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Homosexuality and the Bible: A Real Debate

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In *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views*, professors Dan O. Via and Robert A. J. Gagnon present opposing arguments with full force. Via, now Professor Emeritus of New Testament at Duke University Divinity School, is well known as a revisionist scholar of the New Testament. Robert Gagnon, Associate Professor of New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, has established himself as the leading scholarly defender of the church’s historic understanding of homosexuality as revealed in the Bible. These two scholars meet head to head in a confrontation that, as a rare exception, produces as much light as heat.

Via presents his case first, arguing for a nontraditional view of homosexuality that “seeks a more open and accepting position” than the traditional understanding of homosexual acts as inherently sinful. Via promises to develop a theological and biblical rationale for this revisionist stance.

As he sets out his case, he begins with an affirmation of biblical authority. “I take the Bible to be the highest authority for Christians in theological and ethical matters, although I recognize also the legitimacy of tradition, reason, and experience. Authority does not mean perfection or inerrancy or complete consistency. The authoritative norm is the one that you finally listen to in a situation of competing norms.” In other words, when Via pledges to take the Bible as “the highest authority for Christians in theological and ethical matters” he does not mean that the Bible has the last say—much less that it is the inerrant and infallible Word of God. He identifies his understanding of biblical authority as the “experiential or existential view” that accepts the Bible as authoritative “only in those parts that are existentially engaging and compelling—that give grounding and meaning to existence.” In other words, he will decide what should and should not be taken as authoritative in the biblical text.

As Via sets the stage for his argument, he points to changing views of homosexuality in science and society. Ultimately, he argues that these changed understandings must alter our view of the Bible and its teachings concerning sexuality.

Turning to the Bible itself, Via points to “the few biblical texts that mention homosexuality.” When he looks to the Old Testament, he sees the issue as uncleanness rather than sinfulness. In other words, the Old Testament writers were more concerned with ritual purity than with identifying specific acts as sin. Via’s emphasis on the purity rules of the Old Testament allows him to dismiss any application of these texts to the New Testament church. “In some,” he argues, “the unclean in uncleanness or impurity is disorder, confusion, the mixing of what should not be mixed—a lack of the wholeness, unity and integrity that contradicts what makes God God—holiness.” Via does not deny that the Old Testament presents a comprehensively negative view of homosexuality; he simply argues that we should see the Old Testament concern about homosexuality not in terms of sinfulness, but of uncleanness. Thus, he questions whether Christians should

“accept a rule that is justified in the way that the Old Testament justifies the condemnation of homosexuality?”

Confronting the New Testament, Via quickly argues that “the new testament annuls, delegitimizes, and invalidates in principle the very category of impurity or uncleanness.” Pointing to Romans 14:14, Via asserts that Paul denies that nothing is unclean in itself. With this move, Via simply invalidates the Old Testament. “When there is theological or ethical conflict within the canon, conscientious Christians simply have to decide to which side they will give priority. I choose Paul and the Gospels over Leviticus as having the more profound understanding of the human situation.”

But—Via does not see Paul as having a very profound understanding of the human situation at all. Using a convoluted argument now common to pro-homosexual advocates, Via calmly undermines Paul’s authority. “Paul seems to have agreed with the generally held belief of the ancient world that there is only one sexual nature, what we would call a heterosexual nature. Therefore, what he is condemning as contrary to nature is homosexual acts by people with the heterosexual nature.” Thus, Via accuses Paul of being woefully inadequate as a guide to human sexuality. Since Paul knows nothing of our modern notion of “sexual orientation,” he cannot be trusted to know what he is talking about when he condemns homosexuality in every form with vigorous force. Instead, Via argues that we should employ the modern concept or idea of sexual orientation and “draw ethical consequences from it.”

We should refuse to relativize the biblical text when it fails to conform to modern expectations. Furthermore, we should appreciate Via’s honesty in affirming that, according to the Bible, “homosexual practice is forbidden in all circumstances.” Indeed, Via accepts that the Bible presents a unanimous opposition to homosexual practice. Nevertheless, he insists that this does not mean that the church must base its understanding on this clear and undeniable biblical trajectory. “There is, however,” he argues, “no a priori reason why a univocal position cannot be overridden if the countervailing biblical, theological, and cultural considerations have sufficient strength, as I believe they do.”

Answering Via, Robert Gagnon begins his argument by asserting that dispute over homosexual practice is “the greatest crisis facing the church today.” Why? Gagnon explains that the Bible’s “intense opposition” to homosexuality in every form, “acutely raises the question of Scripture’s place in the life of the church.” Furthermore, homosexuality “involves the lives of our loved ones in significant ways.” While activists on one side want to end what they see as cultural opposition against homosexuals, others “do not want church and society to promote, and coerce our children to accept, an unnatural behavior that jeopardizes the standing of its practitioners before God and substantially increases the risk of health and relational problems.”

