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Conclusions

Weaving through the various threads of this book is the concept of “moral logic.” At one level, this concept of moral logic is simple and uncontroversial: When interpreting scriptural commands or prohibitions, we must ask not only *what* is commanded or prohibited but *why*. The reason for asking why emerges when we attempt to apply the commands and prohibitions of Scripture in new and diverse contexts. It is only when we know *why* Scripture prohibits the charging of interest on loans to fellow Israelites that we can judge whether granting or receiving a home mortgage between Christians today is right or wrong (see Exod. 22:25; Lev. 25:36-37; Deut. 23:19-20; Ps. 15:5; Ezek. 18:8ff.). We need to understand *why* Paul says that nature teaches that it is disgraceful for a man to wear long hair (1 Cor. 11:14) if we are to make appropriate moral judgments about length of hair among men today, or even if we are to make sense of other biblical passages where some men were commanded *not* to cut their hair (Num. 6; Judg. 13:2-5; 1 Sam. 1:11).

Discerning the “moral logic” underpinning a command or prohibition involves uncovering the deeper values and commitments that give rise to the command or prohibition in the first place. Often, these underlying assumptions are stated explicitly. For example, the prohibition of murder in Genesis 9:6 bases the command not to shed the blood of another explicitly on the fact that “in his own image God made humankind.” At other points, however, discerning the underlying moral logic requires a broader exegetical exploration of the whole witness of Scripture, along with other ancient texts. Only in this way can the underlying rationale for any specific command or prohibition be interpreted with clarity and confidence. For example, chapter 4 of this book described an emerging “trajectory” regarding women in leadership that emerges from the canon as a whole, which helps to frame a wide diversity of perspectives on this issue in various biblical texts.

When we turn to those passages of Scripture that seem to prohibit or denigrate same-sex erotic relationships, however, Christians disagree about *why* these texts say what they do. Traditionalists believe that these prohibitions and negative portrayals are rooted in a fundamental vision of divinely intended gender complementarity, which is discerned in the differences in bodies and personalities between males and females. In this view, the “one-flesh” union spoken of in Genesis 2:24 can thus be constituted only by the joining of male and female, who bring to this union their complementary bodies and personalities.

By contrast, I have argued that the language of “one flesh” refers not to complementarity but to kinship. The relationship of kinship is not based on complementarity, but on similarity and mutual obligation. Kin are those who have something essential in common with each other, and who accept the obligation to help and support each other in distinctive ways. Moreover, nowhere in Scripture is the notion of anatomical or biological complementarity of male and female explicitly portrayed or discussed. The absence of confirming texts calls into question whether this vision of gender complementarity truly underlies the antipathy Scripture shows toward the same-sex erotic relationships it addresses.

So if gender complementarity is not the basic moral logic underlying Genesis 2:24, as well as those texts that denigrate same-sex erotic relationships, what is the underlying moral logic? The more detailed discussion of Romans 1 in the previous section of this book clearly shows the moral logic that shapes Paul’s rejection of the same-sex erotic activity he discusses, using his own vocabulary as the reference point. He characterizes such behavior as lustful, as impure, as shameful, and as a distortion of that convergence of individual disposition, social convention, and biological order understood in the ancient world as “nature.”

Traditionalists do not contest the claim that Paul portrays same-sex erotic relationships in Romans 1 as lustful, impure, shameful, and unnatural. What they also claim, however, is that at the root of the lust, shame, and impurity of such behavior is a core problem: its “unnaturalness,” conceived as the violation of divinely intended gender complementarity. This, they argue, is what is assumed or taken for granted by Paul when he writes, even if he

explicitly only uses the more general and (as we have seen in chapter 11) somewhat ambiguous category of “contrary to nature.” It is this “unnaturalness,” they argue, that makes these desires inappropriate (and therefore lustful), that makes these behaviors a violation of proper boundaries (and therefore impure) and results in a failure to live out one’s true identity (and therefore shameful).

Taking a very different perspective, I have argued that the same-sex eroticism Paul derides in Romans 1 reflects an expression of excessive and self-centered desire — and is thus *lustful*. For Paul, lust is determined not so much by the object of desire but by the excess of desire. When Paul describes this behavior as *impurity*, he is speaking not so much about the violation of boundaries but about an inward problem — a heart that seeks its own benefit and power. When Paul says that this behavior is *shameful*, he focuses attention on the violation of male honor specifically, as well as gender roles more generally. Finally, when Paul speaks of this behavior as *unnatural*, he focuses attention not on the violation of gender complementarity but on the ways in which this behavior violates assumptions taken for granted throughout the culture of that day regarding what is natural for men and women as individuals, as members of society, and as part of the physical world. For Paul, all of these dispositions are expressive of a fundamentally disordered state arising from humanity’s proclivity to idolatry and its failure to worship the one true God. I argue that, at the same time, we cannot assume that all committed same-sex relationships are *necessarily* prone to the errors and problems that Paul narrates in Romans 1. There is thus room to evaluate these relationships using broader biblical understandings of sexuality and intimate faithfulness, quite apart from a doctrinal commitment to “gender complementarity.”

