The Moral Vision of the New Testament

Community, Cross, New Creation

A Contemporary Introduction
to New Testament Ethics

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6. But see Cullmann (1956, 86), who can speak of "a fundamental unity in the valuation of the State."

7. In Part IV, I shall argue that when we find ourselves caught between contradictory NT teachings, it is better to choose one resolutely, using clearly articulated theological criteria, than to waffle or seek artificial compromises. See especially the discussion of anti-Judaism in Chapter 17.

8. Käsemann 1964 [1960], 103. See also his provocative lecture on "Unity and Multiplicity in the New Testament Doctrine of the Church," delivered at the Fourth World Conference for Faith and Order in Montreal, July 16, 1963 (Käsemann 1969 [1965], 252–259). It should never be forgotten that Käsemann's relentless insistence on applying the gospel as a *critical* norm against false forms of Christianity—even if they be somehow based on an appeal to the NT canon—was inspired by his experience of seeing the church of his own land and time captured by Nazism's "German Christianity."

Chapter 10

Three Focal Images

Community, Cross, New Creation

The unity that we discover in the New Testament is not the unity of a dogmatic system. Rather, the unity that we find is the looser unity of a collection of documents that, in various ways, retell and comment upon a single fundamental story.[1] That story may be summarized roughly as follows:

The God of Israel, the creator of the world, has acted (astoundingly) to rescue a lost and broken world through the death and resurrection of Jesus; the full scope of that rescue is not yet apparent, but God has created a community of witnesses to this good news, the church. While awaiting the grand conclusion of the story, the church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is called to reenact the loving obedience of Jesus Christ and thus to serve as a sign of God's redemptive purposes for the world.

Different New Testament writers emphasize different aspects of this story; for example, Luke places great emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in empowering the church's witness, whereas Mark mentions it only in passing (e.g., Mark 13:11). Various particular elements are elucidated using different conceptual categories, and a different "spin" is put on the story by each writer; for example, we find widely different evaluations of the degree of continuity between Israel and the church. Consequently, it would be impossible—or, at best, infelicitous—to put these different accounts into the blender so as to produce a single harmonized telling of the story, a late-twentieth-century Diatessaron.[2]

What we can do, however, is to identify certain key *images* that all the different canonical tellings share. Why look for images, rather than concepts or doctrines, as a ground of coherence? As David Kelsey has demonstrated, every theological reading of Scripture depends upon "a single synoptic, imaginative judgment" in which the interpreter "tries to catch up what Christianity is basically all about."[3]

> In short: at the root of a theological position there is an imaginative act in which a theologian tries to catch up in a single metaphorical judgment the full complexity of God's presence in, through, and over-against the activities comprising the church's common life and which, in turn, both provides the *discrimen* against which the theology criticizes the church's current forms of speech and life, and determines the peculiar "shape" of the "position."[4]

This single metaphorical judgment not only shapes "decisions about how to construe and use particular passages of scripture" but also governs "the sort of 'wholeness' each [theologian] concretely ascribes to Scripture."[5] In other words, the unity and sense of Scripture can be grasped only through an act of metaphorical imagination that focuses the diverse contents of the texts in terms of a particular "imaginative characterization." Kelsey does not use the word "image" to describe this imaginative characterization; indeed, his examples ("ideational mode," "concrete actuality," and "ideal possibility") suggest that he is thinking in terms of concepts (*Begriffe*) rather than images (*Vorstellungen*). Given his emphasis on the role of metaphor and imagination in the formation of such synoptic judgments, however, I propose that Kelsey's insight can best be developed by identifying a particular biblical image (or images) in which the synthetic metaphorical judgment is concretized. (For example, liberation theology takes the image of "liberation"—evoking the Exodus story—as the distillation of what Scripture is all about.) I propose, then, to identify images of this kind within the New Testament that concretely represent its narrative coherence.

This strategy seeks to respect the form in which the texts present themselves to us. (See the third procedural guideline outlined in Chapter 9.2). Though some of the New Testament texts, especially the letters of Paul, engage in second-order conceptual reflection,[6] many of the most important texts take the form of stories with minimal explicit second-order commentary. By looking for fundamental images, we stand a better chance of identifying common elements present in these different types of discourse without imposing conceptual abstractions on narrative texts and without forcing pastoral letters into a narrative mode. The images we seek, if they are to give adequate expression to the unity of the New Testament's moral vision, must arise from the texts themselves rather than being artificially superimposed upon them.

One might think of such images as root metaphors embedded in the New Testament texts: they encapsulate the crucial elements of the narrative and serve to focus our attention on the common ground shared by the various witnesses.[7] Thus

they serve as *lenses* to focus our reading of the New Testament: when we reread the canonical documents through these images, our blurry multiple impressions of the texts come more sharply into focus. In this respect, such images would function in a way formally analogous to the Rule of Faith used by Irenaeus and other patristic interpreters: the images would simultaneously summarize the story told in (or presupposed by) Scripture and govern the interpretation of individual texts by placing them within a coherent narrative framework.[8] It is crucial to see that such synthetic images do not *replace* the New Testament texts; rather, they serve to focus and guide our readings and rereadings of the New Testament, which itself remains the primary source and authority for our theology and ethics.

It will be immediately evident that the focal images we choose will become pivotal for our subsequent normative use of the New Testament in ethical argument and formation of the community. For example, if it were decided that a major focal image in the New Testament were "the orderly household"—as one might conclude if the pastoral Epistles were seen as the center of gravity in the New Testament—the church would be led to adopt hierarchical structures and practices that emphasize authority and stability. On the other hand, if the key image were taken to be "freedom from Law and tradition"—as one might conclude if Galatians and Mark 7:1–23 were seen as the center of gravity—the church would be led to reject authority structures and to adopt practices that emphasize Spirit-inspired spontaneity. The divergent character of such hypothetical proposals[9] shows that we need to articulate criteria for critical evaluation of judgments about the unity of the New Testament. How can we tell a good synthetic proposal from a bad one?

I would offer three criteria for evaluating themes or images proposed as focal lenses for discerning the coherence of the New Testament's moral vision:

- Does the proposed focal image find a textual basis in all of the canonical witnesses? The more widely represented a particular theme or image is across the spectrum of the New Testament writings, the more claim it has to articulate a part of the New Testament's coherent moral vision.
- Does the proposed focal image stand in serious tension with the ethical teachings or major emphases of any of the New Testament witnesses? If so, this would count against the viability of the proposal.
- Does the proposed focal image highlight central and substantial ethical concerns of the texts in which it appears? One might find agreement across the canonical spectrum on some matter of minor significance (e.g., opposition to adultery) that would nonetheless fail to provide a sufficiently broad view of the New Testament's range of moral concern.

The two hypothetical proposals above ("the orderly household" and "freedom from Law") fall afoul of all three of these criteria. One might, however, make some differentiated judgments: with regard to the first criterion, "freedom from Law" is

arguably a more widely represented theme in the New Testament than is "the orderly household"; thus, on the basis of this criterion alone, the former would appear to have a better claim as a synthetic image for New Testament ethics. On the other hand, with regard to the second criterion, "freedom from law" stands in deep tension with several important New Testament witnesses (Matthew, James, and the pastorals), whereas "the orderly household" is not exactly in opposition to the central teaching of any New Testament texts—though the demands of radical discipleship in the synoptic Gospels are potentially disruptive of family order (e.g., Mark 3:31–35, 10:28–31; Luke 14:26). Thus, on the basis of the second criterion alone, "freedom from Law" is more problematic as a ground of unity than is "the orderly household." With regard to the third criterion, both proposals fail: either proposal, taken alone, represents a severely truncated account of the New Testament's moral perspective.

No single image can adequately encapsulate the complex unity of the New Testament texts. Because these texts retell and interpret a narrative, their message reflects the complexity and temporal movement of emplotted experience; consequently, we need a cluster—or, better, a sequence—of images to represent the underlying story and bring the texts into focus. On the basis of the descriptive survey of the New Testament texts treated in Part I of this book, I would suggest three such focal images as guidelines for synthetic reflection about the New Testament canon: *community*, *cross*, and *new creation*. Reading the diverse New Testament texts through these focal images will enable us to see them all more clearly within Scripture's overarching story of God's grace. Let us consider each of the three in turn.

1. Community

The church is a countercultural community of discipleship, and this community is the primary addressee of God's imperatives. The biblical story focuses on God's design for forming a covenant *people*. Thus, the primary sphere of moral concern is not the character of the individual but the corporate obedience of the church. Paul's formulation in Romans 12:1–2 encapsulates the vision: "Present your bodies [*sōmata*, plural] as a living sacrifice [*thysian*, singular], holy and well-pleasing to God. . . . And do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (RH). The community, in its corporate life, is called to embody an alternative order that stands as a sign of God's redemptive purposes in the world. Thus, "community" is not merely a concept; as the term is used here, it points to the concrete social manifestation of the people of God. We could equally well use the term "church," though it is subject to being misunderstood in terms of an institutional hierarchy. The term "community" more adequately connotes the corporate participatory character of the people of God in Christ. Many New Testament texts express different facets of this image: the church is the body of Christ, a temple built of living stones, a city set on a hill, Israel in the wilderness. The coherence

of the New Testament's ethical mandate will come into focus only when we understand that mandate in *ecclesial* terms,[10] when we seek God's will not by asking first, "What should *I* do," but "What should *we* do?"[11]

2. Cross

Jesus' death on a cross is the paradigm for faithfulness to God in this world. The community expresses and experiences the presence of the kingdom of God by participating in "the *koinōnia* of his sufferings" (Phil. 3:10). Jesus' death is consistently interpreted in the New Testament as an act of self-giving love, and the community is consistently called to take up the cross and follow in the way that his death defines. (When "imitation of Christ" is understood in these terms, the often-proposed distinction between discipleship and imitation disappears.[12] To be Jesus' disciple is to obey his call to bear the cross, thus to be like him.) The death of Jesus carries with it the promise of the resurrection, but the power of the resurrection is in God's hands, not ours. Our actions are therefore to be judged not by their calculable efficacy in producing desirable results but by their correspondence to Jesus' example.[13] Consequently, the role of the community appears paradoxical: "While we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our mortal flesh" (2 Cor. 4:11). That is the vocation and job description of the church. Common sense protests this account of Christian faithfulness, just as Peter did when scandalized by Jesus' talk of cross-bearing (Mark 8:31–38), but the New Testament texts witness univocally to the *imitatio Christi* as the way of obedience: "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ"[14] (Gal. 6:2).

In view of the reservations expressed by some theologians about the use of the cross as a paradigm for Christian ethics, an additional word of clarification is necessary in order to avert misunderstanding.[15] The image of the cross should not be used by those who hold power in order to ensure the acquiescent suffering of the powerless. Instead, the New Testament insists that *the community as a whole* is called to follow in the way of Jesus' suffering. The New Testament writers consistently employ the pattern of the cross precisely to call those who possess power and privilege to *surrender* it for the sake of the weak (see, e.g., Mark 10:42–45, Rom. 15:1–3, 1 Cor. 8:1–11:1). In the New Testament's one clear application of this pattern to the patriarchal marriage relationship, it is *husbands* (not wives) who are called to emulate Christ's example of giving themselves up in obedience for the sake of the other (Eph. 5:25). To read such a text—which calls for husbands to love and tenderly care for their wives—as though it somehow warranted a husband's domination or physical abuse of his wife can only be regarded as a bizarre—indeed, blasphemous—misreading. It is precisely the focal image of the cross that ensures that the followers of Jesus—men and women alike—must read the New Testament as a call to renounce violence and coercion.[16]

3. New Creation

The church embodies the power of the resurrection in the midst of a not-yet-redeemed world. Paul's image of "new creation" stands here as a shorthand signifier for the dialectical eschatology that runs throughout the New Testament.[17] In the present time, the new creation already appears, but only proleptically; consequently, we hang in suspense between Jesus' resurrection and parousia. "The whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:22–23, adapted from RSV). The eschatological framework of life in Christ imparts to Christian existence its strange temporal sensibility, its odd capacity for simultaneous joy amidst suffering and impatience with things as they are. We can never say—as do the guys in a popular beer commercial—"It doesn't get any better than this," because we know it will; we are, like T. S. Eliot's Magi, "no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation." The church is, in Paul's remarkable phrase, the community of those "upon whom the ends of the ages have met" (1 Cor. 10:11, RH).[18] In Christ, we know that the powers of the old age are doomed, and the new creation is already appearing. Yet at the same time, all attempts to assert the unqualified presence of the kingdom of God stand under judgment of the eschatological reservation: not before the time, not yet. Thus, the New Testament's eschatology creates a critical framework that pronounces judgment upon our complacency as well as upon our presumptuous despair. As often as we eat the bread and drink the cup, we proclaim the Lord's *death . . . until he comes.* Within that anomalous hope-filled interval, all the New Testament writers work out their understandings of God's will for the community.[19]

These three images, I would propose, can focus and guide our reading of the New Testament texts with respect to ethical issues. Having introduced this proposal, I want to address several points about the derivation, use, and limits of these suggested criteria.

First, no one should suppose that these images have been derived in some strictly scientific or objective manner from exegesis of the individual New Testament texts. It is true that I have settled on these categories through a period of years of teaching on the various New Testament texts and reflecting inductively on the question of their coherence. (Some of the results of that inductive study are presented in Part I.) At the same time, however, it is equally true that my critical reading of the texts is shaped and informed by my participation in a living community of faith that has schooled me from an early age in the art of reading the Scriptures as coherent expressions of a story about God's grace. Thus, George Lindbeck, having read an earlier draft of my synthetic proposal, rightly remarks that it is "dependent on the mainstream Christian tradition of canonical reading that goes back to

Irenaeus" and that it articulates a theological framework "fully consistent with the christological, trinitarian and anti-Marcionite decisions of the church."[20] Thus, both my descriptive readings and my synthesis of these readings are influenced by community traditions of interpretation and practice. This is a clear illustration of a point made earlier: that the four tasks of New Testament ethics inevitably interpenetrate and overlap.

Second, my readings and my proposed synthesis are not *merely* repetitions of a traditional perspective. They offer a new interpretative "performance," the product of a fresh encounter with the texts that poses questions not necessarily asked by the tradition. I have sought to do what any serious interpreter must do: to *listen* to the texts with the aid of the best critical methods available and to discern their witness for the present time. (My reading of the Gospel of Mark is a good illustration of my point: though the interpretation set forth in Chapter 3 would enjoy general acceptance among contemporary New Testament scholars, no one in the church before the late twentieth century ever read this Gospel as embodying an ironic vision of the moral life and resisting epistemological closure.) But if my descriptive and synthetic accounts are a contingent interpretive performance, then they can hardly be claimed to be permanently definitive; the only interesting question is whether they are illuminating. Other equally serious readers might construe the texts in a different pattern. We are not compelled to read the New Testament texts as expressions of and reflections about the story encapsulated in the images of community, cross, and new creation; all that is claimed here is that a synthetic reading guided by these focal images will in fact fruitfully discover a coherent moral vision in the texts.

Third, reading the diverse New Testament witnesses in light of these focal images will not automatically resolve all tensions and difficulties, nor will it end debates about how to appropriate these texts for our time. All that is offered by these synthetic images is a framework within which the next step—hermeneutical reflection—can proceed. Indeed, the actual function of the images will become clear only as we employ them in Part IV of this book to shape our reading of the New Testament texts in relation to particular ethical issues.

