

## *Revisionist Readings*

In the previous chapter I explored some fairly deeply embedded problems with the traditionalist position on same-sex erotic relationships. I noted the extent to which a theory of gender complementarity is assumed as the underlying form of moral logic that shapes most traditionalist positions. Yet such a reading of the biblical text encounters several significant difficulties. First, it is inadequate simply to talk in abstract terms about “gender complementarity” because these words, by themselves, do not tell us anything about the specific patterns of similarity and difference that actually express themselves in the complementarity of the genders. When traditionalist arguments are pressed further, in the attempt to discern more specifically what is meant by “gender complementarity,” two approaches emerge. One approach emphasizes hierarchy as the essential way in which the complementarity of the genders expresses itself normatively in Scripture. This has led, in many conservative churches in North America, to a significant retrenchment in some churches’ commitment to the full equality of women in church and society — and thus a diminution of the full use of women’s gifts in church and society. I believe that this represents a misreading of the biblical text, but I will address this problem in more detail in chapter 4.

Another approach emphasizes the physical or biological complementarity of the genders, basing itself on the creation narrative in Genesis 1 and 2. As I have argued in the preceding chapter, however, such a reading of the physical complementarity of the genders is nowhere else directly affirmed (or even addressed) in Scripture, and thus cannot be sustained as a comprehensive reading of the creation narratives themselves. A third ap-

proach to gender complementarity focuses on procreation. I will explore this question in more detail in chapter 6, where I will argue that procreation is not a sufficient basis on which to ground the essence of marriage.

The failure of these approaches raises in a pressing way the need to discern more clearly the underlying forms of moral logic that do shape the negative portrayal of same-sex erotic relationships in texts such as Leviticus 18:22, 20:13, and Romans 1:26-27, and in the related texts of Genesis 19, Judges 19, 1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:10, and Jude 7. If we are to discern how and to what extent these texts speak to gay and lesbian Christians in committed relationships today, we must discern the underlying forms of moral logic that shape these passages, as well as the links between these passages and the wider biblical witness regarding gender and sexuality. It is not sufficiently precise to speak vaguely about "gender complementarity" without further specifying the content and dynamics of such complementarity. And, as we have seen, it is also inappropriate to appeal to physical or biological differences between the genders as the meaning of gender complementarity, since Scripture itself doesn't speak of gender differences and interaction in this way.

These observations do not yet provide a constructive reading of the texts in question, nor do they provide a clearer glimpse of the forms of moral logic that actually shape the passages that take a negative view of same-sex erotic relationships. But they do identify some significant problems with the hermeneutical foundations of the traditionalist position. One of the goals of this book is to provide a more satisfactory foundation for reading and interpreting these passages.

### Understanding Revisionist Positions

But it is not only the traditionalist position that has run into problems in the debate over the church's response to gay and lesbian Christians in its midst. If traditionalist readings have been too dependent on a theory of gender complementarity that is either undefined or unsupported by a close reading of the relevant texts, revisionist readings have struggled with their own difficulties in interpretation. The overall thrust of most revisionist positions has been to emphasize the historical *distance* between the world of the biblical text (and thus the forms of sexual behavior and desire addressed by the text) and our own contemporary world. Whatever the Bible is talking about in the "seven passages" (often used by the traditionalists when they

talk about same-sex behavior), so the revisionist argument proceeds, these passages are not talking about the sexual or relational experience of contemporary gay and lesbian Christians in committed relationships. Therefore, they say, the Bible is essentially silent in addressing the contemporary experience of committed, long-term same-sex relationships.

However, beneath this kind of argument lurks a problem that is sensed, in a variety of ways, by Christians who are concerned about biblical authority. Because revisionist arguments emphasize so strongly the historical distance between the Bible and contemporary experience, this interpretative strategy may implicitly call into question whether the Bible can speak directly, with sufficient specificity and power, to any issues of sexual ethics more broadly considered in contemporary life. If the Bible's approach to sexual ethics in this particular case is so removed from our world, what would prevent us from constructing the same kind of argument to apply to other areas of contemporary sexual ethics? Might we not, following the same kind of analysis, claim that the Bible cannot speak at all to the modern experience of divorce, cohabitation, abortion, incest, or polygamy? If the Bible does not speak to our contemporary experience of homosexuality, even when it does seem to speak explicitly about same-sex erotic relationships, how can the Bible speak to our contemporary sexual experience at all?