Note that both sides of this debate agree on important issues. Both sides of the debate, at least as it has been presented in this book, agree that the behavior that Paul speaks of in Romans 1 is rightly rejected and identified as an expression of sinfulness and idolatry, even if we disagree about the reasons Paul has for rejecting the behavior. For traditionalists, Paul rejects the behavior because it violates divinely intended gender complementarity inherent in the creation narrative. I contend, however, that the same-sex eroticism Paul envisions is either an expression of the monstrous ego of the Roman imperial house, or an expression of prostitution, child abuse, or promiscuity, an absence of mutuality, a neglect of the obligation to procreate, or a failure of persons to express with their bodies what they say with the rest of their lives. Such persons “receive back the due penalty for their error,” in self-evident forms of judgment, showing the obvious consequences of their misbehavior (Rom. 1:27). In either case, both sides of the debate can agree that Paul is correct in what he says here. In other words, both sides accept the authority of the text in what it is directly teaching. This is an important point that should not be passed over lightly. Neither side of the debate denies the authority and truthfulness of Scripture. The point of difference centers on the underlying moral logic that shapes the text, and thus its applicability to contemporary life.

Consequently, the two sides disagree on how Paul’s discussion (and the rest of the biblical witness) speaks to our contemporary experience, particularly the experience of gay and lesbian couples in committed relationships. Traditionalists locate the center of the problem with same-sex erotic relationships in their violation of the gender complementarity that was intended at creation. For them, such relationships can *never* be regarded as appropriate, regardless of whether same-sex committed relationships may reflect disciplined desire, whether they arise from a self-giving and loving heart, whether there is a desire to honor the partner, whether commitments are deep and abiding, or whether there is evidence of an intention to live out a form of life that is in harmony with one’s self, with others, and with the natural world. Even if such relationships appear to lead to a flourishing life rather than to the self-evident forms of judgment that Paul alludes to somewhat cryptically in Romans 1:27, they are unacceptable to the traditionalists. None of these admirable qualities are sufficient to overcome the core problem: these relationships violate divinely intended gender complementarity.

By contrast, I have argued that gender complementarity is never directly taught in Scripture in such generic terms. To the extent that language that might suggest gender complementarity appears at all in Scripture, it is a way of speaking about one of several more specific things:

- the hierarchy of the genders (in which case we also see a movement in Scripture away from such hierarchical understandings);
- other culturally defined role differences between men and women (which change quite radically from one culture to another — even within Scripture itself);
- or else as an expression of the procreative purpose of sexuality (which, I have argued, is an important,

though not essential, meaning of sexual relations).

Over against this entire line of interpretation focusing on gender complementarity, I have argued that at the heart of the Bible's understanding of the meaning of sexual relationships lies the one-flesh kinship bond. This bond is formed when the desire for self-gratification (*eros*) comes to recognize that one's own gratification is only possible in the context of loving self-giving to the other (*agapē*). Hence, longing turns to loving, as intimacy unfolds into long-term kinship bonds of service, commitment, and mutual care. Therefore, a fundamental rejection of promiscuity lies at the heart of the Bible's vision for sex, and it also undergirds Paul's rejection of the lewd behavior he describes in Romans 1:24-27. In other words, one can locate Paul's entire discussion in quite a different world of discourse, identifying quite different underlying values and assumptions that shape his rhetoric.

How is one to navigate such an impasse? At one level, the challenge is an exegetical one. Which vision of the heart and significance of the "one-flesh" bond can be more fully documented in the biblical witness and related ancient sources? I argue that the exegetical evidence tilts strongly toward "one flesh" as a loving kinship bond, rather than as an expression of gender complementarity.

But the debate is not only an exegetical one. Elements of personal experience factor largely into this discussion as well, but often remain implicit and hidden. I would suggest that most heterosexual persons who have fallen in love, married, and lived for any period of time with someone of the opposite sex know deep in their hearts something of the mystery that stands at the heart of such a relationship. That mystery is characterized by a deep and profound interaction of similarity and difference — in other words, *complementarity*. Many men and women think differently, solve problems differently, tend to experience the world differently. Those differences enrich many heterosexual marriages in countless ways, both great and small. It is enormously tempting simply to assume that this is what the Bible has in mind when it speaks of the "one-flesh" union in Genesis 2:24. It is also tempting, in this light, to wonder whether same-sex intimate relationships must necessarily lack something that many heterosexual marriages find of enormous beauty and value.

But two important cautionary points must be raised here. The first has to do with changes that have taken place over the centuries in the institution of marriage itself. It is undoubtedly true that many modern marriages experience and value intimacy and complementarity much more highly than was true in the ancient world. Stephanie Coontz's history of marriage has shown that modern notions of love and intimacy in marriage arose for the first time in the nineteenth century.¹ Prior to that, marriage was driven centrally by economic concerns, a desire for social advancement, and the need for social alliances. If some marriages also found deep love, complementarity, and intimacy, that was a welcome bonus, but it was not of the essence of the relationship. Therefore, we must be cautious about reading our experience back into the biblical texts, as wonderful and as valuable as our experience may be. This is not to diminish the significance of the experience of complementarity in intimate relationships; it is simply to note that this kind of experience was probably not broadly shared by the original writers and readers of the biblical text. We should not assume that these categories or experiences are assumed or implicit in the text. The biblical writers were far more pragmatic about marriage than we are. (Moreover, the escalating divorce rate in most modern cultures suggests that modern expectations of intimacy and complementarity may not always be easy to fulfill.)

