

## Going in the Wrong Direction: A Response to David Atkinson

by Robert A J Gagnon

A leader in the renewal movement of the Episcopal Church has informed me that a one-sided book on the homosexuality issue may have been sent to all Episcopal (and Anglican?) bishops as 'preparation' for the upcoming 2008 Lambeth Conference. The book is entitled *Other Voices, Other Worlds: The Global Church Speaks Out on Homosexuality* (edited by Terry Brown and published in 2006 by Church Publishing in New York). In the leader's words, sending out the book may have been part of a broader strategy of the radical left to 'persuade those who go [to Lambeth] that [the left's stance on homosexual practice is] reasonable and centrist and not way on the left.' The book contains a 16-page essay by a scholar-cleric by the name of David Atkinson entitled, 'The Church of England and Homosexuality: How Did We Get Here? Where Do We Go Now?' (pp298-313). Since Atkinson's article contains a brief critique of my first book, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Abingdon, 2001),<sup>1</sup> the leader mentioned above asked me to comment on the critique. I did more than I originally planned on doing, offering not only a response to Atkinson's comments on my work but also a response to the article as a whole.

Atkinson is an interesting case in that he is an evangelical (or at least used to be) who once wrote a book against homosexual practice<sup>2</sup> but since the mid-1990s has adopted a position that at least seeks to accommodate committed homosexual unions. He was formerly a Fellow and Lecturer in Theology at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, where he taught Christian ethics and psychology of religion, as well as a visiting lecturer in pastoral theology at Wycliffe Hall. Over a decade ago he published some Old Testament commentaries with a pastoral bent for Intervarsity Press's series *The Bible Speaks*. Since 2001 he has been Suffragan Bishop of Thetford in the Diocese of Norwich (England).<sup>3</sup>

### **I. In what sense does Genesis 1:27 integrate human male-female sexual pairing into creation in God's image?**

Atkinson insists that Genesis 1:27, 'in the image of God he created him [or: it, i.e. the human], male and female he created them', does not bring together in any significant way creation in God's image and male-female sexual pairing. He cites from my first book where I say, with respect to Genesis 1:27, that 'the fullness of God's image comes together in the union of male and female in marriage' (*Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 58). Such a remark, Atkinson claims, 'does not give much space for single people - or for our unmarried Lord himself (p308).

Yet Atkinson misses the context for my remark, which intimates an implicit prefacing comment, 'so far as sexual relations are concerned'. In the only other instances in the Old Testament where the precise phrase 'male and female' (*zākār ûnēqēbâ*) appears the reference to sexual pairing is unmistakable (Genesis 5:2; 6:19; 7:3, 9, 16)<sup>4</sup>, just as it is in the immediate context for Genesis 1:27 (i.e. Genesis 1:28: 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the

earth and subdue it'.) It is legitimate to speak of the two sexes as complementary, and so incomplete, representations of God's image *in the restricted sphere of sexuality* without denying the broader integrity of an unmarried person's creation in God's image.

Viewing male and female as incomplete expressions of God's image in the sexual sphere is just another way of stating the elementary point that women bring out dimensions of God's image lacking in men and vice versa. While male and female each bear the stamp of God's image on their sexuality and have independent integrity as such, they do so as angular<sup>5</sup> and complementary expressions of that image. Similarly, one can speak of God's image as more fully represented in a community of believers than in any single individual in isolation without denying that the individual too is made in God's image.

The procreative element is one, but not the only, complementary feature of 'male and female' (anatomy and psychology are two others). Doubtless, the Priestly Writer(s) in the context of ancient Israel would not have viewed an infertile male-female union with the degree of abhorrence associated in ancient Israel with a man-male union (cf Leviticus 18:22; 20:13). Atkinson oddly chastises me for 'reduc[ing the divine image] to procreative capacity' (ibid.), which is an indication that he has not read carefully even this one page of my book (p58; to say nothing of the rest of nearly 500 pages). In that very page I stress that male-female complementarity exists *independently* of whether any procreation actually takes place. I asked: 'Is the sexual complementarity of men and women, then, contingent on procreation?' and answer: 'God's intent for human sexuality is imbedded in the material creation of gendered beings, irrespective of the globe's population' (p58).

When I later discuss whether Paul's indictment of homosexual practice was primarily due to its nonprocreative character, I conclude that this was *not* the case and that Paul, who showed relatively little concern for issues of procreation, had a broader view of male-female complementarity. Male-female procreative capacity functioned for Paul more as a heuristic clue that two persons of the same sex are not appropriate sexual counterparts than as the main reason for rejecting homosexual behavior (pp270-73). In the similar way, we don't reject incestuous practice between committed adults *only* when it might lead to procreative problems. If it were otherwise, we would be compelled to accept all *homosexual* adult-committed incest, since same-sex pairings between close blood relations could not result in birth abnormalities. The procreative problems that arise from incest function as a clue that close blood relations are too much alike on an embodied, structural level to justify adult incestuous relations.

In recognizing a connection in Genesis 1:27 between God's image and the sexual pair 'male and female', it is not a question of reducing the 'image of God' to sexual differentiation, much less procreation, but rather of recognizing that in Genesis 1:27 *human sexual differentiation and pairing are uniquely integrated into God's image*. The fact that God's image is also stamped on human sexuality makes it possible for humans to enhance or efface that image through their sexual behavior in a way that is not possible for animals - which is why I never held my dear 'cockapoo' dog Cocoa<sup>6</sup> to the same sexual standards to which the people of God are held. The alternative is to argue, falsely, that sexuality is wholly disconnected from God's image, thereby making it possible for one to engage in every kind of sexual misbehavior without doing any harm to the imprint of God's image<sup>7</sup>. To sever a theology of sexuality from

bodily structures is to depart from orthodox Christian faith and move in the direction of Gnosticism.

It is axiomatic and undeniable that a male or a female is only one half of complete sexual whole since, obviously, there are two primary sexes<sup>8</sup>. The logic of a male-female sexual bond is that the two primary sexual halves are united into a single sexual whole. The logic of a same-sex sexual bond is that each partner is only half his or her own sex, which unites to form a whole male or a whole female. Such a union dishonors the integrity and completeness of one's maleness, if male, or femaleness, if female.

