

Christian Moral Reasoning and the Question of Homosexual Practice

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It is perhaps cliché now to express surprise about how quickly things change in late modern Western society. I believe we are now mostly used to change being the only constant. One of the most notable changes in recent years is the widespread shift toward approval of homosexual practice.¹ The decades-long rise in the social acceptability of sexual practice outside of heterosexual marriage took a major leap forward with the U.S. Supreme Court's *Obergefell* decision of 2015, legalizing same-sex marriage at the federal level.

The culture has largely embraced and celebrates the “LGBTQ+” message. In academia, for example, especially in the humanities, and particularly in religious studies, the message of unquestioned approval has been prominent for many years. In addition, in the past few years, Christian churches have become increasingly open to non-heterosexual practice. This move toward a new sexual ethic may be seen not only in mainline Protestant churches but also in typically conservative church communions, including Churches of Christ. As an autonomous fellowship with no denominational hierarchy or structure, we are certainly (un)organized for such rapid change at the congregational level.

In a growing number of congregations and universities associated with Churches of Christ and the American Restoration Movement, the question of

¹ I refer to homosexuality as any consensual sexual contact with a person of the same sex. That is, unless otherwise specified, it is the practice and not the desire that I primarily have in mind.

whether homosexual practice is morally permissible or impermissible is treated as if it is a question of indifference. Among other congregations and universities, homosexual practice is openly affirmed as an issue already decided (as it is in popular culture). Such affirmation happens usually without clear appeal to authority. If any basis is cited, it is typically along the lines of personal experience or “unconditional love.”

Logically prior to asking the necessary pastoral question about how best to show the love of Christ to homosexuals, we must first determine the moral status of the practice in question. It is this task that Christians often bypass on the way to unconditionally embracing not only moral agents but also all their actions. Thus, the question that I propose to address briefly in this article has to do with the proper basis for any Christian moral evaluation in general and for the evaluation of homosexual practice in particular. In other words, how do Christians know moral good, by what criteria should Christians assess ethical practices, and on what ground are some Christians now supporting homosexual practice as morally permissible?²

I. Criteria for Evaluation

It is important for every student of theology and ethics—indeed for any thoughtful Christian believer—to understand how to evaluate theological and ethical positions. Whether a given doctrine is true or a behavior good must depend on something more than subjective preference. But what are those criteria? Where does the authority for faith and practice lie? What are the standards for evaluating different theological points of view? A helpful tool in this task of assessing faith and morals is the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral. The Quadrilateral provides a set of four criteria by which doctrines and morals may be evaluated. They are, in descending order of importance (going down the chain), Scripture, Christian tradition, reason, and experience.

1) Scripture. In our pursuit of holiness, Christians have always looked primarily to Scripture for guidance. Turning to Scripture as the first source of authority should be a practice that is intuitive to Christians, especially in Churches of Christ. Scripture is an infallible guide in matters of faith and

² Much of what follows is adapted from Keith D. Stanglin, *Ethics beyond Rules: How Christ's Call to Love Informs Our Moral Choices* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Reflective, 2021).

morals. If Scripture seems misguided, it is more likely due to our misinterpretation. Correct application assumes correct interpretation. Of course, there are obscurities in Scripture and difficulties with applying documents that were not written to us, but these challenges do not imply that Scripture is a wax nose that has no shape other than what readers give it. In most cases, the moral duties and expectations for disciples of Jesus are clearly revealed. When there are interpretive difficulties, these next three criteria help in the interpretation and application of Scripture.

2) Tradition. Specifically, with tradition we have in mind the nearly 2,000-year history of the church, with heavier emphasis on the earlier beliefs and practices of the brothers and sisters who lived so close to the time of Jesus and his apostles. As Christians have assumed throughout church history, further upstream toward the fountains, the water tends to be purer. With regard to ethical issues, we should ask what the universal church has taught for the majority of its history. If Christians from the earliest times have interpreted and applied the Bible's commands and principles uniformly, then we should heed their testimony. It does not mean that the great tradition is infallible. But if Christians have had 1,900 years of consensus on an issue, and we decide that they have been wrong all this time, then we better have a very good rationale for dissenting. That rationale must go up the chain and should be based primarily on Scripture. Tradition, by the way, is the most neglected of the four criteria today. It requires something currently in short supply—knowing and appreciating the history of Christian thought.