Fourth, it might be asked whether the order of the three images is significant. I would suggest that the sequence *is* important. By placing *community* first, we are constantly reminded that God's design of forming a covenant people long precedes the New Testament writings themselves, that the church stands in fundamental continuity with Israel.[21] By placing *cross* in the middle, we are reminded that the death of Jesus is the climax and pivot-point of the eschatological drama. By placing *new creation* last, we are reminded that the church lives in expectation of God's future redemption of creation. In other words, the images are to be understood within a plot; they figure forth the story of God's saving action in the world.

Finally, it might be asked whether community, cross, and new creation become de facto a canon within the canon when they are employed in the way I have suggested.[22] The answer is yes, though in a way different from the common use of the

term. The three images do serve as a canon within the canon in the sense that they provide a "rule" or guide for interpretation. They do not, however, replace or exclude any of the canonical writings. The function of these synthetic images must be kept clearly in mind. They should not be treated as principles that can be applied independently to the analysis of ethical issues without reference to the texts from which they are derived; rather, they are *lenses* that bring our reading of the canonical texts into sharper focus as we seek to discern what is central or fundamental in the ethical vision of the New Testament as a whole.

4. Why Love and Liberation Are Not Sufficient

Some readers will be surprised to find that I have not proposed love as a unifying theme for New Testament ethics. It is widely supposed that love is the basic message of the New Testament. Indeed, the letters of Paul, the Gospel of John, and the Johannine Epistles explicitly highlight love as a (or *the*) distinctive element of the Christian life: it is the "more excellent way" (1 Cor. 12:31–13:13), the fulfillment of the Law (Rom. 13:8), the new commandment of Jesus (John 13:34–35), and the revelation of the character of God that is to be reflected in relationships within the community of believers (1 John 4:7–8). Certainly, in these writings love is fundamental to the moral life.

Nonetheless, my omission of love from the above list of unifying images is not an oversight. For several reasons, love cannot serve as a focal image for the synthetic task of New Testament ethics.

First of all, love notably fails to meet my first criterion for evaluating focal images (discussed at the beginning of this chapter). For a number of the major New Testament writers, love is not a central thematic emphasis.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus' promulgation of the double love commandment (Mark 12:28–34) stands as an isolated element, not supported by other references to love in the story. In its narrative context, this pericope, part of a cycle of controversy discourses (11:27-12:44), serves to demonstrate that the Jewish religious authorities stood condemned by the norms that they themselves professed.[23] In this one passage, to be sure, love is assigned great importance: the greatest commandments in the Torah are love of God (Deut. 6:4–5) and love of neighbor (Lev. 19:18). For Mark, however, the Torah has been eclipsed by the coming of Jesus; consequently, the call of Christian discipleship cannot be understood simply in terms of continuity with the commandments of the Law, even the greatest ones. Nowhere in Mark's Gospel does Jesus teach or command his disciples to love; discipleship is defined not by love but by taking up the cross and following Jesus. If Mark were the only Gospel in the New Testament canon, it would be very difficult to make a case for love as a major motif in Christian ethics.[24]

In Hebrews and in Revelation, we encounter only scattered incidental references to love, mostly with regard to God's love of human beings, as in Hebrews 12:6, quoting Proverbs 3:12: "[T]he Lord disciplines those whom he loves." Only once in Hebrews is love held forth as an ideal or an imperative:

> *Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.* (Heb. 10:23–25)

The prevailing vision of the moral life in Hebrews—as one can see even in this exhortation—is characterized not so much by love as by patient endurance, holding fast the confession, following the example of Jesus' suffering obedience (5:7–10, 12:1–2). Similarly, as we have seen, the moral vision of Revelation focuses attention primarily on the testimony and the endurance of the saints, who "loved not their lives even unto death" (Rev. 12:11, RSV). The only references to love as an attribute or obligation of the community appear in two brief passages in the letters to the seven churches. The church at Thyatira is commended—somewhat perfunctorily in contrast to the stinging rebuke that is to follow (Rev. 2:20–23)—for its love, as one element in a list of virtues: "I know your works—your love, faith, service, and patient endurance" (Rev. 2:19). The church at Ephesus, on the other hand, is scolded for a lack of love:

> *But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.* (Rev. 2:4–5)

One cannot say that the authors of Hebrews and Revelation are indifferent to love, but the paucity of references is striking. In each case where love is mentioned, it is closely identified with good works, and only in Revelation 2:4 is there a hint that love is anything more than a conventional description for good behavior. In sum, these two writings join the Gospel of Mark in bearing witness to a vision of the moral life in which love is not a major constitutive factor. Instead, all three of these major New Testament witnesses call the church to a rigorous, suffering obedience following the example of Jesus.

Perhaps the most striking evidence, however, comes from the Acts of the Apostles. Nowhere in this book does the word "love" appear, either as a noun or as a verb. Nowhere in any of the Lukan summaries of the apostolic preaching do we find any references to love; this foundational account of the early church neither commends love nor exhorts readers to experience or practice it. Even the programmatic accounts of the common life of the early Jerusalem community (2:42–47 and 4:32–37) emphasize unity and the power of God rather than the virtue of love. Christian readers are perhaps so accustomed to thinking of love as the preeminent characteristic of the Christian life that they subconsciously read it into Acts, but to do so is sloppy reading. The absence of the word "love" from Acts is not merely a lexical fluke; it is a true indicator of Luke's vision of the church. Acts is a book not about love but about power. Its fundamental theme is the triumphant march of the Spirit-empowered church throughout the Roman world. Certainly, Luke was not

opposed to love; several passages in his Gospel (though fewer than one might suppose) commend love as a norm or as an appropriate response to Jesus (Luke 6:27–36, 7:36–50, 10:25–28 [with the parable of the good Samaritan in 10:29–37 as an exemplification of the meaning of loving the neighbor]). Nonetheless, his narrative account in Acts of the emergence and growth of the church does not lend itself to being synthesized with the rest of the New Testament under the rubric of "love."

This quick survey of the evidence demonstrates that at least four major New Testament witnesses—Mark, Acts, Hebrews, and Revelation—resist any attempt to synthesize their moral visions by employing love as a focal image. Or, to state the problem differently, a synthesis of the New Testament's message based on the theme of love drives these texts to the periphery of the canon. Surely this is an unacceptable result. The images of community, cross, and new creation more adequately bring these texts into focus along with the rest of the canonical witnesses. Despite the powerful theological uses to which the motif of love is put by Paul and John, that motif cannot serve as the common denominator for New Testament ethics.

The second reason that love is unsatisfactory as a focal image is that it is not really an image; rather, it is an interpretation of an image. What the New Testament means by "love" is embodied concretely in the *cross*. As 1 John 3:16 declares with powerful simplicity, "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." The content of the word "love" is given fully and exclusively in the death of Jesus on the cross; apart from this specific narrative image, the term has no meaning. Thus, to add love as a fourth focal image would not only be superfluous, but it would also move in the direction of conceptual abstraction, away from the specific image of the cross.

The third reason for the inadequacy of love as a focal image is closely related to the second. Love covers a multitude of sins in more ways than one. The term has become debased in popular discourse; it has lost its power of discrimination, having become a cover for all manner of vapid self-indulgence. As Stanley Hauerwas has observed, "The ethics of love is often but a cover for what is fundamentally an assertion of ethical relativism."[25] One often hears voices in the church urging that the radical demands of Christian discipleship should not be pressed upon church members because the "loving" thing to do is to include everyone without imposing harsh demands—for example, disciplines of economic sharing or sexual fidelity. Indeed, love is sometimes invoked even to sanction sexual relations outside marriage or the use of violence. Surely in such cases the term has been emptied of its meaning. The biblical story teaches us that God's love cannot be reduced to "inclusiveness": authentic love calls us to repentance, discipline, sacrifice, and transformation (see, e.g., Luke 14:25–35; Heb. 12:5–13). We can recover the power of love only by insisting that love's meaning is to be discovered in the New Testament's story of Jesus—therefore, in the cross.[26]

This last reason shades over into concerns that are more properly hermeneutical than synthetic. Taken alone, it would not be a sufficient reason to resist using

love as a synthetic lens. In combination with the above considerations, however, it suggests that love as a focal image might produce more distortion than clarity in our construal of the New Testament's ethical witness.

The arguments against using liberation as a focal image are somewhat similar. We find a powerful emphasis on this theme in Luke-Acts and in Paul. It is even possible, as David Rensberger has demonstrated, to read the Gospel of John as a witness for God's liberation of a community oppressed by the alienating powers of "the world."[27] It is difficult to see, however, how several of the other New Testament witnesses provide textual support for this image: Ephesians and the pastoral Epistles would be particularly resistant to a reading through the lens of liberation, though Matthew also presents a vision of the Christian life that is oriented more to orderly obedience than to deliverance from oppressing powers. Thus, although liberation finds a broader base of textual support than does love, it remains unable to bring the full spectrum of New Testament witnesses into focus. Indeed, the image of liberation actually stands in severe tension with the ethic of the pastoral Epistles. (See the second criterion discussed at the beginning of this chapter.) Thus, while liberation theology can rightly claim to be an authentic development of themes found in some of the New Testament witnesses, it does not represent a ground for synthesis; indeed, if the image of liberation were taken to be normative, it would have to serve as a critical principle to silence some of the voices within the canon.

The term "liberation" does have advantages; it offers a more specific image than the term "love." Indeed, the theme of liberation has proven theologically potent precisely because its allusive appeal to the Exodus story is so richly evocative: it touches the imagination, and it links the New Testament compellingly with the Old. Furthermore, unlike love, liberation is unlikely to fade into a conceptual abstraction, because it points resolutely to social and economic realities.

One potential danger in the use of liberation as a focal image, however, is that it can easily be understood in a purely immanent sense as a political term, thus losing touch with the New Testament's emphasis on the power of God as the sole ground of hope and freedom. When this happens, the New Testament's "eschatological reservation" (the "not yet" of salvation) may slip from view, so that the delicate balance of the eschatological dialectic is lost. For the New Testament writers who use the term, liberation is not a political program that human beings can implement; rather, it is the promised eschatological action of God.[28] Consequently, just as love is best understood through the focal image of the cross, so also liberation is best understood through the focal image of new creation: liberation is already given to us through Christ (Gal. 5:1), yet we still await liberation—the redemption of our bodies—while groaning along with the creation in bondage to decay (Rom. 8:18–25).

Thus, New Testament ethics will speak of love and liberation, and speak with urgent conviction, so long as these terms are understood as subheadings under the more fundamental categories of cross and new creation.[29] The latter categories

serve as lenses that shape and focus our reading of the New Testament texts that speak of love and freedom. When love and liberation are removed from the focusing power of the cross and new creation, however, they can become distorted. And if we try to use love and liberation as focal images in their own right, we will produce reductive and truncated readings of the New Testament's canonical witness.

Taken together, the three images of *community*, *cross*, and *new creation* bring the moral vision of the New Testament canon into focus and provide a matrix within which we can speak meaningfully about the unity of New Testament ethics. But can this matrix of images be normative for us? That is the question to be pursued in the next part of this book.

NOTES

1. This claim is, of course, potentially controversial. For discussions that lend support in various ways to this assertion, see Dodd 1936; Frei 1975; Hays 1983; Wright 1992, 371–417. The earliest creeds characteristically articulate the content of Christian faith in narrative form. For recent discussion of the problem of the narrative character of Christian convictions, see the essays collected in Hauerwas and Jones 1989.

2. The Diatessaron was a late-second-century harmony of the four canonical Gospels, melding the four narratives into one. See W. L. Petersen 1992.

3. Kelsey 1975, 159.

4. Kelsey 1975, 163.

5. Kelsey 1975, 167, 197.

6. As I have argued elsewhere, however, this second-order reflection presupposes and comments upon a narratively structured gospel. See Hays 1983 and my essay "Crucified with Christ" in Bassler 1991, 227–246.

7. Images of this sort have much in common with Northrop Frye's conception of *dianoia*, adapted from Aristotle. Whereas the *mythos* of a literary work is its linear plot, the *dianoia* is its theme, the narrative pattern seen as a synoptic unity. "The word narrative or *mythos* conveys the sense of movement caught by the ear, and the word meaning or *dianoia* conveys, or at least preserves, the sense of simultaneity caught by the eye. . . . [A]s soon as the whole is clear in our minds, we 'see' what it means" (Frye 1957, 77). For further exposition and discussion, see Hays 1983, 20–28.

8. As Rowan A. Greer observes, "Irenaeus at every step of the way draws upon Scripture in articulating the framework by which he believes it must be interpreted" ("A Framework for Interpreting a Christian Bible," in Kugel and Greer 1986, 155–176; quotation from p. 174). I am indebted to Kathryn Greene-McCreight for calling my attention to the formal similarity between my proposal and the hermeneutical function of the Rule of Faith. For further reflections on the relation between "ruled reading" and "the literal sense" of the Bible, see Greene-McCreight 1994.

9. Of course, these proposals are not entirely hypothetical; one may in fact identify particular groups of Christians that do, de facto, read the NT through these particular focal lenses.

10. See Lohfink 1984 [1982]; Hütter 1994.

11. Allen Verhey, in private correspondence, suggests that the NT does not neglect individual responsibility but frames it with constant reference to communal discipline and discernment; thus, in some texts, the key question becomes, "What should I do as a member of this community?" Consequently, Christian discipleship involves the resocialization of the individual into the social patterns of a new community. The point is well taken: the NT does certainly offer moral exhortation and guidance for individuals. Nonetheless, I stand by the statement that the corporate obedience of the community is the primary concern of the NT writers. This concern differs so markedly from the usual individualistic assumptions of Western liberal culture that strongly worded guidelines are necessary in order to recall us to the NT's ecclesially oriented perspective.

12. Cf. Betz 1967.

13. The point has been argued compellingly by Yoder 1994.

14. On this text, see Hays 1987.

15. The following comments treat matters that pertain more properly to the hermeneutical and pragmatic tasks than to the problem of synthesis. I have nevertheless placed them here in the discussion, because my experience of lecturing on these texts has shown that the mere mention of the cross raises a red flag for many hearers—particularly for some feminist theologians. This is partly a consequence of the inescapable *skandalon* of the cross, but it is also, sadly, a consequence of the way in which patriarchal cultures have sometimes twisted the proclamation of the cross into a rhetorical instrument for subjugating women and the powerless. Such abuse—both of the texts and of human beings—must be emphatically repudiated by NT ethics. For feminist critiques of the theology of the cross, see D. S. Williams 1993; Heyward 1984; Brock 1988.

16. Ellen Charry (1993) has argued eloquently that the cross and its attendant character-forming implications (humility, self-sacrifice, etc.) are precisely the most powerful theological instruments that can be brought to bear *against* male abuse of power. This seems to me to be exactly correct. I would add only that the NT's call for self-sacrificial service cannot be restricted only to men; to exempt women from the summons to be conformed to Christ's example of self-giving would be—paradoxically—to patronize them by excusing them from the call to radical discipleship.