A second qualifier on the contemporary experience of complementarity is even more important. We cannot clearly distinguish, even in modern experiences of intimate complementarity, between those patterns of similarity and difference that are inherent to gender (understood biologically) and those patterns that are simply a function of the *otherness* of one's life partner. Indeed, many heterosexual marriages take on very different role divisions and patterns, depending on the partners' strengths and dispositions. In one marriage, for example, the husband cleans the house, and the wife keeps the books; in another, the wife sets the social agenda, but the husband is the better listener. Role differentiation abounds, but it doesn't always line up along stereotypically gendered lines, and it often has little to do with the biological differences between men and women. I believe that this is why so many discussions about "gender complementarity" in Scripture stay at such a general and nonspecific level. In modern society, we have intense experiences of complementarity, and these are clearly related to our individual gendered identities. Yet it is hard to press further and to characterize these in ways that might be more universally applicable. Our bodily desires tell us that our partner's gender matters, and the patterns of similarities and differences with our partner shape the relationship in profound ways. However, we cannot specify in more detail exactly those patterns of similarities and differences that apply normatively, not only to us as individuals, but to everyone. Indeed, when we look at a wide

range of patterns, structures, and styles of marriage across different times and cultures, such universal commonalities seem very elusive.

This raises a profound and important question. Perhaps what heterosexuals are experiencing in marriage is not essentially a complementarity of gender understood biologically, but simply a form of *otherness* that usually takes shape along gendered lines, even if those gendered lines may shift significantly from one context to the next. Indeed, my own limited conversations with gay and lesbian couples who have lived with each other over extended periods of time leads me to believe that intimacy and complementarity, desire and otherness, play very significant roles in gay and lesbian committed relationships as well as in heterosexual ones. Otherness is an unavoidable aspect of our humanness, and as our relationships move toward deeper intimacy, the profound mingling of similarity and difference becomes more, not less, pronounced. Surely, our closest nonsexual friendships with others of the same sex share the same deep characteristics: points of deep commonality along with points of otherness and difference that enrich and enliven the friendship. In other words, one need not relinquish the deep value of complementarity — nor its gendered manifestations — in offering greater approval to gay and lesbian committed relationships. Instead, one may simply recognize that this mingling of similarity and difference, fueled by desire and longing, may take different but equally meaningful forms in gay and lesbian relationships, alongside its wonderful heterosexual expressions. One need not relinquish complementarity; one must only loosen its essential link to a hard-wired understanding of gender in order to account for a wide range of experience of longing, love, and intimacy amidst difference — shaped in long-term bonds of love and faithfulness.

In short, I argue that the Bible neither assumes nor teaches a normative understanding of gender complementarity. The Bible regards procreative complementarity as an important — though not essential — feature of one-flesh unions; and it assumes in some passages a hierarchical relationship between the genders. But the larger trajectory of Scripture as a whole moves away from this assumption. The Bible also looks at gender issues through the ancient lens of an honor-shame culture; but again, Scripture does not absolutize that honor-shame framework. Indeed, there are many passages in the Bible that deconstruct or reframe ancient assumptions regarding honor and shame. My conclusion — that the Bible does not teach a normative gender complementarity — should thus not be regarded as surprising. Furthermore, there is nothing of such a notion whatsoever in the creedal tradition of the church: we find nothing of gender complementarity in the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, or any other of the ancient ecumenical creeds. We also find no mention of gender complementarity in the great confessional documents of the Reformation: the Augsburg Confession, the Westminster Confession of Faith,² the Second Helvetic Confession, or the Belgic Confession. Nor do we find gender complementarity taught in any of the great catechisms of the Reformation. While different gender roles have been taken for granted throughout the life of the church, the formulation of specific understandings of normative gender complementarity has never emerged in the church's creeds or confessions. Such a doctrine is not taught in Scripture, considered in its entirety, and has never been part of normative Christian teaching.

To the extent that the Bible views same-sex erotic relationships, then, it does so through lenses other than a normative understanding of biological gender complementarity. As the previous chapters have demonstrated, when we broadly peruse early Jewish and Christian literature (and particularly Paul's letter to the Romans), we see four forms of moral logic that form the central framework for objections against same-sex erotic relationships in the ancient world:

- First, Paul viewed these relationships as an expression of excessive lust that is not content with heterosexual relationships but is driven to increasingly exotic forms of stimulation, leading to the loss of purity of heart. The notion that someone might not be significantly attracted to persons of the opposite sex — but to persons of the same sex — is never even considered by early Jewish or Christian writers.
- Second, he viewed these relationships as shameful, particularly because they treated a man as a woman, inherently degrading the passive partner, and more generally because they violated understood gender roles in the conventions of the ancient world.
- Third, because same-sex relationships are nonprocreative, Paul regarded these relationships as selfish and socially irresponsible, neglecting the obligation of procreation.
- Finally, Paul regarded these relationships as “unnatural” because they violated ancient society's understanding of the natural order, the commonly accepted synthesis of understanding one's individual

disposition, larger social values, and the surrounding physical world.

