

A reply by Walter Wink: A conversation on gays and the Bible

by [Walter Wink](#) in the [August 14, 2002](#) issue

Robert Gagnon's treatment of my own work in his book *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* is anything but irenic. "Wink's analysis has all the theological sophistication of a math test or football game: sixteen sexual policies in the Bible we no longer heed versus just four that we do. One may half wonder why Wink does not take his logic full circle and disregard the other four mores, particularly incest and bestiality." Thus he tries to make me say the very opposite of what I have said.

My point, which is quite serious and, I believe, persuasive, is that biblical sexual mores changed over time, so much so that only four of 20 biblical sex mores are still in place for Christians today. This simple observation is enough to dash the notion of absolute sexual precepts universally valid in every time and place. Gagnon makes no attempt to deal with my argument, which is, I believe, unanswerable.

Gagnon faults me for slighting the compassion he shows toward those beset by homoerotic desire. But that compassion, for him, is conditional on gays and lesbians being willing to change their sexual orientation or to not live out that orientation. I am certain that many homosexual Christians will find his assertion that they will otherwise be excluded from the kingdom of God a heartless and cruel judgment.

On the question of analogies, Gagnon says that the issues of slavery, divorce and the suppression of women are not analogous to the issue of homosexuality. His treatment of divorce contains some helpful insights, as does his exegesis generally (this is not a "concession," but an acknowledgment of the value of some of his arguments). But Gagnon misses the key point. Moses allowed divorce. Jesus categorically rejected divorce. Paul moderated Jesus' position by allowing a believer to divorce an unbelieving spouse if the spouse wishes to have the marriage dissolved (1 Cor. 7:12-16). The Gospel of Matthew liberalizes Jesus' saying on divorce by adding an exception for adultery. Thus we see the church already altering Jesus' commands in the light of new situations. If Gagnon sanctions this modulation of ethical demands within the canon, why shouldn't we today feel authorized, in the

light of new knowledge and the prompting of the Holy Spirit, to “judge for yourselves what is right” (Luke 12:57)?

Missing in Gagnon’s remarks is any sense of what it might have cost slaves, divorcées and women to be ground under foot by the thought police of Christianity. We can no longer simply submit to scripture without asking whether new light is needed to interpret it. I for one do not abandon scripture, but neither do I acquiesce. I wrestle with it. I challenge it. I am broken and wounded by it, and in that defeat I sometimes encounter the living God. I will not concede the field, therefore, to a putative orthodoxy that dodges the hermeneutical task.

On the issue of a sexual ethic, my distinction is not between a sex ethic and sexual mores, but between sexual mores, which change from time to time in every society, and a communal love ethic, which we must apply to whatever sexual mores are current. This demands a critique that involves not only the individual but also the community of accountability, which is the church. Apparently Gagnon does not approve of Augustine’s injunction, “Love God and do as you please,” but I regard it as one of the most inspired ethical statements ever penned.

Gagnon tests my position by arguing that on my terms “one could not categorically deny any form of consensual sexual relationship, except perhaps prostitution.” What has become of the community of accountability? Is the church likely to regard such behavior as upbuilding? And if the community were to lapse into promiscuity, would it not come under the kind of censure that Paul had to exercise in Corinth? I believe that the Holy Spirit in the community of believers can lead us to make responsible decisions. My disagreement with Gagnon is itself a manifestation of that effort.

A third major issue is whether gays and lesbians can change, and, if so, to what degree. A gay person cannot be asked to repent for being gay unless one holds that sexual changes are really possible. I showed in my review that only people in the middle of the continuum from hetero to homo have any real chance of change. Gagnon’s case depends heavily on the possibility of change, and much of the data he uses are from the conservative InterVarsity Press.

Gagnon unfortunately failed to note that I said, “I would affirm any person who has been able to change his or her sexual orientation.” Only then did I add, “but I also affirm all those who, for whatever reason, cannot or do not wish to do so.” Those in the last category, who don’t or won’t (or can’t) wish to change, are damned to hell, according to Gagnon. (Hence the title of my article, which was added by the editors

and which I rather like.)

Gagnon notes that the idea of damnation is “the virtually unanimous position of the church for almost two millennia.” “Wink’s view makes Jesus Christ himself the main perpetrator of this ‘cruel abuse of religious power.’” Once again, the issue is hermeneutical. There are other passages where Jesus (or the early churches in his name) does speak of hell. But most such passages have been added by Matthew. Look in any concordance for the terms hell, hell of fire, eternal punishment, unquenchable fire, gnashing of teeth, eternal torture, and so on, and you will discover that almost all of these are found only in Matthew. Apparently Matthew had some unresolved anger at the persecutors of his church, and he wanted revenge.

More to the point, belief in a place of eternal torments is unworthy of the highest forms of Christian faith. Gagnon is certain that the Jesus he worships will exclude from God’s everlasting presence those who are unrepentant for sexual sins. He is welcome to such beliefs, but I find them reprehensible.

The homosexual Christians I know are indistinguishable from heterosexual Christians. If they are to be sent to hell, true Christianity requires, I believe, that we join them there, on the principle that the God we worship is a God of love and mercy who will see that no one is ever lost.

[Walter Wink's review](#) of Robert Gagnon's book

[Robert Gagnon's response](#) to Walter Wink's review