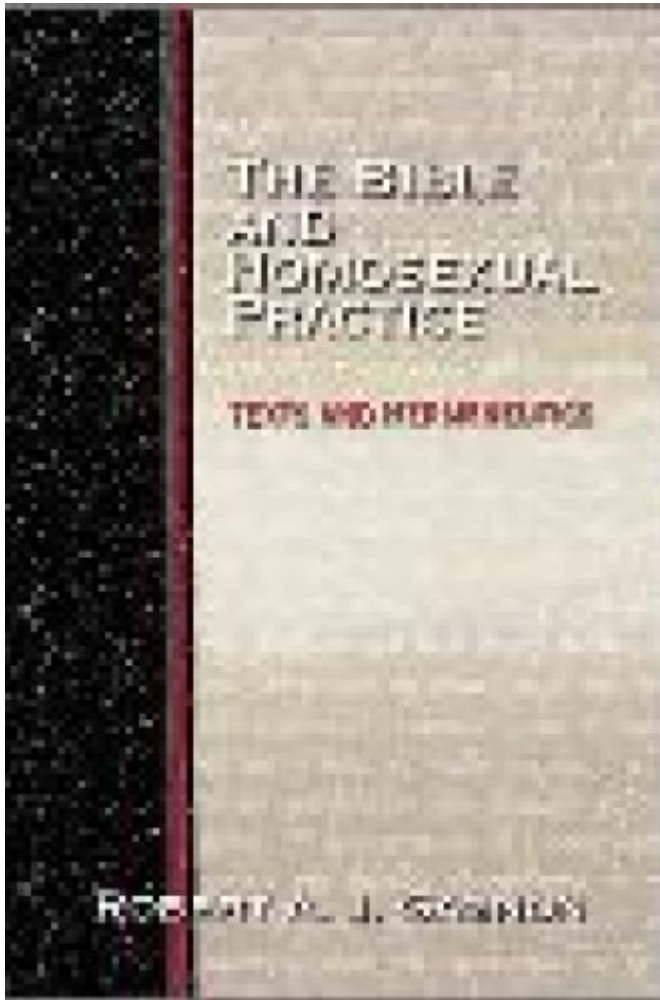


To hell with gays?

By [Walter Wink](#) in the [June 5, 2002](#) issue

In Review



The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics

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It was inevitable that the antihomosexual lobby would develop something equivalent to a neutron bomb designed to wipe out the homosexual lobby without (it is hoped) altogether destroying the church. I refer to a tendentious study by Robert A. J.

Gagnon of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. In an exhaustively argued work of over 500 pages he has tracked down most of the views put forward by homosexuals and targeted them for annihilation. Gagnon makes no secret of his convictions. From the first page he displays his loathing for homosexual behavior. In this short review, I can scarcely sift through all his arguments, but I think his case sinks under its own weight.

Gagnon bases his argument on Genesis 1-2: "Scripture rejects homosexual behavior because it is a violation of the gendered existence of male and female ordained by God at creation." Homosexuality is not mentioned in these chapters, so how does he know this? By means of physiology: penis fits vagina, and that's that. Penis only fits vagina? Of course heterosexual coupling is normal. Survival of the species depends on it. But it is not normative. If monogamous heterosexual behavior alone satisfies the will of God, why didn't Jesus marry? Why didn't Paul?

To back up his argument, Gagnon exegetes every biblical text even remotely relevant to the theme. This section is filled with exegetical insights. I have long insisted that the issue is one of hermeneutics, and that efforts to twist the text to mean what it clearly does not say are deplorable. Simply put, the Bible is negative toward same-sex behavior, and there is no getting around it. The issue is precisely what weight that judgment should have in the ethics of Christian life.

Imagine the difficulty that abolitionists faced in making their case in the mid-19th century. In the absence of proof-texts, they had to fall back on the tenor of scripture, the spirit of Jesus, and appeals to compassion and empathy.

Amazingly, enough people understood their case that they were able to carry the day. Today, almost no one still argues that slavery is justifiable because it is biblically sanctioned. Likewise, churches have been challenged to accept the equality of women with men, including holding of church offices, though the majority of Christians in the world still do not honor that equality. And women are kept down by appeals to scripture.

Gagnon, for his part, tries to circumvent the Bible's treatment of women and slaves with arguments intended to bury the real issue, which is whether the Bible's clear rejection of same-sex relationships needs to be reinterpreted today, just as its attitude toward women and slaves has been.

Despite his conservative treatment of scripture, Gagnon does have reservations about the way Paul reaches some of his conclusions. For example, he sometimes finds Paul's exegesis of the Old Testament to be less than compelling. "Paul is still my apostle," he writes, "but he does not (and did not in the first century) have to be inerrant in every matter." In theory, that means Paul doesn't have to be inerrant on the matter of homosexuality as well.

Divorce is another matter that Gagnon slides over. Jesus unequivocally condemns divorce. Gagnon notes that Matthew and Paul each in his own way modified Jesus' words to make them less rigorous. Yet our churches are full of divorced people. Jesus never mentions homosexuality, but he explicitly condemns divorce. Why, then, does Gagnon single out homosexual behavior for censure, while refusing to treat divorce with the same condemnation as homosexual behavior? Does Gagnon believe that divorced people will, like practicing homosexuals, be damned to hell?

My own position is stated best by David Bartlett: "In Christ Jesus, neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality—in themselves—are of any avail, but faith working through love." Gagnon is incredulous at such a position: Fornicators, persons engaged in incest, pederasts, those engaged in adultery, prostitution and bestiality, could, according to a vague principle of love, justify their lustful and promiscuous behavior. How could anyone stand up against Gagnon's withering logic here?