17. The Gospel of John is the one NT text that may not fit easily into this synthetic account. John's emphasis on the realized element of eschatology is so strong that it threatens to dissolve the tension of unrealized promise found elsewhere in the NT. This Gospel continues, however, to look forward to a resurrection "at the last day," which cannot be identified with the fulfillment of coming to know Jesus in the present life. See the discussion of Johannine eschatology in Chapter 6. Also, when the Gospel is read in canonical context along with 1 John, the future eschatological emphasis is more clearly preserved: see, e.g., 1 John 2:28, 3:2, 4:17.

18. See the discussion of this passage in Chapter 1.2.a. Most English translations obscure Paul's conviction that the community stands at the point of the collision or overlapping of two ages.

19. My explication of this image owes much to the work of Ernst Käsemann, J. Christiaan Beker, and J. Louis Martyn. See also Finger 1989.

20. Lindbeck 1995, 19.

21. Indeed, if these same images were described by the terms "Israel, cross, and resurrection," I would not object so long as "Israel" were understood to include the Gentile Christians grafted into what Paul calls "the [eschatological] Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16) and so long as "resurrection" were understood to refer not only to the resurrection of Jesus (the already) but also to the general resurrection at the last day (the not yet).

22. This question was put to me by Ben Ollenburger in private correspondence (Feb. 24, 1993).

23. See my discussion of the passage in Chapter 3.

24. One possible strategy for making such a case would be to highlight the passages in which Mark portrays Jesus as having compassion on the crowds (6:34, 8:2) or as loving the rich man who asks what he must do to inherit eternal life (10:21). If these passages are taken as indicators of Jesus' general attitude toward people, then the call to follow Jesus might be interpreted to include sharing his disposition toward love. This strategy, however, is problematical. Mark (in contrast to John) does not encourage his readers to emulate Jesus' love; furthermore, if Jesus' compassion is taken to be exemplary, what are we to do with the passages in which Jesus manifests intolerance (7:27), impatience (8:17–21, 9:19), and anger (11:12–17, 1:41 [taking *orgistheis* ("being angry") as the original reading; see Lane 1974, 84 n. 141])? Mark's Jesus is not so much a loving figure as a powerful, somber, enigmatic one. The healings, exorcisms, and other miracles in Mark are not so much signs of love as signs of the power of God's inbreaking kingdom.

25. Hauerwas 1981b, 124.

26. Hauerwas's comment is again apt: "The ethic of the Gospel is not a love ethic, but it is an ethic of adherence to this man [Jesus] as he has bound our destiny to his, as he makes the story of our life his story. As an ethic of love the Gospels would be an ethic at our disposal, since we would fill in the context of love by our wishes . . ." (Hauerwas 1981b, 115).

27. Rensberger 1988; cf. Cassidy 1992.

28. One might compare the critique of liberation as a descriptive category for reading Exodus in Levenson 1993, 127–159.

29. Similarly, justice is rightly to be comprehended through the focal image of community. In other words, within NT ethics, justice (*dikaiosynē*) names the narratively rendered account of the covenant relation between God and God's people. For further discussion, see Hays 1992.

PART THREE

The Hermeneutical Task

The Use of the New Testament in Christian Ethics

Chapter 11

How Do Ethicists Use Scripture?

Diagnostic Questions

How can we read the New Testament texts as a message addressed to us? Once we have given a synthetic account of the basis for unity in New Testament ethics, we must move on to confront the hermeneutical task. What interpretive strategies shall we adopt to allow these ancient writings to continue speaking nineteen hundred years after their composition? When we confess these texts to be authoritative for the church, what precisely do we mean? Are certain parts or aspects of the New Testament authoritative in ways that other parts are not? What does it mean to say that a narrative text (such as Acts or one of the Gospels) is authoritative?

In order to approach these difficult questions, it will be useful to examine the ways in which a representative cross-section of theologians have in fact used the New Testament in setting forth normative accounts of Christian ethics. By examining their practices of interpreting and employing Scripture, we can gain a sense of the range of possible hermeneutical strategies and see what is at stake in their differing methodological decisions. In other words, before attempting to prescribe how we *should* use the New Testament in doing ethics, it is wise to consider how theologians *do* in fact use it.[1] I propose to investigate the role of Scripture in the ethics of five major twentieth-century interpreters: Reinhold Niebuhr, Karl Barth, John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. All five have

been widely influential voices in the church. Although only Schüssler Fiorenza is a biblical scholar by trade, all five grant a major role to the New Testament in the formation of Christian ethics. I do not claim that their uses of the New Testament represent a comprehensive typology of hermeneutical strategies. All five, for example, are scholars who represent the academic culture of Europe and America. Four of the five are Protestants; only Schüssler Fiorenza is a Roman Catholic, and, as we shall see, her position is in no way representative of the dominant Thomist tradition in Catholic moral theology. Nonetheless, these five figures are sufficiently diverse to exemplify an instructive spectrum of hermeneutical options. One could expand the spectrum by adding representatives of other theological and cultural traditions (e.g., a Thomist, a Pentecostal, a Third World liberation theologian, and so forth); the range of possibilities is in principle infinite.[2] For the purposes of this book, however, the five thinkers selected for attention here will serve to raise the major hermeneutical issues for New Testament ethics. Readers are invited to extend this survey for themselves by posing the diagnostic questions developed in this part of the book to the work of other theologians.

Rather than attempting a complete survey of the use of the New Testament in the work of each of these writers, I will focus particularly on their treatments of war and violence. This specific test case will reveal much about their various methodological commitments, and it will provide a convenient point of comparison among the five.

After completing the comparative analysis of the hermeneutical strategies of these five theologians, I will offer some overall assessments and normative proposals about the role of the New Testament in Christian ethics. I do not expect that every reader will assent to my normative proposals; however, I hope that the categories employed in this chapter will at least clarify some of the differences in our interpretive practices within the church. At the same time, this discussion of hermeneutical methodology may encourage a more rigorous examination of the ways in which we appeal to Scripture as a basis for our ethical convictions.

Before we undertake the discussion of the use of the New Testament by Niebuhr, Barth, Yoder, Hauerwas, and Schüssler Fiorenza, it will be useful to set forth some diagnostic categories, a list of questions to pose to these five interpreters. This list of questions will focus the analysis and facilitate comparisons.

1. Modes of Appeal to Scripture

Hermeneutical appropriation of the New Testament requires us to make decisions about the *mode* of ethical discourse in which biblical warrants may function authoritatively. What sorts of work does Scripture do in ethical discourse? What sorts of affirmations does it authorize? We may distinguish four different modes of appeal to the text in ethical argument.[3] Theologians may appeal to Scripture as a source of the following:

- *Rules:* direct commandments or prohibitions of specific behaviors.
- *Principles:* general frameworks of moral consideration by which particular decisions about action are to be governed.
- *Paradigms:* stories or summary accounts of characters who model exemplary conduct (or negative paradigms: characters who model reprehensible conduct).
- A *symbolic world* that creates the perceptual categories through which we interpret reality.[4] (We may distinguish for analysis two different, but correlated, aspects of the New Testament's symbolic world: its representations of the human condition and its depictions of the character of God.)

Each of these modes of discourse may be found *within* Scripture as well as in secondary theological reflection about Scripture's ethical import. For example, the *rule* mode is illustrated by the New Testament's prohibition of divorce (Mark 10:2–12 and parallels). The *principle* mode is exemplified by Jesus' linking of Deuteronomy 6:4–5 with Leviticus 19:18 to form the double love commandment (Mark 12:28–31, parallels). The *paradigm* mode is illustrated by Jesus' use of the parable of the good Samaritan to answer the question "Who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29–37) and by Paul's offering himself as an example to be imitated (1 Cor. 10:31–11:1); an example of a negative paradigm is the story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11). The *symbolic world* as context for moral discernment is by definition pervasive in New Testament texts. As examples, consider the following instances: Romans 1:19–32 offers a diagnosis of the fallen *human condition* without explicitly articulating any moral directives, and Matthew 5:43–48 proffers a *characterization of God* (who makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust) in order to establish a framework for discipleship.

The presence of all these modes of discourse within the New Testament suggests that all of them are potentially legitimate modes for our own normative reflection.[5] Thus, the hermeneutical task is—in part—the task of rightly correlating our ethical norms with the modes of Scripture's speech. Our investigation will seek to determine the characteristic mode(s) of appeal to Scripture for each of the five theologians to be considered.

2. Other Sources of Authority

The other major hermeneutical issue that New Testament ethics must confront is the question of the authority of the New Testament's ethical vision in relation to other sources of authority for theology. No matter how seriously the church may take the authority of the Bible, the slogan of *sola Scriptura* is both conceptually and practically untenable, because the interpretation of Scripture can never occur in a vacuum. The New Testament is always read by interpreters under the formative influence of some particular tradition, using the light of reason and experience and attempting to relate the Bible to a particular historical situation. Thus, the

hermeneutical task in New Testament ethics requires an attempt to specify as clearly as possible the relationship between Scripture and other sources of authority. These other sources are often characterized under the rubrics of *tradition*, *reason*, and *experience*.[6] This categorization is heuristically serviceable, but we must define carefully what is meant by each of these terms.

When we speak of *tradition* as an authority for theology, we refer not to general cultural customs but specifically to the church's time-honored practices of worship, service, and critical reflection. Included under this heading are first of all the ancient ecumenical creeds and dogmatic definitions; tradition also includes, however, the writings of individual theologians, particularly those who have been widely read and revered in the church over long periods of time (e.g., Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Wesley). As some of these examples suggest, tradition can also take more local forms: particular denominations or cultural groups within the church universal bear their own distinctive forms of belief and practice, which play a significant role in the way ethical issues are addressed. In Christian theology, tradition can never be treated as sacrosanct; we must bear in mind Jesus' warning against those who "abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition" (Mark 7:8 and parallels). The classic formula remains serviceable: Scripture is *norma normans* ("the norming norm"), while tradition is *norma normata* ("the normed norm"). Still, tradition gives us a place to start in our interpretation of Scripture; it teaches us how to read with imaginative sympathy and an obedient spirit. Only where there is an appropriate concern for the witness of tradition in the church will we find it possible to sustain what Hauerwas calls a "conversation with one another and God . . . across generations."[7]

When we speak of *reason* as an authority for theology, we refer to understandings of the world attained through systematic philosophical reflection and through scientific investigation. With regard to hermeneutical issues, reason is a necessary tool in weighing the intelligibility of the text, its correspondence to the world as perceived through other media of knowledge. Additionally, critical reason has played a major role in the historical study of the Bible, enabling us to understand more about the cultural context of scriptural writings and their processes of composition and development. The relationship of reason to the New Testament as an authority is sometimes problematical. That is so not because the New Testament is unreasonable but because reason itself is always culturally influenced. One important insight of philosophical reason in the late twentieth century has been the recognition that we have no access to a universal objective "reason."[8] Rationality is a contingent aspect of particular symbolic worlds. Consequently, when we ask about the relation between Scripture and "reason" as sources of authority, we are in effect seeking the best way to coordinate the cultural logic of the New Testament writings with the cultural logic of our own historical setting. The possibility of significant—perhaps irreconcilable—tensions between these sources can hardly be ruled out a priori.

When we speak of *experience* as an authority for theology, we refer not just to the religious experience of individuals but also to the experience of the community

of faith collectively. Private revelatory experiences may prove edifying, but they can claim normative status in the interpretation of Scripture only insofar as they are received and validated in the wider experience of the community. (A classic example is Luther's experience of finding grace and forgiveness in Scripture; his personal experience became paradigmatically illuminating for many and thus became hermeneutically normative for an important theological tradition.) Experience serves not only to illuminate the meaning of the text but also to confirm the testimony of Scripture in the hearts and lives of the community. This is what the tradition calls *testimonium internum Spiritus Sancti*, what John Wesley meant when he spoke of "experimental religion": experience is the living appropriation of the text, which becomes self-attesting as it is experienced in faith.

> I love to tell the story, because I know 'tis true;
> it satisfies my longings as nothing else can do.[9]

The satisfaction of longings becomes evidence for the truth of Scripture's testimony. But what about experience that seems to contradict the witness of Scripture? That is a difficult problem that must be explored in our study of representative theological ethicists. In any case, just as tradition and cultural norms of rationality inescapably form our sensibilities, so also we are formed as interpreters by our personal experiences of God and the world. This formative role of experience must be acknowledged and reckoned with in our account of New Testament hermeneutics.

The right relation of Scripture to each of these other sources of authority has been a perennial problem for theology. The challenge has taken slightly different forms in different historical eras, but the church must always struggle to get the balance among these four factors right. The Reformation fought its hermeneutical battles over the relation of church *tradition* to Scripture; the Enlightenment wrestled with the relation of *reason* to Scripture, a battle that continued into the early years of the twentieth century. Now, however, we have passed into an era in which the urgent question is the relative authority of Scripture and *experience*. Many feminist and liberation theologians are willing to assert explicitly that the authority of Scripture is in principle subordinate to the authority of the critical insight conferred by the experience of the oppressed or of women. Here great caution is necessary to distinguish the appropriate—indeed, inevitable—role of experience in shaping our interpretation of the text from the bolder claim that personal experience can be treated as a source of theological authority independent of Scripture.

As we assess the hermeneutical strategies of Niebuhr, Barth, Yoder, Hauerwas, and Schüssler Fiorenza, we must ask how each one weighs the relative importance of these four sources for theology and how their interpretations of New Testament ethics are shaped by that methodological decision. But still one more factor remains to be considered.

3. The Enactment of the Word

As we survey the hermeneutical strategies of our five representative interpreters, we must ask finally in each case about the concrete embodiments of their moral visions. What sort of communities have resulted or might result from putting their readings of Scripture into practice? When we ask this question, we have moved imperceptibly across the indistinct theoretical line that distinguishes the hermeneutical task from the pragmatic.[10] If we want to assess the normative implications of differing readings of New Testament ethics, this movement to the pragmatic question is inescapable.

When we pose this question as an integral part of an inquiry into New Testament ethics, we are acknowledging the force of James's insistence that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:26b). Or, to put the point in a slightly different way, we are subjecting various accounts of New Testament ethics to the "fruits test" that Jesus proposed for distinguishing false prophets from true: "You will know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:20). It is important to note, however, that we are not pursuing an ad hominem inquiry about the moral quality of the personal lives of these theologians. Rather, we are asking how their programmatic proposals for the use of the New Testament in ethics have been put into practice in living communities of faith. The operative assumption of this inquiry, then, is that a clearly articulated and faithful reading of the ethics of the New Testament ought to contribute to the formation of communities that palpably embody the love of God as shown forth in Jesus Christ.

4. A Diagnostic Checklist

In view of the above considerations, we may now formulate a diagnostic checklist to be employed in assessing the role of Scripture in the work of various theological ethicists. The overall structure of the checklist corresponds to the four-part structure of this book, distinguishing, for the sake of analysis, the *descriptive*, *synthetic*, *hermeneutical*, and *pragmatic* aspects of New Testament ethics. One could elaborate these diagnostic questions considerably; the questions posed in Parts I and IV of the list are broadly formulated, asking for summary judgments about complex matters. For our present purposes, however, this list will suffice as a structuring device for the discussion.

