

An Unexpected, Yet Bidden, Journey



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About the Author

I was born in 1954 in Charleston, West Virginia, and was raised in the Episcopal Church. I have been married 26 years to Karen (Boyd) Mills, and we have two children, Jamie and Sarah. I graduated Virginia Theological Seminary in 1980. Because my undergraduate degree was in religion I was able to do some special study in Hebrew, Greek and Biblical Studies. I have served various churches in the Dioceses of West Virginia and East Tennessee.

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O Lord, mercifully receive the prayers of your people who call upon you, and grant that they may know and understand what things they ought to do, and also may have the grace and power faithfully to accomplish them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. (Collect, Proper 10, The Book of Common Prayer)

I found myself to be a reluctant pilgrim on a journey I never expected to make, to a destination I would not have reached without the slow, loving prodding of the heavenly Father and patient friends. My beliefs were clear and distinct and they made sense, I believed, of the clear teaching of Scripture. I had, since my conversion in 1975, counted surety on this issue as one of the fixed points of my inner working model of the world around me. In an article for the newsletter of the parish I served in 1995, I wrote:

The question about any moral issue that must be asked is, "What does Scripture say about this behavior?" Homosexuality is strictly forbidden in both the Old and New Testaments. The clearest texts forbidding this behavior in the Old Testament are Genesis 19:1-26 (the destruction of Sodom) and Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. In the New Testament it is named in lists of forbidden behavior in 1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:10, and most particularly in Romans 1:18-32. I want to expand on these texts momentarily, but first I want to point out something that many students of the Bible miss. That reality is that even if homosexuality were never condemned in Scripture, the path of lifelong, monogamous marriage is so clearly mandated for human sexuality that any deviation from this path, including homosexuality among other activities, is clearly viewed by Scripture as falling short of the target, and therefore is viewed as sinful. From the first chapters of Genesis onward the call of God's people is to enter into the covenant of marriage as the normal state of human community and sexual expression. Marriage is the joining and melding of opposites, a man and a woman, so that they become one and mutually enjoy, complement and support each other.

It all seemed so clear. There seemed to be no honest way to evade the message of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah or direct statements such as, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." (Lev. 18:22, all passages of Scripture are from NRSV unless noted otherwise), or, "...do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither...male prostitutes, nor homosexual offenders ...will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor. 6:9-10, NIV). Did not Paul also exclude homosexual behavior in the first chapter of his letter to Rome by describing it as the logical end of pagan idolatry, as God's just wrath poured out upon the pagan societies of antiquity?

Well, at the end of my journey all these things turned out not to be so clear after all. I have come to believe the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu to be true,

We struggled against apartheid because we were being blamed and made to suffer for something we could do nothing about. It is the same with homosexuality. The orientation is a given, not a matter of choice. It would be crazy for someone to choose to be gay, given the homophobia that is present.

This essay is the story of how I got "from there to here." In spite of my beliefs about homosexuality, my life has been graced, from childhood, with gay and lesbian friends. Before my conversion to the Christian faith from a devout socialist paganism I simply did not care what they did in their private lives. I never understood the fear and loathing toward them that many amongst us hold. I was converted by one of the well-known fundamentalist campus organizations and eventually filtered back

to the Episcopal Church because I needed the sanity of the way we read Scripture and the focus and order of the liturgy. In many subconscious ways I long retained the intellectual and emotional template of the fundamentalism of my conversion.

My life has continued to be graced by gay and lesbian friends. I embraced them as friends, but they knew my beliefs, as a Christian, about their “life style.” I hoped that my love and friendship would play a part in their eventual repentance. I led a close friend through a journey to heal the wounds of his childhood in hopes that his orientation would change, as it seemed to...for a time. Finally, after a difficult encounter with someone regarding the issue a lesbian friend suggested that I study the issue, yet again. I made this reading my Lenten discipline for that year and I read everything I could find from all perspectives about homosexuality. In the end my beliefs changed, but this change came about in stages, intellectually and emotionally. I outline the stages of my intellectual and emotional journeys below, beginning with the intellectual.