Both Jesus and Paul viewed the single state as a non-moral deficit for the sake of advancing God's kingdom but not as a sin (Matthew 19:10-12; 1 Corinthians 7:7-8, 25-40). However, they also both recognized that active entrance into a structurally incongruous, male-male or female-female sexual union *is* a moral violation that threatens to mar the image of God stamped on human sexuality<sup>9</sup>. Jesus clearly predicated his restriction of two persons in a sexual bond, whether serially (polygamy) or concurrently (divorce and remarriage), on the sexually dimorphic character or 'twoness' of the sexes, 'male and female he made them' (Mark 10:6-9). Similarly, the Essene community at Qumran rejected 'taking two wives in their lives' because 'the foundation of creation is "male and female he created them" [Genesis 1:27]' and because 'those who entered (Noah's) ark went in two by two into the ark [Genesis 7:9]' (CD 4.20-5.1). Paul clearly echoed Genesis 1:27 when he indicted female and male homosexual practice in Romans 1:26-27. He made eight points of correspondence, in a similar tripartite order, between his remarks in 1:23, 26-27 and the text of Genesis 1:26-27: (1) *human, image, likeness*; (2) *birds, cattle, reptiles*; (3) *male, female*. For Paul those who suppressed the truth about God transparent 'since the creation of the world' were more likely to suppress the truth about the complementarity of the sexes, 'male and female', transparent in 'nature'<sup>10</sup>.

So Atkinson misses the point when he argues that linking the sexual pairing of 'male and female' to the stamp of God's image does injustice to singleness and to Jesus' role as image-bearer. Being single does not mar the imprint of God's image on one's sexual being because it is not an attempt at completing one's sex or gender through merger with a sexual same, as though one were only half one's sex. Same-sex intercourse does mar that image insofar as it treats a sexual same as a sexual complement, rejecting the fact that God created 'male and female' as sexual counterparts, not 'male and male' and 'female and female'.

## **II. Would Paul have had in view male-female 'Anatomical Complementarity' when indicting homosexual practice in Romans 1:24-27?**

Atkinson rejects my argument that Paul had 'anatomical complementarity' in mind, in part, when he rejected homosexual practice as 'contrary to nature'. According to Atkinson, 'nowhere does St Paul talk about anatomy and Gagnon's argument at this point is derived not from exegesis but from his own assumption of what is "natural"' (p308). Once again Atkinson shows that he has not read my work well. That Paul had such a thing in view is beyond debate, for two main reasons.

First, some such notion clearly existed among some Greco-Roman moralists of the period, as even supporters of homosexual unions have argued. Nature arguments that suggest male-female complementarity appear already in Plato's *Laws* (636B-D, 836C-E, 837B-C, 838E,

840D-E, 841D-E). These types of arguments become more pronounced in the Roman Imperial Age. As classicist Thomas K Hubbard, author/editor of the definitive sourcebook on Greco-Roman homosexuality, rightly states: 'Basic to the heterosexual position [against homosexual practice in the Greco-Roman world of the first few centuries CE] is the characteristic Stoic appeal to the providence of Nature, which has matched and fitted the sexes to each other.'<sup>11</sup> Similarly, classicist William R Schoedel states in an important article entitled 'Same-Sex Eros: Paul and the Greco-Roman Tradition' that ancient writers 'who appeal to nature against same-sex eros find it convenient to concentrate on the more or less obvious uses of the orifices of the body to suggest the proper channel for the more diffused sexual impulses of the body.'<sup>12</sup> An example of this kind of thinking can be found in the second-century physician Soranus (or his later 'translator' Caelius Aurelianus), who referred to *molles*, 'soft men' eager for penetration (i.e. the Latin equivalent for the term *malakoi* in 1 Corinthians 6:9), as those who 'subjugated to obscene uses parts not so intended' and disregarded 'the places of our body which divine providence destined for definite functions' (*On Chronic Diseases* 4.9.131). Even Craig A Williams in his book *Roman Homosexuality* admits that 'some kind of argument from "design" seems to lurk in the background of Cicero's, Seneca's, and Musonius' claims: the penis is "designed" to penetrate the vagina, the vagina is "designed" to be penetrated by the penis.'<sup>13</sup>

Second, it is evident from the context preceding Romans 1:24-27 that Paul had male-female anatomical complementarity at least partly in view. For Paul makes a parallel observation in Romans 1:19-20 about the attributes of God being 'transparent ... *from the creation of the world*, ... being mentally apprehended *by means of the things made*' (pp256-58). Just as pagans ought to be able to deduce from observation of the grandeur and order of material creation that the Creator cannot be captured in images made in the form of humans or, worse, animals, so too pagans ought to be able to deduce from compatible male-female material structures that God's will for human sexual pairing does not embrace homosexual unions.

So it is not a question of me arbitrarily foisting my assumptions about 'anatomical complementarity' onto the text of Romans 1:24-27 but rather of me reading Romans 1:24-27 in its historical and literary contexts - contexts that Atkinson has ignored.

Atkinson should also have recognized that my argument about complementarity is not restricted to anatomy. 'Gender complementarity between male and female is expressed not only in basic sexual anatomy but also in a more holistic sense' that includes physiology and psychology - the whole package of what it means to be male and what it means to be female (pp139, 487). Anatomy is merely the initial and most obvious indicator of sexual complementarity between men and women. At the same time it is both part of and emblematic of a broader array of compatible features. When homosexual persons claim to be attracted exclusively to members of the same sex and not at all, or barely so, to members of the other sex, are they attracted only to the anatomy of their own sex? No, they are attracted to a broad array of features that they identify exclusively with their own sex - which, strangely, they already possess. It is problematic to be sexually aroused by the distinctive features of one's own sex. We have here either sexual narcissism (if one perceives attraction for what one already has) or, more commonly, sexual self-deception (if one perceives that one can fill in gaps in one's own maleness or femaleness by merging sexually with someone of one's own sex). Approving homosexual relationships, committed or otherwise, merely

regularizes the misperception that one is only half one's own sex instead of half of a sexual spectrum that consists of male and female.

