

RAW MATERIAL

STUDIES IN BIBLICAL SEXUALITY

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Chapter 19

Patristics 2

The Church Tradition of the Necessary Evil

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The Church Tradition of the Necessary Evil

In an issue as volatile as sexuality and sexual ethics a wide array of cultural presuppositions find its way into the reading of the Biblical text and the decisions made by a church body. There is one set of presuppositions which looms larger than most in the topic of sexuality. These presuppositions have to do with the goodness or intrinsic evil of sexual pleasure. Therefore these presuppositions must be examined openly that we may understand the ways in which they influence our readings of the text and our choices as individuals and as church members.

Brooten's question from the last chapter highlights an important aspect of Augustine's attitude toward sexual activity. Like Clement, Augustine saw sex as appropriate only for necessity, that is to say procreation. When Augustine speaks elsewhere against sexual relations between women he does not need a proof text like Romans 1:26. Instead he has Neoplatonic assurances that sexual pleasure is not good and should be restricted by necessity. Thus all non-procreative sexual pleasures, including sex between women, are excluded. Though Augustine does "pardon" sex for pleasure within proper marital relations, describing such intercourse as a venial sin, in several texts he insists that Adam and Eve, if they had not sinned, would have procreated through a manner other than sex as we know it. Augustine identified lust as an evil, even within marriage (*City of God* 14.16). He believed that unfallen males would be able to control erection and ejaculation like any voluntary action, and pre-sin sexual intercourse would consist of a passionless deposit of semen in the woman without so much as disturbing the hymen (e.g. *City of God* 14.26).

Even in an apologetic study such as that of Hunter, Augustine remains strictly opposed to lust and guarded about sexual pleasure within proper marriage. For Augustine the good sexuality before the Fall would be lust-free, non-sensual and wholly rational. Augustine's most extensive discussion of the topic is in book 14 of *City of God*. More than any other church father, Augustine found the agricultural metaphor to be a fruitful and convincing argument for limiting sexual activity to the pursuit of pregnancy and progeny, and he extends this metaphor in a unique way in *City of God* 14.23. Augustine elaborates on the same agricultural metaphor we have seen in Plato, Philo, Athenagoras and Clement. He laments that lust does not limit itself to necessary procreation and begins an elaboration on the metaphorical "hand" which sows the seed. He modestly terminates the

discussion lest it become obscene, then hints broadly at how he would extend the metaphor in 14.24.

It is easy to speculate on this part of Augustine's unfinished metaphor. The farmer's hand sows the seed where the farmer wills. The hand is under the farmer's control and has no desire to sow its seed without the farmer's will. It has no "mind" of its own. Also, it needs no arousal to extend itself and sow its seed. Naturally (Augustine would argue), the male reproductive organs would do likewise if they were still in their pristine, unfallen state.

Modern readers should remember that the ancient writers were unaware of genetics as we know it. They were aware, however, of how soils and climate affect the nature of a crop. So this agricultural metaphor which recognizes seed only from the male does not deprive the woman of contributing to the form of the offspring. Plato himself made the point that seed should be planted only in such a woman as would make a good contribution to the forthcoming child (*Laws* 839a). The woman's contribution, of course, was viewed as a passive one, and the male seed as active.

The Church Fathers seemed to have a blind spot on this metaphor from Plato. As Christians they should have been more wary about using such a familiar story, for Jesus also used an agricultural metaphor about a farmer sowing his seed in a field (Matt 13:3-9; Mark 4:3-9; Luke 8:5-8). But the sower in the parable of Jesus was not as "wise" as the farmer in Plato's metaphor. This sower spread his seed abroad in all types of soil, including the rocky soil excoriated by the Church Fathers. In the gospels the seed was not semen, but rather the preaching of the word. Even so, the two metaphors do invite cross-fertilization in the imagination, an intertextuality which the Church Fathers certainly did not intend.