It will be helpful for us — before we probe this basic question further — to explore more precisely the nature of the revisionist interpretation of the “seven passages” that are often cited as prohibiting same-sex erotic relations. If we are to assess this larger anxiety about the use of Scripture in sexual ethics, we need a more concrete sense of the historical gap envisioned by revisionist interpreters between the world of these texts and the contemporary world. For example, in reading the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, revisionist interpreters correctly note, first of all, that other biblical texts focus on the sin of inhospitality in this story, rather than on the alleged sin of same-sex relations.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, they note that even if one concedes that the “wickedness” of Sodom might have included the sinfulness of the attempted rape of Lot's male guests by the men of the city, the text says nothing about consensual same-sex intimate relations in committed relation-

1. See John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 94. Boswell cites the following texts: Deut. 29:23; 32:32; Isa. 3:9; 13:19; Jer. 23:14; 49:18; 50:40; Lam. 4:6; Ezek. 16:46-48; Amos 4:11; Zeph. 2:9; Matt. 10:15; Luke 17:29; Rom. 9:29; 2 Pet. 2:6; Jude 7.

ships, but instead speaks to the abhorrence of the violence and violation of rape.<sup>2</sup> The same analysis holds true for the parallel story in Judges 19.

Turning to the Levitical texts (Lev. 18:22; 20:13), both of which declare that it is an “abomination” for a man to “lie with a male as with a woman,” Jack Rogers argues that these are concerned with “ritual purity” and are preoccupied with distinguishing Israel from its pagan neighbors. Rogers then sets this concern over against the teaching of Jesus, who is concerned not with ritual purity but with purity of heart.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, these texts do not address sexual ethics in the church today, which is no longer defined in terms of ritual purity.<sup>4</sup>

In considering the “vice lists” of 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10, revisionist interpreters focus on the difficulties of translating and understanding the key words involved, which refer to those who will not “inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:10). In 1 Corinthians 6:9, the words translated in the NRSV as “male prostitute” (*arsenokoitēs*) and “sodomite” (*malakos*) carry with them a number of interpretative problems. The word *arsenokoitēs*, for example, does not occur in any extrabiblical Greek texts that are prior to or contemporaneous with the biblical writings, so it is difficult to ascertain its precise meaning via comparison with other contemporary or earlier texts. Thus Boswell is attempting to argue that the word refers to male prostitutes — without any particular homosexual connotation.<sup>5</sup> Robin Scroggs, by contrast, emphasizes the link between both of these terms (*arsenokoitēs* and *malakos*) and the Greek practice of peder-

2. One other New Testament passage that is often cited when considering the Sodom and Gomorrah story is Jude 7, where Sodom and Gomorrah are condemned because they pursued “unnatural lust” (NRSV). But the Greek text here (*apelthousai opisō sarkos heteras*) cannot refer to same-sex desire. The phrase *sarkos heteras* literally means “other flesh,” and the word “other” means “another of a different kind.” It is the same word from which we get the English word *heterosexual*! The sin envisioned in the text is not lusting after someone of the same sex, but the sin of lusting after the angelic visitors — who are not human — hence the NRSV’s rendering of the phrase “unnatural lust.”

3. Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), pp. 68-69.

4. For a more comprehensive and helpful discussion of the place of purity in biblical discussions of sexuality, see Louis William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

5. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, p. 107. This interpretation has not generally been sustained by later scholarship. See the critique in Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 114ff.

asty, the sexual use of younger boys (*malakoi*) by older men (*arsenokoitai*).<sup>6</sup> Dale Martin argues that we cannot know much more about the word *arsenokoitēs* than that it refers to some kind of sexual abuse or exploitation.<sup>7</sup> Many interpreters also note a third term, which appears next to *arsenokoitēs* in 1 Timothy 1:10: *andropodistēs*. Literally, the word means “slave-dealer” or “kidnapper.” A number of revisionist interpreters have connected this word to the ancient sex trade, where young boys were captured, castrated, and sold to be used as sexual slaves.<sup>8</sup> These and many other revisionist interpreters argue that the negative portrayal of these abusive ancient practices cannot be used to justify the condemnation of consensual, committed, and loving same-sex unions today.

