

**THE BOND
THAT BREAKS
THE BOUNDARIES**

RALPH BLAIR

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When it comes to the subject of gay and lesbian evangelical Christians, *most evangelical Christians agree with most gays and lesbians*. Just as Grape-Nuts is neither grapes nor nuts and Christian Science is neither Christian nor science and Therapeutic Touch is neither therapeutic nor touch, to most evangelicals *and to most gay people, a gay evangelical Christian is neither truly gay nor truly Christian*. For most people, you cannot be *both* an openly evangelical Christian *and* an openly gay man or lesbian.

EVANGELICAL AND GAY/LESBIAN DIVERSITY

Actually there are *all sorts* of evangelicals – from the all-out-of-sorts kind to those who aren't. And there are *all sorts* of gay men and lesbians – from the all-out-of-sorts kind to those who aren't.

According to an evangelical history professor: "Once past a shared commitment to a supernatural gospel, evangelicals are all over the place theologically." [Mark Noll] The president of Southern Baptist Seminary joins a church historian at Westminster Seminary to declare that "No single evangelical tradition exists." [Albert Mohler, Jr. and D. G. Hart] A Regent College theology professor states: "Evangelicalism is a network and tradition of Christians united on a few select convictions. As such, evangelicalism is not essentially committed to this or that ... so long as Christ is glorified, the Bible obeyed, the gospel preached and the kingdom extended." [John G. Stackhouse, Jr.]

"Evangelical identity," says an Anglican evangelical, "has come to embrace such a wide range of theological options." And he grants that it has been so ever since the 18th century split between John Wesley and George Whitefield – during the very beginnings of what is known as evangelicalism. [Gerald Bray] He notes that "from that day to this, there has never been an evangelical church or even a confession of faith, which all evangelicals can accept as definitive of this movement."

In his new book, *Christian America?*, sociologist Christian Smith again reports research that undercuts the notion that

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evangelicals make up a monolithic community. Evangelicals are divided along political, racial and class lines. And contrary to popular opinion, evangelicalism and the Religious Right are not synonymous, though most people who identify as evangelicals do not approve of homosexuality.

The president of the board of the Religious Right's *World* magazine has proposed that a group of conservative Christians start a daily newspaper "from a distinctively Christian point of view." If his *World* magazine is any indication, what he means by reporting the news "from a perspective committed to the Bible as the inerrant Word of God" is a perspective that's against homosexuals and for capital-gains tax cuts. But, at any rate, he laments that there's an even bigger obstacle than the raising of the millions of dollars it would take to finance such a daily newspaper. He complains: "We Christians are woefully disunified and unprepared ideologically and philosophically to define and then live out the profile of a 'Christian' daily newspaper. We Christians still disagree way too much on what it means to be a 'Christian' anything." [Joel Belz] Evangelical Christian diversity is "way too much" for him.

As the dean of American church historians puts it: "There are evangelicals and there are evangelicals." [Martin E. Marty]

And, of course, there are gays and there are gays. There are lesbians and there are lesbians. A gay columnist says: "I'm an Irish Catholic fag from Chicago. What do I have in common with a Polynesian lesbian immigrant? There's this infantile notion that there is such a thing as a gay community and that they all feel and think the same way about everything." [Dan Savage] Most gay people really don't spend all their free time doing designer drugs in the urban club scene. And the self-appointed politically-correct "gay leadership" doesn't speak for most gay people. According to a gay columnist: "Few of us feel the national organizations are even the tiniest bit relevant to our lives." [Mubarak Dahir] Another gay columnist says he's "always laughed at homophobic conservatives' bogeyman notion of a 'gay agenda' since [his] experience has proven that two or more gay people can't agree on where to go for dinner, much less on the public platform of a political event." [Steve Bolerjack]

And just as the intolerant Religious Right rages against less conservative Christians, the intolerant GLBT Left rages against less liberal lesbians and gay men. For example, a recent *New York Times* article on pro-life lesbian columnist Norah Vincent

noted the "rage" her opinion pieces provoke among the GLBT elite.

Homosexuality and evangelical Christianity can be approached from a number of angles: historical, political, sociological, economic, cultural, biblical, theological, pastoral. For example, what *historical* preparation has there been for a sexuality that's been so unspeakable for so long? What *psychological* preparation has there been for something one never expected? How can evangelical Christians who are gay "come out" without risking the loss of family and friends? But how then are evangelical Christians to know that they already know and love homosexuals without realizing it? How can Christians who are gay withstand their churches' rejection of their homosexuality and still hold to the rest of the faith they've been taught in these churches? How can evangelical pastors *afford* to change their minds on homosexuality when to do so would, no doubt, mean their *economic* and *social* ruin? And how can any evangelicals change their minds about homosexuality when they're told over and over and over again that the Bible condemns all expressions of homosexuality and when the evangelical press pushes hopeless claims of a "deliverance" through Christ?

THE BIBLE AND "HOMOSEXUALITY"

Christians turn to the Bible for many reasons. Some do so to know what the Bible says. But too many Christians turn to the Bible merely to find footnotes for their foolishness and proof-texts for their prejudice. Not surprisingly, they find what they seek. Over the years they've found proofs that the world is only six thousand years old, that slavery is God-ordained, that women and blacks should not be allowed to vote, that interracial marriage is wrong, that women should neither preach nor wear lipstick, and on and on. The Bible verses that once footnoted these notions are all still in the Bible. But most Christians have changed their minds about these matters. So they've made the Bible verses fit their changed minds or they simply ignore those verses altogether.

According to evangelical theologian Alister McGrath: "Theology is just another discipline, not an eternal theological truth. It is natural, and to be expected, that it will be revised over and over again by each generation."

Here's just one example of such theological shifting within contemporary evangelicalism. In a new sociological study of an

InterVarsity group, the researcher [Paul A. Bramadat] is taken aback by the group's charismatic concentration on spiritual warfare and he devotes a whole chapter to "Satan and the Spiritual Realm." An evangelical theologian's review of this book notes that when *he* belonged to an IVCF chapter 20 years ago, "almost no one ever referred to demons." [John G. Stackhouse, Jr.] I remember that when I was on the IVCF staff nearly 40 years ago, the official IVCF line on such charismatic theology was a *warning!*

A year ago, two Gordon College student groups – the Society for New Politics and Gender & Justice – invited me to come to campus to speak on homosexuality. After much hassle, the administration of this evangelical college ruled that I would be allowed to speak only after a presentation of the college's "Bible-believing" viewpoint on homosexuality. So before I gave my presentation, Elaine Phillips of the Bible and Theology faculty gave the "official" line on the Bible and homosexuality. Then it was my turn. I noted that there was a time when Gordon College would not have employed a *woman* to teach the Bible to male students. I also called attention to a notice in the campus newspaper about an upcoming "Dance 'til You Drop" event and reminded the audience that there was a time when Gordon College would not have permitted a campus dance.

Evangelicals have come a long way on heterosexuality. In an article on "Singles, Sex, & Celibacy" in a recent issue of the evangelical *Christian Counseling Today* journal, counselor Sharon Morris answers the Christian single's question: "How far can I go and not have sex?" She points out that "what is done physically should match the relationship spiritually." Here's what she suggests Christian counselors do in their working with Christian singles: "Place a circle in the middle of a piece of paper. In the circle write: marriage. Draw several circles around the marriage circle and label them in progression: *engaged, dating toward engagement, dating, casual going out.* Next, go back to the center marriage circle and write *sexual intercourse.* Now for each progressive stage of dating, have your client establish her physical boundaries in the light of God's guidance." This advice is *not* what would have been said only a few years ago.

But these fluctuations from fundamentalism's past are but recent examples of revisions that have characterized church history. We must remember that Augustine published 14 books of "retractations." And the best of the Reformed tradition takes

seriously its motto: Reformed and Ever Reforming. The first church historian at Westminster Seminary [Paul Woolley] used to say that he resisted writing books because he'd later not agree with what he'd written earlier. Said Coventry Patmore, at the close of the 19th century: "In all matters but the very few defined by the Church, Catholic opinion is liable to great though slow change, and it shares in or even leads the advances of civilization, especially in its increasing mildness. For instance, an eternity necessarily intolerable for all persons out of the pale of the visible Church, is an opinion which is probably now only taught by the priests of Ireland and by Irish priests in England; and that only by way of alleviating their feelings towards the governing country."

But when it comes to homosexuality, most Christian conservatives have not changed their minds. So they still rummage through the Bible for verses to back them up.

When Christians turn to the Bible to find something on *homosexuality* they'd do well take note of a word of caution from the most conservative professor at conservative Calvin Seminary. I'm referring to a warning from the late Marten H. Woudstra, chair of the Old Testament translation committee for the NIV Bible and, in 1979, president of The Evangelical Theological Society. His conservative colleagues called his work "outstanding" [Allan A. MacRae] and "distinguished" [Ronald Youngblood] and predicted that his commentary on Joshua would "become the standard evangelical commentary on the book for years to come." [Idem.] Woudstra's word of caution on the Bible and homosexuality was delivered to the Synod of his denomination – the very conservative Christian Reformed Church. He said: "There is nothing in the Old Testament that corresponds to homosexuality as we understand it today." He was *so carefully* conservative that, as an *Old Testament* scholar, he declined to comment on the *New Testament*. Yet, as soon as antigay fundamentalists in Britain found out that Woudstra was gay, they insulted his memory by mounting a campaign to dump the NIV as a "sodomite's Bible" and championed the King James Version – evidently oblivious to the king's sexual proclivities. But had Woudstra intended to be so recklessly gay-activist, would he have restricted his word of caution to his Old Testament expertise?