Augustine joins a long line of church leaders who understood sexual pleasure as a necessary evil,¹ church leaders such as Athenagoras and Clement of Alexandria. Examples could be multiplied. For instance, the Venerable Bede (*Eccl.* 1.27.8) quotes a letter of Pope Gregory 1 who contrasted the pleasure of conception and the pain of childbirth. Gregory explained that the defect was in the pleasure, not the pain. In this letter Gregory commends most of the sex-negative ideas already addressed in this chapter. This patristic theme of the necessary evil is not a new discovery, but rather is studied in a variety of seminaries today.

¹ The term "necessary evil" is suggested by the comments of two of the Inklings, C.S. Lewis (*Allegory of Love*, p. 16) and Charles Williams (*The Figure of Beatrice*, p. 37) on the sexual philosophy of Thomas Aquinas.

The views of Augustine on sexual pleasure are cited with approval in the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas 1.1.98.2; 2.1.34.2. Aquinas argues that sexual pleasure falls short of being good because it hampers or obscures the faculties of reason. He poses a sharp distinction between rational pleasure and bodily pleasure, the latter represented by sexual pleasure. However, Aquinas also writes that sexual pleasure is not sinful (within marriage) because it is necessary for procreation. Aquinas firmly agrees with his predecessors that bodily sexual pleasure is a result of Adam and Eve's sin. Though not always evil itself, it is a result of evil. Aquinas sums up a long and deep tradition in Christian theology that sexual pleasure is a necessary evil. It is to be restricted to necessity – procreation within marriage. This theology is the foundation for clerical celibacy and the church ban on contraception.

Aquinas neglected, and may have avoided, Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 7 that sexual pleasure could also be used to sate a spouse and thus reduce the lure of extramarital activity. Not only have modern commentators on Aquinas noted this neglect, but likewise the traditional writers of the *Supplement* to the *Summa Theologica* (Cates 331-332). Apparently Aquinas could not fit this bit of Pauline thought within his systematic theology. Also neglected was the potential that marital sexual activity could participate in the sacramental unity of matrimony. Aquinas found one purpose only for sexuality – procreation.

So important was procreation to Aquinas, who called it the “natural use” of sex, that in one infamous passage he identified non-procreative sex acts as the most sinful acts. He claimed that these “unnatural vices” were more sinful than rape or incest because rape and incest can produce offspring (*Summa* 2.2.154.12).

Nor should we forget that Aquinas and Augustine were moderate voices among the church fathers concerning sexuality. More extreme examples are numerous, such as Jerome's *Contra Jovinian*. Aquinas cites and refutes these extremists in the *Summa*, as does Augustine in *City of God* 14.21. These ancient and medieval authors are more extreme than Augustine and Aquinas both in their hatred of sexual pleasure and in their misogyny. Misogyny? Women stir up lustful passions in (heterosexual) males. Ancient and modern men alike often succumbed to the temptation to ascribe their evil lusts to the women who stir up such lusts simply by existing. If women arouse lusts in men, those women must be full of lust and the source of male lust (e.g. Philo, *De Opificio*

Mundi 59 / 165-166). And if these lusts are believed to be evil, the women who provoke them must likewise be evil. To their credit, Augustine and Aquinas usually resist the lure of this argument and require female modesty because of the weakness of men, not the sinfulness of women.

As the ancient church had its extremists, so also ancient philosophy had its extremists. For instance, Epicurius and Lucretius did not find reproduction to be a necessity. Therefore sexual pleasure for them was an unnecessary evil (Nussbaum 140-191; Deming 63-64), though it was not excoriated to the extent that we find in Jerome. Other philosophers were more moderate, merely requiring reproduction as the desired end when the pleasures of sex are enjoyed. This moderate position in Philo likens additional sexual activity with one's wife to gluttony (SpL 3.9). The philosophical problem with sexual pleasure had to do with its lack of rationality. Lust was excited (or not excited) aside from rational concerns, and even the trained philosophical mind had to submerge itself in irrational behavior in order to reproduce. For the rational philosopher this submission to irrationality was an almost unendurable humiliation.