We find a similar pattern of argument, emphasizing historical distance, in revisionist treatments of Romans 1:26-27, though the complexities of the debate warrant caution against an overly facile summary here. But much of the debate has focused on what Paul means in his reference to “nature” (*phusis*) when he says that women gave up “natural intercourse for unnatural,” and men gave up “natural intercourse with women” and were consumed with passion for one another. Some revisionist interpreters have followed Boswell, who argues that Paul here assumes that heterosexual persons are engaging in homosexual relationships that violate their own sexual nature, and thus these verses do not apply to those who are “naturally” attracted to others of the same sex.<sup>9</sup> Other interpreters argue that the word “nature” in Paul’s usage means “customary” or “normal,” and they understand Paul as portraying behaviors that violate ancient standards of decency, rather than universal norms established in the creation itself.<sup>10</sup> All these lines of interpretation suggest that Paul is speaking

6. Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), pp. 106ff.

7. Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), p. 43.

8. See, for example, the discussion in William Stacy Johnson, *A Time to Embrace: Same-Gender Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 50, 133. He notes how Roman emperors attempted, on three separate occasions, to ban the practice, which was deemed exceedingly offensive even by ancient Roman standards.

9. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, pp. 107ff. Boswell says: “Paul did not discuss gay persons but only homosexual acts committed by heterosexual persons” (p. 109).

10. See, for example, Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), pp. 103ff. Cf. Paul’s use of the same word (*phusis*) in 1 Cor. 11:14-15: “Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrad-

to an ancient context, with ancient assumptions — assumptions that cannot be simply transferred directly to contemporary life without significant critical assessment.

It is not my purpose, at this point, to evaluate the merits and strengths of these various arguments and interpretations of the relevant texts. I will revisit all these arguments, and many others, in the coming chapters and will explore them in greater detail. At this point, I simply want to observe a common thread that weaves its way through all these arguments (just as I observed the common thread of “gender complementarity” that pervades traditionalist arguments). The common thread in the revisionist argument is this: Whatever specific behaviors and relationships the Bible is condemning in the “seven passages” cannot be used to condemn committed same-sex unions today. These ancient texts are speaking against pagan practices, against pederasty and abuse, and against violations of commonly embraced standards of decency and “normality” that were part of the ancient world. As such, they cannot speak directly to committed, mutual, and loving same-sex unions in the contemporary church. The Bible is thus essentially silent when it comes to addressing the ethics of such unions, at least when we consider the seven passages that might be construed as having anything specific to say on same-sex sexual behavior at all.<sup>11</sup> Robin Scroggs summarizes this entire line of argument when he says, “Biblical judgments against homosexuality are not relevant to today’s debate . . . not because the Bible is not authoritative, but simply because it does not address the issues involved.”<sup>12</sup>

### Difficulties in Revisionist Positions

It is important to note that this problem of historical distance emerges not only when dealing with biblical texts that address same-sex erotic relations. The problem comes up repeatedly in biblical texts that deal with other sexual issues as well. Over and over, we confront the historical distance between the world of the text and our own, and the difficulty of directly applying biblical teaching on sexual issues to contemporary life.

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ing to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory?” This sounds much more like “nature” as “custom” or “normality.”

11. Boswell writes: “The New Testament takes no demonstrable position on homosexuality” (*Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, pp. 117ff.).

12. Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, p. 127.

Consider an obvious example: Deuteronomy 22:28-29 says that, if a man rapes a virgin who is not betrothed, “the man who lay with her shall give fifty shekels of silver to the young woman’s father, and she shall become his wife. Because he violated her he shall not be permitted to divorce her as long as he lives.” To our minds and in our context, such a command seems monstrous and unthinkable, regardless of what it might have meant in the ancient world concerning the rights of fathers and the provision of economic care for women deprived of socially sanctioned marriage. This passage simply cannot be directly appropriated today: it comes from a strange world and does not fit in our context. Other examples could easily be cited: the levirate marriage law that requires the brother of a deceased husband to marry his brother’s widow (Deut. 25:5-10), the practice of polygamy by the patriarchs, the abhorrence of contact with menstrual blood (Lev. 18:19), and so forth. A lot of the discussion of sexuality in the Bible is very strange to us, and it simply cannot be directly applied to contemporary life.<sup>13</sup> This same perception of historical distance between the world of the text and our world lies at the heart of many revisionist positions regarding same-sex relationships.