### **III. Does the "Context" of Love and Commitment Override All Absolute Sexual Prohibitions?**

Atkinson criticizes my work for allegedly not taking into account the 'context' of love and commitment when evaluating the moral character of homosexual relationships. According to Atkinson:

In his concentration on anatomy [cf however my point above about a more holistic framing of complementarity] and on the morality of sexual actions without reference to their context in a relationship, Gagnon gives no acknowledgement of the fact that, to some extent at least, context determines the moral value of actions. This is universally accepted in the heterosexual world, where married sexual love is recognized as wholly different in meaning from rape. One of my primary difficulties with Gagnon's lengthy thesis is that the entire focus is on the morality of actions separated from any consideration of the contexts that give them meaning. To abstract behaviour from the whole context of a person's motivation, relationships and moral vision fails to do justice to the biblical emphasis on 'the heart'.... It leads to a morality of rules, rather than to a personal morality of allegiance to the covenant Lord.

With this argument Atkinson, probably unknowingly, does away with every categorical prohibition, including those against adult-committed incest and adult-committed polyamory (three or more concurrent sexual partners) - prohibitions that, incidentally, depend on the validity of a male-female prerequisite for sexual bonds for their own validity.

#### **(a) Polyamory**

As we noted above, Jesus himself clearly predicated his view of marital monogamy and indissolubility on the foundation of Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 (Mark 10:6-9; Matthew 19:4-6). These texts have only one thing in common: the fact that an acceptable sexual bond before God entails as its most foundational prerequisite - after, of course, the assumption of an intra-human bond - 'male and female' (Genesis 1:27) or, defined for age, 'a man' and 'his woman' (Genesis 2:24). Jesus argued that the 'twoness' of the sexes ordained by God at creation was the foundation for limiting the number of persons in a sexual bond to two, whether concurrently (as against polygamy) or serially (as against repetitive divorce and remarriage). This is at one and the same time an argument from Scripture (an appeal to God's intention at creation) and an argument from nature (inferences from the existence of two primary sexes).

It is axiomatic that the foundation (a two-sexes prerequisite) must be more important than the regulation predicated on it (a monogamy principle). If the Western church is not inclined to tolerate faithful 'plural' unions among the laity, much less among its ordained leaders, it should be even less inclined to tolerate violations of the foundation upon which monogamy is based. In recognition of the illogic of holding the line on a two-partner limitation after eliminating its two-sexes foundation, some 'homosexualist' quarters of the church have already begun contemplating 'polyamory awareness' and 'polyfidelity' (true, for example, of

the homosexual Episcopal New Testament scholar, L William Countryman; of the American Academy of Religion's 'Gay Men's Issues in Religion' group, of the Unitarian Universalist Church, and the 'gay' American denomination known as the Metropolitan Community Churches).<sup>14</sup>

## (b) Incest

The principle by which same-sex intercourse is rejected is also the principle by which incest, even of an adult and consensual sort, is rejected. Incest is wrong because, as Leviticus 18:6 states, it involves sexual intercourse with 'the flesh of one's own flesh.' In other words, it involves an attempted sexual merger with someone who is already too much of a formal or structural same on a familial level. The degree of formal or structural sameness is felt even more keenly in the case of homosexual practice, only now on the level of sex or gender, because sex or gender is a more integral component of sexual relations, and more foundationally defines it, than is and does the degree of blood relatedness. So the prohibition of incest can be, and probably was, *analogically derived* from the more foundational prohibition of same-sex intercourse.

It is important to note here that I am not making merely a 'slippery slope' argument, though the kinds of arguments used by Atkinson to justify committed homosexual unions supply both the slope and the grease. The argument that I am making here is that if Atkinson finds even committed incestuous or polyamorous unions to be offensive, he should find committed homosexual unions even more offensive since the latter constitute a violation of a more foundational prerequisite.

It matters little that Atkinson almost certainly does not condone committed incestuous or polyamorous sexual unions. All that matters is that the arguments which he employs to justify homosexual unions - bowing to the 'moral context' of love, commitment, and intentional longevity and criticizing a 'morality of rules' - equally justify (or more so) both adult-committed incestuous relationships and faithful polyamorous relationships. For in neither type of sexual bond can Atkinson, or anyone else, demonstrate absolute, scientifically measurable harm for all participants in all circumstances. How is Atkinson's categorical rejection of such unions any less a focus 'on the morality of actions separated from any consideration of the contexts that give them meaning'? Does he not 'fail to do justice to the biblical emphasis on "the heart"'?

By Atkinson's own rationale, Paul should not have rejected out of hand the instance of sexual relations at Corinth between a man and his stepmother (1 Corinthians 5) and, extrapolating further, any case between a man and his biological mother or sister or adult child, without first inquiring whether the participants intended the relationship in question to be consensual, committed, long-term, loving, and faithful. Atkinson's argument forbids God and God's church from taking any consistent action against a union that on formal or structural grounds is non-complementary. Everything must be decided on a case by case basis. Even adult-child bonds would have to be reconsidered since no scientific study has ever demonstrated *absolute measurable* harm to children in such relationships. Indeed, most studies show that a sizable percentage of adults who in their childhood experienced sexual relations with an adult are asymptomatic for discernable harm.

Contrary to what Atkinson argues, there are obviously formal or structural prerequisites for valid sexual bonds that transcend, or must be taken into account prior to, any consideration regarding the affective (loving, committed) quality of the proposed sexual bond. Sexual love is not merely a more intense form of generic love. To introduce sexual love into a relationship of non-erotic intimacy with a person of the same sex, or a close blood relation, or two or more persons concurrently, or a child is not to apply more rigorously Jesus' love commandment but rather to violate that commandment.