The pagan philosophical ideal of sex limited to procreation made its appearance in popular culture in a variety of ancient texts. For instance it is used for comic effect in an epigram of Martial (9.41), dating to the 1st century. In the Heliodorus novel *Ethiopica* (1.19) a pirate leader attempts to dignify his desire to marry a beautiful captive by explaining that this was not to satisfy his appetite but rather to produce offspring of appropriate parentage.² The desire to satisfy appetite is, of course, unworthy of true marriage (*contra* 1 Cor 7:1-9).

A negative value of sexual activity is obvious in the church fathers already studied in this chapter. Athenagoras denied to widows and widowers the right of remarriage, describing such remarriage as adulterous and lascivious. Clement openly borrowed sexual values from the Jewish Platonist Philo of Alexandria. Even the sexless nature of God was used as a basis for the celibate ideal (Roetzel 244-245).

Here we can follow only one strand of this theology of sexuality, for it had many manifestations, theological formulations and social ramifications. Thanks to the influence of Greek philosophy, Christianity took a pagan ideal and made it a social norm for a wide range of social classes, bending all manner of Scripture and tradition to the service of severe chastity. As Peter

Brown noted (p. 358), “Paul’s mighty notion of the flesh, as all that was opposed to the Spirit of God, was whittled down to more manageable proportions, by being referred exclusively to sexual activity.” To this day in our culture we still are likely to equate “sins of the flesh” with sexuality. The church fathers did also critique greed, gluttony, lust for power, and even lust for security, but sexuality had a special place of opprobrium in the patristic literature.

Too often the sex-negative attitude of the church fathers is ignored or underrated. Christine Gudorf briefly critiqued Augustine for his negative stance on sexuality, but emphasized Augustine’s misogyny (2000, pp 138-139; 1994, pp 129-131). The issue of sexual pleasure as an evil was marginally addressed (1994, pp 81-82), and this issue is marginal in most studies on the church’s response to sexual variance. However, the issue of this necessary evil must be understood before the historical church policies on sexuality can be understood.

The Revisionists

The revisionists of the tradition of the Necessary Evil are the Protestant reformers of the 16th century. As early as the *Augsburg Confession* (Art 23; cf. Art 27) the reformers attacked the requirement of clerical celibacy and affirmed the goodness of human sexuality as expressed within marriage (Maurer 180-181). Though Protestant reformers did find that sexual pleasure could be used for evil, it was not evil in itself, but rather sexual pleasure was good and part of God’s created order. They also found celibacy to be unnatural and the celibacy requirement for clergy and the religious to be dangerous as well as unnecessary. The celibacy requirement was blamed for the various scandals and sexual abuses perpetrated by the clergy on the laity of the church. Attacks on celibacy can be found in a variety of early Protestant literature, ranging from theological works (Calvin, *Institutes* 4.12.23-28) and political satires (Barlowe & Roye, *Rede Me and Be Nott Wrothe* 2608-2679 and *passim*) to popular narratives (Margaret of Navarre, *Heptameron*, stories 1, 5, 23, 29, 31, 33, 46, 48, 56, 72). Early Protestant polemical works continue to be cited heavily in modern Roman Catholic treatises contesting clerical celibacy (e.g. Ozment; Lynch). This Protestant shift in sexual thought is profound, but often neglected in modern studies. Only rarely do studies on the church’s response to sexual variance manage a brief statement on how the Reformation revised church tradition on sexuality, and revised it radically (e.g. Elliott 297; Hansen *et al.* 50-51, 65-66). Even studies which emphasize continuity between Medieval and Reformation sexual values admit that the

reformers shifted the value of marriage to “the ideal state” and ended the treatment of married people as “second-class Christians” (Wiesner-Hanks 63).