Turning to the *New Testament* and homosexuality, here's what the world-renowned preacher/theologian and author of *The Evangelical Faith*, Helmut Thielicke, had to say as far back

as the early 1960s: "Homosexuality ... can be discussed at all only in the framework of that freedom which is given to us by the insight that even the New Testament does not provide us with an evident, normative dictum with regard to this question. Even the kind of question which we have arrived at ... must for purely historical reasons be alien to the New Testament."

These warnings from Woudstra and Thielicke are like those of classicists, historians, anthropologists and literary scholars who warn against our "reading contemporary concerns and politics into texts and artifacts removed from their social context." [John J. Winkler] As it's explained by an historian of Greek antiquity: "Sexual categories which seem so obvious to us, those which divide humanity into 'heterosexuals' and 'homosexuals,' seem unknown to the ancient Greeks." [Robert Padgug] According to another historian: the ancients "conceived of 'sexuality' in nonsexual terms: What was fundamental to their experience of sex was not anything we would regard as essentially sexual; rather, it was something essentially social – namely, the modality of power relations that informed and structured the sexual act." [David Halperin] Moreover, as C. S. Lewis and others have pointed out, our own familiar *experience of romantic love* itself post-dates biblical times, coming to us from the early Middle Ages.

As I've been saying for forty years now, there are no homosexuals in the Bible. Contrary to the attacks by the antigay lobby, neither the men of Sodom, nor cult prostitutes, slave boys and masters, nor call boys and customers were gay. And contrary to the special pleading of the GLBTQ apologists, Ruth and Naomi were no lesbians, David and Jonathan weren't gay, and neither were Jesus and John. *The Bible is an empty closet.*

But evangelicals and fundamentalists abuse gays and lesbians with abused Bible verses, so let's take a look at the Book to see what's up.

GENESIS 1:27. God created people in God's own image: male and female. Here's the Hebraic celebration of God's equal creation of male and female for mutuality – a foreign concept among ancient pagans. Says another evangelical scholar, "Crude natural law ideas are [nowadays] read into ...Genesis [to support] the 'physicalist' ethical model upon which heterosexism is built." [Douglas J. Miller] He notes that such eisegesis "is based upon the obvious anachronism of reading 13th century definitions of nature into ancient Hebrew texts."

Paul explicitly addresses the "male and female" pairing of Genesis. In his letter to the Galatians, he lifts the term "male and female" from the Genesis text as he deliberately shifts from his "neither/nor" pairings and states that *in Christ, there is now no theological significance to this "male and female" pairing.* [Gal 3:28] Evangelical Pauline scholar F. F. Bruce points out that "Paul states the basic principle here; if restrictions on it are found elsewhere, they are to be understood in relation to Galatians 3:28, and not *vice versa.*"

GENESIS 19:1-9. Here's the story of Sodom. It's not what most people think it's about, though there was that woman who once thanked Joseph Parker of London's City Temple for clearing up her confusion over Sodom and Gomorrah. She told him she'd always thought that Sodom and Gomorrah were husband and wife.

An evangelical Bible scholar notes: "the oppression of the stranger is the basic element of Genesis 19:1-9 [and] 'sodomy' in Genesis is basically oppression of the weak and helpless." [William Brownlee] The prophet Ezekiel had declared this long ago: "As I live, says the Lord God, ... this was the sin of your sister city of Sodom: she and her suburbs had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not help or encourage the poor and needy. They were arrogant and this was abominable in my eyes." [16:48f] The focus is on Sodom's abomination *long before* the attempted gang-rape. Jesus recalled Sodom's refusal of hospitality to *God's* messengers as he warned *his own* messengers that they too would face refusals of hospitality. [Matt 10:15] Here again, we have biblical allusion to biblical text. And none of it sees Sodom as a story of sex.

LEVITICUS 18:22 (20:13). You shall not lie with men as with women: it is abomination.

This verse is incomprehensible apart from an understanding of the inferior status of women in the ancient Middle East. To use another man as one would use a woman was the ultimate insult. Emasculate a fellow Israelite? Abominable!

So among the ritual practices proscribed in this ancient holiness code (chapters 17-26) – along with impurities such as molds, the mixing of foods and weavings that don't belong together, the eating of blood and intercourse with menstruating women – is the mixing of sex *roles* resulting in ritual pollution. But these are proscriptions which both Jesus and Paul rejected (cf. Mark 7:17-23; Rom 14:14, 20) to the consternation of the religious establishment and to their own peril at the hands of

that religious establishment. Even the *Fundamentalist Journal* admits that this code condemns "idolatrous practices" and "ceremonial uncleanness," concluding: "We are not bound by these commands today." Nonetheless, fundamentalists still misuse these useless rules to abuse homosexuals.

DEUTERONOMY 23:17-18. No daughter in Israel, nor any son, may become a temple prostitute ... for these are abomination to the Lord God.

The King James mistranslation here is "sodomite." But no form of the word for Sodom is found in this Hebrew text. The words are *qedeshah* and *qadesh*. They mean holy whores and sacred male prostitutes of the Canaanite fertility rites. The magical idea was this: cultic sex acts arouse the gods and result in successful pregnancies and harvests. The term "abomination has a cultic sense." [A. D. H. Mayes] Israel was not to engage in such pagan pandering. Again, we have here nothing against homosexuality as such.

ROMANS 1:26-27. Alluding to pagan religious practices, Paul notes that the women exchange natural use for unnatural and also the men, leaving the natural use of women, lust in their desire for each other, males working shame with males, and receiving within themselves the penalty of their error.

Here, in typical Jewish polemic, Paul is ridiculing pagan religion. He says that the pagans knew enough about God to be thankful, but that they rebelled and worshipped idols instead of God. To build his case – which he turns against self-righteous Jews just a few sentences later – he takes note of the cross-dressing, sex-role exchange, and sex among priestesses and between men and eunuch prostitutes in the temple of Aphrodite under the shadow of which he's writing this Roman letter from Corinth.

Here's how a Bible scholar describes these sexual cultic rituals in the very conservative *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*: "Men wore veils and long hair as signs of their dedication to the god, while women used the unveiling and shorn hair to indicate their devotion. Men masqueraded as women, and in a rare vase painting from Corinth a woman is dressed in satyr pants equipped with the male organ. Thus she dances before Dionysos, a deity who had been raised as a girl and was himself called male-female and 'sham man.'" [Catherine Kroeger] She continues: "The sex exchange that characterized the cults of such great goddesses as Cybele, the Syrian goddess, and Artemis of Ephesus was more grisly.

Males voluntarily castrated themselves and assumed women's garments. A relief from Rome shows a high priest of Cybele. The castrated priest wears veil, necklaces, earrings and feminine dress. He is considered to have exchanged his sexual identity and to have become a she-priest." Doesn't this sound like what Paul has in mind in his ridiculing the ungrateful goyim?

I CORINTHIANS 6:9 and I TIMOTHY 1:10, the Apostle's reference to the malakoi and the arsenokoitai. But who were they?

The Fundamentalist Journal admits: "these words are difficult to translate." Evangelical New Testament scholar Gordon D. Fee also grants that these two terms are "difficult" to pin down. But such acknowledged difficulty does not stop antigay preachers who want to push "homosexuals!" into the Bible.

Paul seems to have coined the term *arsenokoitai*, since we can't find it elsewhere in the literature of Paul's day. And since he puts the word in a list, there's no sentence context to help with the meaning. Fee confirms that "this is its first appearance in preserved literature" and adds: "subsequent authors are reluctant to use it, especially when describing homosexual activity."

Though antigay commentators say the term means "going to bed with a male" because it combines terms for male and bed, we cannot know. After all, deciphering what a term means by *that* means would come up with a murderer of women for "lady-killer." [John Boswell] Words can mean more than the sum of their parts.

I once debated a well-known evangelical who insisted that *arsenokoitai* meant "homosexuals" because, in *his* words: "they put the penis in the *arse*." [Sherwood Wirt] But, of course, a Greek prefix and a British variant for the buttocks are unrelated. Besides, as I told him, they don't *all* "put the penis in the arse."

Ancient sources indicate that the *malakoi* were "effeminate call-boys." Some think that the *arsenokoitai* may have been their customers. Who knows. At any rate, call-boys were substitutes for women because they could provide for genital gratification without the man's stooping to have sex with females. Females were beneath the social status of males. Call-boys were desired so long as they were still "feminine" in appearance – only so long as they had not yet sprouted facial

hair and other indications of emerging masculinity. This does *not* describe the preferred sex partners of gay men these days.

The other kind of pederasty in Paul's day was that of slave "pet-boys." Both their adult and adolescent owners exploited them for sex. Again, these desired boys were pre-pubescent.

Now since these difficult terms appear in a vice list, let's take note of what a scholar has to say about interpreting vice lists. In the multi-volume *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* we're told that "it is doubtful whether ... we can or should try to fix with precision the meaning of each individual word" in a vice list. [Albrecht Stumpff] If this can be said about more familiar words in vice lists, it certainly must be said about a word that's otherwise unknown to us.

But Paul's point in this passage does not depend on the meaning of any specific item in his vice list. His point is this: Christians who slander and sue each other in pagan courts are shameful. They are as shameful as robbers, drunkards, the greedy, and the *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, whatever they were. But today, some of the most viciously antigay preachers readily run rough-shod over Paul's plain teaching and sue other Christians in the secular courts while they proof-text their attacks on gays by footnoting this very passage. One of the latest of these is fundamentalist preacher Tim LaHaye, co-author of the best-selling series, *Left Behind*. For many years he's been blasting gays on the basis of this Bible verse. Now, in violation of the whole passage, he's suing fellow Christians in secular courts.