To be sure, the church should continue to stand against those sinful dispositions that motivate the Bible's concerns in sexual ethics, including its discussion in Romans 1. This includes, first, a rejection of promiscuity of all kinds and a deep valuing of committed love that cultivates and flourishes in lifelong relationships. Such love disciplines and moderates our natural desires, which all too readily become merely self-serving. The church should continue to stand against lust. The church should also continue to reject all sexual relationships that are marked by domination, control, lack of consent, and lack of mutuality, including especially relationships marked by pederasty. The church should thus continue to insist that all sexual relationships be mutual and consensual — that they must honor both persons involved. Finally, the church should stand against the modern assumption that sexual relationships are merely “private” matters between consenting adults and that wider concerns about social order and the larger social and environmental context are irrelevant to sexual ethics. Instead, the church should urge the cultivation of a robust vision of sexual ethics that leads to a flourishing of life for all, marked by the convergence of individual disposition, social order, and harmony with the world around us.

But I have also argued that there are significant reasons why Christians today should reconsider whether the strictures against the same-sex relationships known in the ancient world should also apply to contemporary committed and intimate same-sex relationships. To explore this thesis more closely, we need to turn again to rest of the “seven passages,” those few biblical texts that are commonly understood to refer explicitly to same-sex erotic relationships. We need to summarize what these passages say, why they say it, and how their concerns reflect or diverge from the experience of gay and lesbian Christians in committed relationships today.

Reviewing the Rest of the “Seven Passages”

Sodom and Gomorrah and the Levite's Concubine

The first two passages are “texts of terror” that share a similar shape and focus. Both the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 and the story of the Levite's concubine in Judges 19 show the same pattern. A foreigner spends the night in the house of a local host. The men of the town surround the house, and they demand that the visitor be brought out; their intention is to rape him. In both cases, the owner of the home offers a woman from the house to the locals as a substitute victim. The Bible narration presents both stories as evidence of extreme degradation and corruption. Both stories regard a man being raped by other men as an expression of violence and extreme degradation; both assume that the rape of female members of the household would be preferable to the rape of the male visitors, which underscores the deep violation of male honor that is assumed in both stories to be attached to the rape of a male by another male.

All Christians today will agree that sexual violence is a profound violation of human dignity. All Christians can also agree, I believe, that these stories reflect a limited moral perspective: that is, they assume that the rape of a female is less offensive than the rape of a male. Christians may also agree that these two stories can help illuminate the antipathy shown elsewhere in the Bible to sexual relations between men, given the fact that these two stories associate this behavior with humiliation, violence, and inhospitality toward strangers — expressed in its most extreme form. But precisely because of this extremity, Christians should also recognize that these stories are of no more value in assessing lifelong, loving, committed same-sex relationships than stories of heterosexual rape can be used to morally evaluate loving heterosexual relationships. The failure to distinguish between consensual, committed, and loving sexual relationships and violent, coercive relationships represents a serious case of moral myopia. I do not wish to provide moral justification for all consensual sexual relationships; but I do wish to state clearly that *all* nonconsensual, violent, or coercive sexual relationships are always morally wrong, because they are inherently incapable of deepening the relational kinship bonds intended by God to be established and nurtured by sexual relations. To attempt to derive further moral guidance from these stories is to fail to recognize the focus of their moral concern. As numerous commentators have noted, the canonical treatment of these stories elsewhere in the Bible does not focus on the offense of male-male sex, but rather on violence and inhospitality. In one case (Jude 7), Sodom and Gomorrah also serve as an example of “unnatural lust” because of the desire of the residents for the

angelic visitors, though the language used in Jude cannot be understood to focus on same-sex eroticism. In short, while the stories of Sodom and Gomorrah and the Levite's concubine graphically portray the horror of rape, they simply do not speak to committed same-sex intimate relationships.

The Levitical Prohibitions of “Lying with a Male as with a Woman” (Lev. 18:22; 20:13)

As I noted in chapter 9, which deals with purity and impurity, there are broad forms of moral logic that shape many of the purity laws in general terms, including these texts from Leviticus. The purity laws attempt, in general, to replicate the order of the original creation, where there was “a place for everything, and everything was in its place.” They tend toward preserving what was perceived as the order of creation, and avoiding inappropriate mixtures. These concerns covered food to be eaten, clothes to be worn, and many other things, including the boundaries of appropriate sexual relationships. In this context, I also focused in chapter 9 on the generative processes whereby life comes into the world. Purity laws seek to keep these processes carefully regulated. Emissions of blood and semen were regarded as especially problematic. One can see how this concern for a man “lying with a man as with a woman” would raise concerns in the context of both of these broad forms of moral logic.