THE USE OF SCRIPTURE IN ETHICS

I. ***Descriptive***
How accurate/adequate is the exegesis of texts used?

II. ***Synthetic***
A. Range: How comprehensive is the scope of texts employed?
B. Selection: Which biblical texts are used and not used? Is there a canon within the canon? How is selection determined?

C. How does the interpreter handle texts that are in tension with his or her position?
D. What focal images are employed?

III. ***Hermeneutical***
A. What is the mode of appeal to the text? What sort of work does Scripture do? What sorts of proposals does it authorize?
1. Rules
2. Principles
3. Paradigms
4. Symbolic world
a. The human condition
b. The character of God
B. What other sources of authority do the interpreters rely on?
1. Tradition
2. Reason
3. Experience

IV. ***Pragmatic***
The fruits test: How is the vision embodied in a living community? Does the community manifest the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23)?

NOTES

1. Kelsey (1975) gives an exemplary account of the various ways in which theologians appeal to Scripture to authorize theological claims. The present study, while drawing significantly on his insights, focuses more narrowly on a special case of the more general problem analyzed by Kelsey: the use of the NT in theological ethics.

2. For a comprehensive study of the use of Scripture by a somewhat wider range of theological ethicists, see Siker (forthcoming). My decision to treat Barth, Yoder, and Hauerwas entails a decision to give more intensive attention to a certain particular band within the spectrum, for there are definite family resemblances among these three in their use of Scripture. Because all three of them share my concern to grant Scripture a constitutive role in Christian ethics, I have found it instructive to clarify my own position by delineating more carefully the differences between them—differences that in my judgment turn out to be of considerable importance.

3. Here I follow Gustafson 1970, though I have modified his categories slightly.

4. Cf. the work of Berger and Luckmann 1966 and its application to the study of early Christian ethics by Meeks 1986b and 1993.

5. But see Verhey 1984, 176–177, who would exclude appeals to the NT at the "moral-rule" level.

6. The four sources of theological authority thus outlined correspond to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral described by Albert Outler, which has become widely influential as a framework for discussion in much recent Protestant thought. For Outler's own account of these categories, see Albert C. Outler, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral—In John Wesley," in Langford 1991, 75–88. For a historical critique of Outler's attribution of these categories to Wesley himself, see Ted A. Campbell, "The 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral': The Story of a Modern Methodist Myth," in Langford 1991, 154–161. Anglican theology does not treat "experience" as a separate category, identifying instead a threefold authority for theology: Scripture, tradition, and reason. In effect, this classification treats contemporary religious experience as part of the data to be weighed by reason. While this is a workable schema, I believe it is more heuristically useful to consider experience as a separate category, thus distinguishing between scientific and philosophical investigations (i.e., reason) on the one hand and the evidence of intuitive and anecdotally reported spiritual *experience* on the other.

7. Hauerwas 1981a, 64.

8. For example, MacIntyre 1988 points out that "standards of rational justification" are embodied in and emerge from particular traditions (p. 7). Although the Enlightenment promised to provide standards of reason

"undeniable by any rational person and therefore independent of . . . social and cultural particularities," it failed (p. 6); there is no universal reason, because reason itself is tradition- and history-bound.

9. Katherine Hankey, "I Love to Tell the Story," *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 156. (Originally written in 1868.)

10. See my discussion of these terms in the Introduction.

Chapter 12

Five Representative Hermeneutical Strategies

1. Reinhold Niebuhr: Christian Realism

Reinhold Niebuhr (1902–1971) has been the most influential American Protestant theological ethicist of the twentieth century. As a young pastor and active advocate for organized labor in Detroit during the 1920s, he harbored strong socialist and pacifist sympathies. However, his 1932 book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*—written after he had become a professor of Christian ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York—marked an intellectual and political watershed. Niebuhr had come to regard his earlier political idealism as unrealistic; his subsequent career was devoted to championing his vision of "Christian realism," which he understood as a biblically informed prophetic critique of ideologies both on the right and on the left. Niebuhr's influence can hardly be overestimated; his essays and books came to define mainstream Protestant ethics during the middle part of this century. He became an adviser to presidents and Washington policy-makers during the Cold War era, and his picture appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1948. What appears to be commonsense political ethics to the majority of Protestant churchgoers today is actually a popularized version of Niebuhr's Christian realism.

e.g., Fee 1987, 303–305. It has not been possible to discuss this exegetical problem here, but the weight of probability lies with the reading adopted above.

42. It is tempting to turn to the Song of Solomon to find a joyous, sensual celebration of sex; the only difficulty with that text for our present purposes is that it does not explicitly describe the passionate lovers in the poem as married.

43. See Whitehead 1993.

44. Spong 1984, 1127.

45. Spong 1984, 1127.

46. One reader of my manuscript comments: "I would agree that such a pathetic 'parody' of the marriage covenant *might* be better than abandoning the fellowship of the church, but I would not say that it is better than parting in anger.' It seems to me that anger at injustice and unfaithfulness is something Christians today need to foster rather than avoid. It may be the case that the only faithful way to part is in anger."

47. Willimon 1990, 925.

48. This is merely one illustration. My aim here is not to produce a list of exceptions but to illustrate the use of hermeneutical procedures that we might apply to the texts.

49. For an extended argument in defense of this position, see Keener 1991.

50. Garvey 1987, 169.

Chapter 16

Homosexuality

Gary came to New Haven in the summer of 1989 to say a proper farewell. My best friend from undergraduate years at Yale, he was dying of AIDS. While he was still able to travel, my family and I invited him to come visit us one more time.[1]

During the week he stayed with us, we went to films together (*Field of Dreams* and *Dead Poets Society*), we drank wine and laughed, we had long sober talks about politics and literature and the gospel and sex and such. Above all, we listened to music. Some of it was nostalgic music: the record of our college singing group, which Gary had directed with passionate precision; music of the sixties, recalling the years when we marched together against the Vietnam War—Beatles, Byrds, Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell. Some of it was music more recently discovered: I introduced him to k.d. lang and the Indigo Girls; he introduced me to Johannes Ockeghem's *Requiem* (*Missa pro defunctis*). As always, his aesthetic sense was fine and austere; as always, he was determined to face the truth, even in the shadow of death.

We prayed together often that week, and we talked theology. It became clear that Gary had come not only to say goodbye but also to think hard, before God, about the relation between his homosexuality and his Christian faith. He was angry at the self-affirming gay Christian groups, because he regarded his own condition as more complex and tragic than their apologetic stance could acknowledge. He was worried that the gay apologists encouraged homosexual believers to "draw their identity from their sexuality" and thus to shift the ground of their identity subtly and disastrously away from God. For more than twenty years, Gary had grappled with his homosexuality, experiencing it as a compulsion and an affliction. Now, as he faced death, he wanted to talk it all through again from the beginning, because

he knew my love for him and trusted me to speak without dissembling. For Gary, there was no time to dance around the hard questions. As Dylan had urged, "Let us not talk falsely now; the hour is getting late."

In particular, Gary wanted to discuss the biblical passages that deal with homosexual acts. Among Gary's many gifts was his skill as a reader of texts. After leaving Yale and helping to found a community-based Christian theater group in Toronto, he had eventually completed a master's degree in French literature. Though he was not trained as a biblical exegete, he was a careful and sensitive interpreter. He had read hopefully through the standard bibliography of the burgeoning movement advocating the acceptance of homosexuality in the church: John J. McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual*; James B. Nelson, *Embodiment*; Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?*; John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality.*[2] In the end, he came away disappointed, believing that these authors, despite their good intentions, had imposed a wishful interpretation on the biblical passages. However much he wanted to believe that the Bible did not condemn homosexuality, he would not violate his own stubborn intellectual integrity by pretending to find their arguments persuasive.

The more we talked, the more we found our perspectives interlocking. Both of us had serious misgivings about the mounting pressure for the church to recognize homosexuality as a legitimate Christian lifestyle. As a New Testament scholar, I was concerned about certain questionable exegetical and theological strategies of the gay apologists. As a homosexual Christian, Gary believed that their writings did justice neither to the biblical texts nor to his own sobering experience of the gay community that he had moved in and out of for twenty years.

We concluded that our witnesses were complementary and that we had a word to speak to the churches. The public discussion of this matter has been dominated by insistently ideological voices: on one side, gay rights activists demanding the church's unqualified acceptance of homosexuality; on the other, unqualified condemnation of homosexual Christians. Consequently, the church has become increasingly polarized. Gary and I agreed that we should try to encourage a more nuanced discourse within the community of faith. He was going to write an article about his own experience, reflecting on his struggle to live as a faithful Christian wracked by a sexual orientation that he believed to be incommensurate with the teaching of Scripture, and I agreed to write a response to it.

Tragically, Gary soon became too sick to carry out his intention. His last letter to me was an effort to get some of his thoughts on paper while he was still able to write. By May of 1990 he was dead.

This section of the present book, then, is an act of keeping covenant with a beloved brother in Christ who will not speak again on this side of the resurrection. I commit it to print in the hope that it will foster compassionate and carefully reasoned theological reflection within the community of faith.[3] The need for such reflection is great; no issue divides the church more sharply in the 1990s than the normative status of homosexuality. How is Scripture rightly to be employed in our deliberations about this matter?

1. Reading the Texts

The Bible hardly ever discusses homosexual behavior. There are perhaps half a dozen brief references to it in all of Scripture. In terms of emphasis, it is a minor concern—in contrast, for example, to economic injustice. The paucity of texts addressing the issue is a significant fact for New Testament ethics. What the Bible does say should be heeded carefully, but any ethic that intends to be biblical will seek to get the accents in the right place, not overemphasizing peripheral issues. (Would that the passion presently being expended in the church over the question of homosexuality were devoted instead to urging the wealthy to share with the poor! Some of the most urgent champions of "biblical morality" on sexual matters become strangely equivocal when the discussion turns to the New Testament's teachings about possessions.)[4]

As we deal with this issue, it will be useful first to comment briefly on the Old Testament texts usually cited. This procedure will enable us to clear away some possible misconceptions and to delineate the basis for the traditional Jewish teaching that is presupposed by the New Testament writers.

(A) GENESIS 19:1–29 The notorious story of Sodom and Gomorrah—often cited in connection with homosexuality—is actually irrelevant to the topic. The "men of Sodom" come pounding on Lot's door, apparently with the intention of gang-raping Lot's two visitors—who, as we readers know, are actually angels. The angels rescue Lot and his family and pronounce destruction on the city. The gang-rape scenario exemplifies the wickedness of the city, but there is nothing in the passage pertinent to a judgment about the morality of consensual homosexual intercourse. Indeed, there is nothing in the rest of the biblical tradition, save an obscure reference in Jude 7, to suggest that the sin of Sodom was particularly identified with sexual misconduct of any kind.[5] In fact, the clearest statement about the sin of Sodom is to be found in an oracle of the prophet Ezekiel: "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy" (Ezek. 16:49).

(B) LEVITICUS 18:22, 20:13 The few biblical texts that *do* address the topic of homosexual behavior, however, are unambiguously and unremittingly negative in their judgment. The holiness code in Leviticus explicitly prohibits male homosexual intercourse: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination" (Lev. 18:22). (Nothing is said here about female homosexual behavior.) In Leviticus 20:10–16, the same act is listed as one of a series of sexual offenses—along with adultery, incest, and bestiality—that are punishable by death. It is worth noting that the *act* of "lying with a male as with a woman" is categorically proscribed: motives for the act are not treated as a morally significant factor. This unambiguous legal prohibition stands as the foundation for the subsequent universal rejection of male same-sex intercourse within Judaism.[6]

Quoting a law from Leviticus, of course, does not necessarily settle the question for Christian ethics. The Old Testament contains many prohibitions and commandments that have, ever since the first century, generally been disregarded or deemed obsolete by the church—most notably, rules concerning circumcision and dietary practices. Some ethicists have argued that the prohibition of homosexuality is similarly superseded for Christians: it is merely part of the Old Testament's ritual "purity rules" and therefore morally irrelevant today.[7]

The Old Testament, however, makes no systematic distinction between ritual law and moral law. The same section of the holiness code also contains, for instance, the prohibition of incest (Lev. 18:6–18). Is that a purity law or a moral law? Leviticus makes no distinction in principle. In each case, the church is faced with the task of discerning whether Israel's traditional norms remain in force for the new community of Jesus' followers. In order to see what decisions the early church made about this matter, we must turn to the New Testament.

(C) 1 CORINTHIANS 6:9–11, 1 TIMOTHY 1:10, ACTS 15:28–29 The early church did, in fact, consistently adopt the Old Testament's teaching on matters of sexual morality, including homosexual acts. In 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10, for example, we find homosexuals included in lists of persons who do things unacceptable to God.

In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul, exasperated with the Corinthians, some of whom apparently believe themselves to have entered a spiritually exalted state in which the moral rules of their old existence no longer apply to them (cf. 1 Cor. 4:8, 5:1–2, 8:1–9), confronts them with a blunt rhetorical question: "Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God?" He then gives an illustrative list of the sorts of persons he means: "fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, *malakoi*, *arsenokoitai*, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers."

I have left the terms pertinent to the present issue untranslated, because their translation has been disputed recently by Boswell and others.[8] The word *malakoi* is not a technical term meaning "homosexuals" (no such term existed either in Greek or in Hebrew), but it appears often in Hellenistic Greek as pejorative slang to describe the "passive" partners—often young boys—in homosexual activity. The other word, *arsenokoitai*, is not found in any extant Greek text earlier than 1 Corinthians. Some scholars have suggested that its meaning is uncertain, but Robin Scroggs has shown that the word is a translation of the Hebrew *mishkav zakur* ("lying with a male"), derived directly from Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 and used in rabbinic texts to refer to homosexual intercourse.[9] The Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) of Leviticus 20:13 reads, "Whoever lies with a man as with a woman [*meta arsenos koitēn gynaikos*], they have both done an abomination" (my translation). This is almost certainly the idiom from which the noun *arsenokoitai* was coined. Thus, Paul's use of the term presupposes and reaffirms the holiness code's condemnation of homosexual acts. This is not a controversial point in Paul's argument; the letter gives no evidence that anyone at Corinth was arguing for the acceptance of same-sex

erotic activity. Paul simply assumes that his readers will share his conviction that those who indulge in homosexual activity are "wrongdoers" (*adikoi*, literally "unrighteous"), along with the other sorts of offenders in his list.

In 1 Corinthians 6:11, Paul asserts that the sinful behaviors catalogued in the vice list were formerly practiced by some of the Corinthians. Now, however, since Paul's correspondents have been transferred into the sphere of Christ's lordship, they ought to have left these practices behind: "This is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God." The remainder of the chapter, then (1 Cor. 6:12–20), counsels the Corinthians to glorify God in their bodies, because they belong now to God and no longer to themselves.

The 1 Timothy passage includes *arsenokoitai* in a list of "the lawless and disobedient," whose behavior is specified in a vice list that includes everything from lying to slave-trading to murdering one's parents, under the rubric of actions "contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel." Here again, the Old Testament prohibition is presupposed, but the context offers little discussion of sexual morality as such.