In his entry on homosexuality in the evangelical *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (published by InterVarsity Press), D. F. Wright acknowledges that, in contrast to today's antigay Christians, "Paul does not single out same-sex intercourse as specially perverted or monstrous." Actually, as we know homosexuality, Paul doesn't single it out at all. Wright observes that "the paucity of Paul's references is inconsistent with [homosexuality's] being incomparably execrable."

Well there they are: the Bible verses used these days to terrorize gay Christians, condemn all homosexuality and deprive lesbians and gay men of all opportunity to meet needs for loving psychosexual intimacy. How would heterosexuals like it if such flimsy arguments were used to condemn them and prohibit their meeting *their* basic needs for loving psychosexual intimacy?

By the way, it's not as if flimsy theological arguments have *not* been used against *heterosexual* acts – even in marriage! There's a very long anti-sex heritage in much of religion – not least of all in the Christian West. Sexual intercourse – even in marriage – was said to be an emergency outlet for the extinguishing of burning flesh. Procreation had priority over pleasure – for Augustine and even for Luther. For Calvin, the cloak of marriage "covers over the fault of sexual passion" – but notice that that sexual passion is still a *fault* "springing from the corruption of human nature."

What would those sexually squeamish church fathers think of Tim LaHaye's sex manual that speaks about the "eruptive climax that engulfs the participants in a wave of innocent relaxation" and his linking "aggressive" sex with career success? What would they think about the "Enhancing Sexual Desire in Women" article in the most recent issue of the evangelical *Christian Counseling Today* journal? In another article in the same issue, an evangelical sex therapist "Set[s] the Stage for the Journey to Sexual Ecstasy." She says that "a turned-on woman is usually a turn-on to a man ...[so] "Get Active and Go After" it. "Soak-in-pleasure!" Can we imagine Calvin saying *that* – at least in *those* words?

Surely, as with the older Western views of sex and so many other controversies in the church's past, the allegedly Bible-based antigay argument *precedes* proof-text rationalizations. As Samuel Taylor Coleridge observed: "Alas! The main hindrance to the use of the scriptures as your manual lies in the notion that you are already acquainted with its contents." And this is all made worse by what a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (no Leftist) calls "the fundamentalist fallacy." [Robert Letham] Here's how he defines that: "For anything and everything, all we really need is the Bible, a good concordance, and an ability to find a collection of Bible verses that address our topic." He criticizes "Fundamentalists [who] consider the Bible to have the precise answers to each and every question and dilemma we will ever face." He says: "This view is very common among conservative Christians. It sounds good, since it purports to have a high view of Scripture. ... However, all is not so clear as it seems. ... God does not hand us everything on a plate. He expects us to think, to work, to labor. ... He expects us to grow up." That is a *moral* obligation because *not* to grow up means we'll go on treating others from

juvenile judgments and immature understanding. And *that* can be quite cruel and even deadly.

When it comes to the issue of homosexuality, we need to see Scripture as a whole, and not isolate the topic. That's what John Stott says about the issue of divorce – an issue of particular concern to *heterosexuals* and about which the Bible is clearly negative. Says Stott: "We need to see Scripture as a whole, and not isolate the topic of divorce." It's a shame that he (and his antigay cohorts) do not see their way clear to apply this good principle of interpretation to the topic of homosexuality as well! In another context, Stott decries "the cherishing of traditions which are not in the Bible [and] the abandoning of doctrines which are." Without meaning to do so, he is describing the church's negativity to gayness and negligence of the Golden Rule.

THE FUNDAMENTAL FUNDAMENTAL

Back in the 4th century, Gregory of Nyssa urged fellow Christians to "Cling only to what is necessary." That's always been good counsel. What would that look like at the beginning of the 21st century? What's still necessary?

According to the historian who wrote *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition*: "The most widely accepted essentialist definition of evangelicalism [defines it] as a movement of orthodox Protestants who stress conversion, the Bible, the cross, and activism." He grants this "is a big umbrella, but, it is essentialist." [Bruce Hindmarsh] He recognizes that the call to focus on evangelicalism's central message of the gospel is, as he puts it, "worth heeding ... [a]mid the balkanization of evangelicalism in America and Britain today over issues of gender, sexuality and politics."

Recently, an American evangelical New Testament scholar has written what he subtitles "A Paleofundamentalist Manifesto for Contemporary Evangelicalism." He calls for "a renewed fundamentalism [in which we can] be culturally engaged with the world enough to be critical rather than so culturally secluded as to be mute, morally separate from the world but not spatially cloistered from it, and unashamedly expressive of historic Christian essentials but not quarrelsome over nonessentials." [Robert H. Gundry] Again: "Cling only to what is necessary." He roots this call in *the necessarily essential* in I John 2:7-11 and 3:11.

"Beloved, it's not a new commandment that I'm sending you, but the old original commandment that you've had from the beginning. It's the old message you've heard before. And as I give it to you again, it is true in Christ's life and in yours. The darkness is beginning to lift and the true light is already shining. Whoever says, 'I am in the light,' but doesn't love a fellow-Christian, is still in darkness. Anyone who loves a fellow-Christian lives in light and has no reason to stumble. But those who don't love a brother or sister are in darkness; they walk in the dark and have no idea where they're going. The darkness has blinded them. ... The message you've heard from the beginning is this: We should love one another."

Here's *the* Christian essential. Here's the *fundamental* fundamental. It's real and practical love. John knew it. Paul knew it. Jesus taught it. Jesus lived it. Jesus died it. How can so many Christians for so long so sadly fail to see that we are called to spend and be spent in acts of love for each other?

So again, I ask: Would heterosexuals want such flimsy arguments as are used to abuse homosexuals to stand between themselves and the meeting of *their own* basic needs for loving psychosexual intimacy? Of course not. They wouldn't stand for it. But still they go on, insisting on enjoying the intimacy of *their own* "family values" while doing whatever they can to prevent *others* from enjoying the intimacy of *their* families.

A very recent attack against the loving affirmation of gay people is entitled *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*. But strangely, it's author, Robert A. J. Gagnon, who teaches at a Presbyterian seminary in Pittsburgh, says his aim is to show "that affirming same-sex intercourse is *not* an act of love." He insists that "that road [of affirmation] leads to death: physically, morally, and spiritually." Furthermore, he complains that "Promoting the homosexual 'rights' agenda is an awful and harmful waste of the church's energies and resources."

Gagnon thinks that if the church is welcoming of any "homosexual practice," that welcoming "will shake to the core the church's fidelity toward Scripture." But he's arguing as though the church hasn't already weathered centuries of shakings over Scripture in all sorts of controversial issues. There was a time when no less a Christian leader than Martin Luther complained that "this fool [Copernicus] will turn the art of astronomy upside down. The Scripture shows and tells

another lesson, where Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, not the earth." And John Calvin exclaimed: "Who will venture to place the authority of Copernicus above that of the Holy Spirit?" At the same time Calvin recognized that "it cannot be denied that astronomy unfolds the admirable wisdom of God." Would that he'd have been more receptive to what the astronomers had to *unfold* to him of that wisdom. And would that contemporary Calvinists and all other evangelicals were more receptive to the *unfolding* of psychological research into human sexuality.

These are matters of the progressive nature of God's revelation and illumination in the history of His dealings with His people. And as an evangelical scholar notes: "When we fail to recognize the development of doctrine both within Scripture and by the Spirit's gradual illumination of Scripture in church history, we begin to think we are in control of the gospel. ... we think we need only apply our previous understandings to new situations rather than continually listening to God through fresh readings of God, Scripture, and world, [and] we are in danger of hearing not the gospel but ourselves, and at that point theology becomes idolatry." [Gerald R. McDermott]

Besides the Copernican revolution, there have been controversies over Scripture and usury, Scripture and slavery, Scripture and race, Scripture and Sunday-closings, Scripture and dancing, Scripture and this and Scripture and that. Every one of these controversies divided Christians who, in many cases, butchered each other for "the truth" of Scripture – as late as the 19th and 20th centuries. All of these issues have been resolved in what was said to be the "unbiblical," "progressive," or "liberal" direction. And all have been resolved to the satisfaction of virtually all Christians, no matter how conservative.

But not one of these earlier controversies went to a core psychological experience of self in everyday personal life. The homosexuality controversy does go to such a core experience. Even "race" is but skin-deep. Sexual orientation goes to the very heart of the most intimate of personal human experience.

The Triune God's "Self-enlargement" or "real involvement in history through the creation of new relationships" [McDermott] has been evident to Christians from Peter and Paul to Jonathan Edwards and C. S. Lewis. It is evident today to those who are reaching out and supporting the full integration of evangelical

Christian faith and discipleship and responsible handling of homosexuality.

Yet, "despite [as he puts it] one's personal repugnance for same-sex intercourse," Gagnon manages to go on for some 500 pages, rehashing what's been repeatedly and responsibly refuted by biblical scholars and theologians. And in spite of his failure to empathize with homosexuals' deep needs for human intimacy, he ends the book with these expressions of concern: "The real difficulty for the church lies not in assessing whether the Bible's stance toward same-sex intercourse is unremittingly negative. ... No. the real difficulty for the church lies in the pastoral dimension: the 'nuts-and-bolts,' day-to-day compassionate response to people whose sexual actions are recognized [by him] to be sinful and harmful to themselves, to the church, and to society at large." His "pastoral" concern peters out in the public square!