First of all, my belief that “*homosexuality is strictly forbidden in both the Old and New Testaments*” was challenged. I shall let the reader do his or her own reading on this issue (see Bailey, Boswell, Greenberg, Dover, Jordan, Fone, *et. al.*), but would like to make the following comments about the main texts used to bolster the traditional view. The judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah and that of Gibeah (Genesis 19 and Judges 19) seemed to have come about, according to Scripture itself, because of their lack of hospitality, as hard as this is to fathom for modern readers who were taught that they were judged because of their sodomy. It was only tangentially about homosexuality, and the threatened homosexual rape (if the sexual interpretation of the Hebrew verb *to know* is correct) of sojourners at that. The virtue of hospitality is still the crowning social virtue practiced in the Middle East. I saw it overshadow all other cultural norms and mores among Jews, Moslems and Christians when I was in the Middle East. If I had not seen it myself, I am not sure that I would be able to see these two stories within the framework of this virtue.

The Letter of Jude (vs. 7) did say that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah “...*indulged in sexual immorality and (literally) went after other flesh ...*” This phrase might have inferred homosexuality, but it also might have referred to the sojourners as “cultural” other flesh. More likely, it was a reference to a current interpretation of Genesis chapter 6 where *the Sons of God* were thought to have been angels who engaged in sexual intercourse with human women (human flesh being the *other flesh*). The topic at hand in Jude was those very angels and their punishment.

The broader Jewish tradition held, up to the time of Jesus, that it was Sodom and Gomorrah’s (and by inference, Gibeah’s) particularly ugly, and sexual, breach of the cultural norm of hospitality that was the reason for their demise. It seems clear to me that the compiler of the Genesis stories meant to indicate this interpretation by juxtaposing the story of the blessing of Abraham *because of his hospitality to the very same (unknown to him angelic) sojourners* in the preceding chapter 18. The prophet Ezekiel (ch. 16:48-49) read the story as cities that were judged for their “*pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease*” and ones which “*did not aid the poor and needy*”, an interpretation regarding the failure to show hospitality from their great abundance. And when Jesus declared the coming judgment upon the cities that rejected his messengers using the words, “*Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on that day than for that town.*” he surely meant that they shall be judged because of their lack of hospitality (to him and his). The Galilean cities’ sexual practices simply were not mentioned and were immaterial to Jesus’ pronouncement. As hard as this interpretation of the stories of Genesis 19 and Judges 19 was for me to accept at first (enculturated as I was by the other, “homosexual”, interpretation), the textual evidence, in the end, became compelling.

The two texts from Leviticus were a little more difficult to ignore. They lie amidst commands about

sexual taboos that, for the most part, most still believe are binding. It would, however, be a bad idea to accept them *too* literally because Leviticus 20:13 commands the death penalty for male homosexual activity, a command our forebears in the medieval and reformed church, sadly, carried out with grim “faithfulness”. Moreover, Christians have always had to be very careful about how to use the commands of the Torah. Not all of its commands are binding for all time (see *Article VII. Of the Old Testament of The Articles of Religion*). As modern medicine, psychology and psychiatry have altered our understanding of things such as eating disorders, depression and a host of mental and emotional illnesses, alcoholism and addiction, and so on, the church has had to let go of some of its former beliefs about these things, even beliefs that have seemed clearly taught by scripture and tradition. I decided to hold the Leviticus commands forbidding (if one is precise, male) homosexual behavior provisionally until I could examine the pertinent New Testament texts. I began to wonder if these prohibitions are not among the many commands in the Bible that are in fact culturally bound and represent ancient cultural artifacts which must be abandoned before the fuller understanding of human nature gleaned through modern science and social science.