One other possibly relevant passage is the apostolic decree of Acts 15:28–29, which rules that Gentile converts to the new Christian movement must observe a list of minimal purity prohibitions in order to have fellowship with the predominantly Jewish early church:

> For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication [**porneia**].[10]

If, as seems likely, these stipulations are based on the purity regulations of Leviticus 17:1–18:30—which apply not only to Israelites but also to "the aliens who reside among them" (Lev. 17:8–16, 18:26)—then the umbrella term *porneia* might well include all the sexual transgressions enumerated in Leviticus 18:6–30, including *inter alia* homosexual intercourse. This suggestion about the Old Testament background for Acts 15:28–29 is probable but not certain. In any case, the immediate narrative context in Acts reflects a primary concern with the issue of whether Gentile converts must be circumcised; sexual morality is not the major point at issue. Thus the precise scope of the prohibited *porneia* is not explained in the story.

(D) ROMANS 1:18–32 The most crucial text for Christian ethics concerning homosexuality remains Romans 1, because this is the only passage in the New Testament that explains the condemnation of homosexual behavior in an explicitly theological context.

> *Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring*[11] *of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator. . . . For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable 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 own error. (Rom. 1:24–27)

(This is, incidentally, the only passage in the Bible that refers to lesbian sexual relations.) Because the passage is often cited and frequently misunderstood, a careful examination of its place in Paul's argument is necessary.

After the greeting and introductory thanksgiving (Rom. 1:1–15), the substance of Paul's exposition begins with a programmatic declaration in 1:16–17: the gospel is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith, as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'" This theologically pregnant formulation emphasizes first of all the character of the gospel as an active manifestation of God's power. The gospel is not merely a moral or philosophical teaching that hearers may accept or reject as they choose; it is rather the eschatological instrument through which God is working his purpose out in the world.[12]

Like Habakkuk long before him and like Milton long after, Paul is undertaking in his own way to "justify the ways of God to men"[13] by proclaiming that the righteousness of God (*dikaiosynē theou*) is now definitively manifest in the gospel. As a demonstration of his righteousness, God has "put forward" Jesus Christ, precisely in order "to prove at the present time that he himself [i.e., God] is righteous" (Rom. 3:25–26). The gospel is, among other things, a vindication of God. Of course, this vindication of God's righteousness entails more than an abstract declaration of God's moral uprightness; for Paul, the gospel that proclaims God's justice is also a power, "the power of God for salvation" (1:16), reaching out graciously to deliver humanity from bondage to sin and death.[14]

Having sounded this keynote, Paul abruptly modulates into a contrasting key by turning to condemn the unrighteousness of fallen humanity: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth" (1:18). The Greek word that the NRSV translates as "wickedness" (*adikia*), used twice in 1:18 for unmistakable emphasis, is the direct antithesis of "righteousness" (*dikaiosynē*). Unless we translate it as "unrighteousness," we are apt to miss the intended contrast; the righteousness of God is manifest in God's wrath against the unrighteousness of humankind. The ensuing discussion (1:19–32) explains, documents, and elaborates this human unrighteousness. Humanity's unrighteousness consists fundamentally in a refusal to honor God and render him thanks (1:21). God has clearly shown forth his "power and divine nature" in and through the created world (1:19–20), but the human race in general has disregarded this evidence and turned on a massive scale to idolatry (1:23). The genius of Paul's analysis, of course, lies in his refusal to posit a catalog of sins as the cause of human alienation from God. Instead, he delves to the root: all other depravities follow from the radical rebellion of the creature against the Creator (1:24–31).

As Ernst Käsemann comments, "Paul paradoxically reverses the cause and consequence: moral perversion is the result of God's wrath, not the reason for it."[15]

In order to make his accusation stick, Paul has to claim that these human beings are actually in rebellion against God, not merely ignorant of him. The way in which the argument is framed here is crucial: ignorance is the consequence of humanity's primal rebellion. Because human beings did not acknowledge God, "they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened" (1:21; cf. 2 Thess. 2:10b–12). Paul does not argue on a case-by-case basis that every single individual has first known and then rejected God; instead, thinking in mythico-historical categories, he casts forth a blanket condemnation of humankind. The whole passage is "Paul's real story of the universal fall."[16] As Käsemann puts it, "For the apostle, history is governed by the primal sin of rebellion against the Creator, which finds repeated and universal expression."[17] The passage is not merely a polemical denunciation of selected pagan vices; it is a diagnosis of the human condition. The diseased behavior detailed in verses 24–31 is symptomatic of the one sickness of humanity as a whole. Because they have turned away from God, "all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin" (3:9).

According to Paul's analysis, God's "wrath" against his fallen human creatures takes the ironic form of allowing them the freedom to have their own way, abandoning them to their own devices.

Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator. (1:22–25)

These and the following sentences, in which the refrain "God gave them up" occurs three times (1:24, 26, 28), repeatedly drive home Paul's point: idolatry finally debases both the worshiper and the idol. God's judgment allows the irony of sin to play itself out: the creature's original impulse toward self-glorification ends in self-destruction. The refusal to acknowledge God as Creator ends in blind distortion of the creation.

Thus, the particular depravities catalogued in verses 24–31 serve two basic purposes in Paul's argument. (Notice that the failings listed in verses 29–31 have nothing to do with sexual behavior.) First, these various forms of "debased mind" and "things that should not be done" are seen to be manifestations (not provocations) of the wrath of God, punishments inflicted upon rebellious humanity rather as the plagues were visited upon the Egyptians in Exodus.[18] Paul is not warning his readers that they will incur the wrath of God if they do the things that he lists here; rather, speaking in Israel's prophetic tradition, he is presenting an empirical survey of rampant human lawlessness as evidence that God's wrath and judgment are *already* at work in the world. Second, the heaping up of depravities serves to demonstrate

Paul's evaluation of humanity as deeply implicated in "ungodliness and wickedness" (1:18b). John Calvin saw clearly that Paul uses homosexuality as an illustration of his point because

> [u]ngodliness is a hidden evil, and therefore Paul uses a more obvious proof [i.e., homosexual acts] to show that they cannot escape without just condemnation, since this ungodliness was followed by effects which prove manifest evidence of the wrath of the Lord. . . . Paul uses these signs to prove the apostasy and defection of men.[19]

It is certainly true that Paul's portrayal of homosexual behavior is of a secondary and illustrative character in relation to the main line of argument;[20] however, the illustration is one that both Paul and his readers would have regarded as particularly vivid. Rebellion against this Creator who may be "understood and seen in the things that he has made" is made palpable in the flouting of sexual distinctions that are fundamental to God's creative design. The reference to God as Creator would certainly evoke for Paul, as well as for his readers, immediate recollections of the creation story in Genesis 1–3, which proclaims that "God created humankind in his own image . . . male and female he created them," charging them to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:27–28).[21] Similarly, as we have noted in our discussion of divorce, Genesis 2:18–24 describes woman and man as created for one another and concludes with a summary moral: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh." Thus the complementarity of male and female is given a theological grounding in God's creative activity. By way of sharp contrast, in Romans 1 Paul portrays homosexual behavior as a "sacrament" (so to speak) of the antireligion of human beings who refuse to honor God as Creator. When human beings engage in homosexual activity, they enact an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual reality: the rejection of the Creator's design. Thus, Paul's choice of homosexuality as an illustration of human depravity is not merely random: it serves his rhetorical purposes by providing a vivid image of humanity's primal rejection of the sovereignty of God the Creator.

The language of "exchange" plays a central role in this passage, emphasizing the direct parallelism between the rejection of God and the rejection of created sexual roles. The "exchange" imagery first appears in 1:23, where Paul charges that rebellious humans have "exchanged [*ēllaxan*] the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles." The accusation is recapitulated in 1:25, where it is for the first time connected directly to sexual impurity: because "they exchanged [*metēllaxan*] the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator," God handed them over to "the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves." Up to this point, Paul's condemnation could apply equally well to all sexual offenses, heterosexual as well as homosexual.

In 1:26–27, however, he introduces a further development in his account of humanity's tragic rebellious trade-off: "Their women exchanged [*metēllaxan*] natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another." The deliberate repetition of the verb *metēllaxan* forges a powerful rhetorical link between the rebellion against God and the "shameless acts" (1:27) that are themselves both evidence and consequence of that rebellion.

In describing what it is that straying humans have "exchanged," Paul for the first time introduces the concept of "nature" (*physis*) into the argument (1:26): they have exchanged (translating literally) "the natural use for that which is contrary to nature" (*tēn physikēn chrēsin eis tēn para physin*). What did Paul mean by "nature," and where does this idea come from?

There are abundant instances, both in the work of Greco-Roman moral philosophers and in literary texts, of the opposition between "natural" (*kata physin*) and "unnatural" (*para physin*) behavior. These categories play a major role in Stoicism, where right moral action is closely identified with living *kata physin*. In particular, the opposition between "natural" and "unnatural" is very frequently used (in the absence of convenient Greek words for "heterosexual" and "homosexual") as a way of distinguishing between heterosexual and homosexual behavior.[22]

This categorization of homosexual behavior as "contrary to nature" was adopted with particular vehemence by Hellenistic Jewish writers, who tended to see a correspondence between the philosophical appeal to "nature" and the teachings of the Law of Moses. "The Law recognizes no sexual connections," writes Josephus, "except for the natural [*kata physin*] union of man and wife, and that only for the procreation of children. But it abhors the intercourse of males with males, and punishes any who undertake such a thing with death."[23] In Paul's time, the categorization of homosexual practices as *para physin* was a commonplace feature of polemical attacks against such behavior, particularly in the world of Hellenistic Judaism. When this idea turns up in Romans 1 (in a form relatively restrained by comparison to the statements of some of Paul's contemporaries, both pagan and Jewish), we must recognize that Paul is hardly making an original contribution to theological thought on the subject; he speaks out of a Hellenistic-Jewish cultural context in which homosexuality is regarded as an abomination, and he assumes that his readers will share his negative judgment of it. In fact, the whole design and logic of his argument demands such an assumption. Though he offers no explicit reflection on the concept of "nature," it appears that in this passage Paul identifies "nature" with the created order. The understanding of "nature" in this conventional language does not rest on empirical observation of what actually exists; instead, it appeals to a conception of what ought to be, of the world as designed by God and revealed through the stories and laws of Scripture. Those who indulge in sexual practices *para physin* are defying the Creator and demonstrating their own alienation from him.

Let us summarize briefly our reading of Paul on this issue. The aim of Romans 1 is not to teach a code of sexual ethics; nor is the passage a warning of God's judgment against those who are guilty of particular sins. Rather, Paul is offering a *diagnosis* of

the disordered human condition: he adduces the fact of widespread homosexual behavior as evidence that human beings are indeed in rebellion against their Creator. The fundamental human sin is the refusal to honor God and give God thanks (1:21); consequently, God's wrath takes the form of letting human idolatry run its own self-destructive course. Homosexual activity, then, is not a *provocation* of "the wrath of God" (Rom. 1:18); rather, it is a *consequence* of God's decision to "give up" rebellious creatures to follow their own futile thinking and desires. The unrighteous behavior catalogued in Romans 1:26–31 is a list of *symptoms*: the underlying sickness of humanity as a whole, Jews and Greeks alike, is that they have turned away from God and fallen under the power of sin (cf. Rom. 3:9).

When this context is kept clearly in view, several important observations follow:

- Paul is not describing the individual life histories of pagan sinners; not every pagan has first known the true God of Israel and then chosen to turn away into idolatry. When Paul writes, "They exchanged the truth about God for a lie," he is giving a global account of the universal fall of humanity.[24] This fall is manifested continually in the various ungodly behaviors listed in verses 24–31.
- Paul singles out homosexual intercourse for special attention because he regards it as providing a particularly graphic image of the way in which human fallenness distorts God's created order. God the Creator made man and woman for each other, to cleave together, to be fruitful and multiply. When human beings "exchange" these created roles for homosexual intercourse, they *embody* the spiritual condition of those who have "exchanged the truth about God for a lie."
- Homosexual acts are not, however, specially reprehensible sins; they are no worse than any of the other manifestations of human unrighteousness listed in the passage (vv. 29–31)—no worse in principle than covetousness or gossip or disrespect for parents.
- Homosexual activity will not *incur* God's punishment: it is its own punishment, an "antireward." Paul here simply echoes a traditional Jewish idea. The Wisdom of Solomon, an intertestamental writing that has surely informed Paul's thinking in Romans 1, puts it like this: "Therefore those who lived unrighteously, in a life of folly, [God] tormented through their own abominations" (Wisdom of Solomon 12:23).

Repeated again and again in recent debate is the claim that Paul condemns only homosexual acts committed promiscuously by heterosexual persons—because they "*exchanged* natural intercourse for unnatural." Paul's negative judgment, so the argument goes, does *not* apply to persons who are "naturally" of homosexual orientation. This interpretation, however, is untenable. The "exchange" is not a matter of individual life decisions; rather, it is Paul's characterization of the fallen condition of the pagan world. In any case, neither Paul nor anyone else in antiquity had a concept of "sexual orientation." To introduce this concept into the passage (by suggesting that Paul disapproves only those who act contrary to their individual sexual orientations) is to lapse into anachronism. The fact is that Paul treats *all* homosexual activity as prima facie evidence of humanity's tragic confusion and alienation from God the Creator.

But one more thing must be said: Romans 1:18–32 sets up a homiletical sting operation. The passage builds a crescendo of condemnation, declaring God's wrath upon human unrighteousness, using rhetoric characteristic of Jewish polemic against Gentile immorality. It whips the reader into a frenzy of indignation against others: those unbelievers, those idol-worshipers, those immoral enemies of God. But then, in Romans 2:1, the sting strikes: "Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things." The reader who gleefully joins in the condemnation of the unrighteous is "without excuse" (*anapologētos*) before God (2:1), just as those who refuse to acknowledge God are *anapologētos* (1:20). The radical move that Paul makes is to proclaim that all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, stand equally condemned under the just judgment of a righteous God.

Consequently, for Paul, self-righteous judgment of homosexuality is just as sinful as the homosexual behavior itself. That does not mean that Paul is disingenuous in his rejection of homosexual acts and all the other sinful activities mentioned in Romans 1:24–32; all the evils listed there remain evils (cf. also Rom. 6:1–23).[25] But no one should presume to be above God's judgment; all of us stand in radical need of God's mercy. Thus, Paul's warning should transform the terms of our contemporary debate about homosexuality: no one has a secure platform to stand upon in order to pronounce condemnation on others. Anyone who presumes to have such a vantage point is living in a dangerous fantasy, oblivious to the gospel that levels all of us before a holy God.

2. Synthesis: Homosexuality in Canonical Context

Though only a few biblical texts speak of homoerotic activity, all that do mention it express unqualified disapproval. Thus, on this issue, there is no synthetic problem for New Testament ethics. In this respect, the issue of homosexuality differs significantly from matters such as slavery or the subordination of women, concerning which the Bible contains internal tensions and counterposed witnesses. The biblical witness against homosexual practices is univocal.

No theological consideration of homosexuality can rest content, however, with a short list of passages that treat the matter explicitly. We must consider how Scripture frames the discussion more broadly: How is human sexuality portrayed in the canon as a whole, and how are the few explicit texts treating homosexuality to be read in relation to this larger canonical framework? To place the prohibition of homosexual activity in a canonical context, we should keep in mind at least the following factors in the biblical portrayal of human existence before God.