Gagnon has put much time and effort into concocting his arguments against allowing any of his homosexual neighbors' having a close, sexual intimacy with a loved one of the relevantly same gender. So he's no doubt oblivious to the obscenity of three little words printed on a page preceding the Table of Contents. They are words of affectionate dedication: "For my wife." As though there had never been a Golden Rule in Christianity, not to mention in the common grace and decency of other religious traditions, Gagnon celebrates his own sexual intimacy while doing his damndest to damn the intimacy in the lives of his homosexual neighbors. Says a Regent College professor of theology: "Any theology or mission that does not 'love your neighbor as you love yourself' is offering a truncated and therefore heretical gospel." [John G. Stackhouse, Jr.]

Paul urged his fellow Christians to possess their *own* marriages in honor and he warned them not to seek advantage over others by disregarding *their* sexual claims. [I Thessalonians 4:4-6] He told them to "mind their *own* business" in such matters. Today, we'll say: Focus on *your own* family. According to the Religious Right's Focus on the Family founder James Dobson, the major presenting problem of conservative ministers who call the Focus ministers' hotline is sexual addiction and pornography. The evangelical Barna Research group finds that conservative Christians are somewhat more likely to get divorced than Americans in general.

Among the clobbered Bible verses we've reviewed, Gagnon concentrates most of his attention on the passage in Leviticus (18:22) and that in Romans (1:26-27).

Would that he'd paid attention to a sentence in Leviticus that lies just one chapter beyond: Leviticus 19:18 ("Love your neighbor as yourself.") Though this verse was not all that popular in the days of the Old Testament, it's the verse from the Pentateuch that is the most frequently cited in the New Testament. It's a *summary* and *fulfilling* of the Law that was repeatedly cited by Jesus and Paul and James. As Durham Bible scholar James D. G. Dunn says: "On Jesus' lips Lev 19:18 became a word which validated his concern for sinner and esteem for Samaritan (Luke 10:33-37). It was a word which broke through the boundaries which had become a feature of so much contemporary Judaism – boundaries within Israel, between 'righteous' and 'sinner,' boundaries surrounding Israel, between Jew and Gentile."

And would that Gagnon had paid attention to another sentence in Romans instead of the one he tries to foist onto all expressions of homosexuality today. In Romans 13:9, Paul reminds Christians that the love commandment from Leviticus, signaled by Jesus, *fulfills* the Law. He refers to a number of commandments and then adds as a radical *et cetera*: "*and any other commandment.*" Paul says that love fulfills all the *familiar* commandments as well as "*any other commandment*" anyone can ever come up with. In a sense, *this love commandment is the only statement on homosexuality in the Bible*. It's the statement that addresses any and all activity not otherwise specifically addressed about which anyone could ever come up with a proscription. "What is meant is that every injunction, exhortation, and whatever in the Law concerns human relationships" is covered by this blanket statement from Paul. [Matthew Black] "And *any other* commandment!" What part of "any other" don't fundamentalists understand?

Ironically, fundamentalists cite Leviticus and Romans to call for a *carelessness* of the needs of neighbors while Paul cites Leviticus in Romans to call for *care* for the needs of neighbors. Who are these neighbors and how far should we go to care for them? Says Dunn: "The neighbor is the person encountered in the course of daily life who has a need which lays claim to the believer's resources – a claim, it should also be said, which can never be regulated or limited by rules or code of practice and that often has an unexpected quality." He asserts: "The point

is, then, that a realistic and active love which seeks the good of the other without necessarily being bound by convention meets the requirements of God's law more than a love constrained by legal precedent and conditioned on acceptance of ethically limiting customs and rituals."

Like everyone else, evangelicals quietly cut corners on scruples. We're all quite capable of rationalizing our very own moral relativism. But in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, *Christianity Today* managing editor Mark Galli actually *called for* our cutting corners on morality. Proposing a Christian reaction to the assaults, he advocates a middle course between "*dualist revenge*" where we'd "divide the world between the forces of evil (Islamic terrorists) and the forces of good (the USA and democratic capitalism)" on the one hand and, on the other, "*cowardly compassion* [in which] we are enticed to ... love our enemies." Galli calls his middle way "*tragic courage.*" He explains "It is tragic because it requires us to shoulder responsibilities that entail morally troubling actions, like war, which involve the deliberate killing of soldiers and inevitably the death of some noncombatants." He says "This course requires courage because it means risking one's moral purity in the pursuit of justice." So he argues that even when justice-seeking entails the inevitable slaughter of innocents, Christians should run that risk to moral purity. This is nothing original in Christianity. It's just-war theory as old as Augustine and as new as Niebuhr.

Incidentally, it's nothing new in Islam either. The Koran clearly calls for jihad (struggle and/or striving that includes killing) to combat injustice and oppression. According to the Koran: "Allah does not love aggressors [so Muslims are under orders to] "slay [aggressors] wherever you may come upon them ... for oppression is even worse than killing." [2:190-191]

But if an editor of evangelicalism's major periodical can publicly endorse even the killing of innocents and the consequent risking of moral purity to *do justice*, can he risk the risking of moral purity in sexuality – in which no innocents can be killed – to *love mercy*? Can he risk the risking of his notions of moral purity in order to *love*?

Galli himself calls *justice* and *love* "equally biblical demand[s]." And yet, isn't *love* greater than even *abiding faith* and *hope*? Doesn't *love* fulfill any and all commandments? So if evangelicals may suspend their scruples against killing the innocent in order to see that they themselves get justice, might

not at least the *married* heterosexuals suspend their scruples against the love-life of homosexuals in order to love these neighbors as they love themselves?

Galli recognizes that "we cannot know God's will perfectly" and so we must do whatever we do while we "depend on the grace of God for his justification." Amen. But maybe it's clearer that we're to love all our neighbors as we love ourselves than that we're to kill all our foes for justice. Indeed, loving others "as we love ourselves" *is* justice!

Incidentally, functional magnetic resonance imaging of the brain reveals an interesting parallel between the neural circuits that light up when one is identifying with others and those that light up when one is thinking about one's self. Researcher Chris Frith of University College London observes: "Thinking about yourself in a situation may be the way you think about other people." If so, we may be *designed* to know how to care for the welfare of others (as we care for our own welfare) in a way earlier Christians could never have imagined.

PAULINE CHRISTIANITY LIVES AND LETS LIVE

As Paul goes on in his letter to the Romans, he presents another discourse that is much more relevant to our current ecclesiastical dispute over homosexuality than are any of the clobbered passages used to clobber gay people. This discourse is centered in chapter 14. Here, as Dunn notes, "The golden rule of love of neighbor which has knit together the earlier exhortation (12:3, 9-10, 13, 14-17, 21; 13:8-10) continues to be the leading principle governing relationships strained by differences on important matters affecting faith and communal lifestyle."

In and around Romans 14, Paul addresses a church embroiled in disputes and controversies over behavior and lifestyle. The church is made up of Christians he sees as "weak-in-faith" and Christians who are "strong-in-faith." He clearly identifies himself among the "strong." He sees the "weak-in-faith" as those who are less able or willing to trust in God's grace alone, without adding restrictive rules and regulations about diets and days as requirements for proper Christian lifestyle. Such a person is "at heart still a legalist [and] believes that he can gain God's favour by doing certain things and abstaining from others," says William Barclay. Paul does not regard these rules and restrictions "as an expression of faith as such." [Dunn]

In Paul's day, one of the biggest controversies in the church was over laws about observing diets and days. In our day, perhaps the biggest controversy is over homosexuality. The "weak-in-faith" today add restrictive rules against any and all expression of homosexuality as a requirement for Christian lifestyle. The "strong" today do not insist on adding such rules and regulations and they better understand the freedom that Paul said Christians have in Christ.

Paul says that the stronger Christians should welcome the less mature into the fellowship. And he says the "strong" should welcome them without doing so only to argue and force them to change their views. In Paul's day, the "weak-in-faith" was in the minority. In our day – so far as homosexuality is concerned – the "weak-in-faith" is the majority. And according to Paul, the majority should not try to use its power position to impose its view on the minority. In our day, that means that the antigay Christians should not force Christian gays and lesbians to adopt an antigay doctrine or else find themselves excluded from the fellowship. Of course, the opposite is true too. The broad-minded minority should not practice aggression against the narrow-minded majority. Paul's view is that "the liberty of the Christian assembly should be able to embrace divergent views and practices without a feeling that they must be resolved or that a common mind must be achieved on every point of disagreement." [Dunn]

Today, most Christians don't get upset over what others eat or what they do on Sundays. Today, Christians are much more likely to get upset over homosexuality. So lest anyone think that issues of diet and days in those days are not analogous to gay issues today, we must be reminded of the extreme importance of the dietary laws and the Sabbath commandment for Jews of that early period. The dietary laws are clearly set forth in the Torah (Lev 11:1-23; Deut 14:3-12). As Dunn notes: "the Maccabean crisis had made observance of these laws a test of Jewishness, a badge of loyalty to covenant and nation ... 'eating unclean food and violating the sabbath' ranked together as the two chief hallmarks of covenant disloyalty." They did so then no less than today's conservatives make their case by citing scripture to make an antigay position a test of evangelical faith, a badge of loyalty in Evangelicaland.