It is important to remember that it was only in the 20th century that the Anglican Communion allowed her members to practice birth control or allowed her members to remarry after being divorced. On the latter, Jesus was painfully clear in his condemnation of divorce and remarriage (Matthew ch. 19, for example). It was only as the church saw divorced parishioners build strong, prayerful, and at the time *secular*, marriages that the church came to believe that God might well, in spite of Jesus’ flat condemnation of marriage after divorce, call divorced persons into marriage again. Likewise, it was only after modern medicine, psychology, and psychiatry challenged the incredibly sick and repressive ideas often underlying the church’s beliefs about sexuality, and the church’s foolish belief that sexual intercourse was only permissible for the purpose of procreation, that the church allowed the use of birth control. Both changes were extremely difficult for the church to make and the discussion of these issues was often hateful and vitriolic. And these changes were, it is now clear, God’s will.

As I continued my Lenten reading, I began to believe more and more strongly that the prohibitions in the passages in Leviticus, and even those in Romans, 1 Corinthians, and 1 Timothy, just might need to be jettisoned as we have learned more about homosexuality from the fields of science, medicine, psychology, anthropology, and so on. For example, the American Psychological Association no longer lists homosexuality as a DSM mental or emotional illness (www.apa.org/pi/statemen.html). There is no clear answer as to what causes a seemingly fixed and stable number among us to have a homosexual orientation, but there does seem to be a general agreement that this orientation is innate and enduring in gay and lesbian people. We must, at the least, be aware of the scientific community’s work as we interpret Scripture today. In time, and in stages, I found myself able to do so.

When I came to examine the passages from Paul that stated that “*male prostitutes and homosexual offenders* (among a list of sinners) *will not inherit the kingdom of God*” (1 Corinthians 6:9-10, NIV) and that “*...the law is made...for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and the irreligious; ...for perverts* (among a host of other sinners)” (1 Timothy 1:8-10, NIV), the stakes went up simply because the statements, again, seem so clear and impossible to interpret in any other way than to take them at face value. This is *especially* true for Romans chapter one in which Paul seemed to say that gay and lesbian behavior was the logical end of, and the manifestation of, God’s wrath upon Greece and Rome’s idolatry. In this passage Paul was setting the cultural backdrop that determined the premise for the rest of his epistle about God’s grace and mercy, and it seemed that if his premise about fallen human nature in chapter one was faulty that the rest of the epistle would be without much theological worth.

My Lenten reading pointed me back to the Greek texts of all three passages. One of the first things I came realize was that, in all three passages homosexual behavior was listed as one of many varieties

of sin and that the church has historically obsessed only about homosexuality in these passages and ignored the more homely and common sins of envy, strife, slander, haughtiness and boastfulness which were also listed. As I mentioned above, my journey has been made in stages. Having examined these passages carefully, **I came to firmly believe that, although the New Testament does condemn homosexuality, it does so tangentially and as one behavior among many other behaviors mentioned along with it.**

However, as I continued to plough through the massive scholarly literature about these passages I began to realize that no one seems to agree as to exactly what the two Greek words to describe the forbidden behaviors in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy actually mean. In 1 Corinthians Paul said that among other sinners the *malakoi* and *arsenakoitai* were not going to inherit the kingdom of God. Both are plural nominatives and the NIV translates them *male prostitutes* and *homosexual offenders*, respectively. In 1 Timothy Paul or the unknown author again used the word *arsenakoitais*. Here the word is a plural dative and the NIV translates it as *perverts*. If one does the research, they shall find that the word *malakos*, used only in 1 Corinthians, simply meant *soft*, but when used metaphorically it could mean many things, usually being associated with decadent appetites. Sometimes it was used of homosexuality, but more often it was not. It usually referred to over the top appetites as in Aristotle's use of the word. Interestingly, many Medieval and Reformation writers translated or understood the word (and its Latin equivalent) as *masturbation*.