(A) GOD'S CREATIVE INTENTION FOR HUMAN SEXUALITY From Genesis 1 onward, Scripture affirms repeatedly that God has made man and woman for one another and that our sexual desires rightly find fulfillment within heterosexual marriage. (See, for instance, Mark 10:2–9, 1 Thess. 4:3–8, 1 Cor. 7:1–9, Eph. 5:21–33, Heb. 13:4. The Song of Solomon, however it is to be interpreted, also celebrates love and sexual desire between man and woman.) The general lines of this portrait were sketched in the foregoing discussion of divorce and need not be repeated here. This normative canonical picture of marriage provides the positive backdrop against which the Bible's few emphatic negations of homosexuality must be read.

(B) THE FALLEN HUMAN CONDITION The biblical analysis of the human predicament, most sharply expressed in Pauline theology, offers a subtle account of human bondage to sin. As great-grandchildren of the Enlightenment, we like to think of ourselves as free moral agents, choosing rationally among possible actions, but Scripture unmasks that cheerful illusion and teaches us that we are deeply infected by the tendency to self-deception. As Jeremiah lamented, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9, RSV). Romans 1 depicts humanity in a state of self-affirming confusion: "They became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools. . . . They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but applaud others who practice them" (Rom. 1:21–22, 32). Once in the fallen state, we are not free not to sin: we are "slaves of sin" (Rom. 6:17), which distorts our perceptions, overpowers our will, and renders us incapable of obedience (Rom. 7). Redemption (a word that means "being emancipated from slavery") is God's act of liberation, setting us free from the power of sin and placing us within the sphere of God's transforming power for righteousness (Rom. 6:20–22, 8:1–11, cf. 12:1–2).

Thus, the Bible's sober anthropology rejects the apparently commonsense assumption that only freely chosen acts are morally culpable. Quite the reverse: the very nature of sin is that it is *not* freely chosen. That is what it means to live "in the flesh" in a fallen creation. We are in bondage to sin but still accountable to God's righteous judgment of our actions. In light of this theological anthropology, it cannot be maintained that a homosexual orientation is morally neutral because it is involuntary.

(C) THE DEMYTHOLOGIZING OF SEX The Bible undercuts our cultural obsession with sexual fulfillment. Scripture (along with many subsequent generations of faithful Christians) bears witness that lives of freedom, joy, and service are possible without sexual relations. Indeed, however odd it may seem to contemporary sensibilities, some New Testament passages (Matt. 19:10–12, 1 Cor. 7) clearly commend the celibate life as a way of faithfulness. In the view of the world that emerges from the pages of Scripture, sex appears as a matter of secondary importance. To be sure, the power of sexual drives must be acknowledged and subjected to constraints, either through marriage or through disciplined abstinence. But never within the canonical perspective does sexuality become the basis for defining a person's identity or for finding meaning and fulfillment in life. The things that matter are justice, mercy, and faith (Matt. 23:23). The love of God is far more important than any human love. Sexual fulfillment finds its place, at best, as a subsidiary good within this larger picture.

How then—keeping these larger canonical perspectives in mind—do we employ the three images of *community, cross,* and *new creation* in our interpretation of the New Testament witness concerning homosexuality? The role of these images, it should be remembered, is not to serve as independent theological motifs but to bring our reading of the New Testament texts into clear perspective. Since there are only a few directly pertinent texts, the focal images have a limited amount of work to do on this issue. Still, a few observations are in order.

Community. The biblical strictures against homosexual behavior are concerned not just for the private morality of individuals but for the health, wholeness, and purity of the elect *community.* This perspective is certainly evident in the holiness code of Leviticus. Almost immediately following the prohibition of homosexual conduct (Lev. 18:22), we find the following general warning, which refers to all the foregoing rules about sexual practices (Lev. 18:6–23):

> *Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves. Thus the land became defiled; and I punished it for its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. But you shall keep my statutes and my ordinances and commit none of these abominations, either the citizen or the alien who resides among you.* (Lev. 18:24–26)

Israel as a holy nation is called upon, for the sake of the whole people's welfare, to keep God's commandments. Those who transgress the commandments defile not merely themselves but the whole land, jeopardizing the community as a whole. That is why "whoever commits any of these abominations shall be cut off from their people" (Lev. 18:29).

Similarly, Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians to "glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:20) grows out of his passionate concern, expressed repeatedly in 1 Corinthians, for the unity and sanctification of the community as a whole. Fornication with a prostitute is wrong, among other reasons, because "your bodies are members of Christ" (6:15). Thus, to engage in sexual immorality defiles the body of Christ. Through baptism, Christians have entered a corporate whole whose health is at stake in the conduct of all its members. Sin is like an infection in the body; thus, moral action is not merely a matter of individual freedom and preference. "If one member suffers, all suffer" (1 Cor. 12:26). This line of argument is not applied specifically to every offense in the vice list of 6:9–10, but it does not require a great leap of

imagination to see that for Paul the church is analogous (though not identical) to Israel as portrayed in the holiness code. That is the logic behind his demand that the Corinthian church expel the man engaged in a sexual relationship with his stepmother (5:1–13).[26] A similar logic would certainly apply, within Paul's frame of reference, to the *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* of 1 Corinthians 6:9. The community of those who have been washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ ought to have put such behaviors behind it. The New Testament never considers sexual conduct a matter of purely private concern between consenting adults. According to Paul, everything that we do as Christians, including our sexual practices, affects the whole body of Christ.

We must hasten to add that Paul's corporate concern is for the *church*, not the wider civil society; that is one of the major differences between Leviticus and 1 Corinthians. The right to privacy may well be a useful principle for a secular political order. Such a political right, however, does not extend carte blanche to sexual conduct within the church, where the question of each member's responsibility for the spiritual well-being of the community as a whole imposes a particular and far more stringent set of normative criteria for evaluating our actions. At the same time, the church also provides *koinōnia*, within which living out the obedience of faith is supported and sustained.

Cross. No New Testament text brings the issue of homosexuality into direct relationship with the story of Jesus' death. The connection is, however, implicit and crucial in Romans. The human rebellion and unrighteousness summarized in Romans 1:18–32 create the condition of crisis that makes the death of Jesus necessary. "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). The human unrighteousness detailed in Romans 1 is answered by the righteousness of God, who puts forward Jesus to die for the unrighteous (Rom. 3:23–25), enabling them to walk in newness of life:

> *For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and as a sin offering, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.* (Rom. 8:3–4)

What are the implications of this act of God for understanding what Romans 1 says about homosexual practices?

First of all, the wrath of God—manifested in God's "giving up" of rebellious humanity to follow their own devices and desires—is not the last word. The gospel of the cross declares that God loves us even while we are in rebellion and that the sacrificial death of his own Son is the measure of the depth of that love. That is the fundamental theological logic underlying Paul's "sting" exposé of self-righteousness in Romans 2:1: we should not leap to condemnation of others, for we—no less than those who are engaged in "the dishonoring of their bodies"—are under God's judgment, and they—no less than we—are the objects of God's

deeply sacrificial love. This has profound implications for how the Christian community ought to respond to persons of homosexual inclination. Even if some of their actions are contrary to God's design, the *cross* models the way in which the community of faith ought to respond to them: not in condemnation, but in sacrificial service. This is a particularly urgent word for the church in a time when the AIDS plague has wrought great suffering among homosexuals. (It should also be noted that many members of the gay community have responded to this crisis with actions of radical self-sacrificial love that powerfully reflect the paradigm of the cross; the church at large would do well to learn from such examples.)

Second, the cross marks the end of the old life under the power of sin (Rom. 6:1–4). Therefore, no one in Christ is locked into the past or into a psychological or biological determinism. Only in light of the transforming power of the cross can Paul's word of exhortation be spoken to Christians who—like my friend Gary—struggle with homosexual desires:

> *Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.* (Rom. 6:12–14)

Paul's references to homosexual conduct place it within the realm of sin and death to which the cross is God's definitive answer. All of this is simply to say that the judgment of Romans 1 against homosexual practices should never be read apart from the rest of the letter, with its message of grace and hope through the cross of Christ.

New Creation. A similar point can be made here: neither the word of judgment against homosexuality nor the hope of transformation to a new life should be read apart from the eschatological framework of Romans. The Christian community lives in a time of tension between "already" and "not yet." Already we have the joy of the Holy Spirit; already we experience the transforming grace of God. But at the same time, we do not yet experience the fullness of redemption: we walk by faith, not by sight. The creation groans in pain and bondage, "and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:23). This means, among other things, that Christians, set free from the power of sin through Christ's death, must continue to *struggle* to live faithfully in the present time. The "redemption of our bodies" remains a future hope; final transformation of our fallen physical state awaits the resurrection. Those who demand fulfillment now, as though it were a right or a guarantee, are living in a state of adolescent illusion. To be sure, the transforming power of the Spirit really is present in our midst; on the other hand, the "not yet" looms large; we live with the reality of temptation, the reality of the hard struggle to live faithfully. Consequently, in this time between the times, some may find disciplined abstinence the only viable alternative to disordered sexuality. "For

in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with endurance" (Rom. 8:24–25).[27] The art of eschatological moral discernment lies in working out how to live lives free from bondage to sin without presuming to be translated prematurely into a condition that is free from "the sufferings of this present time" (Rom. 8:18).

3. Hermeneutics: Responding to the New Testament's Witness Against Homosexuality

As the foregoing exegetical discussion has shown, the New Testament offers no loopholes or exception clauses that might allow for the acceptance of homosexual practices under some circumstances. Despite the efforts of some recent interpreters to explain away the evidence, the New Testament remains unambiguous and univocal in its condemnation of homosexual conduct. The difficult questions that the church must face are all *hermeneutical* questions. In what way are we to apply these texts to the issues that confront us at the end of the twentieth century, as the church faces new and forceful demands for the acceptance and ordination of homosexuals?

(A) THE MODE OF HERMENEUTICAL APPROPRIATION One striking finding of our survey of the handful of relevant texts is that the New Testament contains no passages that clearly articulate a *rule* against homosexual practices. The Leviticus texts, of course, bluntly and explicitly prohibit male homosexual acts in a rule form. Paul, as we have seen, presupposes this prohibition—indeed, there may be an allusion in Romans 1:32 to Leviticus 20:13, with its prescription of the death penalty for a man who "lies with a male as with a woman"—but he neither repeats it explicitly nor issues any new rules on the subject. Consequently, if New Testament texts are to function normatively in the mode in which they speak, *no direct appeal to Romans 1 as a source for rules about sexual conduct is possible.* Similarly, 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 states no rule to govern the conduct of Christians; rather, it declares that they have already been transferred from an old life of sin to a new life of belonging to Jesus Christ. In other words, it presents a descriptive account of the new symbolic world within which discernments about Christian conduct are to be made (see further on this below). Indeed, in view of Paul's wider discussion of the role of the Mosaic Law in the Christian life, it would be at least mildly ironic to read and venerate Paul as the promulgator of a *nova lex* concerning homosexuality. If the prohibition of *porneia* in the apostolic decree (Acts 15:28–29) does include homosexual acts, that would be the one instance in the New Testament of a direct rule dealing with the issue. As we have seen, this reading of the passage is probable but not certain.

The New Testament passages in question do express ideas that can be read as *principles* governing sexual conduct. From Romans 1, one could properly infer the principle that human actions ought to acknowledge and honor God as Creator. When read against the specific background of the Genesis creation story, this principle yields for Paul the conclusion that homosexuality is contrary to the will of God. This application of the principle, however, is dependent on a particular construal of the order of creation. Taken by itself—apart from the biblical narrative context—the same principle could be used to authorize quite different judgments. For example, if homosexuality should be judged on the basis of empirical factors to be a "natural" part of the created order, this principle could be used to argue strongly in favor of its acceptance within the church. This example illustrates once again how little normative work general principles do, or—to speak more precisely—how the normative application of principles is fundamentally dependent on a particular narrative framework.

Similarly, from the slightly wider context of 1 Corinthians 6, we could derive this *principle:* "Glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:20b). Good advice, no doubt, but how does it apply to the issue of our immediate concern? In its original context, the sense of the principle is governed by the more particular specifications of 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 and 6:15–18. If the principle is removed from these moorings, it could mean almost anything up to and including, "Celebrate the divinity of your own body by expanding the horizons of your sexual experience as far as possible." Of course, this would be a complete distortion of Paul's meaning. Thus, we must insist that our interpretation of "biblical principles" must be constrained and instructed by the way in which the New Testament writers themselves applied these principles.

The only *paradigms* offered by the New Testament for homosexual behavior are the emphatically negative and stereotypic sketches in the three Pauline texts (Rom. 1:18–32, 1 Cor. 6:9, 1 Tim. 1:10). The New Testament offers no accounts of homosexual Christians, tells no stories of same-sex lovers, ventures no metaphors that place a positive construal on homosexual relations. Occasionally, one encounters speculative claims that Jesus was gay (because of his relationship with the "beloved disciple"; see John 13:23) or that Mary and Martha were not really sisters but lesbian lovers.[28] Such exegetical curiosities, which have found no acceptance among serious New Testament scholars, can only be judged pathetic efforts at constructing a New Testament warrant for homosexual practice where none exists. If Jesus or his followers had practiced or countenanced homosexuality, it would have been profoundly scandalous within first-century Jewish culture. Such a controversy would surely have left traces in the tradition, as did Jesus' practice of having table fellowship with prostitutes and tax collectors. But there are no traces of such controversy. In the paradigmatic mode, the slender evidence offered by the New Testament is entirely disapproving of homosexuality.

A more sophisticated type of paradigmatic argument in defense of homosexuality is offered by those who propose that acceptance of gay Christians in the twentieth-century church is analogous to the acceptance of Gentile Christians in the first-century church.[29] The stories in Acts 10 and 11 provide, so it is argued, a paradigm

for the church to expand the boundaries of Christian fellowship by recognizing that God's Spirit has been poured out upon those previously considered unclean. The analogy is richly suggestive, and it deserves careful consideration. The question is whether the analogy is a fitting one and whether it can overrule all the other factors enumerated here that create a strong presumption against the church's acceptance of homosexuality. (See further comments about the role of *experience*, below.)

The mode in which the New Testament speaks explicitly about homosexuality is the mode of *symbolic world* construction. Romans 1 presents, as we have seen, a portrayal of humankind in rebellion against God and consequently plunged into depravity and confusion. In the course of that portrayal, homosexual activities are—explicitly and without qualification—identified as symptomatic of that tragically confused rebellion. To take the New Testament as authoritative in the mode in which it speaks is to accept this portrayal as "revealed reality," an authoritative disclosure of the truth about the human condition. Understood in this way, the text requires a normative evaluation of homosexual practice as a distortion of God's order for creation.

Likewise, Romans 1 holds abundant resources for informing our understanding of God: God is a righteous God who creates human beings for obedience to his purposes, grants them freedom to rebel, stands in righteous judgment of their rebellion, and manifests his "wrath" by allowing them to suffer the just consequences of their sin. This characterization of God must be held together dialectically with the portrayal, developed at length elsewhere in Romans, of God as a merciful God whose righteousness is revealed preeminently in his act of deliverance through Jesus Christ, whose righteousness transforms and empowers us. In contrast, however, to other New Testament texts that present the character of God as a pattern for human emulation (e.g., Matt. 5:43–48), the understanding of God in Romans 1 provides not primarily a source of concrete norms but rather a ground of motivation for ethical action.