Now remember that required Sabbath observance was the subject of one of the Ten Commandments of the Law of Moses. And Jesus had said that not one jot or one tittle of that Law

would pass away (Matt 5:18). And that Sabbath commandment was rooted in *creation* (Gen 2:2-3; Exod 20:8-11) no less than antigay evangelicals root mandated heterosexuality and antigay theology in the *creation* of "Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve." It must have seemed to traditionalists of Paul's day that he'd turned his back on scripture and had gone hopelessly heretical. Indeed, before his Damascus Road experience of the Risen Christ, that's what Paul thought Christians were doing. Today's reactionary conservatives are like their first century counterparts.

All of us may be able to relate a bit to traditionalists of an earlier time. Some of *us* were more traditionalist at an earlier time. But none of us can have any experiential sense of the world *before* the fall. We don't go back that far. We cannot live as unfallen creatures. So it's beside the point to hark back to the creation for a model of life for the present. Literalistic fundamentalists who insist there was no "Steve" for "Adam" (or for "Eve" for that matter) must admit that there was *nobody* else before the fall. Same-sex matters were moot. There were no two men even for prayer partners! But, of course, it wasn't long before God did bring "Steve" along – as well as "every Tom, Dick and Harry." Look: "In the world of the fall," as evangelical theologian Geoffrey Bromily reminds us, "some part of life, if not all, must be lived temporarily or permanently outside the regular patterns of God's created order." And this applies to *all* sexuality as well as to everything else in *this* world.

For us these days, homosexuality is indeed a *bigger* issue than diets and days. But it's a bigger and a *deeper* issue because – unlike all other controversies in the history of the church – it goes to the very heart of a person's most personal interpersonal experience. A person's self-awareness of his or her need for an intimate psychosexual connection of profound love and intimacy with another human being is one of the very strongest needs anyone has. It is definitely *not* among the "great many things [that] are not essential parts of life and conduct but belong to what we might call the extras of life." [William Barclay] If, as Paul urges, integrity of Christian fellowship requires the shelving of all disputes over *external customs* (albeit based in the Law), how much more must all disputes be shelved when it comes to a homosexual brother's or sister's *ingrained, intractable, and internally experienced need for intimacy*? Says Barclay: "Paul's advice is clear. *It is a*

Christian duty to think of everything, not as it affects ourselves only, but also as it affects others."

It must be noted that "Paul was generalizing" [Dunn] in his illustrations of days and diets. According to Dunn, his sensitive pastoral advice "is of much wider relevance than to this issue alone – of relevance wherever concerns to maintain old traditions come into conflict with" the less traditional. So the application of Paul's principle to our issues of homosexuality is not a stretch at all.

Paul cautions both the "weak-in-faith" and the "strong" against succumbing to their typical temptations. He warns that the "weak-in-faith" should not *condemn* the "strong." That means they should not claim that the "strong" are "unacceptable to God." [Dunn] The attitude of these traditionalists "is fully equivalent to the attitude of 'the righteous' within the various sects of Judaism at the time, who regarded the nonobservers of such customs as 'sinners.'" [Dunn] And Paul warns the less traditional Christians not to *despise* the more traditional. These are, indeed, the attitudes the more conventional and the more liberal always take to each other. The traditional tend to rage against the non-traditional. The non-traditional tend to ridicule the traditional.

Using social assumptions of relationships between slaves and masters, and addressing the "weak-in-faith," Paul asks rhetorically: Who do you think you are to give orders to those who are answerable only to their own master and not to you? It's explained that "the point is that whereas 'the other' thinks some particular conduct constitutes a 'fall,' the master regards it as acceptable and not as a fall." [Dunn] And furthermore, Paul sees this criticized slave as *sustained* in his behavior rather than *restored* for misbehaving. Paul says that the master to whom the slave reports keeps his own slave standing. It's as though Paul said: Even if *you* can't stand them, their Lord can and does. Even if you won't *understand* them, the Lord understands them and the Lord *undergirds* them.

So Paul concludes by advising that each Christian should be fully convinced in his or her own mind when it comes to the rightness of one's own lifestyle. Each individual is responsible for his or her own conscience before the Lord. Paul affirms that he himself is convinced in the Lord that *nothing, as such*, is out-of-bounds. *Nothing* is unclean or every-day common. *Nothing! No thing!* What part of "*no thing*" don't fundamentalists understand? Why are they so resistant to

Paul's teaching that it's the word of the Lord that it's the individual Christian's relationship with and reliance on the Lord that really counts, however *differently* he or she behaves. "They can disagree, and *both* be *right* (that is, accepted by God). It was not necessary for one to be wrong for the other to be right." [Dunn] So if the Lord makes them *all* right, how can that not be *all right* with all of them?

Rosalind Rinker, the well-known missionary to China and inspired teacher of "conversational prayer," was an EC keynoter at two of our earliest summer conferences. In her book, *Within the Circle*, she wrote on Christian unity: "God does not say 'agree with one another in order that you may love one another.' But He clearly commands: 'Love one another, just as I love you.'" She noted that, among Christians of differing opinions, "there is a failure to realize that God is on both sides and that His purpose is to unite all things in Christ (Col 1:20) [rather than] in verbal agreement, legalism, or doctrine." She said it in another way as well: "God does not take sides. He is Truth."

Now Paul does warn that a thing *is* out-of-bounds for the person who *believes* it's out-of-bounds. He cautions Christians not to do anything that might contribute to a guilty conscience, for it is spiritually and psychologically unhealthy for a person to violate conscience. In fact, Paul warns that the preaching of the weak can drive others who are weak into such distress that they might even abandon their Christian faith. That is certainly what has happened to many gay men and lesbians who were reared in fundamentalist and evangelical churches. But by the clearer preaching of God's grace, Christians should assist in lovingly relieving the guilt feelings of a misinformed and unbiblical conscience. And they should refrain from promoting or prolonging the guilt feelings of a misinformed and unbiblical conscience. By the clearer preaching of God's grace – the *strongest* gospel – such offended brothers and sisters can be welcomed back.

Dunn observes that Paul's pastoral tactic is "to get the traditionalists actually to accept that someone who differs from them, and differs from them in something they regard as fundamental, is nevertheless acceptable to God and accepted by God. With genuine recognition that the spectrum of Christian opinion on such crucial matters is broader than any particular expression of Christian opinion, there can be a real

respect among fellow believers across the spectrum of Christian liberty."

Paul's call to forbearance is understandably addressed to the strong. After all, if designations of "weakness" and "strength" of faith mean anything, it's the strength of the faith of the stronger Christians that can better afford to forbear with others. In "survival of the fittest," only the strong survive. But if the point of Christian fellowship is for *all* to survive, the strong must bear the larger burden and must compensate for what the weak-in-faith bring to the table. If *all* are to survive the crisis, response must mainly be the responsibility of those who are in a better position for response with empathic patience and Christian tolerance. But, of course, they cannot do fellowship by themselves. That takes both them and the weak working together.

But while Paul is primarily addressing the strong, he is not bypassing the responsibilities of the weak. The strong may indeed err by seducing the weak to indulge beyond what their conscience allows and engage in license rather than liberty. But the weak, too, may err with such a steady beat of legalism that even the strong finally succumb to their seducing sermons and stumble into the ever-present temptation of a second-guessing conscience.

Paul goes on, in chapter 15, to imply that "there is a giving way to the conservative which could be bad and would not benefit the church." [Dunn] We are to *welcome each other as the Christ, himself, welcomes each of us*. So Dunn explains that "If the more liberal are to express their liberty by restricting it, so the more conservative have genuinely to accept those who profess commitment to Christ as fellow Christians, and neither to use their particular understanding of Christianity to exclude the others in fact or effect." He notes that "Paul has in view *mutual* acceptance among those *continuing* to maintain *different* praxis (14:3-6, 23)."

Christian "liberty, as the individual's right to discern God's will for herself or himself, must be safeguarded," says Dunn. "The freedom to reach a different opinion, even in such important matters as define the character of the faith, and still know oneself to be fully acceptable to God must not be yielded." He points out that "The unconditional character of faith must be allowed to come to expression in liberty; the concern for another which overrestricts liberty is a cheap love which damages faith as well. The balance of faith, liberty, and love

must be maintained, however difficult." As Paul nears the end of this letter to the Romans, Dunn notes that the "echo of the indictment of 1:18-3:20 is not accidental. The threat of the believer's relationship is ever present, of once again falling into the primeval trap of acting in disregard of God, of erecting one's own judgments into instruments by which to control others (to 'be as God')" to them.

Christian Smith has found in his sociological research on evangelicals in America that, at least in principle, most self-identified evangelicals agree that we should all live and let live. In applying Paul's appeal to live and let live to matters of homosexuality, we might ask: Is it easier for the antigay to live with the homosexuality of others and leave them alone or is it easier for homosexuals to live with the antigay condemnations from heterosexuals? Is it easier to change one's mind about the homosexuality of others or is it easier for the homosexuals to change their homosexuality?

The call to the strong to bend over backwards is a call in the interest of the protection of the oppressed. It is one thing for conservatives to observe their own rules and regulations for themselves. They need to be supported in doing so. But it is something else indeed for them to impose their rules and regulations on all others, including even non-Christians, as antigay fundamentalists do.

It's in this totalitarian intolerance and *militant* mindset that Christian fundamentalists resemble the fundamentalists of all religions. They all root themselves, as historian Martin Marty observes, in a tradition that they mistakenly take to be "the old-time religion" that's remained unchanged from the beginning. They perceive what they take to be a terrible threat to their own way of life. They perceive anyone who doesn't live according to their rules as a heretic or an infidel. And they determine to wage at least a culture war, if not a bloody *jihad*, against this threat. They employ every means at their disposal, including theological threat, economic pressure and political power. They take for granted that God is backing them up all the way in all of this. But sadly, it is *in just this intolerance* that Christian fundamentalists fail to resemble the Christians Paul calls for in Romans 14.