The second word, *arsenakoites*, used in both epistles, is very difficult to translate and was a little used word in antiquity. One author proposes that Paul invented the compound word, fusing together two words from the Greek Septuagint translation of the pertinent passages from Leviticus, and in this way specifically forbade homosexuality. But there is, in fact, no scholarly consensus about what the word means. Others speculate that it meant *male prostitute* and that Paul used it this way. Some speculate that by using the combination of *malakoi* and *arsenakoitai* together Paul was condemning both the passive (*malakoi*) and the active (*arsenakoitai*) participants in homosexual intercourse ...or homosexual prostitution. In the end, no one knows for sure what the two words were intended to describe, particularly if another author besides Paul was responsible for penning 1 Timothy. *Arsenakoites*, when used in non-biblical texts, much like *malakos*, often involved some sort of homosexual behavior or non-procreative sex. But sometimes it did not. It did, however, always seem to have a primary meaning of forced, coercive, or predatory behavior. This is so much so that one author translates the word as *homosexual slave trading*.

The various translations of these two words in the various editions of the Bible reflect how unsure the church has been about their meanings (see www.jeramy.org/gay/gaytrans.html for most of them). Although there may be a reference to homosexuality in these texts, the application of explicitly homosexual meanings to these two words may well be primarily reflective of the enormous influence that both The Authorized (King James) Version and The Geneva Bible have had on later translations. These two translations, in turn, reflected the mania in Northern Renaissance Europe at the time to extirpate Sodomites from their lands. Having done the research on these two passages, **I came to believe that the condemnation of homosexuality in the New Testament was less sure than I had thought, and that perhaps only the passage from Romans could be interpreted to clearly do so.**

As I read, and re-read, the passage in the first chapter of Romans, I found the arguments of the now standard interpretation, *i.e.*, that Paul was here only describing the perversion of heterosexuals who, against their nature, practiced homosexuality, unconvincing. It seemed as if this one passage from the Bible did, in fact, condemn homosexual behavior. However, as I read the Greek text one day something important struck me. As I read it, I noticed that the homosexual passions Paul described were very hot and have a flavor of driven need to them. It occurred to me that this driven need does not accurately describe the relationships between the committed gay and lesbian couples whom I

know. It does describe what I know of the gay bath houses and gay prostitution of our time. Moreover, it very accurately described the decadence of much of aristocratic Roman homosexuality, particularly that practiced by many of the emperors (Julius Caesar and Nero, for example). Roman literature parodied some of these emperors not because of their homosexuality, *but because of its wantonness*. In the end, I came away with a hunch that although homosexuality *may* indeed be forbidden in the New Testament, the Scriptural warrant for this prohibition was slim at best. But by this point, because of some other research I had done, I began to wonder if the Scriptural prohibitions would not actually be moot to begin with.

(Note: Since finishing this article I have come upon a study by Jeramy Townsley at www.jeramyt.org/papers/paulcybl.html. He argues very convincingly that the behavior Paul condemned in Romans was the ritualized sex of the Cybele/Attis cult, widely practiced in the New Testament period—notably in the temple dedicated to Cybele in Rome on the Palatine Hill. He cites Church Fathers who seemed to read this passage this way, and if he is correct, this passage was not about romantic/sexual relationships at all, but the sexualized religious practices of the ancients.)

To get to this point I must take a side journey. I have always been fascinated by history. I recently was preparing for a sermon having to do with which social and religious institutions mentioned in the Bible are binding for believers of all ages and which are cultural artifacts of which we can, and sometimes must, let go. I promised at my ordination that, *“I do believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation.”* I still do. But I do not believe that everything in scripture is necessary for salvation, and, in fact, the church has had to leave some cultural artifacts embodied in the Bible behind in order to live in a just and holy way. The practice of holy war, the practice of slavery, Jesus’ prohibition of remarriage after divorce, the church’s traditional prohibition of birth control, and the biblical role of women are all very good examples of cultural artifacts that the church has abandoned, often centuries after they should have been left behind. Seeing how clear the church of old was about the Bible’s teaching on these issues -- and how horribly wrong they really were -- helped me let go of my formerly clear ideas on homosexuality. I have touched upon divorce and remarriage and birth control, but now I want to use the church’s historic positions on the issues of slavery and the role of women as an argument that it is now time to similarly leave the cultural artifact of the Bible’s *possible* prohibition of homosexuality behind.