3) Reason. When it comes to moral questions, we ask what reason or common sense suggests. What does nature or natural law have to say about the issue in question? What is the natural purpose or design of the thing in question? As Paul claimed in Romans 1:18–32, innate knowledge of God and of right and wrong is built into creation, a point acknowledged by nearly all pre-modern intellectual traditions. Reason is a level at which one can speak with non-Christians who do not care what Scripture and Christian tradition reveal. That is, one can make cases that support Christian ethics without ever appealing to Scripture or specifically Christian tradition. Human reason, however, is certainly fallible. It is subject to false arguments, emotions, ignorance, and other influences that might cloud judgment. But if Scripture seems to be saying

“x,” and it is supported by Christian tradition, and it does not contradict reason, then one has a solid case.

4) Experience. Experience, the most ambiguous of these criteria, could be taken to mean empirical observation of the world around us. Today, it is often taken to mean “my own personal experience” of life, an individual’s opinions about right and wrong. If it is the latter, then this approaches moral relativism and is definitely the most unreliable criterion in this list. Our desires, even those that we experience as natural to us, are often disordered and sinful. So experience, at best, must mean the experience of the entire church community, and it can then only be a confirming criterion. It is not properly a source of authority at all. It should never be exalted above Scripture or any of the criteria on the chain above. If it is thus exalted, and if it alone contradicts Scripture, tradition, and reason, then, from a Christian perspective, it seems to be simply confirming one’s own heterodoxy or sin. It is definitely one way to live—and one that is common in our society—but it is no longer a Christian way of life. Unlike tradition and its widespread neglect, experience is now the most common and authoritative source to which people, including some Christians, appeal for moral authority.

Although this set of four criteria is often called the *Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, this mode of theological reasoning and evaluation encompasses so much more than the Wesleyan or Methodist heritage. This set of criteria or authorities is not uniquely Wesleyan.³ The appeal to Scripture, church tradition, and reason is an ancient, orthodox, catholic way of doing theology. Among those sources of authority, Scripture has historically functioned as the highest standard, the norming norm (*norma normans*) of theology. A few examples that span church history may suffice to illustrate these points.

Origen of Alexandria (ca. 185–254), the greatest theologian of the ante-Nicene church, repeatedly appealed to these sources of knowledge. As he describes his theological method in the preface to his *On First Principles*, he declares that the words of Christ in Scripture are always the foremost source for

³ For a study of the Quadrilateral, including its history and recent Wesleyan reflections on its use today, see W. Stephen Gunter, et al., *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997).

teaching us how “to live well and blessedly.”⁴ After Scripture, Origen then appeals to “the apostolic preaching” and “the church’s preaching.”⁵ What he proposes in the preface is consistently modeled throughout this great work. His examination of difficult matters is based not only on “the reasoning of inference” but also on “holy Scripture.”⁶ He returns again and again to “reason itself and the authority of Scripture.”⁷ Origen states that he will yield his opinions to anyone who can discover something better and prove it by clearer statements from holy Scripture.⁸

Fast forward a millennium to the high medieval period in the West. Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), the greatest of the scholastic theologians, began his *Summa theologiae* by considering the authorities to which he would appeal in his magnum opus. For Thomas, Scripture’s authority is certain and therefore superior to genuine but inferior extra-biblical authorities, such as the church fathers or philosophers:

Nevertheless, sacred doctrine uses these [philosophical] authorities as extrinsic and probable arguments; but properly uses the authority of the canonical Scriptures as an incontrovertible proof, and the authority of the other doctors of the Church as one that may properly be used, but merely as probable. For our faith rests on the revelation made to the apostles and prophets who wrote the canonical books, and not on the revelation (if any such there are) made to other doctors.⁹

What Thomas articulates here anticipates the mainstream position of the magisterial Reformations of the sixteenth century. For instance, the English theologian Richard Hooker (1554–1600), in his arguments against the emerging Puritan faction in the Church of England, was known for appealing primarily to Scripture, but also to “the judgment of antiquity” and “the long

⁴ Origen, *De princ.*, I.preface.1, in *On First Principles*, 2 vols., ed. and trans. John Behr, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), vol. 1:10–11. For Origen, these “words of Christ” include revelation in both Old and New Testaments.

⁵ Origen, *De princ.*, I.pref.3–10 (1:12–21).

⁶ E.g., Origen, *De princ.*, I.v.4 (1:96–97).

⁷ E.g., Origen, *De princ.*, I.vii.4 (1:126–27).