“Revisionist” is a term of opprobrium bandied about in the recent debates on homosexuality in the church. Wold’s use of the term has been noted in the last chapter, and in the Balch volume one contributor made heavy use of the term. Greene-McCreight marshaled the weight of church tradition against those who would allow homosexuality within the church, and repeatedly attacked the revisionist position as much for its revision as for its haste. Ironically it is Greene-McCreight who critiqued Augustine for his “extratextual interpretation devices,” namely his “dearly held Neoplatonic philosophy” (p 249). Not once did she include Augustine’s negative stance on sexual pleasure as part of his Neoplatonic philosophy or consider that without extra-textual interpretation devices the Biblical case against female homosexual relations would evaporate and the case against male homosexual relations would be weakened severely. Nor did she critique the role played by Augustine’s concept of sexuality in the church’s historic position on sexuality.

Protestantism is by nature a revisionist branch of Christianity. The Protestant, Reformed and Anabaptist branches of the 16th-century Reformation all shared the premise that even the deepest and longest-lasting church traditions can and should be revised, and be revised radically, using the Scriptures as a primary authority. Although the Bible clearly does restrict sexual activities, these restrictions do not follow the lines laid down by the theology of the necessary evil. There is good reason for this, the reason behind the Protestant revision. The Bible never upholds, and in several places repudiates the notion that sexual pleasure is a necessary evil, or that it should be restricted to procreation. The New Testament writers avoid making the connection between sexuality and reproduction, or define reproduction as the goal of marriage.

Returning to the revisionism of the Reformation, Luther’s *Smalcald Articles* 3 contains interesting language in the 11th article against clerical celibacy. It states that the power of the prelates to impose celibacy is equal to their power to make, “a woman of a man or a man of a woman, or annihilate such distinctions.”³ This language should be given its full weight in the modern climate where it is widely held that sexual orientation and gender identity usually have a biological basis and

³ Latin, “nec . . . datum est, ut ex masculo feminam aut ex femella marem condamus aut utrumque annihilemus.” German, “aus einem Mannlein ein Fraulein oder aus einem Fraulein ein Mannlein zu machen oder beides nichts zu machen.”

are not merely learned.

If we consider the points studied by Greene-McCreight we find the specific ways in which the Protestant Reformation is not complete and revisionism is called for in the church's response to sexual minorities.

The Two Testaments

Greene-McCreight first states, "Traditional hermeneutics offered a coherent theological reading of the two covenants of our Bible" (p 249). She is not clear whether she views the "two covenants" synonymous with the two Testaments, though she recognizes the problem of affirming God's word in both Testaments "without the New Testament stifling the witness of the Old." Of course the mass of scholarship on the two covenants, or for that matter the relationship of the two Testaments, clearly indicates that the "coherent theological reading" itself is a myth which has existed under systems based on "extratextual interpretation devices." It is enough here to point out that the concept of the old and new covenants is itself derived from the Old Testament and was not created within the New (Heb 8:8-13; 10:15-17 / Jer 31:31-34; Mendenhall 2002, p. 215; cf. 2001, pp 185-186; Moberly).⁴ The Biblical concept of the new covenant precedes the New Testament literature.

For her second point Greene-McCreight extends the problem noted in her first point, that "without adequate relating of the two Testaments, Christian appropriation of the law becomes problematic" (p 250). At this point we can draw Seitz into the discussion, for in his chapter in Balch's volume as well as in a *Theology Today* article he argued extensively for a strong interaction of the two Testaments in Christian ethics, especially on the issue of homosexuality. Seitz strongly criticizes the "tendencies in Christian circles to privilege . . . the New Testament witness(es) over against the Old Testament (Balch 178).

In a lengthy footnote in his *Theology Today* article (p 240) Seitz glides quickly over a counterexample to his method for applying Old Testament law in the church. The problem is the food law of Acts 15, and here the problem does not involve privileging one Testament over the other,

⁴ Also interesting, the Jeremiah text is preceded by a declaration which runs contrary to the idea of inherited guilt or salvation (31:29-30; cf. Ex 20:5; Deut 5:9), a factor important to the idea of the new covenant and to the family values of the New Testament.

but rather one New Testament witness (perceived as new covenant) over another (perceived as old covenant). The problem shares several important parallels to the issues surrounding homosexuality in church ethics. This food law is a classic conundrum for Protestants, and Balch included a footnote on early Lutheran attempts to come to a satisfactory conclusion (p 291, n 61).