Slavery is, seemingly, as old as the human race. The Old Testament accepted and codified it, and in fact limited it to a great deal (the Jubilee Year’s manumission, for example). The New Testament accepted it as a part of life. Jesus made no comment about its morality, but, in fact, he used the practice of slavery a great deal in his teaching. Paul, in Ephesians 6:5-9, accepted it as a part of life, but tempered its brutality by saying:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, knowing that whatever we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free. And, masters, do the same to them. Stop threatening them, for you know that both of you have the same Master heaven, and with him there is no partiality.

Furthermore, Paul sent a runaway slave named Onesimus back to his master Philemon and Onesimus actually carried Paul’s Letter to Philemon that, in the end, became one of the books of The New Testament. Later Christians took the acceptance of slavery in the Bible as if were commanded as a positive good, even great minds such as Augustine and Aquinas. The bitter end of this was the enslaving of Africans and Native Americans in the Western world, especially in the New World. The

Bible was used as a defense for a practice that was as barbaric as it was unchristian. Christians, including their clergy, up until the 19th century argued, “*There is not one verse in the Bible inhibiting slavery, but many regulating it. It is not then, we conclude, immoral*” (The Rev. Alexander Campbell). They could, with the general agreement of most who heard them, say, “*The right of holding slaves is clearly established in the Holy Scriptures, both by precept and example*” (The Rev. R. Furman).

An even more pernicious twist on slavery was added by Christians who believed that the right to enslave black Africans was given because of the curse of God upon one of Noah’s three sons, Ham, narrated in Genesis chapter 9. Ham was believed to be the ancestor of all the black African peoples. Africans, and later African-Americans, were not considered to be human beings, or if human, they were seen as lesser beings than whites—because of the curse on Ham. This was true in *The United States Constitution* and ignominious legal decisions such as Dred Scott. Most Christians also forbade love, sex, and marriage between whites and blacks using similar spurious biblical arguments.

The fact is that Christian men (and it usually was men) could, with Bible in hand, make these arguments and legitimize them as what the Bible clearly says. They were correct about what the Bible said - and, in fact, both they and the Bible were wrong. But it seemed so right to them! It took centuries of Herculean effort and much bloodshed for Christians to figure out just how bankrupt and barbaric the practice of slavery was and is. The racism it spawned is still with us and one still finds people who use the Bible to forbid racial intermarriage.

I now move on to the biblical role of women. Perhaps because of men’s physical strength combined with the biological realities of women’s menstrual cycles and, more importantly, the great length of time that human babies must be cared for until maturity, women’s status as equals to men has historically suffered. If one is honest about it, one must admit that the entire saga of biblical history, even when it narrated the stories of female heroes, was written from a male, patriarchal point of view. Modern translations of the Bible have tried to lessen this masculine bias with greater and lesser degrees of success. There is fairly uniform agreement among biblical scholars that, beginning with the law of Moses, the Bible saw a woman primarily as property, first of her father and then of her husband. The commandment not to covet your neighbor’s property included both his ass and his wife! It was thus in all of antiquity. In fact, as bad as the Old Testament was regarding women as property, it mitigated some of the harsher aspects of this status, but only within this understanding of women as property.

In time, particularly when the story of “the Fall” from Eden was factored in, women began to be seen as not only lesser beings and property, but as somehow intrinsically wicked or evil. In the Book of Sirach (in the Apocrypha) one finds statements like, “*the birth of a daughter is a loss*” (22:3) and, more to the point, “*From a woman sin had its beginning (i.e. in Eve), and because of her we all die.*” (25:24). One gets the same feel when one peruses the New Testament except in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus seems to be the only person in antiquity who surrounded himself with women as equals and peers! This would have been seen as scandalous to the Jews, Greeks and Romans of his day, but he did it anyway.