⁸ Origen, *De princ.*, II.vi.7 (2:214–15).

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Latin/English edition, 8 vols. (Lander, Wyo.: The Aquinas Institute, 2012), Ia.i.8 ad 2.

continued practice of the whole Church,” along with the “light of nature” and “reason.”¹⁰ Hooker writes, “Be it in matter of the one kind or of the other, what *Scripture* doth plainly deliver, to that the first place both of credit and obedience is due; the next whereunto is whatsoever any man can necessarily conclude by force of *reason*; after these the *voice of the Church* succeedeth.”¹¹ We could call this Hooker’s—or, better, the Anglican—trilateral, three supports that have also been likened to a tripod or a stool held up by three supporting legs.¹²

These figures from Christian history are not outliers, but are representative of the premodern consensus of the church universal. Even in the sixteenth century, when Roman Catholics effectively exalted tradition alongside Scripture and some radical Anabaptists effectively eliminated the use of tradition, Scripture was still unanimously acknowledged as the preeminent authority for Christian faith and practice.¹³ Thus, the primacy of Scripture is not a Restorationist idiosyncrasy or even a merely Protestant principle; it is the common, ancient heritage of Christianity at large. And the use of Scripture, read through the lenses of tradition and reason, has guided the greater part of the church universal throughout most of its history.¹⁴ To an extent, this is true even for churches that ostensibly reject tradition and reason. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral adds experience to these three criteria, and this is perhaps what makes it more Wesleyan, or at least somewhat distinct from the common history of Christian theological discourse. Like tradition and reason, experience—whether personal or communal—is something that one cannot help but use in

¹⁰ See Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* III.viii.4, 10, 12; V.vii.1, in 2 vols. (London: J. M. Dent, 1907), vol. 1:310–11, 316, 319; vol. 2:27. Cf. Egil Grislis, “Scriptural Hermeneutics,” in *A Companion to Richard Hooker*, ed. Torrance Kirby, Brill’s Companions to the Christian Tradition 8 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 273–304; and Ted A. Campbell, *Christian Confessions* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 143–44.

¹¹ Hooker, *Laws*, V.viii.2 (2:31) (emphasis added). Here Hooker transposes the order of tradition and reason. Cf. W. Stephen Gunter, “The Quadrilateral and the ‘Middle Way,’” in Gunter, et al., *Wesley and the Quadrilateral*, 36–37.

¹² See Ranall Ingalls, “Sin and Grace,” in *A Companion to Richard Hooker*, 155.

¹³ The late medieval and early modern situation is discussed in Keith D. Stanglin, *The Letter and Spirit of Biblical Interpretation: From the Early Church to Modern Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 125–32.

¹⁴ See Keith D. Stanglin, “Ecclesial Unity, Biblical Interpretation, and the Rule of Faith,” in *Scripture First: Biblical Interpretation that Fosters Christian Unity*, ed. Daniel B. Oden and J. David Stark (Abilene: ACU Press, 2020), 77–102.

interpretation. One's experience is inescapable. At the same time, it cannot by itself teach new content; it only confirms and applies what is discernible through the dictates of Scripture, read through tradition and reason. Experience is intended to play a supporting role.

In his classic work on New Testament ethics, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (1996), Richard Hays employs these same four "sources of authority"—Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience—in the examination of each ethical test case he raises.¹⁵ Reflecting the typical ordering of the Quadrilateral, Hays emphasizes the priority of Scripture: "*Extrabiblical sources stand in a hermeneutical relation to the New Testament; they are not independent, counter-balancing sources of authority.* In other words, the *Bible's* perspective is privileged, not ours."¹⁶ As such, Hays echoes the same caveats that we have mentioned about these extra-biblical sources. Christian tradition, human reason, and experience are certainly fallible.¹⁷ As I noted above, experience is not even a proper authority. Nevertheless, with acknowledgment of their appropriate roles, these three criteria are clearly useful as lenses for confirming the interpretation and application of Scripture. With Scripture, tradition, and reason, we have an ancient and tested mode of Christian moral reasoning. Christian ethics, in order to be Christian, must be answerable to these authorities.