Paul concludes with a sad observation on the negative effect bickering and hostile Christians can have on non-Christian onlookers. Evangelism is eviscerated when evangelicals elevate their disputes above their giving of the gospel. Out of the

Christian debates over slavery and race, the greatest 19th century evangelist, Charles G. Finney, said: "Revivals are hindered when ministers and churches take wrong ground in regard to any question involving human rights." It is incumbent on Christians "to remove heart and intellectual objects to the clear preaching of the gospel," as one evangelical ministry puts it. [Ravi Zacharias International Ministries] Paul understands that outsiders of good will can see narrow-minded, mean-spirited Christians majoring in minor matters and find it all a total turn-off. Is *that* what Christianity is all about?

Paul reminds Christians that the Kingdom of God is *not* about any external observances or specific behavior. In the words of Leon Morris, "Much more important than a particular view [of any controversy] are things like consideration for other people. ... Love, not particular views about [any and all commandments] must be the guide" for the Christian. Paul says the Kingdom of God is about the *righteousness* or justice that is "giving to [others] and to God what is their due." [William Barclay] The Kingdom of God is about working for the peace, *shalom* or *salaam*, that is a person's best wellbeing. The Kingdom of God is about Christian *joy* in the Holy Spirit that, as Barclay says, "can never be a selfish thing." Again, the Kingdom of God calls for everyday Golden Rule living.

In summary of Paul's lesson, a German Bible commentator says: "No one must make his faith a norm for others as they seek to serve Christ. The weak want uniformity by making their law binding for brothers, and the strong seek it too by forcing their insight on the weak. We thus try to make others in our image and in so doing sin, since faith has to do always and exclusively with the image of Christ." [Ernst Kasemann]

If the church throughout history had taken Paul's teaching in Romans 14 to heart, just think of all the foolishness, not to mention all the bloodshed, that would have been avoided. If the contemporary evangelical community were ever to take seriously these wise pastoral admonitions, there would be no *problem of homosexuality* in Christianity today. Is it really too much to ask Christians to live together in peace as they each must report on their own to their Lord? Is it really too much to ask Christians *to live* in Christ *and let* others, too, *live* in Him?

Back in 1769, John Wesley wrote to Nancy Ford, a friend of his in Southwark. Evidently she had written him about her confusion over some teachings by Calvinist preacher William Romaine. The Arminian Wesley responded with two pages of

vigorous rebuttal, arguing that Romaine "confirms by five texts whereas in five and twenty more" he's contradicted. "But I have not time to be minute. Hoping to save you a good deal of trouble I just told you what then occurred to my mind." Wesley graciously concludes: "But I have no right to prescribe. Please yourself and you will please, My dear Nancy, Your affectionate Brother, J Wesley." Would that Wesley's spirit of firm conviction tempered with Christian largess were more alive today.

EARLIER EVANGELICAL RESPONSES TO GAYS AND LESBIANS

Let's go back 26 years ago tonight. Some of you hadn't yet been born. In Canada, k. d. lang turned 14. Maybe she was beginning to suspect something. In Taiwan the Billy Graham Crusade was in its final night, with closeted and conflicted homosexuals on stage and in the stands. Outside Rome a 17-year-old male prostitute had just murdered film director Pier Paolo Pasolini and was repeatedly driving over the corpse in Pasolini's own Alfa Romeo. In Germany, the country's Roman Catholic bishops were issuing a Resolution lamenting that "despite the exemplary behavior of some individuals and groups - we were nevertheless as a whole a church community that kept on living its life too often in turning its back to the fate of the persecuted Jewish people." And in New York City, I was having dinner with the president of a major evangelical institution. He was a devout Christian, a national leader of the conservative evangelical community, heterosexually married, a father, and - as he was about to tell me - disconnectedly homosexual. As on any day, in any year, these are scenes of the challenge to live with one's own or another's otherness.

Needless to say, my dinner companion lived most of his life in the deep recesses of a closet. He traveled a lot as an evangelical leader and it was during these trips that he'd venture out of the closet long enough to do what he'd later regret doing. But he told me, very movingly, that he always tried to share the gospel with the men he met.

That evening, I was hearing one too many of the sad stories of conflicted conscience I'd heard for years. I saw the need for a ministry to help gay and lesbian Christians and their families integrate their evangelical Christian faith and homosexuality. That was the beginning of Evangelicals Concerned.

It didn't make the news. Not even in New York. According to the *Britannica Book of the Year*, in 1975 there were only two bits on homosexuality worth mentioning. The American Psychiatric Association, having already revised its classification of homosexuality as a mental disorder, now added that people who are "bothered by, in conflict with, or wish to change their orientation still can be diagnosed as ill." And in New Zealand, Parliament failed to pass a bill aimed at legalizing homosexuality. Such were the times.

Eleven years before, in 1964, while on the staff with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, I was advocating the integration of evangelical Christian faith and homosexuality for Christian gays and lesbians. When it was reported to IVCF's national office that this greenhorn had told the Yale Christian Fellowship that a faithful Christian could be in a gay relationship, my reappointment for the next year was nixed.

About the same time, Helmut Thielicke observed that one's homosexuality could be seen "as a talent that is to be invested (Luke 19:13f)." He said that "the homosexual has to realize his optimal ethical potentialities *on the basis* of his irreversible situation" and he advocated applying "the same norms" to same-sex couples as to heterosexual couples. Thielicke reasoned that, in terms of the love commandment, it made no Christian sense to demand of homosexuals a celibacy that we would never demand of heterosexuals. That is, I think, still the major reason evangelical Christians who are serious about the love commandment must change their minds about homosexuality. In Lionel Trilling's words: "If only life were not so tangible, so concrete ... [we could get away with commitment to] abstraction."

Even earlier, C. S. Lewis (whose closest friend throughout life was a homosexual) had made the following keen observation on the typical antipathy to homosexuals: "There is much hypocrisy on this theme. People commonly talk as if every other evil were more tolerable than this. But why? Because those of us who do not share the vice feel for it a certain nausea? ... I think that a very little relevance to moral judgment. ... Is it then on Christian grounds? But how many of those who fulminate on the matter are in fact Christians? And what Christian, in a society so worldly and cruel ... would pick out the carnal sins for special reprobation? Cruelty is surely more evil than lust and the World at least as dangerous as the Flesh. The real reason for all the pother is, in my opinion,

neither Christian nor ethical. We attack this vice not because it is the worst but because it is, by adult standards, the most disreputable and unmentionable, and happens to be a crime."

Elsewhere, Lewis addressed issues of enforced therapies. "Of all tyrannies," he wrote, "a tyranny exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. ... To be 'cured' against one's will and cured of states which we may not regard as disease is to be put on a level with those who have not yet reached the age of reason. ... You start being 'kind' to people before you have considered their rights, and then force upon them supposed kindnesses which they in fact had a right to refuse, and finally kindnesses which no one but you will recognize as kindnesses and which the recipient will feel as abominable cruelties."

I'd been critiquing the attempts at gay "cures" since the mid-60s. That was a decade before the churches got into the "ex-gay" business with Guy Charles' ill-fated efforts in 1976. There were a few other evangelicals who also voiced objections to these efforts and alleged "cures." Psychiatrist Ernest White – an evangelical Christian – had concluded on the basis of his clinical experience with fifty homosexuals: "If anyone believes that the experience of [Christian] conversion will take away homosexual desires and lead to a normal attraction toward the opposite sex, then he is mistaken. ... I have met no single case of a man being set free from them by spiritual measures." Another psychiatrist and evangelical Christian, J. Ernest Runions of Carey Hall, wrote to *Christianity Today* in the fall of 1977. He said: "As a theological and medical educator, as a pastor, and as a consulting psychiatrist, I know of few subjects as perplexing or troublesome in counseling, church work, family life, or institutional development as homosexuality." He faulted the *CT* editors for superficial thinking on homosexuality and for promoting promises of "cure." He was firm: "Christian experience [does not] alter the condition." He went on to say that "it is sad that evangelical writers can show little pastoral sensitivity to the heartache of families and to the agony of those beset by homosexual fears and temptations, or understanding of the relief and integration (with apparent personal benefits) for the person who finally 'comes out.'" Think of the quarter century of "relief and integration" missed and the pain promoted and prolonged because *CT* and most of the rest of evangelical leadership refused to listen to him and to homosexuals themselves.

An InterVarsity book published in England a decade after my being forced out of IVCF would also be supportive of gay Christians. Author Margaret Evening wrote: "Surely we are all meant to enjoy our sexuality, whether we are heterosexual or homosexual. All too often homosexuality is thought of as a blight, a disease, something that needs to be hidden from all but those few who can share at a deep level. Yet it is often the case that the homosexual is a very loving and lovable person with a tremendous contribution to make." She urged reflection on a Christian homosexual's relationship with God and potential for becoming more fully human in a loving relationship with another person of the same sex. In her words: "If homosexual friends can, with real honesty, answer these questions to their entire satisfaction and peace of mind, then they have nothing to fear."