There is much in Atkinson's article that obscures the distinction between erotic love and non-erotic love. He talks about the depth of 'friendship' in the same-sex covenant relationships between David and Jonathan on the one hand and between Jesus and the beloved disciple on the other (p306), failing to recognize that the introduction of erotic love would have rendered the relationships scandalous and abhorrent to the narrators (the same applies to the covenant relationship between Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi, which would also have had the added feature of incest). As it is, the narrators saw nothing erotic in these relationships<sup>15</sup>. Atkinson calls on the church to see in some homosexual relationships a reflection of the Trinity's 'exclusive relationship' marked by love, faithfulness, companionship, stability, pleasure, and creativity (pp304-6). In making such an argument, he ignores special requirements for sexual relationships that exceed these generic attributes. He seems not to notice that these generic attributes, while necessary criteria for valid sexual bonds, are still insufficient.

Jesus calls on his followers to love everyone. But if his followers have sex with more than one other person in their lifetime they violate his love commandment. What parents who intimately love their children do not know the distinction between erotic love and non-erotic love? Scripture affirms strongly non-erotic, intimate relationships between members of the same sex but categorically rejects, in the strongest terms possible, sexual relations between the same. In blurring the distinction between the two types of love Atkinson does a disservice to the witness of Scripture and even to basic principles of morality that many unbelievers recognize as valid.

#### **IV. Other False Steps by Atkinson**

There are many other bad arguments used by Atkinson in his article, which do not directly reference my work but which still require a response.

##### **(a) The 'gift of celibacy' argument**

Like many supporters of homosexual unions, Atkinson argues, based on 1 Corinthians 7:9 ('better to marry than to burn'; cf 7:7), that it is 'better for homosexual people ... to order their desires within a covenanted stable and faithful friendship of love than to be tempted into a life of promiscuity' (pp309-10). This is akin to arguing that it is better for polysexual people, that is, those who find monogamy extraordinarily difficult, to order their desires within a covenanted stable and faithful polyamorous bond than to be tempted into a life of promiscuity.

Atkinson's argument fails to recognize that Paul, like Jesus in Matthew 19:11, never intended the point about a celibacy gift to cancel out structural prerequisites for sexual bonds prescribed by God. Both Jesus and Paul operated on the premise that, so long as one could

not find a partner who met the prerequisites for marriage, one could assume God's empowerment to chastity in singleness. Scripture provides a conditional opportunity for sexual intimacy, not an opportunity by right of innate passions. Marriage was never the *only* provision made by God to keep humans from being alone.

If one cannot find sexual satisfaction in an other-sex marital bond, this does not entitle one to circumvent the prerequisites to marriage on the pretext of avoiding *porneia* (sexual immorality), as if God's commands regarding sexual behavior had to give way to any 'ordered' relationships as determined by the range of innate human sexual urges. This is clear enough in Jesus' take on 'born eunuchs' in Matthew 19:12 (which may have included men with a sexual desire for men rather than for women, figures whom Jesus presumed would have no sexual relations) and his revocation of polygamy and remarriage even for polyamorous males (Mark 10:6-9). One ought not to avoid one form of sexual immorality (specifically, unmarried fornication) by committing what Scripture views as an even worse form of sexual immorality (specifically, homosexual practice).

### **(b) The exploitation, orientation, and misogyny arguments**

Atkinson declares that 'the Lambeth Resolution 1.10, like Gagnon, supposes that it is a straightforward matter to move from texts of Scripture to questions of contemporary homosexual practice without acknowledgement of the complexities and compromises of living in the world as it is' (p309). This is a remarkable statement in view of the fact that I devote almost 150 pages in my first book alone to discussing the seven main hermeneutical arguments that cite such 'complexities and compromises' as a basis for discounting the biblical witness (pp341-485). I give far more attention to considering these arguments than does Atkinson or anyone else for that matter - and am still adding new material.

For example, as regards *an exploitation argument*, I have recently completed for future publication a lengthy chapter in a book on the evidence for the conceptualization and awareness of committed homosexual relationships in the Greco-Roman world, a chapter that builds considerably on my previous work<sup>16</sup>. In Romans 1:26-27, Paul's reference to a nature argument, his indictment of lesbian intercourse, the broad wording of his indictment of all same-sex intercourse, and his allusion to the mutual gratification of the participants are all strong indicators that Paul intended his indictment of homosexual practice to include any and every form, irrespective of degree of commitment and love (much like his attitude to incestuous bonds).

As rebuttal to *an orientation argument*, I have already discussed at length the existence of theories in the ancient world that posit some degree of congenital influence for at least some forms of homosexual attraction<sup>17</sup>. As Hubbard notes, 'Homosexuality in this era [viz of the early imperial age of Rome] may have ceased to be merely another practice of personal pleasure and began to be viewed as an essential and central category of personal identity, exclusive of and antithetical to heterosexual orientation.'<sup>18</sup>

We know of some Greco-Roman moralists who, even taking into account the possibility of loving relationships and congenital influences, still rejected homosexual unions absolutely. What is the possibility, then, that Paul, operating out of a Jewish context far more hostile to all forms of homosexual practice than any other cultures known in the ancient world, might

have approved of committed homosexual unions between homosexually oriented persons, had he only known about the existence of such?

Most homosexualist scholars who know the material about the ancient world recognize that the exploitation and orientation arguments are false steps. For example, the homosexual scholar Louis Crompton admits in his massive work, *Homosexuality and Civilization*, the following:

According to [one] interpretation, Paul's words were not directed at "bona fide" homosexuals in committed relationships. But such a reading, however well-intentioned, seems strained and unhistorical. Nowhere does Paul or any other Jewish writer of this period imply the least acceptance of same-sex relations under any circumstance. The idea that homosexuals might be redeemed by mutual devotion would have been wholly foreign to Paul or any other Jew or early Christian.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, the lesbian New Testament scholar Bernadette Brooten has argued:

Boswell . . . argued that . . . "The early Christian church does not appear to have opposed homosexual behavior per se." The sources on female homoeroticism that I present in this book run absolutely counter to [this conclusion]....