However, chapter 9 also explores the larger canonical movement in which these general concerns about purity need to be viewed. There I argue that we see an overall canonical movement regarding purity laws —

- away from defining purity *externally* toward defining purity in terms of the motives and dispositions of the *heart and will*;
- away from *defensiveness* and separateness toward *confidence* and engagement;
- away from a *backward* look toward the old creation, and shifting to a *forward* look toward the new creation.

This larger canonical context is important in evaluating these passages, and it certainly challenges any attempt to apply these texts to contemporary life without qualification. But it will also be helpful to discern some further nuances in these passages that address same-sex relationships in particular. We need to explore the more immediate context of these passages in order to discern the underlying forms of moral logic that shape them in a more specific way, beyond the general characteristics of purity laws already explored in chapter 9.

The first thing to note is that the immediate contexts of both of these prohibitions against “lying with a male as with a woman” are closely linked to two other problems: injunctions against the practices of idolatry and the urgency of avoiding the practices of surrounding nations. Immediately before Leviticus 18:22 (“You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination”), Leviticus 18:21 declares: “You shall not give any of your offspring to sacrifice them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.” Immediately following this command against “lying with a male as with a woman,” we see another summary injunction: “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.” We see the same pattern in Leviticus 20, with injunctions against idolatrous practice in verses 2-7; we also find a call to practices distinct from the surrounding nations in verses 22-23. Similarly, the characterization of male-male sex as an “abomination” in both of these passages (Hebrew *toēvah*) makes use of a strong word of abhorrence that is closely linked to idolatrous practices in at least thirty-eight other passages in Scripture (Deut. 7:25-36; 12:31; 13:14; 17:4; 18:9, 12; 20:18; 23:18; 27:15; 32:16; 1 Kings 14:24; 2 Kings 16:3; 21:2, 11; 23:13; 28:3; 33:2; 34:33; 36:8, 14; Ezra 9:1, 11, 13; Jer. 2:7; 7:10; 16:18; 32:35; 44:4; Ezek. 6:9; 7:20; 8:9; 14:6; 16:2; 16:36, 47; 18:12; 44:7; Mal. 2:11).

There is evidence linking same-sex eroticism, particularly among males, to cultic prostitution and other idolatrous practices in the ancient world generally; there is no literary evidence for consensual male-male sexual relations in the land of Israel and surrounding regions specifically, apart from that cultic context.³ This linkage with temple or cultic prostitution also helps to explain the death penalty for male-male sex in Leviticus 20:13: it would make no sense to apply such a penalty in the context of gang rape portrayed in the stories of Sodom and Gomorrah or of the Levite's concubine. In those cases of rape, the death penalty for the victim would be monstrous. So we can say with reasonable confidence that the activity envisioned in the Levitical prohibitions is assumed to be consensual, and that it is probably envisioned to take place in cultic contexts, with clear linkages to idolatry and other religious practices

foreign to the nation of Israel. As such, the prohibition of these practices is part of Israel's call to be both separate from other nations and holy to the Lord.

Yet many traditionalists, while perhaps acknowledging some significance to these cultic connections, insist that the moral logic underlying this prohibition is not exhausted merely by its cultic connections. Instead, they insist that the wording of the prohibition itself points to a different form of moral logic that shapes — at an even deeper level — the Levitical prohibitions. By speaking of “lying with a male as with a woman,” these passages focus attention on the failure to act out one's proper gender role in sexual relationships. Thus, traditionalists argue, the concern is not merely with the avoidance of idolatry and cultic prostitution (if that is a concern at all). Rather, there is a deeper concern: to conduct oneself sexually in light of the purposes God has for one's sexual identity revealed in creation — in keeping with one's gender. They argue that this concern focusing on gender is not culturally specific, but rather rooted in biological gender. Indeed, many traditionalists have argued that Paul's use of the Greek word *arsenokoitēs* in reference to same-sex behavior in passages such as 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 is rooted in the language of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, thus confirming the cross-cultural relevance of the Levitical prohibitions for Christian ethics in a way that focuses specifically on the violation of biologically shaped gender roles.⁴

This attempt to link Paul's Greek vocabulary directly to the Levitical texts, however, is speculative and lacks external confirming evidence. But there is also a deeper reason to be suspicious of this reading, which assumes that the moral logic of the Levitical prohibitions is based on upholding biological gender distinctions: that is, there is no parallel injunction against same-sex relations between women in Leviticus. Of course, one might note that female-female sexual relations are rarely discussed in the ancient world generally, and there is no evidence linking such sexual behavior directly to idolatrous or cultic practices. So the absence of any prohibition of female-female sex in Leviticus makes sense from the perspective of a moral logic that focuses primarily on opposition to cultic practices. However, if the concern is not with cultic practices but with the violation of gender, why are women not mentioned? This is particularly noteworthy in light of the explicit prohibition of sex with animals — both for women and for men — in these same chapters of Leviticus (18:23; 20:15-16). There is even scantier evidence of bestiality in the ancient world than there is of same-sex erotic relationships; yet the rarity of the case does not prevent the author of Leviticus from forbidding both male and female sex with animals. Why, then, is there no analogous prohibition of a “woman lying with a female as with a man”? If violations of biological gender roles constituted the primary moral logic underlying the prohibition, one would expect the corresponding injunction against female same-sex eroticism as well. But it is absent.