Thus, the New Testament confronts us with an account of how the ordering of human life before God has gone awry. To use these texts appropriately in ethical reflection about homosexuality, we should not try to wring rules out of them, nor should we abstract principles from them. Instead, we should attend primarily to the way the texts function to shape the *symbolic world* within which human sexuality is understood. If Romans 1—the key text—is to inform normative judgments about homosexuality, it must function as a diagnostic tool, laying bare the truth about humankind's dishonorable "exchange" of the natural for the unnatural. According to Paul, homosexual relations, however they may be interpreted (or rationalized: see Rom. 1:32) by fallen and confused creatures, represent a tragic distortion of the created order. If we accept the authority of the New Testament on this subject, we will be taught to perceive homosexuality accordingly. (Obviously, such a judgment leaves open many questions about how best to deal with the problem pastorally.) Still before us, however, is the problem of how the witness of the New Testament

relates to other moral perspectives on this issue. Do we grant the normative force of Paul's analysis?

(B) OTHER AUTHORITIES Having recognized the New Testament's diagnosis of homosexual activity as a sign of human alienation from God's design, we must still consider how this teaching is to be weighted in relation to other sources of moral wisdom. An adequate discussion of this problem would be very long indeed. For the present, I offer only some brief reflections as places to start the discussion.

Far more emphatically than Scripture itself, the moral teaching *tradition* of the Christian church has for more than nineteen hundred years declared homosexual behavior to be contrary to the will of God. As Boswell's study amply documents, the mainstream of Christian ethical teaching has been relentlessly hostile to homosexual practice.[30] Only within the past twenty years has any serious question been raised about the church's universal prohibition of such conduct. It is extremely difficult to find in the tradition any firm point of leverage against the New Testament on this issue. If anything, a passage such as Romans 1 might serve to moderate tradition's harsh judgment of homosexuals as specially despicable sinners. (John Chrysostom, for example, an influential fourth-century bishop and theologian, declared that homosexual intercourse was a sin worse than fornication, worse even than murder.[31] Surely the biblical passages give no support to such a claim.) In any case, it is impossible to construct an argument for acceptance of homosexuality by juxtaposing the authority of tradition and the authority of Scripture. The result of the juxtaposition is to strengthen the Bible's prohibitions.

With regard to *reason* and scientific evidence, the picture is cloudy. A large body of modern psychological and scientific studies demonstrate the widespread incidence of homosexual activity. Some studies have claimed that as much as 10 percent of the population is inclined to same-sex erotic preference, and some theorists hold that homosexual orientation is innate (or formed by a very early age) and unchangeable. This is the opinion espoused by most advocates of full acceptance of homosexuality in the church: if homosexual orientation is a genetically determined trait, so the argument goes, then any disapproval of it is a form of discrimination analogous to racism. Others, however, regard homosexual orientation as a form of developmental maladjustment or "symbolic confusion." Some therapists claim significant clinical success in helping homosexual persons develop a heterosexual orientation; others challenge such claims. The conventional view at present is that therapeutic intervention can only impose behavior modification; it cannot effect change in a person's underlying sexual orientation.

There are, however, reasons to question the essentialist view that individuals have an innate sexual orientation. A major cross-cultural study published by David Greenberg, professor of sociology at New York University, contends that homosexual identity is socially constructed.[32] According to Greenberg, different cultures have constructed different conventions for same-sex erotic behavior, and the notion of

homosexual "orientation" as a lifelong innate characteristic of some individuals is a relatively modern innovation. Of course, even if Greenberg's point is granted, it proves nothing one way or the other about whether some individuals have a genetic predisposition toward homosexuality.

In one sense, however, the etiology of homosexual orientation is not a significant factor for the formation of normative Christian ethics. We need not take sides in the debate of nature versus culture. Even if it could be shown that same-sex preference is somehow genetically programmed, that would not necessarily make homosexual behavior morally appropriate.[33] Surely Christian ethics does not want to hold that all inborn traits are good and desirable. The analogy of alcoholism, while only an analogy, is perhaps helpful: a considerable body of evidence suggests that some people are born with a predisposition to alcoholism. Once exposed to alcohol, they experience an attraction so powerful that it can be counteracted only by careful counseling, community support, and total abstinence. We now conventionally speak of alcoholism as a "disease" and carefully distinguish our disapproval of the behavior associated with it from our loving support of the person afflicted by it. Perhaps homoerotic attraction should be treated similarly.[34]

The argument from statistical incidence of homosexual behavior is even less useful in normative ethical deliberation. Even if 10 percent of the people in the United States should declare themselves to be of homosexual orientation (and that figure is a doubtful one),[35] that would not settle the *normative* issue; it is impossible to argue simply from an "is" to an "ought." If Paul were shown the poll results, he would reply sadly, "Indeed, the power of sin is rampant in the world."

The advocates of homosexuality in the church have their most serious case when they appeal to the authority of *experience*. There are individuals who live in stable, loving homosexual relationships and claim to experience the grace—rather than the wrath—of God therein. How are such claims to be assessed? Was Paul wrong? Or are such experiential claims simply another manifestation of the self-deception that he describes? Or, beside these irreconcilable alternatives, should we entertain the possible emergence of new realities that Paul could not have anticipated? Does the practice that Paul condemns correspond exactly to the experience of homosexual relations that exists in the present time? Scroggs, for example, argues that the New Testament's condemnation of homosexuality applies only to a certain "model" of exploitative pederasty that was common in Hellenistic culture; hence, it is not applicable to the modern world's experience of mutual, loving homosexual relationships.[36] Scroggs's position, in my judgment, fails to reckon adequately with Romans 1, where the relations are not described as pederastic and where Paul's disapproval has nothing to do with exploitation.

But the fact remains that there are numerous homosexual Christians—like my friend Gary and some of my ablest theological students—whose lives show signs of the presence of God, whose work in ministry is genuine and effective. How is such experiential evidence to be assessed? Should we, like the earliest Jewish Christians who hesitated to accept "unclean" Gentiles into the community of faith, acknowledge the work of the Spirit and say, "Who are we to stand in the way of what God is doing?" (cf. Acts 10:1–11:18)? Or should we see this as one more instance of a truth that all of us in ministry know sadly about ourselves: "We have this treasure in earthen vessels"? God gives the Spirit to broken people and ministers grace even through us sinners, without thereby endorsing our sin.

In Part III, I articulated the hermeneutical guideline that *claims about divinely inspired experience that contradicts the witness of Scripture should be admitted to normative status in the church only after sustained and agonizing scrutiny by a consensus of the faithful.* It is by no means clear that the community of the church as a whole is prepared to credit the experientially based claims being made at present for normative acceptance of homosexuality. Furthermore, in its rush to be "inclusive," the church must not overlook the experience reported by those Christians who, like Gary, struggle with homosexual desires and find them a hindrance to living lives committed to the service of God. This is a complex matter, and we have not heard the end of it.

In any case, it is crucial to remember that experience must be treated as a hermeneutical lens for reading the New Testament rather than as an independent, counterbalancing authority. This is the point at which the analogy to the early church's acceptance of Gentiles fails decisively. The church did not simply observe the experience of Cornelius and his household and decide that Scripture must be wrong after all. On the contrary, the experience of uncircumcised Gentiles responding in faith to the gospel message led the church back to a new reading of Scripture. This new reading discovered in the texts a clear message of God's intent, from the covenant with Abraham forward, to bless all nations and to bring Gentiles (*qua* Gentiles) to worship Israel's God. That is, for example, what Paul seeks to establish in the complex exegetical arguments conducted in Galatians and Romans. We see the rudiments of such a reflective process in Acts 10:34–35, where Peter begins his speech to Cornelius by alluding to Deuteronomy 10:17–18 and Psalm 15:1–2 in order to confess that "God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." Only because the new experience of Gentile converts proved *hermeneutically illuminating* of Scripture was the church, over time, able to accept the decision to embrace Gentiles within the fellowship of God's people. This is precisely the step that has not—or at least not yet—been taken by the advocates of homosexuality in the church. Is it possible for them to reread the New Testament and show how this development can be understood as a fulfillment of God's design for human sexuality as previously revealed in Scripture? In view of the content of the biblical texts summarized above, it is difficult to imagine how such an argument could be made.

Thus, in view of the considerable uncertainty surrounding the scientific and experiential evidence, in view of our culture's present swirling confusion about gender roles, in view of our propensity for self-deception, I think it prudent and necessary to let the univocal testimony of Scripture and the Christian tradition order the life of the church on this painfully controversial matter. We must affirm

that the New Testament tells us the truth about ourselves as sinners and as God's sexual creatures: marriage between man and woman is the normative form for human sexual fulfillment, and homosexuality is one among many tragic signs that we are a broken people, alienated from God's loving purpose.

4. Living the Text: The Church As Community Suffering with the Creation

How, then, shall we respond in the church to the pastoral and political realities of our time? Having said that the New Testament will not permit us to condone homosexual behavior, we still find ourselves confronted by complex problems that demand rigorous and compassionate solutions. What decisions should the church make about the practical questions surrounding its response to homosexuality? How should the witness of the New Testament on this matter be embodied in the life of the church? In what follows, I pose several key issues and venture some discernments, based on the exegesis and theological reflections set forth above. Before and above all else, those who uphold the biblical teaching against homosexuality must remember Paul's warning in Romans 2:1–3: we are all "without excuse"; we all stand or fall under God's judgment and mercy.

(a) *Should the church support civil rights for homosexuals?* Yes. Any judgment about the church's effort to influence Caesar's social policies requires complex reasoning. (The complexity of the problem is illustrated by the controversy over admitting gay persons to the military in the United States. I have argued in this book that *Christians* have no place in the military. On what basis, then, shall we presume to call for admission of gays to an institution of which we disapprove?)[37] Certainly, however, the church should not single out homosexual persons for malicious discriminatory treatment: insofar as Christians have done so in the past, we must repent and seek instead to live out the gospel of reconciliation.

(b) *Can homosexual persons be members of the Christian church?* This is rather like asking, "Can envious persons be members of the church?" (cf. Rom. 1:29) or "Can alcoholics be members of the church?" De facto, of course, they are. Unless we think that the church is a community of sinless perfection, we must acknowledge that persons of homosexual orientation are welcome along with other sinners in the company of those who trust in the God who justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5). If they are not welcome, I will have to walk out the door along with them, leaving in the sanctuary only those entitled to cast the first stone.

This means that for the foreseeable future we must find ways to live within the church in a situation of serious moral disagreement while still respecting one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. If the church is going to start practicing the discipline of exclusion from the community, there are other issues far more important than homosexuality where we should begin to draw a line in the dirt: violence and materialism, for example.

At the same time, I would argue that the pastoral task of the church is to challenge self-defined homosexual Christians to reshape their identity in conformity

with the gospel. Those who hold the offices of teaching and preaching in the church should uphold the biblical standard and call all who hear to follow. This is a tricky line to walk, but we do it on many issues. Can a racist be a member of the church? Probably so, but we hope and pray that the church will become a community of moral formation that will enable him or her to change. Can a soldier be a Christian? Probably so, but my understanding of the gospel requires me to urge that person to renounce the way of violence and to follow Jesus in the way of costly refusal of violence as a means to justice (see Chapter 14). My theological position on violence is a minority position both in the U.S. church at present and with respect to the church's historic mainstream position. I cannot excommunicate my militarist brothers and sisters, and I do not expect them to excommunicate me. But I do expect that there will be vigorous moral debate in which we try to persuade each other whether Christians can ever rightly take up the sword. Just as there are serious Christians who in good conscience believe in just war theory, so there are serious Christians who in good conscience believe that same-sex erotic activity is consonant with God's will. For the reasons set forth in this book, I think that both groups are wrong, but in both cases the questions are so difficult that we should receive one another as brothers and sisters in Christ and work toward adjudicating our differences through reflecting together on the witness of Scripture.

(c) *Is it Christianly appropriate for Christians who experience themselves as having a homosexual orientation to continue to participate in same-sex erotic activity?* No. The only one who *was* entitled to cast a stone instead charged the recipient of his mercy to "go and sin no more." It is no more appropriate for homosexual Christians to persist in homosexual activity than it would be for heterosexual Christians to persist in fornication or adultery. (Insofar as the church fails to teach clearly about heterosexual chastity outside of marriage, its disapproval of homosexual coupling will appear arbitrary and biased.) Unless they are able to change their orientation and enter a heterosexual marriage relationship, homosexual Christians should seek to live lives of disciplined sexual abstinence.

Despite the smooth illusions perpetrated by mass culture in the United States, sexual gratification is not a sacred right, and celibacy is not a fate worse than death. The Catholic tradition has something to teach those of us raised in Protestant communities. While mandatory priestly celibacy is unbiblical, a life of sexual abstinence can promote "good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:35). Surely it is a matter of some interest for Christian ethics that both Jesus and Paul lived without sexual relationships. It is also worth noting that 1 Corinthians 7:8–9, 25–40, commends celibacy as an option for everyone, not just for a special caste of ordained leaders. Within the church, we should work diligently to recover the dignity and value of the single life.

My friend Gary, in his final letter to me, wrote urgently of the imperatives of discipleship: *"Are homosexuals to be excluded from the community of faith? Certainly not. But anyone who joins such a community should know that it is a place of transformation, of discipline, of learning, and not merely a place to be comforted or indulged."* The community demands that its members pursue holiness, while it

also sustains the challenging process of character formation that is necessary for Jesus' disciples. The church must be a community whose life together provides true friendship, emotional support, and spiritual formation for everyone who comes within its circle of fellowship. The need for such support is perhaps particularly felt by unmarried people, regardless of their sexual orientation. In this respect, as in so many others, the church can fulfill its vocation only by living as a countercommunity in the world.

(d) *Should the church sanction and bless homosexual unions?* No. The church should continue to teach—as it always has—that there are two possible ways for God's human sexual creatures to live well-ordered lives of faithful discipleship: heterosexual marriage and sexual abstinence.

(e) *Does this mean that persons of homosexual orientation are subject to a blanket imposition of celibacy in a way qualitatively different from persons of heterosexual orientation?* Here a nuanced answer must be given. While Paul regarded celibacy as a charisma, he did not therefore suppose that those lacking the charisma were free to indulge their sexual desires outside marriage. Heterosexually oriented persons are also called to abstinence from sex unless they marry (1 Cor. 7:8–9). The only difference—admittedly a salient one—in the case of homosexually oriented persons is that they do not have the option of homosexual "marriage." So where does that leave them? It leaves them in precisely the same situation as the heterosexual who would like to marry but cannot find an appropriate partner (and there are many such): summoned to a difficult, costly obedience, while "groaning" for the "redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:23). Anyone who does not recognize this as a description of authentic Christian existence has never struggled seriously with the imperatives of the gospel, which challenge and frustrate our "natural" impulses in countless ways.

Much of the contemporary debate turns on this last point. Many of the advocates of unqualified acceptance of homosexuality seem to be operating with a simplistic anthropology that assumes whatever is must be good: they have a theology of creation but no theology of sin and redemption. Furthermore, they have a realized eschatology that equates personal fulfillment with sexual fulfillment and expects sexual "salvation" now. The Pauline portrayal of human beings as fallen creatures in bondage to sin and yet set free in Christ for the obedience of faith would suggest a rather different assessment of our sexuality, looking to the future resurrection as the locus of bodily fulfillment. Thus, eschatology looms as the crucial question that divides the traditional position from those who would revise it.