Paul could have believed that *tribades* [the active female partners in a female homosexual bond], the ancient *kinaidoi* [the passive male partners in a male homosexual bond], and other sexually unorthodox persons were born that way and yet still condemn them as unnatural and shameful. . . . I see Paul as condemning all forms of homoeroticism as the unnatural acts of people who had turned away from God.<sup>20</sup>

Few people today, myself included, would claim that homosexual desire is easily eliminated or even likely to be all but eliminated in most cases. So what? The degree of intensity and persistence with which particular desires are experienced is not relevant to ascertaining the morality of a given behavior. Polysexual impulses - sexual desires for more than one person - are common to humanity, especially to males. They cannot be easily discarded or eliminated. Nor can pedosexual desires, as any mental health clinician who has worked with pedophiles would attest. Other behaviors that are not normally linked to 'orientations' would not be validated even if there were strong biological influences, such as adult incest (i.e. an incest orientation would not justify adult incest). As regards moral concerns, Paul in Romans 7:7-25 describes sin as an impulse running through the members of the human body, passed on by an ancestor, and never entirely within human control. Innateness in Paul's thinking is the usual mark of sin - not surprisingly given his view of universal sin. Even homosexualist scientists recognize the moral vacuity of an argument predicated on the innateness of urges:

Despite common assertions to the contrary, evidence for biological causation does not have clear moral, legal, or policy consequences. To assume that it does logically requires the belief that some behavior is non-biologically caused. We believe that this assumption is irrational because ... all behavioral differences will on some level be attributable to differences in brain structure or process. Thus,

no clear conclusions about the morality of a behavior can be made from the mere fact of biological causation, because all behavior is biologically caused.... Any genes found to be involved in determining sexual orientation will likely only confer a predisposition rather than definitively cause homosexuality or heterosexuality.<sup>21</sup>

If biological influences impact to some degree all behaviors, then any impact that they have on homosexual behavior must be deemed morally irrelevant.

Atkinson's occasional use of *a misogyny argument* (pp302, 309) - the Bible's opposition to homosexual practice can be traced, at least in the first instance, to a demeaning view of women and a desire to maintain hierarchical distinctions in sexual relations - fails on many counts. First, in Greco-Roman debates about the superiority of male-male love or male-female love, proponents of male-female love are generally much less misogynistic than the proponents of male-male love. The former tend to have a higher valuation of women as suitable life-mates for men. Misogyny is more a hallmark of advocates for male homosexuality in antiquity than it is of advocates for heterosexuality. Second, even in the Greco-Roman world absolute nature arguments that had little to do with misogyny were sometimes used to reject homosexual behavior. Third, since the most intense opposition in the ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman Mediterranean basin appeared in ancient Israel, early Judaism, and early Christianity advocates of the misogyny theory would have to presuppose that the ancient Jews and Christians were the biggest misogynists of their day - a patently absurd conclusion. Fourth, the more pronounced affirmation of women's roles in early Christianity did not bring with it any lessening in the intensity of opposition of homosexual practice. To the contrary, it only made someone like Paul be more explicit about the implicit opposition to lesbianism in the Old Testament.

### **(c) The grace argument**

Atkinson insists that the Lambeth Resolution 'gives little place for grace.' This is an odd remark in view of the message that Paul received from God when he pleaded with God to remove his 'thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to batter me.'<sup>22</sup> God answered with a 'no'. If we adopted Atkinson's understanding of grace, we would have to conclude that there was no good news or grace in God's response. But, on the contrary, God insisted: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is being perfected<sup>23</sup> in weakness' (12:7-9). This remarkable statement defines grace not as Atkinson defines it - permission to avoid hard circumstances and difficult demands - but rather as empowerment from God to endure a 'no' from God to one's own request for deliverance. The good news is that God's grace is not only 'sufficient' even in difficult circumstances but also 'fully actualized' in such, when believers endure with thanksgiving for God's bounty.

Just as the greatest demonstration of God's power came in Jesus' greatest moment of weakness (1 Corinthians 1:18-25), so too for believers it is the endurance of difficult times, not immediate deliverance from them or avoidance of them, that constitutes the supreme moment of God's power. 'So I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I think well of<sup>24</sup> weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong' (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). Similarly Paul could tell the Philippians: 'I have learned in the circumstances I find

myself to be self-sufficient,' whether in need or in abundance, 'initiated' into the mystery that 'I can do all things in/through (*en*) the one who empowers me' (4:11-13). Even near-death experiences serve the purpose of teaching us to 'rely not on ourselves but on the God who raises the dead' (2 Corinthians 1:9).

There is no denying that a two-sexes prerequisite for sexual relationships makes a demand that is keenly felt by a subset of the total population. At the same time all rules create special burdens for a particular part of a population. For example, a rule against multiple-partner sexual bonds or against adultery creates a special burden on persons with an intense polysexual orientation; a rule against adult-child sex creates a special burden on people with a pedosexual orientation; and a rule against covetousness and theft creates a special burden on the poor.

Moreover, obedience to such rules is not without benefits. In the case of refraining from homosexual practice, one avoids dishonoring the sexual self that God created as wholly male or wholly female, since homosexual unions effectively treat the participants sexually as only half their own sex. One also avoids the high risk of contracting a life-threatening STI (if male) and a likelihood of persistent relational failures with their attendant risks for mental health (problematic in both male and female homosexual bonds, but especially the latter).

The pastor who out of a desire to be 'pastoral' gives his blessing to someone with persistent homosexual attractions to engage in homosexual practice has unwittingly interfered with God's special efforts at shaping Christ in the latter and at increasing the latter's reliance on God's love. Worse still, without having the power to act as Judge to acquit, such a pastor has put that individual at risk of not inheriting the kingdom of God, if Scripture is to be believed (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). The church simply does not have the right to change God's foundational requirements for holy living embedded consistently in Scripture and then guarantee that in doing so no harm will befall the practitioners. Appealing on the Day of Judgment to Atkinson's permission to engage in homosexual practice will be of no value in securing an exemption before God for failing to keep God's commands.