This immediately raises a further question: If the Bible does not speak directly and explicitly to contemporary committed and loving same-sex unions, how are we to construct a distinctively Christian approach to such unions? Here is where we detect the second common thread winding its way through a range of revisionist positions. If the first step is to emphasize the historical distance between the world of the text and our contemporary experience and culture, the second step is to appeal to very broad ethical principles that can be established in a wide range of biblical passages. A good example can be found in Dan O. Via’s discussion in *Homosexuality and the Bible*. The brief and distilled character of his essay helps to make the underlying form of the argument more transparent. Via appeals to Jesus’ words that one cannot get bad fruit from a good tree (Matt. 7:17-18; 12:33-35; 23:26); he concludes: “So if the heart is loving, the acts that flow from it cannot be evil . . . . The inner nature of a homosexual relationship does qualify the acts.” He goes on to argue that “for Paul sin is harmful

13. Much of this strangeness arises from the fact that most understandings of marriage in the West (focusing on intimacy and love) diverge rather sharply from the dominant understanding of marriage that has characterized most of human history (focusing on extended kinship relationships and economic considerations). See Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2005).

by its very nature.” He goes on to conclude from this premise: “If it cannot be demonstrated that homosexual practice is harmful in itself — in mutual, consensual, committed relationships — then it cannot be shown, in Pauline terms, to be sinful.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, any acts that proceed from a loving heart and do not harm the other person cannot be considered sinful. Or, to use words that Via does not use (but which seem to express similar perspectives), the biblical basis for assessing the ethics of committed same-sex unions consists of a focus on justice (do not harm the other and respect the other’s rights) and love (act out of good will and concern for the other).<sup>15</sup>

### Justice, Love, and Sexual Ethics

Here is where the debate becomes more focused. No one disputes that the biblical call to justice and love is a necessary component of any Christian sexual ethic. The question is not whether justice and love are necessary conditions of a Christian sexual ethic, but whether they are a *sufficient* basis on which to build an entire sexual ethic.<sup>16</sup> Justice and love must necessarily be part of any Christian ethical framework, since they represent some of the broadest themes of the entire biblical witness. But to speak *only* of justice and love when constructing a sexual ethic seems to imply that the Bible has nothing more to say about sex than that sexual behavior should be just and loving. Yet many Christians wonder whether the Bible has something more than this to say about the meaning of our sexuality and God’s purposes for human sexuality. The question arises about whether the specificity and particularity of the biblical witness has been lost, reduced to generic principles that, though valuable, can be twisted and distorted without the larger and more specific witness of Scripture.

Some traditionalists offer examples to illustrate the problems with this more generic approach that uses justice and love as exclusive ethical criteria. Robert Gagnon, for example, makes repeated appeals to incest as a

14. Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible*, pp. 20-25.

15. Cf. Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), which builds an entire sexual ethic on these twin themes.

16. Dale Martin, arguing for a more open posture in the church toward gays and lesbians, makes a similar distinction and notes further scholarly discussion of the inherent problems in an ethic based solely on love (Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, pp. 165ff.).



counterexample.<sup>17</sup> He argues that incestuous relationships might conceivably be expressed in long-term monogamous, consensual terms, but they would nevertheless be immoral.<sup>18</sup> Richard Hays presses the argument further, claiming that Paul in Romans 1 is not only arguing out of a concern for justice and love. In addition to these, Hays argues, Paul is also saying that “homosexual activities” are “symptomatic of [a] tragically confused rebellion” against God.<sup>19</sup> He observes: “Whatever one may decide about the weight of the love-principle, however, the fact remains that no biblical text directly contradicts the authority of Paul’s teaching on this matter.”<sup>20</sup> For Hays, justice and love are not sufficient because they do not by themselves address the purpose of God established in creation and revealed in Scripture for human sexuality.