II. Homosexual Practice and the Quadrilateral

These criteria, employed in their proper order, are helpful for assessing not only older doctrines and ethics received from our predecessors, but also more recent doctrinal and moral proposals. For our present purposes, these criteria provide an epistemology of ethics that answers the question, how do we know the good and what love requires? More specifically and directly, how should we regard homosexual practice? As with other doctrinal and ethical questions, we should run the question through the four sources or criteria of authority. In doing so, we should also discover the rationale for the increasing acceptance among Christians of homosexual practice. Is it because the arguments from Scripture, tradition, and reason are so overwhelmingly

¹⁵ See his brief descriptions in Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation; A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 209–11, 295–98.

¹⁶ Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 296; cf. *ibid.*, 310.

¹⁷ Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 296–98.

convincing? Let us consider the question of homosexual practice in light of the criteria.¹⁸

Scripture

What does the Bible say? In short, Scripture deals with the question at the level of rules, principles and paradigms, and worldview, and its testimony is unanimously against homosexual practice.¹⁹ The clearest statements are found in Leviticus 18:22; 1 Corinthians 6:9–11; Romans 1:24–27; and 1 Timothy 1:9–10. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19, the most famous narrative about (attempted) homosexual practice, is an instance of attempted rape and therefore not directly relevant to consensual homosexual activity. But what the whole story implies about homosexuality is not entirely irrelevant.²⁰ The narrative itself and other biblical comments on it would lead us to believe that more than one thing was disordered with the morals in Sodom. Furthermore, the fact that most of the documents collected in Scripture do not expressly mention homosexuality at all does not imply that the authors were indifferent about the practice or that they regarded the question as insignificant. Besides indifference, there may be other reasons for silence about particular issues in these ad hoc, ancient documents.²¹

Notwithstanding the clarity of these many passages and the universal assumption in Scripture of male-female sexual relationships, some interpreters have attempted to justify homosexual practice through their reading of Scripture. These attempts usually involve the claim that the Bible does not mean

¹⁸ See the chapter on “homosexuality” in Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 379–406, where he does the same thing. In comparison, my treatment below is necessarily truncated, and I would differ from Hays on certain details, but our methods and results are compatible.

¹⁹ For the most comprehensive treatment of homosexual practice in Scripture, see Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001). See also Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 381–97. The categories of rules, principles, paradigms, and symbolic world are suggested as modes for the ethical analysis of Scripture in *ibid.*, 208–9.

²⁰ Contra Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 381.

²¹ Hays seems to have a simplistic view of silence, implying that “paucity of texts” means that the question is “a minor concern” or a “peripheral issue.” See Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 381. It is as if the quantity of relevant texts alone is decisive. Cf. *ibid.*, 400–1, 445. For a more responsible treatment of silence, rules, and worldview, see the discussion of Jesus’ sexual ethic in Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 185–228.

what it appears to be saying—for example, they may question the clear meaning of words or assert that the proscriptions relate only to rape.²² Such attempts are often feeble and always unconvincing. They are made generally not by critical exegetes or historians but by Christians who have a stake in the prescriptive support of Scripture.

These revisionist attempts are countered effectively by biblical scholars who write in support of homosexual practice but also acknowledge that the practice is opposed to the commands of Scripture. For instance, Luke Timothy Johnson writes, “The task demands intellectual honesty. I have little patience with efforts to make Scripture say something other than what it says, through appeals to linguistic or cultural subtleties. The exegetical situation is straightforward: we know what the text says.”²³ For writers such as Johnson, permission for homosexual behavior must circumvent the clear commands and principles of Scripture. It is for them not a question of exegesis but of hermeneutics or application of Scripture or, more bluntly, of an authority higher than Scripture. At any rate, even these proponents of homosexual practice agree: Scripture could not be clearer on its judgment of homosexual practice as impermissible.

Tradition

In many areas of doctrine and ethics, the historic Christian tradition admittedly yields ambiguity. Not so for the question of homosexual practice. Up until the sexual revolution, Christians have been universally opposed to the practice of homosexuality.²⁴ This ethical consensus is Jewish as well and therefore pre-dates Christianity. We might add, in fact, that all civilizations have recognized the normality of heterosexual marriage and that many pre-

²² Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, addresses many of these revisionist attempts.

²³ Luke Timothy Johnson, “Homosexuality and the Church: Scripture and Experience,” *Commonweal* (June 11, 2007), at <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/homosexuality-church-0>. Similarly, Dan O. Via, who writes against Robert Gagnon in favor of homosexuality, admits, “Professor Gagnon and I are in substantial agreement that the biblical texts that deal specifically with homosexual practice condemn it unconditionally.” Dan O. Via and Robert A. J. Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 93.