Gagnon imagines a request from the Corinthians to Paul for advice, based on 1 Corinthians 5:1-5: "Paul, we have a brother in our church who is having sex with another man. But that other man does not put on makeup or heavy perfume, wear women's clothing, braid his hair, or otherwise try to look like a woman. And the other male is an adult. The two men really do love each other and are committed to spending the rest of their lives together. Neither are [*sic*] involved in idolatrous cults or prostitution. When you mentioned that *arsenokoitai* would be excluded from the coming kingdom of God, you were not including somebody like this man, were you?"

Gagnon expects that account to be a knockout blow: No, Paul wouldn't accept that relationship for a minute. But that is precisely what is at stake here: a new judgment about the morality of same-sex relationships. Of course there are sexual behaviors that are deservedly condemned. But how that judgment is reached is the issue.

That "vague form of love" which Gagnon gags on is the future of the species. We are called, in the name of love, to "choose for ourselves what is right," as Jesus insists

(Luke 12:57). Sexual mores are necessary. We need rules and norms. But rules and norms are easily coopted by the Powers That Be into serving as a form of crowd control.

To get to the point: the Bible has no sex ethic. It only knows a communal love ethic, which must be brought to bear on all the sexual mores of a given society in a given period. This doesn't mean that anything goes. It means rather that everything is to be critiqued by Jesus' love commandment in a fellowship of seekers—just what we find in the Fourth Gospel. 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 long since dealt with this in his inspired phrase, "Love God, and do as you please."

Such a critique rejects any double standards. Gagnon challenges gays and lesbians to the same norms of behavior that guide heterosexuals (but he fails to note that heterosexuals have a pretty poor record themselves). Gagnon cites levels of promiscuity among some gays that soar as high as a thousand sexual partners in a lifetime (but he fails to note that some heterosexuals boast of having matched that number). Gays have too often failed to practice safe sex (so have heterosexuals). Gay men have horrific levels of HIV and AIDS infection (but the vast majority of HIV and AIDS patients worldwide are heterosexual). And gays and lesbians have greater difficulty in maintaining long-term monogamous relationships (but that may be a function in part of books like Gagnon's that condemn them for promiscuity yet keep them from marrying; besides, far and away, most failed monogamous relationships are heterosexual).

Persuaded that no biblical or theological arguments for same-sex relations have survived his initial blasts, Gagnon conducts a mopping-up operation using biological and social-scientific data. He insists that genetic and intrauterine factors cannot, by themselves, account for homosexual behavior. He believes that environmental factors are stronger. What is at stake in this nature-nurture debate is whether gays and lesbians can change. Homosexual activists insist that they cannot change their orientation, and that studies purporting to show that some homosexuals are able to change their orientation are largely fraudulent.

Gagnon insists that the lapses of purported "ex-homosexuals" are only to be expected, just as people with other addictions also occasionally fall "off the wagon." The arguments of both sides are tainted by self-interest. I find it most plausible to

think of a continuum from homosexual to heterosexual, with those in the middle (bisexuals) capable of changing their behavior. So yes, some gays and lesbians can change, if they fall in or near that middle range. But those at either end of the continuum may find it impossible. For some homosexual persons, the effort to change can mean years of individual and group therapy, agonized prayers, suicidal depressions, and the constant fear of detection, loss of job and attack by straight men. Many of these gay people are my friends, and I know how they suffer. It is no picnic being homosexual in our society.

Therefore I would affirm any person who has been able to change his or her sexual orientation. But I also affirm all those who, for whatever reason, cannot or do not wish to do so.

So what is the homosexual to do? This is where Gagnon's position reveals itself for what it is: "a cruel abuse of religious power," as someone put it. The homosexual who wishes to be Christian is supposed to totally abstain from all forms of sex for the rest of his or her lifetime. There is no other possible choice, given Gagnon's logic. And not just homosexuals, but single persons of whatever orientation must also remain totally celibate, says Gagnon, till they marry or die. But look at the scores of Catholic priests who have not been able to maintain celibacy even though they took vows to observe it. How much less likely are gays and lesbians to remain celibate when celibacy is imposed on them by others?

Nor are any of these sexually starved victims of a loveless religion permitted to fantasize about sexual involvement with another person.

"'Change or be destroyed,' was the staple of Jesus' teaching," says the unabashed Gagnon. That's right: "believers who do not turn away from participating in homosexual intercourse are among those who will be excluded from God's kingdom." (The people who talk about heaven always seem to assume they are going there.) That's it: a life of permanent sexlessness not even broken by masturbation, in exchange for a heavenly compensation.

Gagnon thinks the very essence of love is to warn homosexuals that they are doomed unless they repent, change, marry or abandon sex altogether. But everything depends on the prior assumption that motivates his entire study: that homosexual behavior is a sin punishable by everlasting damnation. If we abandon that presupposition, we can envision a different future for the church: a fellowship where homosexuality and heterosexuality scarcely merit discussion any more;

where the sufferings and sins of all God's children are brought to the healing Source; where the excesses of homosexual and heterosexual behaviors are brought under the control of the Holy Spirit, as each and all seek to grow into the maturity that no longer is dictated by anxious ecclesiastics terrified of the freedom in which Christ has established us.

With Gagnon, I look forward to the time when God puts all the principalities and powers under Christ's feet, and the humanization of humanity is accomplished. I would hope to undergo that transformation with my heterosexual and homosexual sisters and brothers—and Gagnon himself.

That is, unless I am eternally damned for writing this review.

See also:

[Robert Gagnon's response](#)

[Walter Wink's reply](#)