Acts 15 explicitly asks and answers the question of which laws should be required of gentile converts. One of the laws specified is a dietary law, a ban on eating the flesh of improperly killed animals. Though food laws do not receive quite as much attention as sexual ethics in Biblical narrative, prophecy and law, the food laws do appear with some regularity as a consistent undercurrent (e.g. 1 Sam 14:24-35; Ezk 4:14-15). The particular prohibition in Acts 15 is derived from Genesis 9 when God first gave humans permission to eat animal flesh. Because Noah was the ancestor of all humanity, the laws given to Noah were understood as incumbent on all humanity, gentile as well as Jew, and indeed there are significant similarities between the laws of Acts 15 and Genesis 9 (Bockmuehl 1995; 2000, pp 164-167).⁵

However, this food law does not begin with Genesis 9. The roots of this law extend into the vegetarian ethic of the creation story itself in Genesis 1 & 2 (GenRab 34.13.1) and are reflected in the ideal vegetarian world envisioned in Isaiah 11:6-9; 65:25. When Noah is given permission to eat animal flesh he is given a strong restriction to remind him of the sacredness of the life which he takes when he kills the animal. The *nephesh* (soul/life) of the animal remains untouchable, and so the blood must not be eaten (Lev 17:10-11). As with sexual laws, so also the food laws have roots deep in the created order of Genesis 1-2 and an ethical basis which transcends and informs the specific food laws. As Romans 1:27 and the term *arsenokoites* (— 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10) are perceived as being derived from Leviticus 18:22. So the laws of Acts 15 derive from Genesis 9 (Bockmuehl 1995). As some modern theologians privilege Paul's theology over Paul's teachings on sexuality (theologians criticized by Seitz and Green-McCreight), so also most Christian theologians privilege Paul's perceived theology about food restrictions over the law of Acts 15.

But Acts 15 remains a text within the New Testament canon, thus bearing the authority of that canon. And the author of Acts claims to have been a traveling companion of this same Paul and

⁵ There is an interesting family values shift between Genesis 9 and Acts 15. Genesis 9:7 quotes and expands on Genesis 1:28, "Be fruitful and multiply." Acts 15 ignores procreation and shifts this command to a prohibition on fornication.

expends more space on Paul than any other non-divine character in the story. According to the book of Acts the events of Acts 15 occurred prior to Paul's first visit to Greece, which would place it prior to the time when Paul wrote his epistles to the Romans and Corinthians, epistles which are often understood as disposing of all food restrictions. And the book of Acts itself was completed long after Paul wrote and sent those epistles. Yet at no point does the author of Acts hint that there was any problem with the validity of the laws upheld in Acts 15, including the dietary restriction. Instead, in 16:4 the author claims the Paul carried this apostolic message on gentile behavior to his churches. In other words, given the canonical authority of Acts and its position relative to Romans and 1 Corinthians, it would seem that Acts 15 should be the text which holds the position of interpreting and limiting what may be derived from Romans and 1 Corinthians concerning food laws. If Paul dissented from the edict of Acts 15, his dissent is not preserved in Acts and is not specified in his letters – and canonical authority suggests that this is due to Divine providence. If Paul did not dissent, those who interpret Romans and 1 Corinthians to the contrary are misunderstanding Paul.

In other words, very few meat products available in the markets of the Western world are licit for Christian consumption. The near-universal neglect of this law throughout the church illustrates the problem of holding sexual minorities in the churches to traditions which reject same-sex relationships and do not recognize transsexuality. If tradition stands primary, it is a tradition based on Neoplatonic and other pagan ideals which are rarely specific on diet but define sexuality as a necessary evil. If the Bible stands primary, it is usually understood through a lens of Pauline theology which trumps a variety of holiness laws, even those explicitly upheld in the New Testament, whether dietary or sexual. It is only by affirming the food restriction of Acts 15 that Protestants seeking a consistent Bible hermeneutic can hope to uphold a ban on same-sex relations within church.