²⁴ The first Christian group to approve of same-sex marriage was the Remonstrant Brotherhood in 1986. “Remonstrant Church,” at <https://www.remonstranten.nl/engels/>.

Christian pagans argued against homosexual relationships for some of the same reasons that Christians have opposed them.²⁵

The clear consensus of the Christian tradition against homosexual practice has not stopped some writers from appealing to history. The most well-known attempt to revise the history was by John Boswell in 1980, who claimed that there is ambiguity in the New Testament and in the church's history regarding homosexual behavior.²⁶ His book has been roundly criticized for its misuse of sources and inclination to see approval of homosexual practice where there is silence or even prohibition.²⁷ Looking back on the book's reception, the sympathetic author of the book's new foreword puts it mildly, confessing that the book "fail[ed] to convince many academic readers of the correctness of its re-interpretations of crucial texts."²⁸

Like Boswell, others occasionally attempt to undermine the argument from tradition by claiming ambiguity. In a recent, anniversary issue of *Sixteenth Century Journal*, for example, one advocate of same-sex marriage supports his view with the rather obvious claim that "marriage changes over time," though he also admits, with a citation against Boswell, "I certainly would not claim that I know of a past time when marriages were made between people of the same sex."²⁹ But this latter admission is precisely what the appeal to tradition is—namely, same-sex marriage was never endorsed. Moreover, in the same journal issue, another historian argues for adoption rights by same-sex couples, observing that, historically, "many children were brought up separated from their biological parents," growing up, for example, "with grandparents or other relatives, in institutions or foster care." This is hardly news, yet the

²⁵ E.g., see Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 397–98, 405.

²⁶ John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*, Thirty-Fifth Anniversary Edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

²⁷ E.g., see the collection of source quotations in S. Donald Fortson III and Rollin G. Grams, *Unchanging Witness: The Consistent Christian Teaching on Homosexuality in Scripture and Tradition* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016). For other responses to and criticisms of Boswell's work, see Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 344 n. 2; Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 405–6 n. 30.

²⁸ Mark D. Jordan, "Foreword to the Thirty-Fifth Anniversary Edition," in Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, xvi.

²⁹ Eric Josef Carlson, "Unpredictability and the Responsibilities of the Early Modern Historian," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 50/1 (2019): 164–65.

obvious fact about children sometimes being raised apart from their biological parents is somehow supposed to counter the “conservative argument” based on “history and tradition.”³⁰ Specious arguments such as these abound and are intended to cast doubt on the historical record. At the end of the day, however, the facts are clear: for nearly two millennia, Christian tradition, echoing Scripture itself, unanimously regarded homosexual relations as morally impermissible.

Reason

Reason is a very broad category. Technically, reason alone does not have much content; it is more a tool than a source per se.³¹ It is the faculty that enables a person to draw conclusions from the evidence available, whether from general or special revelation from God. Hooker called reason a “necessary instrument” with which we reap the harvest of Scripture’s fruit.³² With the help of right reason, then, believers interpret and apply Scripture. In the present case, however, let us consider reason as any deliverance of general revelation and our interpretation of it. In other words, how could the moral case against homosexuality be made to people who do not hold to the authority of Scripture and the Christian tradition? The argument from reason could draw on many sources and go in many directions.³³ The following considerations should make even non-Christians pause.

First of all, what does nature teach about the purpose of sexual relations? The natural purpose of the reproductive system, of course, is procreation. It is the only bodily system that requires two people (no more, no less) to fulfill its natural function. They are not just any two people, but a male and a female.

³⁰ Svante Norrhem, “Why Early Modern Scholarship Matters,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 50/1 (2019): 170–71. The article discusses the law and history in Sweden specifically.

³¹ Rebekah L. Miles, “The Instrumental Role of Reason,” in Gunter, et al., *Wesley and the Quadrilateral*, 77–79.

³² Hooker, *Laws*, III.viii.10 (1:316).

³³ E.g., see Anthony Esolen’s arguments against the legalization and normalization of same-sex marriage, formulated consciously apart from any appeal to specifically Christian sources. Anthony Esolen, *Defending Marriage: Twelve Arguments for Sanity* (Charlotte: Saint Benedict Press, 2014); cf. idem, “Sanity and Matrimony: Ten Arguments in Defense of Marriage,” in two parts, *Touchstone* (July/August 2010): 28–32; (September/October 2010): 25–29. These latter points appeared in a weblog at https://merecomments.typepad.com/merecomments/2006/08/ten_arguments_f_2.html.