In addition, without diminishing the difficulties that a male-female requirement places on some 'category 6' homosexual persons, it is far from being the greatest demand that God's makes of anyone. Despite the homosexualist claim of 'sexual starvation', no one will starve from this sexual prerequisite. A high degree of intimacy is possible in non-sexual relationships - and non-erotic same-sex relationships should be encouraged, not eschewed, for persons with same-sex attractions. Three-quarters of all persons who experience significant same-sex attractions will experience one or more shifts on the Kinsey spectrum in the course of life, even apart from therapeutic intervention (at least according to the Kinsey Institute). This means that the great majority of such persons will experience at least some limited heterosexual functioning at some point in life. But aside from that, a heterosexual person who has 'hope' of marrying but is continually disappointed may find life harder, not easier, than a person who experiences same-sex attractions and has soberly faced the improbability of getting married. And there is certainly no *functional* difference between a heterosexual person who has never had sexual relations, in part because of an unwillingness to violate God's purity demands, and a person with exclusive same-sex attractions who abstains from sexual relations out of obedience to God's commands. Surely God has not withheld grace to either party.

In short, Atkinson's claim that a position that prohibits homosexual practice is void of good news and grace is itself an anti-gospel stance. It presumes that the power and grace of God can only operate in a context where God allows people to gratify intense, innate urges to do what God expressly forbids. Against this notion stands the image of the cross, which signals God's earnest efforts at crucifying 'the flesh with its passions and desires', especially passions and desires for 'sexual immorality, sexual uncleanness, and sexual licentiousness' (*porneia, akatharsia, aselgeia*, Galatians 5:19, 24).

#### **(d) The Jesus-and-outcasts argument**

According to Atkinson, Jesus' example of fellowship 'with people whom others regarded as outsiders' 'require[s] our acceptance of different Christian lifestyles and of those with whom we disagree' (310). This argument misses the point that Jesus did not accept the lifestyle of the tax collectors who engaged in gross economic exploitation of their compatriots, nor the lifestyle of those engaged in egregious sexual sin. He rather reached out to such persons to reclaim them for the kingdom of God, calling them to repentance.

There is no evidence that Jesus would have continued indefinitely in association with tax collectors who, long after their encounter with Jesus, refused to stop exploiting the poor by collecting several times over what they were expected to collect and pocketing the difference; or with women who persisted unrepentantly in adultery or prostitution. Zacchaeus promises to give back whatever he has taken from others (Luke 19:7-10). The sinful woman in Luke 7:36-50 loves much because she has been forgiven much. And the adulterous woman is told to 'no longer be sinning' lest something worse than a capital sentence happen to her (i.e., exclusion from God's kingdom; cf John 8:11 with 5:14).

Atkinson laments that the 'first word some gay people hear from the church is a call to repentance.' He then immediately goes on to dispense with repentance from homosexual behavior altogether, asserting with apparent approval that 'many in the church' view faithful homosexual bonds 'as bearing the marks of God's Spirit' (310). In the preaching of both Jesus and the early church as recorded in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts, the message of grace is often intertwined with a warning of coming judgment for those who do not repent. 'Repent and believe', not 'believe without a requirement to desist from a life led primarily under sin', is usually the call given to outsiders<sup>25</sup>. The Apostolic Decree specifically enjoined on Gentiles abstinence from *porneia* (sexual immorality) as an entry requirement, which always included for Jews of the period abstinence from all homosexual practice, located at or near the top of the list of forbidden sexual offenses (Acts 15:20, 29; cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:2-8; Romans 1:26-27).

#### **(e) Sodom, Leviticus, 1 Corinthians 6:9**

Atkinson makes some bad passing arguments to discount the witness of the Sodom narrative, the Levitical prohibitions, and 1 Corinthians 6:9 (pp302-3).

**Sodom.** Atkinson asserts that the fact that the story of Sodom has to do with homosexual rape means that it has 'little to contribute to contemporary debates.' If someone told Atkinson a story about a really bad town where adults raped their parents, would

Atkinson conclude that the storyteller was condemning only *forcible* incest? If not, why does he conclude that the story of Sodom in a broader cultural environment that is aware of (but still critical of) non-coercive forms of male-male intercourse, is indicting only forcible male-male intercourse?<sup>26</sup>

**Levitical prohibitions.** Atkinson also asserts that the Levitical prohibitions ‘reflect a view of gender - of male ownership and female subordination - which has been overturned by the example and teaching of Jesus concerning the full reciprocity of the sexes’, as also the teaching of Paul about sexual equality in 1 Corinthians 7. Yet it is clear, as we have noted above, that both Jesus and Paul rejected homosexual practice absolutely, which suggests that misogyny was not the basis for the Levitical prohibitions. The priestly notion of creation ‘according to its kind’ (Genesis 1:11-12, 21, 24-25) also speaks to an understanding of structural conformity, as does the Holiness Code’s prohibition of breeding animals, sowing seed, or putting on a garment ‘of two kinds’ (Leviticus 19:19). Although the prohibitions in Leviticus 19:19 strike us as quaint, the interdiction of incest and bestiality in Leviticus 18 and 20 does not. The latter shows concerns both for too much structural identity in a sexual merger (in the case of incest having intercourse with the ‘flesh [šāēr] of one’s flesh [běšārô]’; 18:6) and for too little structural identity (in the case of bestiality an invalid sexual ‘mixing’ of humans and animals [tevel]; 18:23; 20:15-16). Neither of these two sets of prohibitions primarily has in view the maintenance of male hierarchical authority. Instead, structural considerations are primary. The same applies to the prohibition of sex with a menstruant, construed as a discordant mix of physiological functions (Leviticus 18:19; 20:18)<sup>27</sup>

If surrendering a dominant male social status were the real issue behind the proscriptions of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, we would expect the legislators of the Holiness Code to have made subversion of male hierarchy punishable by death, not just the ‘symptom’ of homosexual intercourse. If status were the main concern rather than structure, we might wonder why the legislators did not permit, as The Middle Assyrian Laws seem to have done, high-status men to have sex with low-status males<sup>28</sup>. If the main concerns were the ‘domination and subordination’ of the penetrated partner, we might wonder why the legislators did not permit consensual acts rather than condemn to death both parties. It seems, then, that the primary motive behind prohibiting man-male intercourse was the view that gender dimorphism was absolutely inviolable. A male is not, and never can be, a sexual complement to a man. To pretend otherwise is to commit sacrilege against God’s creation as ‘male and female’<sup>29</sup>. Consistent with this point is the fact that the Yahwist (J) attributes a husband’s rule over his wife, unlike sexual differentiation, to the Fall (Genesis 3:16).