It is, however, the Pauline literature of the New Testament, and I would argue that it is a misinterpretation of the Pauline literature, that set the template for the repression of women in the church and the Western world for two millennia. In his early letters Paul was neurotically negative about sex and marriage. It was hardly a glowing recommendation of marriage for him to have told the Corinthian Christians that “*it is better to marry than to burn*”. He seemed to mellow in time, but he, and the possible Pauline authors who penned works in his name, seemed to none-the-less mandate that women be in an inferior role maritally, religiously, and socially:

As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. Or did the word of God originate in you? (1 Corinthians 14:34-36)

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water with the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind - yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. For no one hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body. 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and the wife should respect her husband. (Ephesians 5: 21-33)

I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothing, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. Let a woman (this word could also be translated here and below as wife) learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty. (1 Timothy 2:8-15, see also 1 Peter 3:1-7)

These three passages are rather breathtaking when read together. Paul's apparent misogyny was mitigated by several things. Paul may not have written the last two letters quoted although they, none-the-less, left their mark on every woman who has lived in the church for two millennia. More importantly, it can be shown elsewhere in the New Testament that Paul counted women, in some way, as coworkers. For example, there are hints of this at the end of his Letter to the Romans. Here Paul named Prisca specifically, and in textual variants two women named Junia (16:7) and Julia (16:7), as in some way grouped with the apostles (The NRSV uses these variants in its translation of these passages). Most importantly, when Paul summed up the Gospel and our status as believers in the Letter to the Galatians, he said the following:

"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise." (Galatians 3:28-29)

This was Paul's *Magna Carta* for women and all of humanity. It reflected the prayer of Jewish men of the time that thanked God that they were not born "a *gentile*, a *slave*, or a *woman*". Sadly, it has taken close to two millennia for the church to make it real for either slaves or women.

In the four passages cited together above, Paul was trying, one the one hand, to call the church to live into the freedom he declared in Galatians, and, on the other, to exhort the church to not create a scandal (by violating the mores of the time) by this freedom and thus hinder the Gospel. Even so,

he still left women as inferiors. One gets the feeling reading them that women/wives were, at best, to be kept as if beloved human pets or children, and, at worst, to be dominated and used for their men's benefit. In Ephesians Paul called Roman men to surrender the lethal and brutalizing power of being the head of his family (in fact, absolute authority up to life and death) and actually love their wives. But women still remained lesser beings. A man's love for his wife was put in terms of benefiting him because she was, through the one flesh union of marriage, an extension of him.

And would that this was all that later Christians would take from Scripture regarding women. Hear the sad and base words of the great minds of the church:

"Woman is a daughter of falsehood, a sentinel of hell, the enemy of peace; through her Adam lost paradise." (John of Damascus)

"Woman is the instrument which the devil uses to gain possession of our souls." (Cyprian)

"Woman is the fountain of the arm of the devil, her voice is the hissing of the serpent." (Anthony)

"Woman has the poison of the asp, the malice of a dragon." (Gregory)

"Do you not know that you are each an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the Devil's gateway: You are the unsealer of the forbidden sea: You are the first deserter of the divine law: You are she who persuaded him whom the Devil wasn't valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man." (Tertullian)

"What is the difference whether it is a wife or a mother, it is still Eve the temptress that we must beware of in any woman." (Augustine)

"As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex; while the production of woman comes from a defect in the active force or from some material indisposition, or even from some external influence." (Aquinas)

Similar sentiments can, sadly, be found in the Reformation and New World Christian writers. These statements are all documented in Karen Armstrong's *The Gospel According to Woman*.

All of these beliefs about women had their legitimate roots in what Scripture said about women, even more convincingly than did the Western beliefs about slavery. For two millennia, Christians have, with Bible in hand, denied women citizenship, the right to vote, an education, employment, any leadership role in the church at all outside of strict boundaries, ordination, and otherwise repressed them. They have convinced them that they must obey their husbands (this was in the Episcopal wedding vows up until the 1928 *Book of Common Prayer*!). They built a society in which even battery was part of being an obedient wife. They have refused them the right to be fully human -- peers to men. Again, Christians could, with Bible in hand, justify this understanding of women, and be dead right about what the Bible says - and be dead wrong and be morally reprehensible. This also seemed so right to them! Generations of Christians never seemed to notice Jesus' way with women as equals and the *Magna Carta* that Paul set down in the Book of Galatians.