After starting Evangelicals Concerned in 1975, I sent a copy of my 1972 booklet, *An Evangelical Look at Homosexuality*, to best-selling author and evangelical Christian, Eugenia Price. She's listed in a new evangelical publication as an author of one of the "100 Christian Books That Changed the Century" – a list endorsed as "edifying and rewarding evangelical [and] conservative Christian reading" by leaders ranging from Chuck Colson to James I. Packer and Carl F. H. Henry.

She wrote back to me immediately saying that my booklet "had special meaning" for her. She spoke of her "excitement and deep, deep appreciation of what you are doing now among homosexuals." Then, banging out an entire sentence in capital letters, she said: "YOUR MATERIAL IS, IN MY OPINION, ON DEAD CENTER." She went on: "True, true, true. I receive so many booklets and literature on projects of one kind or another, I confess I can't read it all. But I did read yours and am more enthusiastic than these few hastily written (and poorly typed!) lines will convey. Right on, man! Jesus Christ backs you up every step of the way. From my heart (and my mind) I thank you again for sharing with me. The big need in the past has been (in my 'humble-dogmatic' opinion) God's blind people even more than homosexuals. Why set us apart in little villages anyway? Any of us?"

She herself was set apart with her friend, Joyce Blackburn, on the little Georgia island of St. Simon's. There they lived beyond the prying eyes of her evangelical readership, behind a sign that read "Keep Out. Private Property."

She later wrote to me to say: "I feel your approach is the sanest and most Scriptural I've found yet! ... My best to you – and I mean that!" When she died a couple of years ago, her obituary was carried in both *Christianity Today* (the flagship of American evangelical Christian journalism) and *The Advocate* (the flagship of American gay/lesbian journalism).

Back in 1976, in his book, *The Worldly Evangelicals*, Richard Quebedeaux observed that "lesbians and gay men are to be found everywhere within the evangelical community." He predicted that "it will become harder and harder for gay evangelicals to remain celibate." He concluded: "Right and center evangelicals may continue to say 'no' to homosexual practice explicitly and homosexual orientation implicitly; but it seems likely that left evangelicals will finally come out closer to Ralph Blair than to Anita Bryant." For those of you who may be too young to have heard of Anita Bryant, she was a former Miss America, a Christian, the celebrity spokesperson for the Florida Orange Juice conglomerate, and she became the leader of a mid-70s antigay crusade in Miami called "Save Our Children." She also sponsored an early "ex-gay" effort.

Quebedeaux's prediction has been coming true not only among those he called "left" evangelicals but also for those in the "center" and even for some who are more conservative than that. And the more that families and friends discover that they actually know *real* people and *real* Christians who also happen to be gay or lesbian, the more this will be true.

It's obvious that even in the 1960s and early 1970s, before the rise of America's politically powerful Religious Right, some evangelicals were sensitively sensible about homosexuality. The more recent rightward turn is a tragic roadblock for social justice for gays and lesbians, not to mention a roadblock to outreach with the gospel. Paul called such roadblocks "stumbling blocks" to the gospel. Evangelical Christian and author Tom Sine comments: "Nowhere else in the world do you have to be a right-wing conservative to be considered a born-again Christian. This is a uniquely American aberration." Contrary to much popular opinion, the Religious Right is *not* synonymous with evangelical Christianity. American public opinion surveys find that only a minority of people who identify themselves as evangelical Christians also identify with the Religious Right.

MORE AND MORE EVANGELICALS BECOME GAY-AFFIRMING

Quebedeaux's prediction in "The Year of the Evangelical," as *Newsweek* dubbed 1976, is coming true throughout the evangelical community. In the intervening quarter century, the evangelical leaders who have accepted my invitation to keynote our EC conferences have all endorsed monogamous gay relationships. This roster has included Rosalind Rinker, Ken Medema, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Letha Scanzoni, Charlie Shedd, Michael J. Christensen, Howard Rice, John Alexander, Peggy Campolo, Mike Bussee, Stan Rock, Nancy Hardesty, Tom Key, Lewis B. Smedes, Marsha Stevens, Kay Lindskoog, Hendrik Hart, Kathy Olsen, Donald Dayton, Chip and Nancy Miller, Mary Lou Wallner, Nelson Gonzalez, and many others from the wide spectrum of the evangelical Christian community. Next year Roy Clements will be one of our keynoters and the following year we'll have your very own Jeremy Marks.

Here, from the past year, are a few promising developments among both fundamentalists and evangelicals – though they're not yet on-board with EC.

To begin with, there is at least a softening of much of the most hostile antigay rhetoric – even in the infamous Chick cartoon tracts. When the brand new version of its antigay tract is compared with its ten-year-old edition, one finds that Chick has softened the wording on the placards carried by the protesting gays depicted in the cartoon. In the older version, the gays' signs are hateful caricatures that read "Accept us or die!" and "Kill the Bigots!" and "Civil Rights or Civil War!" They've been realistically revised to read "Stop the Religious Right" and "Hate is not a Family Value" and "God is Love!"

Last year, an editorial in *Moody* magazine (from Moody Bible Institute) made these observations: "Particularly today, in a charged and divisive political atmosphere, we [fundamentalists] often lash out – sometimes using ugly words and actions. ... People who see us screaming at our enemies [in "hot public issues like ... homosexual conduct"] can't be expected to reconcile our behavior with our claims to represent a gracious, loving God." The editorial ends by noting: "Why should [a homosexual person] believe anything we say about Christ – let alone desire to join us? Should he become, by the grace of God, a follower of Jesus, it would be in spite of us, not with our aid." [*Moody*, November-December, 2000]

At about the same time, an editorial in *Christianity Today* had this to say: "Homosexual men and women will not return to the collective closet, the centuries-old practice of culturally imposed silence. Nor should they. Homosexual activists rightly insist that they not face verbal and physical abuse ... because of their sexual orientation. ... We dare not send homosexual Christians [a term that was not used earlier] back into closets of self-loathing and terror." The editorial continues: "Too often our [evangelical response] begins and ends with referring people to a chapter of an 'ex-gay' ministry like Exodus International and bidding them Godspeed." The editorial concludes that "insisting that all homosexual Christians must change their orientation is ... reckless." [*Christianity Today*, September 4, 2000]

Last summer, a cover feature of the weekly magazine of the very conservative Christian Reformed Church included the testimony from gay-supportive Christians. One was from an openly gay graduate of the denomination's Calvin Seminary. Another was the testimony of parents who lament their church's poor response to their support for their son's having a faithful gay relationship. Another was from a retired CRC pastor who says that he has learned that what the Bible seems to say about homosexuality does not at all describe a fine young gay man who is a member of his congregation. The editor recounts the abuse he himself has suffered at the hands of antigay church people as he's tried, over the years, to attend journalistically to homosexuality. As a result, he says he now empathizes with gay men and lesbians, concluding his editorial by saying: "No wonder so many gay people don't even try to work things out in the church. Our community has always had it in for gay people." [*The Banner*, August 14, 2000]

A new book by a Fuller Theological Seminary sociologist and his wife, who directs Fuller's clinical training program, comes to this conclusion: "We acknowledge that some gay Christians may choose to commit themselves to a lifelong, monogamous homosexual union, believing this is God's best for them. They believe that this reflects an authentic sexuality that is congruent for them and their view of Scripture. Even though we hold to the model of a heterosexual, lifelong, monogamous union, our compassion brings us to support all persons as they move in the direction of God's ideal for their lives." [Jack and Judith Balswick in *Authentic Human Sexuality: An integrated Christian approach*.]

On the so-called "ex-gay" front, the promises have changed over the years – from early claims of instant heterosexuality through prayer to acknowledgment that the struggle to resist homosexual temptation is life long. The former continues to show up in headlines and the latter in the fine print. But the more they say they "change," the more they stay the same.

Last fall, John Paulk was detected socializing in disguise at a gay bar in Washington, DC. This "ex-gay" in charge of Focus on the Family's outreach to homosexuals and president of the board of the "ex-gay" umbrella, Exodus International, was perhaps the most widely known "ex-gay" in America. He'd been pictured with his "ex-lesbian" wife on the cover of *Newsweek*. In the aftermath of the embarrassment at the DC gay bar, Exodus director Bob Davies had to grant that the "ex-gay" movement must "re-examine ... the public perception of our use of terms such as 'healing' and 'change.'" He confessed that the public as well as wannabe "ex-gays" and their families and churches should not be focusing on expectations of *actual healing or change* of homosexual orientation. Davies now claims that he himself "never came to Exodus seeking heterosexuality." It should be noted that, in spite of the scandal, Paulk was never removed from his position as head of Focus on the Family's assault against gays and lesbians. He still travels throughout the country leading rallies and workshops on "overcoming" homosexuality. That indicates something of the state of desperation and denial within the Religious Right's "ex-gay" industry – even in an organization founded by a man trained in human development (James Dobson).

In healthy contrast, British "ex-gay" leader Jeremy Marks and his Courage Trust, has the courage and trust to be truthful. There, the focus will now be on *realistic* support for Christians who are gay instead of trying to "change" their *unchangeable* sexual orientation. Marks acknowledges that his own homosexual orientation has never changed and that he's never seen anyone else's change in some 15 years in "ex-gay" work in Exodus. He well asks: "Have we been praying the kind of prayer God wants to answer?" That's the question only a strongly-committed Christian can afford to ask. It's a question of deep faith and trust in the God who is asked.