**1 Corinthians 6:9.** Atkinson suggests that the reference to homosexual practice in 1 Corinthians 6:9 is limited to an indictment of forms of homosexual practice that ‘diminish, hurt, oppress, or harm others’ since the context in 1 Corinthians 6:1-8 (taking other believers to pagan courts) ‘is on the side of the oppressed and marginalized and opposed to those who are “greedy”’. However, this misreads the context. The context for the vice list is clearly the case of the incestuous man in chapter 5, a case that is certainly not limited to only oppressive (non-loving, non-consensual) forms of incest<sup>30</sup>. The discussion in 6:1-8 is an excursus that arises from Paul’s frustration at the end of chapter 5 that the Corinthians should be judging those inside the church who have committed serious infractions. Not only have the Corinthians shirked their responsibility to judge immorality in their midst but also they have sued fellow

believers in pagan courts over matters of indifference (6:1-8). Having made this point, Paul returns to the issue of sexual immorality in their midst in 6:9-20.

### **(f) Free to disagree?**

Atkinson contends that there is enough ambiguity around Scripture's views on homosexual practice to justify giving 'each other the freedom of conscience to disagree in love' on this issue (pp310-11). Yet his own arguments surely do not justify his claim to scriptural ambiguity. On the contrary, Scripture's view on homosexual practice is at least as clear, and severe, as its view on sexual intercourse with one's parent. It is not regarded as a relatively light matter in sexual ethics. Whatever 'freedom to disagree' is extended to individual believers certainly cannot be extended to a polity right to ordain homosexually active and unrepentant persons to positions of leadership in the church. Paul would have taken the same position on 'men who lie with male' (1 Corinthians 6:9) that he took on the incestuous man in 1 Corinthians 5. Atkinson's plea for tolerance of homosexual behavior is closer to the Corinthians' boasting in their tolerance for adult incest. Paul rejects it utterly. It was Paul, not the tolerant Corinthians, who acted in love toward the sexual offender at Corinth. This is not a game. According to Paul, persons who engage in serial-unrepentant behavior of an egregious sort, including homosexual practice, put themselves at high risk of not inheriting the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

Atkinson contends that differences of opinion about homosexual practice are no more significant than differences of opinion about divorce and remarriage. However, Jesus predicated his view of marital indissolubility and monogamy on the 'twoness' or duality of the sexes. In bringing together the two primary sexes, a third party is neither necessary nor desirable. In other words, the foundation of the twoness of the sexes is the basis for restricting the number of persons in a sexual bond, serially or concurrently, to two and only two. The foundation is obviously more important than the superstructure built on it. Therefore, divorce/remarriage is not as great a violation as homosexual practice. Most believers would similarly recognize that incest, even of an adult-committed sort, is more serious than divorce/remarriage and not something over which the church can agree to disagree.

### **Conclusion**

I do not question the sincerity of Atkinson's beliefs about committed homosexual unions. Sincerity, however, does not make a wrong direction right. In this instance the evidence from Scripture, understood contextually, strongly indicates that Atkinson's perspective on homosexual behavior has deviated significantly from the path that God would have the church take on this important issue, to the peril of those engaged in homosexual activity.

---

*Dr Robert A. J. Gagnon is Associate Professor of New Testament, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Pittsburgh, USA*

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mostly p308, with smaller references on pp306 and 309.

<sup>2</sup> *Homosexuals in the Christian Fellowship* (Oxford: Latimer House, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> For a brief online biography go to:

<http://www.norwich.anglican.org/about/people/bishopthetford.shtml>.

For a list of his publications thru 1999 go to:

[http://www.norwich.anglican.org/about/people/Books\\_by\\_The\\_Rt\\_Rev\\_d\\_David\\_Atkinson.pdf](http://www.norwich.anglican.org/about/people/Books_by_The_Rt_Rev_d_David_Atkinson.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> The last four appear in the story of the Flood and refer to the animals going into the ark by twos, 'male and female,' whereas 5:2 introduces a genealogy from Adam to Noah's children that fulfills the command in Genesis 1:28 to 'be fruitful and multiply' (5:3-32; cf 6:1).

<sup>5</sup> i.e. the image of God seen from a particular angle, here through maleness or femaleness.

<sup>6</sup> By 'cockapoo' I mean part cocker spaniel, part poodle.

<sup>7</sup> cf Nahum M Sarna, *Genesis* (JPSTC; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 13: "No such sexual differentiation is noted in regard to animals. Human sexuality is of a wholly different order from that of the beast.... Its proper regulation is subsumed under the category of the holy, whereas sexual perversion is viewed with abhorrence as an affront to human dignity and as a desecration of the divine image in man."

<sup>8</sup> The existence of 'intersexed' persons does not deny this point. Not only is extreme gender ambiguity but a tiny fraction of a fraction of one percent, a product of intrauterine-hormonal and/or chromosomal disorders, and technically an abnormal amalgam of the only two sexes rather than the creation of a 'third sex', but also extreme gender ambiguity is no more a basis for redefining the male-female character of human sexual relations than is the existence of conjoined ('Siamese') twins a basis for redefining the limitation of two persons at any one time in a sexual bond.

<sup>9</sup> Other obvious instances of structurally incongruous sexual bonds that are to be rejected absolutely, irrespective of claims to love and commitment, are those involving close blood relations even among consenting adults where procreation is unlikely or impossible, an adult and a prepubescent child, and a human and an animal.

<sup>10</sup> At the same time 1 Corinthians 6:9 makes clear that Paul thought it was also possible for Christians to engage in homosexual behavior and thereby put themselves at risk of not inheriting God's kingdom.

<sup>11</sup> *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 444.