And these laws are upheld in only a handful of texts. Though food laws are scattered through a variety of Old Testament texts, they are upheld in the New Testament only in a small set of texts found in Acts 15 and 21. But, to quote from Seitz (1995, p 240 n.), “The New Testament does not break ranks with the teaching of the Old Testament on this matter.” The ban on male homosexuality fares more poorly in the old Testament for it is found only in Leviticus 18 & 20 with no firm narrative or prophetic support. In the New Testament the negative texts are limited to a verse in Romans 1 and a term in the vice lists of 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:10. As we have seen,

the earliest readers of these texts understood them as specific to pederasty. What the food laws lacked was a popular pagan philosophy which would support such laws the way Middle Platonism, Neoplatonism and Stoicism supported a broad variety of sexual restrictions, some of which were extra-Biblical.

There remains one more complication in this question of laws and their place in the church. Seitz and Greene-McCreight both defended heterosexuality and may be presumed to be heterosexual themselves. Most (not all) of their opponents cited in their articles are homosexual. When I write on the food laws I write as a vegetarian with the same “objective” vantage point of heterosexuals who comment on homosexuality within the church. How should we incorporate information about the commentator’s status into our discussions about the law within the church?

The above discussion raises into high relief some of the problems encountered especially by Protestant churches in applying Scriptural authority to discussions which affect the lifestyles of a multitude of church members. I have touched on a few issues hinted in my statement, “A full and proper exposition of biblical authority and use in the various churches is far beyond the reach of any monograph, much less a journal article.”(Miller 1997) The problem of Acts 15 could be used as a dry run for ethical systems which seek to relate the two covenants, the two Testaments and the problems of law within the church. Can Seitz or Greene-McCreight retain their methods without significantly altering the eating habits of Protestant Christianity? If they cannot, should their method retain force when applied to homosexuality? Is there an unofficial hermeneutic which supercedes the plain word of Scripture on the matter of meats, but not sexual minorities (or vice-versa)? Or should the eating habits of the church be revised radically?

And what of other Biblical law? For 1400 years the church universally forbade lending at interest,⁶ something which changed in the West just before the Renaissance. Yet even during the Renaissance the practice continued to be seen as unholy, as may be seen from Shakespeare’s play *The Merchant of Venice* (see Act 1, Scene 3), in particular the recent movie version with Al Pacino as Shylock. A scholastic argument was accepted into canon law which approved of interest if it

⁶ E.g. Dante, *Inferno* (11.43-51; 14.19-27) where bankers and pederasts share the same circle of Hell, but bankers have the greater punishment (Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, p 130). The Biblical prohibition on interest reads Ex 22:25; Lev 25:36-37; Dt 23:19-20 through the lens of Luke 10:29-37, “Who is my neighbor?” The church fathers added a variety of other texts from both testaments on this issue (e.g. Tertullian, *C. Marcion* 4.17).

could be defined as payment for risk (Pirenne 137-139), a bit of Scriptural law-twisting which would be roundly condemned if applied to a sexual law. Of course, prior to the change Christians did practice lending at interest throughout Medieval Europe, though usually the interest was hidden as damages, compulsory late-payment fees, rent on mortgaged property, etc. They charged something like interest, but not openly. Today open, unashamed bankers are welcomed in the pews of almost every church in the Western world, and their money-lending is done publicly with scarcely a protest from the churches.

Also, for centuries “Christian” rulers and states allowed lending at interest to be practiced by resident non-Christians – that is to say Jews. When the church decides an activity is immoral, should non-Christians, or variant Christians, be allowed to pursue such immoral activities? Did the church and Christian governments have an obligation to prevent those of other religious persuasions from engaging in such activities that the church deemed immoral?

Everyone who studies Biblical law in the churches should review the four case studies in Willard Swartley’s classic work, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women*. The sure foundations of the hermeneutics of Seitz and Greene-McCreight are certainly not as solid as they would claim, and Greene-McCreight’s tradition is heavily inflected by extra-Biblical agendas and presuppositions.