The absence of any concern about female-female sex in Leviticus suggests that it is not gender as an abstract or biological concept that these prohibitions have in mind; instead, to the extent that these passages are concerned with gender at all (beyond a concern with pagan cultic practices), they have a more specific focus that we can also see in the stories of Sodom and Gomorrah and the Levite's concubine — that is, the preservation of male *honor*. From the perspective of Leviticus, to “lie with a male as with a woman” is to reduce a male to the status of a female, which inherently degrades him and fails to honor his divinely given status as a male. For a male to willingly accept such degradation makes him equally culpable in the Leviticus author's mind. Sex between females is not mentioned simply because there is no such degradation operative in these cases. This suggests that, in addition to a concern with cultic practices, the Levitical prohibitions should be read in light of assumptions regarding honor and shame that were shared throughout the ancient world. Male-male sex is thus linked with the behavior of alien nations, with idolatry and cultic prostitution, and with the degradation of distinctively male honor. It may also be the case that, since the ancient world assumed that men held the “seed” for future generations, that male-male sex was rejected because of its nonprocreative character, and that female-female sex was left out because there was no “seed” involved. When all these considerations are taken together, Leviticus concludes that “lying with a male as with a woman” is an “abomination” to both God and Israelite sensibilities, and its presence could not be tolerated within Israel.

But how should one respond to gay and lesbian couples who want to commit themselves to each other in lifelong, socially sanctioned relationships, as faithful Christians who seek to honor each other? In such a context, Leviticus's concerns about idolatry, violations of male honor, and the like seem distinctly out of place. We can appreciate the way the ancient writer is seeking to preserve the integrity of Israelite life in Leviticus without assuming that the same concerns are relevant to life today. This is particularly true in light of the larger canonical movement evident in the Bible's treatment of purity laws in the New Testament (outlined in chapter 9 above). In short, the religious, purity,

procreative, and honor-shame contexts that form the underlying moral logic of the Levitical prohibitions, understandable and coherent as they may be in their own context, simply do not apply to contemporary committed Christian gay and lesbian relationships.⁵

Finally, it is also worth noting that this analysis applies quite apart from the more general problem that Christians no longer regard much of the Levitical law as applying to the church today. The overall agenda established by the book of Leviticus concerning purity was radically transformed by the gospel of Christ. It is simply inadequate, from a Christian perspective, to attempt to build an ethic based on the prohibitions of Leviticus alone. This is important material to reflect on, but it cannot stand at the center of a responsible Christian moral position on committed gay or lesbian relationships.

References to Same-Sex Erotic Behavior in the New Testament Vice Lists (1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10)

When we turn to the New Testament, we find two references to male same-sex eroticism; these are found in longer catalogs of misbehavior known as “vice lists.” The most important thing to realize about these texts is that the reference is found in multiple words, not just one. Neither list refers to same-sex erotic behavior with a single word — such as the English word “homosexual.” Instead, the lists use multiple words to reflect widely accepted roles that were part of male same-sex erotic behavior in the ancient world. For example, 1 Corinthians 6:9 uses two words: *malakoi* (literally meaning “soft,” or “effeminate” ones), and *arsenokoitai* (literally “man-bedders”). The latter term is particularly problematic because there is no attested usage of this word preceding the New Testament documents — that is, in extrabiblical literature — that might provide additional information about its range of meaning. But the most important thing to recognize is that there are two words, not just one. Most scholars recognize that the presence of these two words reflects widespread assumptions throughout the ancient world about male-male homosexual activity: almost all the documents discussing male same-sex eroticism assume a distinction between active older men (commonly referred to in Greek as *erastai*) and passive younger males (commonly referred to as *erōmenoi*) — in other words, the practice of pederasty. The *malakoi* (“softies”) are the younger, passive *erōmenoi*, and the *arsenokoitai* (“man-bedders”) are the older, active *erastai*.⁶

The vice list in 1 Timothy 1:10 includes three interrelated terms in reference to male-male erotic activity: *pornoi* (translated by the NRSV as “fornicators,” but can also mean “male prostitutes”), *arsenokoitai* (“man-bedders,” the same term that appears in 1 Cor. 6:9), and *andropodistai* (“slave-dealers,” or “kidnappers”). Many scholars believe that the three terms belong together in this list: that is, we see kidnappers or slave dealers (*andropodistai*) acting as “pimps” for their captured and castrated boys (the *pornoi*, or male prostitutes), servicing the *arsenokoitai*, the men who make use of these boy prostitutes. Scholars have noted that the Roman Empire tried on several occasions to pass laws banning this practice — but with minimal success.⁷