Introducing his argument, Gagnon takes the reader through an exercise in biblical interpretation, dismissing false claims against the Bible and placing the argument within its biblical context. He grounds his argument in a creation ethic and then moves to the biblical text, arguing that both the Old and the New Testaments present a unanimous condemnation of homosexuality in every dimension. Gagnon counters Via’s view that the Old Testament prohibitions against homosexuality are rooted in purity codes rather than an understanding of the inherent sinfulness of the acts. Instead, Gagnon argues that homosexual behavior is, according to the Old Testament, “a first-tier sexual offense.” As he summarizes, “Male-male intercourse puts a male in the category of female so far as sexual intercourse is concerned. Because sexual intercourse is about sexual completion it requires complementary sexual others. Anatomy and physiology provide two transparent clues to a broad range of discomplementary features in homoerotic unions.” Gagnon’s candor is rare in many modern debates about homosexuality, and his directness is to be appreciated.

Moving through the New Testament, Gagnon argues that Paul appropriated the Old Testament’s understanding of sexual immorality. When Paul refers to sexual immorality in general, and same-sex behavior in particular, as uncleanness, “he was not reinterpreting Old Testament impurity language as sin. Rather, he was using purity language in line with much of his scriptural heritage.”

Gagnon also dismisses the modern “myth of a sexually tolerant Jesus.” While liberals customarily claim that Jesus was free from the hang-ups about sex that marked so many of his ancient and modern disciples, Gagnon dismisses this with full force. “One of the most remarkable things about Jesus’ mission was that in the context of an aggressive outreach to the lost he deepened God’s demand for sexual purity. Instead of advocating that divorce and remarriage be as easy for women as for men, he declared that ‘whoever divorces his wife’ both ‘commits adultery’ when he marries another and becomes partly responsible for his wife’s adultery when she remarries; moreover, that a man who ‘marries a divorced woman commits adultery.’” Thus, “Jesus was virtually without peer in his radical insistence on limiting the number of lifetime sex partners to one.”

When liberal activists argue that Jesus would not have denied sexual fulfillment to homosexuals who were, after all, trapped in their own “sexual orientation,” Gagnon responds that Jesus taught that sexual immorality was so dangerous that it would be better to cut off the offending body part than to have the whole person thrown into hell [Matthew 5:29-30]. As Gagnon summarizes: “Most pro-homosex advocates feel certain that Jesus would never have denied a sexual relationship to two exclusive homosexuals in love with one another. In view of Jesus’ unprecedented narrowing of the range of legitimate sexual intercourse, it is hard to think of someone for whom the consideration of ‘sexual starvation’ as a basis for violating a biblical sex norm would have had less impact.”

Looking particularly at the New Testament texts on homosexuality, Gagnon asserts that homosexuality “dishonors God’s creation of complementary gendered beings by attempting to reconstitute a binary sexual whole from a single-sex union.”

Gagnon also presents a pastoral approach to the challenge of homosexuality, urging the church to speak the truth in love. Though some insist that we cannot genuinely love those we confront with their sin, Gagnon argues: “However, doing both is precisely what the gospel is all about. It is the work of Jesus in the world. If the church cannot fulfill that mandate, it should pack its bags. It ceases to be the church, the sphere of Christ’s lordship, in any meaningful sense.”

True compassion means that we must minister to those struggling with homosexuality, seeking “to alleviate suffering caused by unfulfilled desire.” Nevertheless, Gagnon reminds the church that it can never violate God’s commands. Why? “For true life is measured not by getting what we want but by acquiescing to the indwelling Spirit. God has something higher and better in store for us than the satisfaction of fleshly sexual impulses.”

The book concludes with rejoinders from both Via and Gagnon, as each responds to the other’s argument. Via counters Gagnon’s argument by asserting that “his accumulation of biblical texts condemning homosexual practice is irrelevant to my argument since I agree that Scripture gives no explicit approval to same-sex intercourse. I maintain, however, that the absolute prohibition can be overridden, regardless of how many times it is stated, for there are good reasons to override it.”

Gagnon responds by lamenting Via’s absolute rejection of absolute rules. “Via is an absolutist about no absolutes,” Gagnon laments. “He insists that the church must be able to override all rules in one or more contexts. Nothing is ‘intrinsically immoral’.” As Gagnon acknowledges, he suspects that even Dan Via cannot live with this principle in full operation. If so, no sexual act can be categorically considered as immoral.

Homosexuality in the Bible is a landmark achievement in the church’s debate over homosexuality. Rarely have two minds met in such an orderly, respectful, and utterly helpful debate. This book is an indispensable guide to the controversy over homosexuality now threatening to tear mainline Protestantism asunder. More importantly, it is also a powerful witness to the two absolutely irreconcilable views of biblical authority that drive opposing parties in debates over homosexuality and the church. This book should be mandatory reading for every thinking Christian.

