutes? What if one is sexually attracted only to one’s sister? How long does one have to put up with just one sex partner when one is not wired for monogamy?

Wink believes that it is cruel to develop sexual standards that might leave some people “sexually starved.” Yet every sexual rule risks denying sex to some. Unless Wink wants to advocate complete sexual libertinism, he will either have to give up this view of entitlement to sex or else describe himself as someone who engages in a “cruel abuse of religious power.” The very concept of “sexual starvation” holds God’s will hostage to the sexual desires of human flesh.

Wink’s sexual ethic does not promote freedom in the positive biblical sense. Rather it moves dangerously close to promoting the wrong kind of freedom, summarized in Judges as “all the people did what was right in their own eyes.”

[Walter Wink's reply](#)