(f) *Should homosexual Christians expect to change their orientation?* This tough question must also be answered in the critical framework of New Testament eschatology. On the one hand, the transforming power of the Spirit really is present in our midst; the testimonies of those who claim to have been healed and transformed into a heterosexual orientation should be taken seriously. They confess, in the words of the Charles Wesley hymn, that God "breaks the power of cancelled sin; He sets the prisoner free."[38] If we do not continue to live with that hope, we may be hoping for too little from God. On the other hand, the "not yet" looms large; the

testimonies of those like Gary who pray and struggle in Christian community and seek healing unsuccessfully for years must be taken with no less seriousness. Perhaps for many the best outcome that is attainable in this time between the times will be a life of disciplined abstinence, free from obsessive lust. (Exactly the same standard would apply for unmarried persons of heterosexual orientation.) That seems to be the spiritual condition Gary reached near the end of his life:

> Since All Saints Day I have felt myself being transformed. I no longer consider myself homosexual. Many would say, big deal, you're forty-two—and are dying of AIDS. Big sacrifice. No, I didn't do this of my will, of an effort to improve myself, to make myself acceptable to God. No, he did this for me. I feel a great weight has been lifted off me. I have not turned "straight." I guess I'm like St. Paul's phrase, a eunuch for Christ.[39]

(g) *Should persons of homosexual orientation be ordained?* I save this question deliberately for last, where it belongs. It is unfortunate that the battle line has been drawn in the denominations at the question of ordination of homosexuals. The ensuing struggle has had the unfortunate effect of reinforcing a double standard for clergy and lay morality; it would be far better to articulate a single set of moral norms that apply to all Jesus' followers. Strictures against homosexuality belong in the church's moral catechesis, not in its ordination requirements. It is arbitrary to single out homosexuality as a special sin that precludes ordination. (Certainly, the New Testament does not do this.) The church has no analogous special rules to exclude from ordination the greedy or the self-righteous. Such matters are left to the discernment of the bodies charged with examining candidates for ordination; these bodies must determine whether the individual candidate has the gifts and graces requisite for ministry. In any event, a person of homosexual orientation seeking to live a life of disciplined abstinence would clearly be an appropriate candidate for ordination.

We live, then, as a community that embraces sinners as Jesus did, without waiving God's righteousness. We live confessing that God's grace claims us out of confusion and alienation and sets about making us whole. We live knowing that wholeness remains a hope rather than an attainment in this life. The homosexual Christians in our midst may teach us something about our true condition as people living between the cross and the final redemption of our bodies.

In the midst of a culture that worships self-gratification, and in a church that often preaches a false Jesus who panders to our desires, those who seek the narrow way of obedience have a powerful word to speak. As Paul saw in pagan homosexuality a vivid symbol of human fallenness, so I saw conversely in Gary, as I have seen in other homosexual friends and colleagues, a symbol of God's power made perfect in weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). Gary knew through experience the bitter power of sin in a twisted world, and he trusted in God's love anyway. Thus he embodied the "sufferings of this present time" of which Paul speaks in Romans 8: living in the joyful freedom of the "first fruits of the Spirit," even while groaning along with a creation in bondage to decay.

NOTES

1. At that time I was teaching at Yale Divinity School. I moved to Duke in 1991.
2. McNeill 1993; Nelson 1978; Scanzoni and Mollenkott 1978; Boswell 1980.
3. This section of the book represents a revision and expansion of my essay "Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies: The Witness of Scripture Concerning Homosexuality" (Hays 1991a). A revised version of that essay has appeared in an anthology: Siker 1994a, 3–17. Portions of the exegetical work on Romans 1 are also adapted from Hays 1986.
4. On the issue of possessions, see L. T. Johnson 1981; Wheeler 1995.
5. According to Jude 7, "Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which, in the same manner as they, indulged in sexual immorality and went after other flesh, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire." The phrase "went after other flesh" (*apelthousai opisō sarkos heteras*) refers to their pursuit of nonhuman (i.e., angelic!) "flesh." The expression *sarkos heteras* means "flesh of another kind"; thus, it is impossible to construe this passage as a condemnation of homosexual desire, which entails precisely the pursuit of flesh of the *same* kind.
6. In a recent article, Daniel Boyarin (1995) argues convincingly that these Levitical prohibitions were understood in later rabbinic tradition to pertain only to male homosexual intercourse in which anal penetration occurs. Other forms of male same-sex erotic activity would have been understood in this interpretive tradition as forms of masturbation, which was still frowned upon but subject to much less severe sanctions. Boyarin, noting that the Leviticus passages prohibit a specific act but say nothing about sexual "orientation," goes on to contend that the rabbis had no category corresponding to the modern idea of "homosexuality."
7. Countryman 1988.
8. Boswell 1980, 186–187, 338–353.
9. Scroggs 1983, 106–108.
10. The formula repeats the substance of James's earlier speech (Acts 15:19–20).
11. The NRSV translates *atimazesthai* as "degrading." This translation seems a bit too strong; I have rendered it here and throughout this discussion as "dishonoring," which is closer to the literal sense.
12. Schütz 1975, 40–53.
13. *Paradise Lost*, I.26.
14. On the meaning of "the righteousness of God," see Hays 1992, 1129–1133.
15. Käsemann 1980, 47.
16. Scroggs 1983, 110.
17. Käsemann 1980, 47.
18. As noted by Furnish 1985, 75–76. The idea is a familiar one in Hellenistic Judaism; for an interpretation of the Egyptian plagues in these terms, see Wisdom 11:15–16, 12:23: "In return for their foolish and wicked thoughts, which led them astray to worship irrational serpents and worthless animals, you sent upon them a multitude of irrational creatures to punish them, so that they might learn that one is punished by the very things by which one sins. . . . Therefore those who lived unrighteously, in a life of folly, you tormented through their own abominations."
19. Calvin 1960 [1556], 34.
20. Scroggs 1983, 113–114.
21. My colleague Dale Martin has recently argued that Rom. 1:18–32 does not allude to the universal fall of humanity but to an ancient Jewish myth about the origins of Gentile idolatry, as narrated, e.g., in Jubilees 11 (D. B. Martin 1995b). Thus, he questions any reference or allusion in these verses to the Genesis story of creation and fall. This exegetical issue is crucial for the interpretation of the passage. It is impossible to offer here a full reply, but the following points may be noted. (1) Though Paul does not explicitly cite Gen. 1–3, there is an explicit reference in Rom. 1:20 to "the creation of the world" and to "the things [God] has made"; no Jewish reader could read this language without thinking of the Genesis creation story. (2) Furthermore, the language used in Rom. 1:23 explicitly echoes Gen. 1:26–28: "They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for the *likeness* [*homoiōma*] of the *image* [*eikōn*] of a mortal human being or of birds or four-footed animals or reptiles." In Genesis, humankind, made in the *image* and *likeness* of God, is given dominion over the creatures; however, in Romans 1 human beings forfeit the glory of the divine image and instead worship images of the creatures over which God had given them dominion. Thus, idolatrous worship is an ironic inversion of the creation account. (3) Martin contends that Rom. 1:18–32 cannot be read as an account of the universal fallen condition of humanity because it refers only to the spiritual condition of Gentiles, not of Jews. At the first and most superficial level, this interpretation is correct, but it fails to reckon with the larger scope of Paul's argument. In Romans 1, he employs conventional Jewish polemic against Gentile immorality, but as the argument unfolds, the reader—who may have enthusiastically applauded the anti-Gentile polemic—finds him- or herself addressed by the same word of judgment: all, including Jews, are "without apology" (2:1); all, Jews and Gentiles alike, are "under the power of sin" (3:9). Thus, the conventional attack on Gentile idolatry turns out to be also a description of the universal human condition. This claim is fundamental to the whole logic of the letter's argument.

22. For the following examples and others, see Furnish 1985, 58–67; Scroggs 1983, 59–60. For example, the Stoic-Cynic preacher Dio Chrysostom, after charging that brothel-keeping dishonors the goddess Aphrodite, "whose name stands for the natural [*kata physin*] intercourse and union of the male and female," goes on to suggest that a society that permits such practices will soon find its uncontrolled lusts leading to the still more deplorable practice of pederasty:

> Is there any possibility that this lecherous class would refrain from dishonoring and corrupting the males, making their clear and sufficient limit that set by nature [*physis*]? Or will it not, while it satisfies its lust for women in every conceivable way, find itself grown weary of this pleasure, and then seek some other worse and more lawless form of wantonness? . . . The man whose appetite is insatiate in such things . . . will turn his assault against the male quarters, eager to befoul the youth who will very soon be magistrates and judges and generals, believing that in them he will find a kind of pleasure difficult and hard to procure [*Discourse* 7.135, 151–152].

Likewise, Plutarch has Daphnaeus, one of the speakers in his Dialogue on Love, disparage "union contrary to nature with males" (*hē para physin homilia pros arrēnas*), as contrasted to "the love between men and women," which is characterized as "natural" (*tē physei*). A few sentences later, Daphnaeus complains that those who "consort with males" willingly are guilty of "weakness and effeminacy," because, "contrary to nature" (*para physin*), they "allow themselves in Plato's words 'to be covered and mounted like cattle'" (*Dialogue on Love* 751C, E). Plutarch's reference to Plato demonstrates the point that Paul did not originate the application of the *kata physin/para physin* dichotomy to heterosexual and homosexual behavior. Its common appearance in the writings of the Hellenistic moral philosophers is testimony to a convention that can be traced back at least as far as Plato (*Laws* I.636C), almost invariably in contexts where a negative judgment is pronounced on the morality or propriety of the "unnatural" homosexual relations.

23. Josephus, *Ap.* 2.199, Loeb translation corrected; the allusion, of course, is to Lev. 20:13; cf. Lev. 18:22, 29. Elsewhere in the same work, Josephus deplores "intercourse with males" as *para physin* and accuses the Greeks of inventing stories about homosexual behavior among the gods as "an excuse for the monstrous and unnatural [*para physin*] pleasures in which they themselves indulged" (*Ap.* 2.273, 275). Paul's contemporary Philo uses similar language in a long passage branding pederasty as "an unnatural pleasure" (*tēn para physin hēdonēn*) (*De spec. leg.* 3.37–42). Philo's distaste for homosexuality receives its most elaborate expression in his retelling of the Sodom story (*De Abr.* 133–141); he charges that the inhabitants of Sodom "threw off from their necks the law of nature [*ton tēs physeōs nomon*] and applied themselves to deep drinking of strong liquor and dainty feeding and forbidden forms of intercourse. Not only in their mad lust for women did they violate the marriages of their neighbors, but also men mounted males. . . ." After a lurid description of the homosexual practices of the people of Sodom, he leads into the conclusion of the tale with an account of God's judgment of the matter:

> But God, moved by pity for mankind whose Savior and Lover He was, gave increase in the greatest possible degree to the unions which men and women naturally [*kata physin*] make for begetting children, but abominated and extinguished this unnatural and forbidden intercourse, and those who lusted for such He cast forth and chastised with punishments.

24. As correctly noted by Käsemann 1980, 47; Scroggs 1983, 110.
25. This point is overlooked by C. L. Porter 1994, who defends the remarkable thesis that "Paul opposes and argues against Rom. 1:18–32 throughout Romans" (p. 221).
26. See my comment on this passage in Hays 1989, 97.
27. I have altered the final word of this translation from the NRSV's "patience." In English, to say "we wait for it with patience" suggests a docile contentment that is foreign both to the sense of the Greek word *hypomonē* ("endurance") and to the whole sense of Rom. 8:18–25: those who wait are said to "groan inwardly," suffering along with an unredeemed creation.
28. McNeill 1995, 132–139. Cf. the argument of van Tilborg (1993) that the portrayal of Jesus' relationship to the Beloved Disciple in the Fourth Gospel is modeled on the pattern of same-sex love relationships in Hellenistic antiquity.
29. L. T. Johnson 1983, 95–97; Siker 1994b.
30. Boswell 1980. In 1994, Boswell published a study claiming to demonstrate that Christian churches in premodern Europe had established liturgical forms for the blessing of "same-sex unions." The book briefly created a minor sensation: its thesis was even reported by Garry Trudeau in his "Doonesbury" comic strip. Serious

academic reviewers, however, have been withering in their criticism of the book. See, e.g., Young 1994; Shaw 1994. The ceremony of *adelphopoiēsis* that Boswell has "discovered" is well known to liturgical scholars as a rite celebrating adoption or special bonds of friendship, but its purpose was certainly not to give ecclesiastical sanction to "gay marriages," as Boswell seeks to suggest.

31. Chrysostom, "Commentary on Romans, Homily 4," *In Epistolam ad Romanos*; cited in Boswell 1980, 360–361.

32. Greenberg 1989.

33. Here recall the argument above that actions do not necessarily have to be "voluntary" in order to be sinful before God. For a nuanced and helpful discussion of the scientific and social-scientific evidence and the relation of such evidence to normative issues, see Van Leeuwen (forthcoming).

34. For an argument rejecting this analogy, see Siker 1994b.

35. See the study by Laumann et al. 1994, indicating that only 1.4 percent of women and 2.8 percent of men are of homosexual or bisexual orientation.

36. Scroggs 1983.

37. One cannot help recalling Arlo Guthrie's song "Alice's Restaurant," in which the sergeant at the draft induction center expresses dismay at discovering that Arlo had previously been arrested for littering. "Kid, have you rehabilitated yourself?" he asks. "Are you moral enough to kill people?" See the provocative essay of Stanley Hauerwas, "Why Gays (as a Group) Are Morally Superior to Christians (as a Group)," in Hauerwas 1994, 153–156.

38. Charles Wesley, "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing," *United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 57.

39. Actually, Gary's phrase rather elegantly conflates 1 Cor. 4:10 with Matt. 19:12.

Chapter 17

Anti-Judaism and Ethnic Conflict

The Christian stance toward Jews and Judaism is rarely dealt with in books on New Testament ethics. This unfortunate omission is symptomatic of a blind spot in Christian theology that has—as our century has taught us all too well—contributed to tragic results in history. The standard New Testament ethics texts,[1] insofar as they offer normative discussions of ethical issues, deal with sexual ethics, divorce, possessions, obedience to government, violence and nonviolence—important topics all, but none so central to the self-definition of early Christian communities as the question of the relation of the emergent church to Israel. Perhaps the oversight occurs because the New Testament appears to contain little directly hortatory material on the subject of anti-Judaism or other forms of ethnic bias. As I have contended throughout this book, however, the study of ethics can be restricted neither to passages that give explicit moral exhortation nor to matters of individual moral decision; rather, the study of New Testament ethics must consider the fundamental symbols of communal identity and the way in which those symbols shape the ethos of particular communities.[2] Thus, the question of how Christians should regard Israel and treat Jews should be a central issue for any account of the ethics of the New Testament. The church's relation to Israel is an ethical issue that will never go away—as long as church and synagogue endure—because the church's identity as the people of God is rooted in the witness of early Christian communities that struggled bitterly with this problem.