When Noah took male-female pairs of animals into the ark, the reason for this specific demand was so obvious that it did not need to be spelled out. Furthermore, the irrepressible desire of many homosexual couples to have biological offspring testifies to the natural link between marriage, sex, and procreation that is broken by same-sex relationships. The joining of male and female and its procreative fruit are the gift of nature.

Second, many things follow from the relatively novel cultural assumption that sexual relations have nothing to do with procreation and everything to do with pleasure. One such consequence is that any sexual relationship is just as legitimate as any other, consent being the only requirement. Some of those relationships our society has formally approved—especially, homosexual relationships. Other such relationships it has not yet approved, but, given enough time, it eventually will. I will let the reader imagine what those other practices might be and then try to explain why, on the sole criterion of consent, those practices should remain off limits. The truth is that, if we no longer restrict legitimate sex to heterosexual relations with the end or potential for procreation, then there is no rationale for restricting any sexual expression, no matter how repulsive we may find that practice now.

Third, there is a plethora of data that shows the negative consequences of homosexual practice for physical and mental wellness.³⁴ The following examples should suffice. The health risks of anal sex (the primary sexual act of homosexual males) are well known, causing injury and spreading disease like no other sexual practice; it should be enough to point out that the body was not designed for it.³⁵ Homosexual practice is the definition of so-called “risky sex”;

³⁴ See especially the extensive report in Lawrence S. Mayer and Paul R. McHugh, “Sexuality and Gender: Findings from the Biological, Psychological, and Social Sciences,” *The New Atlantis* 50 (2016). Read the executive summary at <http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/executive-summary-sexuality-and-gender>. Much of this report is collated and documented also in *Sexuality and Gender: A Companion to The New Atlantis Special Report* (Austin: Austin Institute for the Study of Family and Culture, 2017).

³⁵ E.g., the CDC reports, “Of the 38,739 new HIV diagnoses in the US and dependent areas in 2017, 27,000 (70%) were among adult and adolescent gay and bisexual men.” See “HIV and Gay and Bisexual Men,” at <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/group/msm/index.html>. In other words, homosexual men, less than 1 percent of the population, account for 70 percent of new HIV cases. The total number and percentages were virtually identical in 2018. See “HIV Surveillance Report,” at <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/statistics/overview/index.html>.

it is not just another healthy lifestyle that our fellow citizens should be encouraged to pursue. In addition, practicing homosexuals experience higher rates of partner violence and depression.³⁶ The promiscuity rates of homosexuals in supposedly committed relationships are radically higher than those in traditional heterosexual marriages.³⁷ This fact should not surprise, given that the sexual revolution in general, as the homosexual agenda in particular, is intended to counteract traditional notions of sexual restraint.³⁸

More could be added. In sum, there are good reasons for non-Christians to promote traditional sexual relationships and family structures and to oppose the normalization of any practice that undermines them. For disciples of Christ, for whom the witness of Scripture and of the historic Christian tradition is already sufficient, these reasons simply confirm the Christian sexual ethic.

Experience

Experience is not so much a source for doctrine and morals as a guide to which teachings to emphasize—as Randy Maddox puts it, experience helps us “discern what to *keep* teaching!”³⁹ But if experience as a category means something like personal or subjective experience (which Wesley decidedly did not mean when he invoked experience⁴⁰), then it is a most unreliable source indeed, especially when it comes to morality. A central affirmation of the Christian faith is that humans are corrupted and sinful. As such, our desires have been disordered and are in need of redemption from above. A little honest introspection confirms that most of us are highly skilled at justifying ourselves and our desires when possible, even when those desires are contrary to God’s moral will. As Hays declares, “Experience is a notoriously tricky guide: human beings are susceptible to all kinds of illusion and self-deception.”⁴¹ This tendency to

³⁶ E.g., see the CDC press release at https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2013/p0125_nisvs.html. See also *Sexuality and Gender*, 32.

³⁷ E.g., see Paul van de Ven, et al., “A Comparative Demographic and Sexual Profile of Older Homosexually Active Men,” *Journal of Sex Research* 34/4 (1997): 349–60. In sum, about half of homosexual men have had over 100 different sex partners.

³⁸ For more data and analysis of promiscuity rates, see Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 453–60.

³⁹ Randy L. Maddox, “The Enriching Role of Experience,” in Gunter, et al., *Wesley and the Quadrilateral*, 121.