Back in America, P-FOX is the "ex-gay" alternative to P-FLAG, the pro-gay support group for parents and friends of lesbians and gays. The P-FOX director says that she and her husband

are no longer trying to "fix" their gay son and that they welcome him and his gay partner to family holidays. This was her testimony in the front-page article in a recent issue of the *Exodus Update* newsletter. Barbara Johnson, the best-selling evangelical author of upbeat nostrums for parents in pain over their gay and otherwise disappointing sons and daughters, has changed her emphasis over the years. Once an outspoken advocate of the "ex-gay" promise, she now says she's never known of any sexual orientation change and she continues to urge parents to stick by their children unconditionally. Now *persona non grata* at Focus on the Family, she is nonetheless still very well received as a celebrity speaker in the evangelical *Women of Faith* crusades throughout America and was recently honored by an evangelical publishing venture as one of the 100 most significant Christian women of the 20th century.

We've come a long way. And there's yet a long way to go. But it all takes time and experience – not only over the timelines and experience of church history but also within the lifetime and personal experience of individual Christians. As Martin Luther once explained: "I did not come to my theology of a sudden, but had to brood ever more deeply. My trials brought me to it, for we do not learn anything except by experience." More and more Christians will better understand what homosexuality is and what it is not. They will come to realize that they know good family members, friends and coworkers as well as fellow Christians who are gay or lesbian. And as they do, their attitudes and their "Bible-based" homophobia will be revised in a truly gospel direction.

It was the immediate aftermath of that unspeakable evil unleashed at the World Trade Center on September 11th. Thousands had literally lost their lives and hundreds of thousands of their loved ones had lost what they'd known as their lives. And there was Jerry Falwell, on Pat Robertson's television program, blaming the bloodshed on everyone and everything he can't stand and projecting this violence onto God. His manipulative message was that God is "mad [at] the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle." Wagging his finger, he pronounced: "I point the finger in *their* face and say 'you helped this happen.'" He declared that God had "lifted the curtain of protection" over America and was raining down death

and destruction over Wall Street because of gays and lesbians and the American Civil Liberties Union. Falwell's god is a cosmic Howard Beale, ranting from his heavenly window: "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it any more!" [from the 1976 film *Network*] Pat Robertson chimed in: "Well, I totally concur, and the problem is we have adopted their agenda at the highest levels of our government."

On that same day, on his own radio show that's broadcast to many millions of Americans, Focus on the Family founder James Dobson agreed with Falwell and Robertson. According to Dobson: "Yes, I believe that the attacks are God's punishment because we are ... forcing children to be taught about homosexuality. ... This is God's way of punishing the wicked."

Fortunately, negative reaction to this self-serving sophistry was swift and sure – even from the Religious Right and from secular sectors of American conservatism. So Falwell and Robertson immediately tried to back-peddle. Falwell claimed the media had misunderstood him and Robertson claimed he, too, had misunderstood him. In late October, while addressing a large group of visitors in the "Chapelteria" at the Focus headquarters in Colorado Springs, Dobson contradicted what he'd clearly said on his broadcast. Without acknowledging his reversal, he now said he disagreed with Falwell's comments. He added that he thought that Falwell probably hadn't meant what he'd said.

As further information on the events of September 11th emerged, one very poignant story stands in for so many and illustrates Andrew Sullivan's response to Falwell: that gay people whom Falwell blamed were among the victims and heroes of the evil. It's the story of the 68-year-old New York City Fire Department Chaplain, Father Mychal Judge. In the first minutes of the disaster, he had rushed with his firefighters to the carnage. While administering last rites to a dying firefighter at the base of the doomed south tower, the priest was hit and killed by falling debris. His heroism has been hailed. The "Pro-Life ProFile" feature of the conservative *National Catholic Register* featured an article headlined: "Father Judge, a Hero, Died a Hero's Death." It was a long interview with the priest's close friend, Steven McDonald, the New York City police detective paralyzed since being shot in the line of duty in 1986. According to McDonald: "First and foremost, he was a priest in love with Jesus. He would bring Jesus into

every gathering or home he was called to. Where there was Father Mike, Jesus was there."

Campus Crusade for Christ has been distributing 2 million free booklets featuring Father Mike. The King's College, an evangelical Christian school at the Empire State Building, distributed a free booklet on the streets of New York on the second Sunday following the disaster. In this booklet, a "gift for the people of New York," the focus was on Mychal Judge. In words quoted from one of the firefighters: "Father Mike was a once-in-a-lifetime individual. You'll never meet anyone like him again. He would help anybody. He always had compassion."

But neither that antigay Catholic newspaper nor that antigay Protestant booklet nor all the other conservative Christian accounts of the fallen fire chaplain noted the fact that Father Mike was gay and a tireless advocate for all gay people.

He was a long-time member of Dignity/USA, the pro-gay Roman Catholic group, and a priest who not only helped fund a St. Patrick's parade that included gay groups but showed up at the event in his brown friar's robe. As Steven McDonald recounted, when a cousin of his was disowned by his family for having AIDS, Judge stepped in to care for him and was with him (and countless others) when he died. Another priest, said of him: "He understood, more than any man I know, that compassion is the heart of all morality." [Bernard Lynch] At his funeral, another Franciscan, Father Michael Duffy, said: "Mychal Judge will be on the other side of death to greet [all the fallen firefighters]. He'll greet them with that big Irish smile and say, 'Hello, welcome. I want to take you to my Father.'" Then the mourners could not but smile through tears when Duffy added that when Judge first got the word to hurry to the scene of the disaster, he paused only long enough "to comb and spray his hair." [Michael Duffy]

That's a little bit of the story of but one of the men and women that Eliphaz Falwell, Bildad Robertson and Zophar Dobson don't even begin to understand, trapped in a tradition that the Lord called nonsense in the days of Job.

Long ago Paul said that it was for *freedom* that Christ has set us free – free *from* the seduction of all moralistic and legalistic tyranny, all sexual promiscuity, all political correctness Left and Right. It's for *freedom* that Christ has set us free – free *for* loving God with all our minds and hearts and strengths and for seeking the real welfare of all our neighbors as much as we

seek our own. Christ's *new* commandment for his disciples is this: Love one another *as I have loved you. As Christ loves us!* That means a willingness to lay down our *lives* for each other. Sadly, it appears that many evangelicals are not willing even to lay down their prejudices and politics for the welfare of others. Indeed, so *weak* is their faith in God that even to *consider* changing their minds about the homosexuality of other men and women seems too threatening to their own livelihoods, families, social circles, and eternal security.

Rich Mullins met a gay guy while hiking on the Appalachian Trail. When the guy found out that Rich was a Christian he asked: "Do you think I will go to hell for being gay?" Rich replied: "No, of course you won't go to hell for being gay. ... Nobody goes to hell for what they do. We go to hell because we reject the grace that God so longs to give us, regardless of what we do." Unlike Rich Mullins, too many Christians make a bigger deal over gays than over grace. On another occasion, the Raggamuffin troubadour was talking about Christian diversity and saying, as Paul had said, that "we don't all have to agree." He observed that he was glad for the diversity because "I'm not sure I want to do it the way they do." Maybe this goes for more than doctrinal minutia.

Too often we're all too much like the young man with the measuring line in Zechariah's third vision. We're relying too much on our own constricted expectations instead of on the measureless grace of God. [Zechariah 2:1-5] Zechariah warns against our drawing the limits of God's grace to keep others out. Said the angel of the Lord: "Run to the young man there and tell him that Jerusalem will be without walls, so numerous will be the people and cattle in it. I myself shall be a wall of fire all round it, says the Lord, and a glorious presence within it." Jesus warned against the limited expectations of exclusionary human judgments when he spoke of his "other sheep." [John 10:16]

One of literature's most moving presentations of this wideness of God's mercy comes from the pen of Flannery O'Connor, the Southerner and devout Roman Catholic who was probably the best short story writer America has ever produced. In the story – not surprisingly called "Revelation" – she portrays the self-righteous Mrs. Turpin, standing in her hog pen, gazing out across the tree line. The woman has a vision of a motley multitude of neighbors she'd always thought herself better than. This "vast horde of souls were rumbling toward

heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and [her husband] Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away."

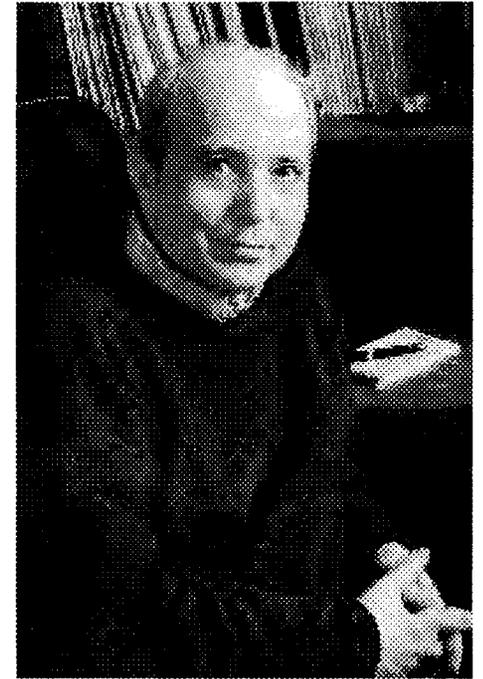
While evangelical Christians continue to hammer out our differences over homosexuality, we'd do well to remember words Charles Wesley wrote on Christian unity in spite of differing political and social opinions and understandings: "Sweetly may we all agree, / Touched with loving sympathy, / Kindly for each other care; / Every member feel its share. / Love, like death, hath all destroyed, / Rendered all distinctions void; / Names and sects and parties fall: / Thou, O Christ, art all-in-all!"

"In essentials, unity.

In non-essentials, freedom.

In all things, love."

Richard Baxter (1615-1691)



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