I have taken this very long and circuitous side journey to get the reader to the end of my journey to Desmond Tutu's side because this is the intellectual journey that I took to get there. At the end of

my reading and soul-searching I came to believe that it did not matter whether my hunch was correct that there is a slight, circumstantial, tangential case to be made that Scripture forbids homosexuality. ***This possible biblical proscription simply does not matter, the point is moot.*** The fact that the Scripture, and generations of Christians, have historically been so consistently wrong about birth control and remarriage, and more importantly, about slavery and women, allowed me to step back and come to believe that we also must jettison our historic views about gay and lesbian people and sexuality. Being intellectually convinced that we, and I, have been wrong about homosexuality, I then, again by stages, came to change about homosexuality emotionally. Having thus narrated these the stages of my intellectual reversal on homosexuality, I would now like to briefly narrate the stages of my emotional turn-around about gay and lesbian people.

The church historically justified racism, slavery, and the oppression of women with the seeming clear warrant of Scripture. But we now know that these teachings about race, slavery and women are cultural artifacts that Christians needed to abandon and leave behind. It has been *our experience* of these changes that have allowed us to know that they were indeed led by the Holy Spirit. The best of us now experienced black people and women - hopefully all people—to be fully human—like us. It is important to remember just how recently, and also unevenly, these reversals on race and gender have taken place in the church and our culture.

Pragmatically, one of the main reasons that the church changed its historic position on remarriage after divorce, in spite of the clear teaching of Jesus, was that we saw the fruit of the Spirit in those who remarried, either in spite of the church's position or after the legal fiction of the annulment of a prior marriage. And, in hindsight, we know that for these couples remarrying was a good and Godly thing to do. *Again it has been because of our experience of the rightness of these changes* that we now know that they were, in fact, guided by the Holy Spirit. We were compelled, at least in part by this experience, to conclude that Jesus, when teaching about divorce and remarriage, was engaging in his known capacity to overstate things in order to jar people into understanding his mission and message.

Likewise, as the church has encountered the fruit of the Spirit in many second marriages to be sweet and good, I personally have found gay and lesbian Christians who have a vibrant life with God. This reality cannot be denied. One day I found myself saying this to a wonderful young lesbian friend who I have come to deeply love. I said to her, *"I can't imagine that God would allow you to have such a vibrant life with him up until the Last Day, and then say, 'Just kidding, off with you to hell.'"* She responded, *"I have thought about that and I don't believe that God would play with my head that way."* I told her that I agreed. Jesus said that we would know his children by their fruit and I see this fruit in many of my gay and lesbian friends - especially the ones who were willing to walk with me until I could figure this all out. ***This my experience of their lives and friendship began an emotional turn-around toward them parallel to my intellectual reversal. This new understanding was the first stage of my emotional turn-around.***

The next stage for me emotionally was facing my own fears about all this. I have come to this radical change of heart and mind with great fear and trembling. I have, very grandiosely, been haunted by a fear that God will judge me for what I now believe, and even worse, that I will lead others into sin and judgment. I stumbled on a passage in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* that has helped me greatly. In chapter 31, Huck wrestles with the belief that, in helping his friend and travel partner Jim, a runaway slave, escape, he is committing a grave sin. His entire culture believed that it was sinful to hide or help a runaway slave, that the Bible permitted slavery, and in fact it was against the law. Huck's thoughts haunt him, *"There was a Sunday-school, you could 'a' gone to it; and if you'd 'a' done it they'd 'a' learnt you there that people that acts as I'd been acting about that nigger goes to everlasting fire."* (Pg. 205). Huck knows what he must do to cleanse his soul, so he writes a letter to Jim's master, Mrs. Watson, telling her where to find him. Then he begins to ponder

the friendship that he and Jim had shared in their travels. He begins to see Jim as a human being. The narrative continues, “...and then I happened to look around and see that paper (the letter). It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I’d got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: ‘All right then, I’ll go to hell’—and tore it up” (Pg. 206).