The assumption of the practice of pederasty, or male prostitution, in both of these lists complicates their applicability to contemporary experience. The NIV translation, for example, unhelpfully blurs this cultural gap by rendering the Greek word *arsenokoitai*, which in its original context refers to the active partners in pederastic relationships, as “homosexuals.” In so doing, the NIV shifts the meaning of the word to the notion of sexual orientation, which is completely lacking in the ancient world among Jews and Christians. But when we take the original social context of these vice lists seriously, we again recognize a gap between what these vice lists are rejecting and what is happening in committed same-sex relationships today. In the ancient world, these pederastic relationships were transitory rather than permanent and committed; they were driven by the desires of the older partner rather than being mutual and shared; and they were often characterized by abuse, slavery, and prostitution. One can readily agree that all sexual relationships that have these characteristics are rightly rejected by Christians, and one can still question whether committed gay and lesbian relationships should be painted with the same brush of rejection.

This becomes particularly important when one recognizes the rhetorical function of vice lists in the ancient world generally — and in the New Testament in particular. Vice lists are not the place where fine moral distinctions are on display. Rather, they single out stereotypically abhorrent behavior that is widely regarded in the community with

condemnation, ridicule, or rejection. Hence they are of limited use in the morally more nuanced conversation taking place in the church today about long-term committed same-sex relationships.

The Application of the “Seven Passages” to Committed Same-Sex Relationships Today

This overview of the entire range of explicit biblical texts addressing same-sex eroticism suggests that the forms of moral logic that undergird this wider range of texts are similar to the forms of moral logic that we saw in the more in-depth analysis of Romans 1:24-27 in the previous chapters of this book. In the stories of Sodom and Gomorrah and of the Levite’s concubine we have seen concerns about the violence of rape and a deep concern about preserving male honor, even at the expense of subjecting women to rape in the place of males. In Leviticus, in addition to broader purity concerns, we have seen concerns with avoiding cultic behavior, maintaining Israel’s distinctness as a nation, preserving the integrity of procreation, and preserving male honor. In the vice lists we have seen concerns with pederasty, prostitution, abuse, sexual slavery, and lust. But in none of these passages have we seen a primary or central concern with upholding anatomical or biological gender complementarity.

Some of these concerns clearly transcend their particular cultural setting and continue to serve as forms of moral logic that should shape Christian moral frameworks today. This is particularly true with concerns about rape and other forms of sexual violence and coercion, concerns about pederasty, sexual slavery, and other forms of nonmutual, short-term sexual behaviors, as well as those concerns that focus on excessive lust and prostitution. Even today, any forms of same-sex eroticism that exhibit these characteristics should be rejected by Christians, just as behavior in heterosexual relationships that exhibits these characteristics should be rejected. In this sense, these texts continue to have a normative impact on Christian moral reflection.

However, there are other aspects of the moral logic undergirding these texts that are more culture-specific, and they require a cross-cultural perspective when we attempt to apply them in contemporary contexts. The dynamics of honor and shame vary dramatically from one culture to another, and those forms of sexual behavior that are regarded as inherently degrading may also shift dramatically from one culture to another. The call to honor each other persists in all cultures, but its particular behavioral manifestations may vary from one culture to another.

Similarly, we have seen how understandings of gender, including masculine and feminine identity, shift dramatically from one culture to another. In Paul’s day, it was assumed that “nature” itself taught that it was degrading for a man to wear long hair (1 Cor. 11:14). Assumptions about masculine and feminine identities — and the roles and behaviors appropriate to those identities — have undergone massive shifts, and the vast majority of Western Christians recognize these variations as different cultural forms rather than as deviations from a divine norm. Attempts to establish universal norms regarding gender identity have never been part of the core of Christian teaching, insofar as that core has been identified by the great creeds and confessions of the church.

Finally, we have seen how assumptions regarding the centrality of procreation in sexual relations exercise a powerful role in many of these passages. At the same time, the modern development of contraception has underscored what we see elsewhere in Scripture: a central way of thinking about sexuality that is based not on procreation but on the one-flesh kinship bond established by sexual relations. This unitive meaning of marriage and sexuality represents the essential center and heart of biblical teaching on the meaning of marriage and sexuality.

To the extent that some of these more culturally variable forms of moral logic inform the Bible’s disposition toward same-sex intimacy in those passages where it is discussed, a cross-cultural analysis is required. Not everything that the biblical writers assume or take for granted is to be considered normative for Christians today, particularly when these assumptions are based on culturally variable norms that Scripture itself engages in a variety of ways. For example, the church of the nineteenth century had to reread the biblical texts on slavery in a more deep and penetrating way. Even the biblical writers, particularly in the New Testament, had simply assumed, without question, that the institution of slavery existed and would continue to exist. So much of the advice offered by the New Testament had to do with “humanizing” the master-slave relationship. But during the nineteenth century the church began to discern deeper and more pervasive principles from the biblical witness, which called into question whether the institution of slavery itself should be supported by Christians. In light of the fresh experience of the church in the nineteenth century, Christians grew in their ability to discern deeper and more abiding forms of moral logic that shape the biblical narrative at its deepest levels.