Celibacy

Clerical celibacy has its roots in the early church under the influence of philosophical aesceticism, heavily indebted to Platonic, Pythagorean, Stoic and Platonic schools of philosophy. These philosophies are responsible for the construction of sexual pleasure as a necessary evil in church tradition. These same schools of philosophy had already created within some forms of Judaism an ideal of celibacy (Van der Horst 2002, p 399), aided by certain restrictions on sexual behavior in the laws of Moses. In the law of Moses men on military campaigns are restricted from emissions of semen – with or without women present. Also, since an emission of semen makes a man unclean until evening, many assume that priests and those seeking to worship in the Temple are likewise restricted from emissions of semen prior to entering the Temple area. In spite of these restrictions, the extreme of celibacy is never contemplated as an ideal in the Hebrew Scriptures. That ideal would have to await a Greco-Roman context which prized aesceticism. Also, this celibacy ideal did not survive within Judaism, though it thrived in the churches of gentile Christianity.

Early in the Protestant Reformation this asceticism was rejected, especially in the form of clerical celibacy. Article 23 of the *Augsburg Confession* begins with a complaint about sexually incontinent priests – failures at celibacy. In the *Apology* this section likewise begins with the notoriety of the same failure. Both documents go on to challenge the authority of the church to impose such an unnatural and dangerous restriction on this large class of people (c.f. *Smalcald* 3.11). Some conservative Protestant writers today nuance the celibacy issue by finding that it should be attempted only by those who are, in some sense, eunuchs (e.g. Glasscock 387-388). Most Protestant publications have ceased active polemics against the Catholic Church, including on the issue of clerical celibacy. Ecumenical Protestant churches ceased anti-Catholic polemics in the wake of Vatican II, and although the issue remains current in a few conservative and Fundamentalist publications (e.g. Chick, R. Brown), others have ceased these polemics entirely. In America the abortion issue seems to be a major player in silencing Fundamentalist anti-Catholic literature, for on this issue Catholics are seen as major allies who should not be attacked.⁷

These conservative Protestant voices resurfaced in the Letters to the Editor sections of newspapers across North America on the heels of negative press on non-celibate priests. National coverage began with a KnightRidder article from the Kansas City Star. In my local Sunday paper it ran as a front-page article with a second supporting article inside (Thomas, Knight Ridder). Studies found Catholic priests to have 4-11 times the AIDS rate of the general population, and the celibacy requirement with its related failure rate were blamed. Almost a year later a major scandal concerning pedophile priests made the covers of all major U.S. news magazines. Properly, the scandal concerned church governance which protected the offending priests while putting at risk the children of the laity. However, the problem of maintaining celibacy played a major role in the scandal. Some writers have combined the two issues by blaming pedophile priests for some AIDS

⁷ Keith Green's *Last Days Newsletter* may illustrate this phenomenon. Issues 3.3-4.2 (1980-1981) contain the four-part "Catholic Chronicles," a series critiquing the Catholic Church, offered subsequently as four tracts. These four tracts were first omitted in issue 7.1 (1984), when the first anti-abortion tract was offered and attendance at the Washington, D.C. March for Life was encouraged. As pro-life emphasis increased in the *Newsletter*, the "Chronicles" would be omitted on occasion. They were last offered in 1986, and in issue 10.4 (1987) Melody Green announced that they would no longer be offered. Continuing Fundamentalist anti-Catholicism remains, but it tends to be expressed sporadically and is often criticized within Fundamentalist circles.

cases (Strub).

A third scandal with less publicity concerns nuns who claim a very high rate of sexual abuse and/or sexual activity, estimated at about 40% of all nuns in the United States. Though much of the abuse comes from outside the celibate orders of the church, many, many cases involve priests, prelates and others sworn to celibacy, including fellow nuns. As a result of these scandals, in respectable society sociologists and media pundits have replaced Protestant apologists in questioning the imposition of celibacy on an entire class of people. Imposed celibacy does not seem to function at an acceptable level in our society or any past Western society from which we have good historical records.