⁴⁰ Maddox, “The Enriching Role of Experience,” 107–16.

⁴¹ Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 297.

self-deception is why experience is, at best, a confirming criterion that corroborates only the content revealed higher up the chain.

III. *Sola Experientia?*

On what basis, then, are some Christians now advocating homosexual marriage? If one aims to defend the permissibility of homosexual practice within the Christian faith, then Scripture and the Christian tradition, with their unequivocal opposition, are dead ends. Reason, incorporating biological and social science, is mostly unhelpful to the advocate. No Christian has ever reached the conclusion that homosexual practice is morally permissible simply by reading Scripture and Christian historical sources. No one was ever convinced, simply by thorough consideration of nature, that homosexuality is a fitting expression of the design and reflection of the natural order built into creation.

Instead, in supposedly Christian arguments that favor homosexuality, experience always reigns supreme. Luke Johnson, who rightly characterizes the witness of Scripture against homosexual practice as “straightforward,” goes on to say:

I think it important to state clearly that we do, in fact, reject the straightforward commands of Scripture, and appeal instead to another authority when we declare that same-sex unions can be holy and good. And what exactly is that authority? We appeal explicitly to the weight of our own experience and the experience thousands of others have witnessed to, which tells us that to claim our own sexual orientation is in fact to accept the way in which God has created us.⁴²

Johnson’s honesty is refreshing. For him, experience wins the day, superseding Scripture as well as tradition and reason. To be sure, Johnson contends that Scripture records instances of human experience trumping Scripture, and therefore, he would argue, the precedent for his hermeneutical move is set in Scripture.⁴³ Examples of this sort, however, are finally unconvincing and ultimately not analogous with homosexual practice.

⁴² Johnson, “Homosexuality and the Church.”

⁴³ E.g., the inclusion of Gentiles in the church is often cited. This is addressed in Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 460–66.

Unlike Christians in the past who have appealed to *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone) as their primary or even sole rule of faith and practice, some believers now make their appeal to *sola experientia* (experience alone) and pit it against Scripture and tradition.⁴⁴ If *sola experientia* is to be considered an acceptable path for assessing homosexual practice, then there is no reason the method should not be universalized. And if this mode of ethical reasoning were to become the norm for Christian morality, imagine the possibilities. It would not take much to convince men, who on average are more sexually permissive and promiscuous than women, that their sexual desires are all God-given and that they should, in the words of Johnson, “claim our sexual orientation” and “accept the way in which God has created us.” A moment’s reflection will reveal how disastrous it would be to lend credibility to moral reasoning of this sort. Whether the issue is homosexual practice or any other, whether the moral agent in question is oneself or someone else, Christians must learn to recognize the appeal to *sola experientia* and have the courage to call it what it is—a non-Christian attempt to justify one’s own desires, regardless of what Scripture and Christian tradition say.

It is no accident that some Christians have begun to question Scripture on homosexual practice just after the culture began to approve and celebrate the practice. To be sure, the influence of culture is good when culture reminds the church of what the Bible clearly teaches—for instance, that there is neither Jew nor Greek, but all are one in Christ. But when the dictates of culture are just as clearly contrary to Scripture, Christian tradition, and reason, faithful Christians must be aware of and resist the danger, not succumb to it.

In church fellowships, or at least in individual Christian congregations, these changes in sexual ethics should not be happening without proper grounding. Maybe the traditional sexual ethic does need to be scrutinized or even changed. Then advocates should make the case, from Christian sources, that it must be so. The change should not be made simply as a concession to the zeitgeist or without compelling arguments. People on each side of the issue

⁴⁴ Maddox, “The Enriching Role of Experience,” 107, quotes a letter to the *United Methodist Reporter* to this effect: “I’m tired of having my interpretations of Scripture dismissed simply because they aren’t orthodox. Everyone interprets Scripture from his or her experience, study and reason. Are we supposed to turn off our minds and let traditionalists think for us?”

ought to be open to being convinced. But, as it stands, there is no convincing biblical argument or, subordinate to that, a convincing argument from Christian tradition, reason, or natural law that would overturn the arguments from all those sources that uphold the traditional sexual ethic. Experience alone, cast in a supporting role and given its severe limitations, does not possess the authority necessary for such a change. And thus there is nothing besides the traditional ethic for experience to support or confirm or corroborate, except perhaps our own vice.