<sup>12</sup> *Homosexuality, Science, and the 'Plain Sense' of Scripture* (ed D Balch; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 46.

<sup>13</sup> *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 242. Williams goes on to say that 'comments like theirs represented a minority opinion' (p243). Yet that this would be a 'minority opinion' among Roman moralists is precisely what one would expect given the fact that few Romans, unlike Jews, believed that same-sex intercourse should be proscribed absolutely.

<sup>14</sup> cf 'Why the Disagreement over the Biblical Witness on Homosexual Practice? A Response to Myers and Scanzoni, *What God Has Joined Together?* *Reformed Review* 59(2005):36-40 (online:

[http://www.westernsem.edu/files/westernsem/gagnon\\_autm05\\_0.pdf](http://www.westernsem.edu/files/westernsem/gagnon_autm05_0.pdf)).

<sup>15</sup> For a critique of the claim that there was something erotic about Jesus' relationship with the beloved disciple see my online article, 'Was Jesus in a Sexual Relationship with the Beloved Disciple?' (February 10, 2008; 8 pgs.; online: <http://www.robagnon.net/articles/HomosexBelovedDisciple.pdf>). For a critique of the claim that David and Jonathan were in a sexual relationship, see *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 146-54; Markus Zehnder, 'Observations on the Relationship between David and Jonathan and the Debate on Homosexuality', *Westminster Theological Journal* 69.1 (2007): 127-74.

<sup>16</sup> In the meantime, see: *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 347-60; 'Why the Disagreement...?': 73-75.

<sup>17</sup> The material in *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (pp384-85, 392-94) is expanded in 'Does the Bible Regard Same-Sex Intercourse as Intrinsically Sinful?' in *Christian Sexuality: Normative and*

---

*Pastoral Principles* (ed R E Saltzman; Minneapolis: Kirk House, 2003), 140-46, with online notes 41-58 (pp. 8-12) at <http://www.robagnon.net/articles/homoPowellRespNotes.pdf>. For a summary, cf.

<sup>18</sup> *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome*, 386.

<sup>19</sup> *Homosexuality and Civilization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 114.

<sup>20</sup> *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 11, 244. cf Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 109-12: 'Paul does not mention *tribades* or *kinaidoi*, that is, female and male persons who were habitually involved in homoerotic relationships, but if he knew about them (and there is every reason to believe that he did), it is difficult to think that, because of their apparent "orientation", he would *not* have included them in Romans 1:24-27.... For him, there is no individual inversion or inclination that would make this conduct less culpable.... Presumably nothing would have made Paul approve homoerotic behavior.'

<sup>21</sup> Brian S Mustanski and J Michael Bailey, 'A therapist's guide to the genetics of human sexual orientation', *Sexual and Relationship Therapy* 18:4 (2003): 432.

<sup>22</sup> Guesses as to what the 'thorn in the flesh' was range from a serious eye condition (cf Galatians 4:13-15) to the whole array of apostolic hardships (2 Corinthians 6:4-10; 11.23-33; 1 Corinthians 4.9-13).

<sup>23</sup> Or: completed, brought to its goal, fully actualized (*teleitai*).

<sup>24</sup> Or: am content with, delight in, am pleased with (*eudokō*).

<sup>25</sup> So *John the Baptist*: Matthew 3:2, 8; Mark 1:4; Acts 13:24; 19:4; *Jesus*: Mark 1:15; Matthew 11:20-21 = Luke 10:13; Matthew 12:41 = Luke 11:32; Luke 5:32; 13:3-5; 15:7, 10; 17:3-4; 24:47; *risen Christ*: Revelations 2:5, 16, 21-22; 3:3, 19; *Jesus' instruction to the Twelve*: Mark 6:12; *the early church*: Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 8:19-23; 11:18; 17:30; 20:21; 26:20. cf Romans 2:4; 2 Corinthians 12:21; 2 Timothy 2:25; Hebrews 6:1-6; 12:17; 2 Peter 3:9.

<sup>26</sup> See further my discussion of the literary and historical context for the Sodom narrative in *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (with Dan O Via; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 57-62 (with online notes at

<http://www.robagnon.net/2Views/HomoViaRespNotesRev.pdf>); 'Why the Disagreement...?' 46-50; *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 63-110.

<sup>27</sup> A later image, which probably applies here, is that of a man who is trying to work the 'field' by sowing 'seed' when nature has already clearly signaled a time for the 'field' to lie fallow in order to renew itself. For further discussion of connecting elements in the Levitical sex prohibitions and a critique of the misogyny argument see *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 134-42.

<sup>28</sup> *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 45-47.

<sup>29</sup> cf the verdict of the homosexualist scholar of early Judaism, Daniel Boyarin. In biblical culture 'penetration of a male constituted a consignment of him to the class of females, but, rather than a degradation of status [as in Greco-Roman culture], this constituted a sort of mixing of kinds.... The issue does not seem to have been status so much as an insistence on the absolute inviolability of gender dimorphism' ('Are There Any Jews in "The History of Sexuality"?' *JHSex* 5 [1995]: 341-43).

<sup>30</sup> The vice list of 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 is almost identical to the vice lists in 5:10-11, the main difference being the addition of a few more sexual vices to fill out the meaning of *pornoi* (identified with the incestuous man in 5:9). The list in 6:9-10 begins with *pornoi* (sexually immoral people), idolaters, adulterers, "soft men," and men who lie with males. The reason that *pornoi* are mentioned separately from the other sexual offenders is that the main issue at hand is still the case of the incestuous man. Hence, *pornoi* is put at the head of the vice list, leapfrogging over idolatry (which is sometimes placed first in vice lists). The ensuing discussion in 6:12-20 and chapter 7 continues to treat the issue of sex, not disputes in pagan courts, again confirming that sexual issues are the overarching context for the vice list in 6:9-10. cf my article, 'A Comprehensive and Critical Review Essay of *Homosexuality, Science, and the "Plain Sense" of Scripture*, Part 2', *HBT* 25 (2003): 227-28 (also online: <http://www.robagnon.net/articles/homoBalchHBTReview2.pdf>).