There remains a basic difference in the responses of Catholic and conservative Protestant organizations in their approach to the problem of homosexuality. The many Protestant ministries dedicated to sexual orientation advocate change and attempt to produce heterosexual function. Catholic ministries, in contrast, tend to advocate celibacy (e.g. Besen 51). The Catholic Church has a long history of dealing with the problems associated with enforced celibacy and finds no more difficulty in imposing this lifestyle upon homosexuals as it does maintaining this policy for the clergy. The Catholic hierarchy is not ignorant or uninformed about the difficulties involved in these policies, including Protestant and sociological protests, and has made an informed choice to promote celibacy.

A fundamental Protestant ethic states that celibacy is for the very few, and to impose it on a large segment of society (clergy) is unnatural and invites disaster. But what if that entire class of people is a sexual minority instead? Consider the Larry King interview with Bob Jones III of Bob Jones University.⁸ When Jones lists homosexuality and adultery together as sin, King counters by pointing out that adultery is chosen. King asks if homosexuality is a choice and Jones replies, “God would not call it a sin if it was something a person couldn’t help. God would be cruel to send a man to Hell for something he couldn’t help.” Aside from a debate over free will versus predestination, Jones does not consider the possibility of a celibate homosexual and therefore assumes sexual orientation must be a choice and change must be possible.

More extreme conservative Protestants tend to be more explicit than Bob Jones III. The notorious preacher Fred Phelps explicitly links homosexual orientation with predestination to

⁸ *Larry King Live*, CNN, March 3, 2000.

perdition. Likewise Phelps rejects the idea of a celibate homosexual (Bell). The orientation itself is a choice on God's part concerning the homosexual's eternal destiny.

If the homosexual cannot be trusted to be celibate, and if conservative Protestants reject homosexual relationships in any form, what is to be done? If both homosexuality and celibacy are not acceptable, then the homosexual must be changed into a heterosexual and properly married off. In theory, simply by changing sexual orientation gay men can be successful within heterosexual monogamy and lesbians can learn to find satisfaction with a husband. Of course, change ministries do not change the orientation of the vast majority of clients who attempt the various forms of reparative therapy or exorcism offered by these ministries (Besen, Kemena). Indeed, it is questionable whether anyone's orientation is changed in these ministries, though some bisexuals may find support systems to maintain themselves on the heterosexual side of the line.

The problem with celibacy remains very much alive among conservative Protestants. And the Bible can be useful in this discussion only if Protestantism once again shakes itself loose from the pagan philosophy which undergirds clerical celibacy and has dominated most of church history.

For decades almost no Protestant work has been done on the problem of clerical celibacy, especially since Vatican II. However within the Roman Catholic communion since Vatican II the *Augsburg Confession* and other early Protestant polemics against clerical celibacy have loomed large in arguments to end the celibacy requirement in the Catholic Church. The argument has died down within the Catholic Church and has become the domain of sociologists.⁹ But the recent sexual scandals have returned the clerical debate to a central issue within the church (e.g. Rohr).

The celibacy question remains an important and poorly explored topic within the various debates in the church over sexual issues. Should Protestants trust celibacy as an option for large sectors of the church, in particular sexual minorities? Should Catholics finally recognize that celibacy is for a few individuals and is beyond the reach of any large segment of the church, clergy or sexual minorities? How much of the church's pagan philosophical heritage should be retained in our sexual ethos? If "Biblical" sexuality is desired as the church norm, which Biblical sexual codes and values should be upheld as standard? Should "family values" be based on the Old Testament emphasis on procreation, the New Testament emphasis on the church as para-family, or

⁹ Some of whom ignore the historical underpinnings of celibacy and focus solely on the modern pragmatics of maintaining an all-celibate, all-male priesthood (Schoenherr).

some other synthesis? And when, if ever, is it appropriate to accuse an opponent in the church of being “revisionist”?