Might committed same-sex relationships present a similar kind of challenge to the church today? This study, along with the reflection of many other Christians, raises an important question: Should the moral logic that informs the condemnation of same-sex erotic activity in the “seven passages” apply categorically to all committed same-sex relationships today? The evidence suggests that there are no forms of moral logic underpinning these passages that clearly and unequivocally forbid all contemporary forms of committed same-sex intimate relationships. This is particularly clear when these contemporary relationships are not lustful or dishonoring to one’s partner, are marked positively by moderated and disciplined desire, and when intimacy in these relationships contributes to the establishment of lifelong bonds of kinship, care, and mutual concern. Such same-sex intimate relationships were never considered by the biblical writers, which leaves us with the need to discern more clearly how the church should respond to these relationships today.

Recognizing this gap between the biblical discussions of same-sex eroticism and the experience of committed gay and lesbian couples today is vitally important. If the core moral logic underpinning the biblical witness is a concern for anatomical or biological gender complementarity, as traditionalists argue, then there can be no gap. Since biology has not changed, the same moral logic applies today. But if there are various forms of moral logic at work, some of them culturally specific and rooted in the ancient world, then the exploration of this gap between the ancient and modern worlds is necessary and urgent. To recognize this gap is not to say that the Bible has nothing to say to contemporary life, but to note that one must discern more particularly the reasons undergirding scriptural commands and prohibitions — and the cross-cultural relevance of those reasons.

Obviously, much more could be said — indeed, much more needs to be said — on the question of the church’s approach to committed same-sex relationships today. Different churches struggle with a variety of more detailed questions about the legal definitions of marriage and the church’s role in marriage vis-à-vis the state, about ordination and the recognition of gay and lesbian persons as Christian leaders, and about how to balance grace and law in dealing with gay and lesbian persons. This book has not directly addressed these more detailed contemporary questions. Moreover, this book has said nothing about some of the more specific and unique issues arising in the lives of bisexual and transgendered persons today.

My focus in this book has been more specifically on the interpretation of Scripture in relationship to these questions. I am convinced that the church needs to move away from an interpretation of Scripture that assumes that the Bible teaches a normative form of biological or anatomical gender complementarity. In its place I have offered a more complex moral vision, one that looks at sexuality through the central category of the exclusive one-flesh kinship bond and sees the core meaning of sexuality expressed in

- a delight in the other;
- a deep desire for gratification and union;
- the attendant call to honor and serve the other in committed bonds of loving mutuality;
- and a fruitful vision of committed love that overflows in many ways — in procreation, adoption, service to the community, and hospitality to others.

This central meaning of our sexuality is hedged and bounded by warnings against excessive and self-centered desire and against behaviors that shame or degrade the other. This vision of a redeemed sexuality offers glimpses of a still deeper dance of sameness and otherness in the new creation, where “they neither marry nor are given in marriage.” That final vision is not the negation of our deepest experiences of intimacy and communion; rather, it is their culmination and fulfillment — in ways we cannot yet fully imagine.

I believe that the church is only beginning to glimpse the ways in which those outside the heterosexual mainstream might participate in the complex journey toward that final destiny. Much of what we have assumed in the past regarding scriptural teaching on same-sex relationships will need to be reconsidered. There are many questions along the way on that journey. But if this book is helpful in providing a framework for biblical interpretation that guides the church on that journey, I will be most deeply gratified.

Summing Up

- One must read biblical commands and prohibitions in terms of their underlying forms of moral logic. The

moral logic underpinning the negative portrayal of same-sex eroticism in Scripture does not directly address committed, loving, consecrated same-sex relationships today.

- Although Scripture does not teach a normative form of gender complementarity, the experience of *complementarity* itself may be helpful and important in both heterosexual and same-sex relationships, even if complementarity is not construed along hard-wired gender lines.
- The stories of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19) and the Levite's concubine (Judg. 19) focus on the horror of rape and the ancient abhorrence of the violation of male honor in rape. As such, they help to explain Scripture's negative stance toward the types of same-sex eroticism the Bible addresses, but they do not directly address the case of committed and loving same-sex relationships.
- The prohibitions in Leviticus against "lying with a male as with a woman" (18:22; 20:13) make sense in an ancient context, where there were concerns about purity, pagan cults, the distinctiveness of Israel as a nation, violations of male honor, and anxieties concerning procreative processes. However, these prohibitions do not speak directly to committed and consecrated same-sex relationships. Nor are they based on a form of moral logic grounded in biology-based gender complementarity.
- The references to same-sex eroticism found in two New Testament vice lists (1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Tim. 1:10) focus attention on the ancient practice of pederasty — the use of boy prostitutes in male-male sex. As such, they also do not address committed and mutual same-sex relationships today.
- There are many more questions to be explored, but this book has attempted to focus on core issues involving the interpretation of Scripture, as the church continues to wrestle with a multitude of questions that arise outside the heterosexual mainstream.