I, like Huck, have experienced gay and lesbian people to be just like me, and often devout Christians. I had become convinced intellectually that the Bible and the church are wrong about homosexuality. **Then, when I too was finally able to say, “All right then, I’ll go to hell”, acting against the internalized bigotry of my culture’s bias, I was able to find some peace about what I truly believe to be true and just.**

The next stage of my emotional transformation had to do with how foreign my new ideas were to my inner working model of the world and just how deeply I had really accepted the fear of my culture and church of gay and lesbian people. I had internalized more antipathy towards gay and lesbian people than I was ever able to see. I was only able to see it when I realized that I was hesitant to emotionally embrace gay and lesbian people long after the Scriptural and intellectual barriers were gone. The following story from early in the life of St. Francis helped me move to the next stage emotionally:

Then the holy lover of complete humility went to the lepers and lived with them, serving them most diligently for God’s sake; and washing all foulness from them, he wiped away also the corruption of the ulcers, just as he said in his Testament: ‘When I was in sins, it seemed extremely bitter to me to look at lepers, and the Lord himself led me among them and I practiced mercy with them.’ So greatly loathsome was the sight of lepers to him at one time, he used to say, that, in the days of his vanity, he would look at their houses only from a distance of two miles and he would hold his nostrils with his hands. But now, when by the grace and power of the Most High he was beginning to think of holy and useful things, while he was still clad in secular garments, he met a leper one day and, made stronger than himself, he kissed him. From then on he began to despise himself more and more, until, by the mercy of the Redeemer, he came to perfect victory over himself.
Thomas of Celano, *The First Life of Francis*, VII.17.

Please do not take away with you the idea that I believe gay and lesbian people are foul and corrupt. In fact lepers were, and are, not. The culture in which Francis grew up was terrified of them and believed, falsely, that they were foul and corrupt - much as our own culture fears and misunderstands gay and lesbian people. The point of the story is Francis’ ability to live beyond his bigotry and fear. This passage about Francis narrates one of the turning points in his conversion. It was only when he embraced, kissed and ministered those whom his culture viewed as unclean that he became free in God. It was only when he saw them as human beings in whom the Christ lies hidden, as he does in all human beings, that he was free from his own crippling fears. Because of the emotional hesitance I saw in myself, I sadly had to admit that at some deep level I too carried my culture’s sinful fear and rejection of lesbian and gay people. Being raised in the United States, it would have been impossible for me to not have assimilated this bigotry—however muted it might have been in me. **If I was to be free in God and free from my worst self, then I had to embrace and serve my lesbian and gay brothers and sisters, be they Christian or otherwise. They are human beings whom God loves, just as he made them, and he calls me to love them exactly as they are as well.**

The final stage of my emotional transformation was the facing of the haunting questions: “What if my motives for this change are base or selfish?” “What if I have changed my mind because of some subconscious need to be loved and accepted by the church, or worse, to receive adulation from the

world?” “What if I am not strong or courageous enough to speak the unpopular message of repentance to homosexuals?” “What if I just do not want to hurt my homosexual friends and I have rationalized away the biblical proscriptions against homosexuality?” I have agonized over this and I have found solace in words of Mother Teresa’s, “*Whenever we give, we give to Jesus. I’d rather we make mistakes in kindness than work miracles in unkindness.*” **God will, in the end, sort all this out. I hope that, if I am mistaken, it will have been wrongdoing done in kindness. Surely God can somehow use my mistakes, if I am wrong, that are made in kindness. I pray that this is so.**

I close with the words of Bennett Sims. He has been one of the voices calling for full inclusion for gay and lesbian people in the Episcopal Church which I serve, including creating rites through which God can bless their unions and removing the barriers to ordination. He is quoted as saying:

Fear not schism. Fear only continued infidelity to the call of compassion and justice in Jesus Christ by straining the patience and long-suffering of our homosexual sisters and brothers.

I believe it is time.