It does not take too much imagination to extend Hays’s critique to other areas of sexual ethics. Can a mere emphasis on justice and love adequately explain the nearly absolute prohibition of divorce we find in the teachings of Jesus and in the later tradition (e.g., Matt. 5:31-32; 19:3-9; Mark 10:2-12; 1 Cor. 7:10-16)? Can justice and love, by themselves, adequately address the finely nuanced discussions of marriage and celibacy we find in texts such as Matthew 19:11-12 and 1 Corinthians 7? Scripture seems to bring a wider array of concerns to its discussion of sexuality than merely the questions of justice and love. One must also come to grips with the biblical understandings of embodiment, desire, marriage, family, procreation, and many other questions. Questions of justice and love certainly factor into all these issues, but questions of justice and love do not exhaust the content of these broader issues.

But this truncation of the biblical witness concerning sexuality is not the only problem. The terms “justice” and “love” are subject to multiple interpretations in different contexts. This raises the question of whether such broad terms are adequate, not only in interpreting the biblical texts, but also in applying biblical norms to everyday life situations. For example,

17. See, for example, Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible*, pp. 48ff.

18. Yet Gagnon’s own subsequent argument that incestuous relationships are “wrong partly because of the disproportionately high incidence of scientifically measurable, ancillary problems” (Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible*, pp. 48ff.) represents an implicit acknowledgment that Via’s “do no harm” criterion would exclude these relationships, rendering Via’s criterion sufficient in the case of this particular counterexample.

19. Hays, “Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to J. Boswell’s Exegesis of Romans 1,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 14, no. 1 (1986): 207.

20. Hays, “Relations Natural and Unnatural,” p. 208.

in modern parlance “consensual” relationships are often deemed to fulfill the requirements of justice, since they are freely chosen by participants who, acting out of legitimate self-interest, would not be expected to embrace relationships that violate their rights. But what it means that relationships are “consensual” is not always easy to determine. Power differentials, psychological problems, and other factors may indicate that even relationships that appear to be consensual may be morally wrong. Obvious examples would include incest or sexual relations with minors, but other, more complex examples are not hard to imagine. Is it not the case that “the heart is devious above all else” (Jer. 17:9), and thus that humans may well deceive themselves about whether their motives in sexual relationships are truly loving or not? If there are no principles, values, or norms beyond the very broad criteria of justice and love, with which we may construct a sexual ethic, we may find it difficult indeed to build a sexual ethic that protects us from our own tendencies to self-deception. In the minds of many, the absence of more specific and focused norms regarding sexuality posited by some revisionist readings of the Bible renders Christian ethics vulnerable to such forms of manipulation and self-deception.

It may be helpful at this point to step back for a moment and review the larger argument that this chapter has been constructing. I have attempted to identify some common threads of the revisionist case, and some characteristic problems with that case. Many revisionist arguments emphasize the historical distance between the text and contemporary life so strongly that the dominant note tends to be the irrelevance to contemporary discussions of committed same-sex unions of the “seven passages” that touch on same-sex eroticism in the Bible. What the Bible is talking about, revisionists argue, is not what contemporary gay and lesbian Christians in committed relationships are experiencing and doing. As a result, revisionists draw an ethical framework for treating loving and committed same-sex relationships, not from the texts that *seem* to speak more directly to this issue, but rather from broader biblical themes, such as justice and love. Critics, however, wonder whether this move to broader principles represents an abandonment of the specificity of the biblical witness on sexual issues and identity in particular, and whether it renders Christian sexual ethics too vulnerable to vagary, self-deception, and manipulation.

It is important to observe that such broad characterizations of “common threads” may not apply equally to all revisionist positions. Indeed, a number of more recent studies have moved well beyond a concern only with the broad ethical categories of justice and love and have attempted to

self-deception



synthesize a nuanced and more comprehensive Christian understanding of sexuality into a revisionist position. Among the more interesting and comprehensive are the studies by William Stacy Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, and Eugene F. Rogers, *Sexuality and the Christian Body*.<sup>21</sup> In deep conversation with the broad Christian tradition, Rogers has developed a carefully crafted theology of Christian embodiment, sexuality, and marriage in which he offers interesting and provocative insights regarding how committed gay and lesbian unions might find their place in this wider vision. Johnson has argued that revisionist positions must move beyond merely a focus on liberation and justice, toward *consecration*, which entails the offering up of ourselves, including our sexual selves, in obedience to and worship of God. Other studies have offered interesting probes and suggestions for a wider ethical vision — without developing those suggestions in more systematic fashion.<sup>22</sup>

### A New Chapter in the Debate over Same-Sex Relationships

These studies are promising beginnings to a new chapter in the church's debate over same-sex relationships. This book is an attempt to make a further contribution to this new phase of the dialogue. This "new chapter" presupposes that most of the historical work on same-sex relations in the ancient world has been completed. While we must always be open to new discoveries, it seems that scholars now have a fairly accurate picture of the relevant data on same-sex erotic relations in the ancient world.<sup>23</sup> Of course, there remain vigorous disputes over the *interpretation* of these data, and the question of interpretation is precisely where the focus of this

21. Johnson, *A Time to Embrace: Same-Sex Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012); Rogers, *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God*, *Challenges in Contemporary Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

22. Writing before he became Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams offered a range of interesting theological observations on embodiment, desire, and sexuality, creating space for gay and lesbian unions, in a brief article entitled "The Body's Grace," reprinted in Charles C. Hefling, ed., *Our Selves, Our Souls, and Bodies: Sexuality and the Household of God* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1996), pp. 58-68. The writings of James Alison also provide suggestive beginning points for a more comprehensively Christian understanding of sexuality that embraces heterosexuals and gays and lesbians. See, for example, Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay* (New York: Crossroad, 2001).

23. The most comprehensive and accessible summary is found in Nissinen, *Homosexuality in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective*.

“new chapter” lies. We can now see much more clearly the nature and character of sexuality and sexual behavior in the ancient world. That increased clarity of vision has shown us how the meaning and social function of sexuality has changed over time, and how we experience our sexual selves differently from women and men in the ancient world. Consequently, not everything that the Bible says about gender and sexuality is directly applicable to life today.

What is needed, however, is not simply a reversion to very broad biblical principles like justice and love. These principles are, of course, entirely necessary; but they are not sufficient in themselves to construct a biblically based, contemporary sexual ethic that can address, among many other things, the contemporary debate over homosexuality and gay and lesbian unions. Theologians such as Eugene Rogers, James Alison, and William Stacy Johnson have begun this new conversation by engaging the broad Christian tradition in a wide-ranging conversation about the meaning of sexuality and marriage in the Christian tradition. This book attempts to contribute to this new conversation in a specific and focused way, by exploring the forms of moral logic that undergird a wide range of biblical texts dealing with sexual issues. I will not focus primarily on engaging the wider Christian tradition on these issues, nor on investigating the discussions taking place in psychology or other social sciences that are part of the larger debate. Rather, my focus is on the biblical texts that deal with sexuality in general — and with same-sex erotic relationships in particular. The goal is to discern in a fresh way the underlying forms of moral logic that shape and focus biblical teaching on sexuality.

The problems of historical distance between our world and the world of the text are present not only in passages that deal with same-sex relations; they are ubiquitous. Because the world of the biblical text is different from our world in countless ways, both great and small, every reading of the biblical text is a cross-cultural encounter, the engagement of a complex interaction between similarity and difference. Discerning the wider underlying forms of moral logic that shape particular biblical texts is of enormous importance in assisting and clarifying this cross-cultural encounter. A canonical approach that seeks to identify shared themes, values, images, and concerns across the biblical witness assists the cross-cultural reading of the Bible in three specific ways.

First, the Bible itself is a multicultural document whose writing spans many centuries and cultures. Understanding the dynamics of intertextuality is enormously helpful in differentiating between those elements that

are historically contingent and those that transcend time and place. For example, it is only from a wide-angle, canonical view that we can see that there are multiple ways in which marriage itself is understood in various texts: some texts accept polygamy as a given (e.g., the multiple marriages of the patriarchs), while other texts assume and presuppose monogamy (e.g., Jesus' words on divorce in Matt. 19:1-9); or, at a more mundane level, we see a variety of cultural processes by which a marriage is celebrated in the Bible, sometimes through a formal wedding ceremony, at other points without such ritual accompaniments (e.g., the marriage of Isaac to Rebekah in Gen. 24:50-67). Each instance of such diversity in the biblical witness is a flag calling attention to factors of cultural variability that need to be considered — a cultural variability sanctioned by Scripture itself.

But it is not only the *diversity* of the canonical witness that is important in discerning underlying forms of moral logic that Scripture as a whole presents to us; one must also consider the progressive and unfolding nature of the canon when sorting through questions of cultural rootedness and transcendence. The canon, in this sense, is not flat; it comes to its divinely intended end and goal in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, to which the New Testament bears witness. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus repeatedly declares, "You have heard it said . . . but I say to you." Jesus' teaching, his death, his resurrection, and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost all provide critical vantage points from which the entire canonical witness is reread and reframed. Some elements of the scriptural witness that were assumed before as universally binding (e.g., the requirements of circumcision and kosher eating for the people of God) were suddenly reenvisioned as culturally particular. So it is not only the *diversity* of the canonical witness that alerts us to the presence of cultural particularity; it is also, more specifically, the *movement* of scriptural revelation that discloses the most important and powerful underlying forms of moral logic that transcend culture and place, but are instead rooted in the gospel, the deepest embodiment of the heart of God's self-revelation.

Third, a canonical approach can help distinguish those patterns in Scripture that are *normal*, or descriptive, from those patterns that are *normative*, or prescriptive. For example, it is clearly normal in the Old Testament for men to be in positions of leadership. But as we shall explore in the next chapter, there are some striking exceptions to that normal pattern — exceptions that call into question whether the normal (or typical) pattern in these passages should also be construed as normative (or prescriptive). Similarly, chapter 6 will note the ways in which the birth of children

is understood to be a normal part of marriage. Yet Scripture never regards the absence of children as a sufficient basis for divorce, in contrast with common patterns in marriages of that day. Hence procreation is normal within marriage, but it does not constitute the normative essence of marriage. Similarly, chapter 7 will explore the complex discussions of marriage and celibacy in Scripture. Here marriage is also understood as normal, but not normative, and Jesus commends those who have "made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of God" (Matt. 19:12). In all these cases, a canonical approach provides a clearer vantage point from which the fundamental patterns of moral logic that unite the biblical witness — amid striking cultural and situational diversity — can be more clearly discerned.

But here is the paradox that drives the methodology of this book: we cannot discern a comprehensive and culture-transcending biblical vision for sexuality unless we look broadly across the entire canonical witness for the underlying forms of moral logic that shape and unfold in the canon as a whole. And we will not be able to establish a wider, transcultural vision for human sexuality into which committed gay and lesbian unions might fit unless we establish that wider biblical framework. Hence I seek in this book to pursue a somewhat complicated juggling exercise that tries to do four things at the same time: (1) look across the canon of Scripture for those underlying forms of moral logic that shape Scripture's discussion of issues involving sexuality and marriage, broadly considered; (2) explore how each of those forms of moral logic may have elements that are particular and unique to specific cultural settings, and how other elements of that particular form of moral logic may transcend cultural boundaries and speak more broadly to God's purposes for, and gracious redemption of, human life; (3) reflect on how these broader themes impact our understanding of the "seven passages" that seem to speak more directly about same-sex erotic relationships in the ancient world; and finally, (4) explore the implications of this analysis for the contemporary debates regarding the church, homosexuality, and committed gay or lesbian unions. The goal is to move beyond abstract and ill-defined conceptions such as gender complementarity, or overly general notions such as justice and love, to a more specific and nuanced cross-cultural biblical vision for gender and sexuality, with particular attention to the implications of that vision for gay and lesbian people in the church.

### Summing Up

- Most revisionist positions argue that whatever the Bible says about same-sex eroticism in the ancient world does not directly apply to contemporary committed gay or lesbian relationships.
- Therefore, many revisionist positions resort to broad biblical categories like justice and love for evaluating same-sex relationships.
- However, though justice and love are *necessary* elements of any sexual ethic, they are not *sufficient* in themselves to develop a full sexual ethic from Scripture.
- What is required is a wider canonical exploration of biblical discussions of sexuality in order to develop a cross-cultural sexual ethic that may have relevance for gay and lesbian relationships today. That kind of exploration is the goal of this book.