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In the Case of John Boswell

Richard John Neuhaus

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This readable and lucid critique of John Boswell's book, Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality (1989) shows that despite wide scholarly refutation of Boswell's arguments, his thesis that the early church countenanced homosexual activity continues to have an extraordinary influence on the councils and statements of many churches today. Neuhaus's exposure will help church leaders confronted with the arguments that Paul's reference to homosexual practice has no relevance to present-day practice, to recognize the source of such false assumptions.

Editor

Until a few years ago there was little need to defend the assertion that Christianity has, in a clear and sustained manner, always taught that homosexual acts are morally wrong. That has now changed, and the change can be dated from 1980, the publication of John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (University of Chicago Press). The influence of that book is truly remarkable; it has become a kind of sacred text for those who want to morally legitimize the homosexual movement. In certain circles, any allusion to what the Bible or Christian tradition say about homosexuality is likely to be met with, 'Yes, but Boswell says ...'

IMPACT OF BOSWELL'S THESIS

Boswell, a professor of history at Yale, says that in the early Church there were few sanctions against homosexuality. 'Intolerance' of gays became characteristic of Christianity during the high middle ages when the Church tried to assert greater control over the personal lives of the faithful. In time, theologians such as [P. 65](#) Thomas Aquinas would provide a theological rationale for the prohibition of homosexual acts, and canon lawyers would give the prohibition force in ecclesiastical discipline. That, Boswell says, is the unhappy legacy that is still with us in the attitudes and laws prevalent in Western societies.

The Boswell book was at first met with widespread acclaim. The reviewer in the *New York Times* said Boswell 'restores one's faith in scholarship as the union of erudition, analysis, and moral vision. I would not hesitate to call his book revolutionary, for it tells of things heretofore unimagined and sets a standard of excellence that one would have thought impossible in the treatment of an issue so large, uncharted, and vexed.' The next year Boswell won the American Book Award for History. Since then the book has become a staple in homosexual literature.

For instance, Bruce Bawer's much discussed *A Place at the Table: The Gay Individual in American Society* (Poseidon Press) devotes page after page to a précis of Boswell, as though this is the only necessary text in Christian history dealing with homosexuality. And, of course, Boswell is routinely invoked in Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and other studies urging that the churches should at last overcome their 'homophobia' and be 'accepting' of homosexuals and homosexuality. 'Boswell says' featured prominently also in last fall's Colorado court case in which gay activists sought (successfully, for the moment) to overthrow Amendment Two, a measure approved by the voters in 1992 and aimed at preventing special legal status for homosexuals as a class.

In sum, Boswell and his book have had quite a run. Among his fellow historians, however, Boswell has not fared so well. The scholarly judgement of his argument has ranged from the sharply critical to the dismissive to the devastating. But reviews in scholarly journals typically appear two or three years after a book is published. By that time the Boswell book had already established itself in many quarters as the definitive word on Christianity and homosexuality. In the draft statement on sexuality issued late last year by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), for instance, Boswell's interpretation of New Testament texts on homosexuality is uncritically accepted.

NEW TESTAMENT TEXTS ON HOMOSEXUALITY

There are not many NT texts dealing explicitly with homosexuality. Extended treatment was not necessary as there is no evidence that St. Paul and other writers dissented from the clear condemnation of such acts in the Hebrew Scriptures. (Boswell and others make a limp effort to mitigate the sharp strictures of the Old Testament and rabbinic literature, but even some gay partisans recognize that that effort is not strikingly plausible.) The most cited NT passage on the subject is the [Romans 1](#) discussion of 'the wrath of God revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men **P. 66** who by their wickedness suppress the truth'. Such people are 'without excuse', says Paul, because they have rebelled against the 'eternal power and deity [that] is clearly perceived in the things that have been made'. This rebellion finds also sexual expression: 'For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.'

Another frequently cited passage is [1 Corinthians 6](#): 'Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolators, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.' Against those who treat homosexuality as uniquely heinous, it is rightly pointed out that the Corinthian text makes clear that it is one of many behaviours incompatible with Christian discipleship. More important, this passage underscores that for homosexuals, as for adulterers et al., there is the possibility of forgiveness and new life. But none of this changes the clear assertion that homosexual behaviour is wrong. And that has been the Christian teaching over the centuries.

REVISIONISTS' INTERPRETATIONS

The revisionists of the Boswell school make several interesting moves. They suggest, among other things, that the homosexual practices condemned by Paul were condemned

because they were associated with idolatrous cults and temple prostitution. And it is true that [Romans 1](#) is concerned with idolatry, but the plain meaning of the text is that homosexual acts are themselves an evidence of turning away from God and the natural order that he has ordained. Put differently, the point is not that some homosexual acts are wrong because they are associated with idolatrous cults; rather, homosexual acts are wrong because they are themselves a form of idolatry. New Testament scholar Richard Hays of Duke Divinity School is among those who are sharply critical of Boswell's mishandling of the New Testament material. Boswell's interpretation, says Hays, 'has no support in the text and is a textbook case of reading into the text what one wants to find there'. (*The Journal of Religious Ethics* [No. 14, 1986])

Boswell's reading of early Christian and medieval history also turns up what he wants to find. Christian history is a multifarious affair, and it does not take much sniffing around to discover frequent instances of what is best described as hanky-panky. The discovery process is facilitated if one goes through history with what is aptly described as narrow-eyed prurience, interpreting every expression of intense affection between men as proof that they were 'gay'. A favoured slogan p. 67 of the contemporary gay movement is 'We Are Everywhere!' Boswell rummages through Christian history and triumphantly comes up with the conclusion, 'They were everywhere.' Probably at all times in Christian history one can find instances of homosexual behaviour. And it is probably true that at some times more than others such behaviour was viewed with 'tolerance', in that it was treated with a wink and a nudge. Certainly that has been true of at least some Christian communities in the last forty years or so. The Church has always been composed of sinners, and some periods are more morally lax than others.

Despite his assiduous efforts, what Boswell's historical scavenger hunt does not produce is any evidence whatever that authoritative Christian teaching ever departed from the recognition that homosexual acts are morally wrong. In the years before, say, the fourth century, when Christian orthodoxy more firmly cohered, there are significant gaps in our knowledge, and numerous sects and heresies flourished, some of them bizarre also in their moral practices. This is a rich field for speculation and fantasy, and Boswell makes the most of it. He has failed, however, to persuade those who are expert in that period. For example, David Wright of Edinburgh wrote the article on homosexuality in the highly respected *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*. After discussing the evidence, he summarily dismisses the Boswell book as 'influential but highly misleading'.

Also influential but highly misleading is another move made by the revisionists. What Paul meant by homosexuality is not what we mean by homosexuality today, they contend. Thus Boswell says that the people Paul had in mind are 'manifestly not homosexual; what he derogates are homosexual acts committed by apparently heterosexual persons. The whole point of [Romans 1](#), in fact, is to stigmatize persons who have rejected their calling, gotten off the true path they were once on.' Paul, Boswell says, failed to distinguish 'gay persons (in the sense of permanent sexual preference) and heterosexuals who simply engaged in periodic homosexual behavior'.

This line of thinking is picked up in the Lutheran and similar statements to make the argument that, living as he did in the first century, Paul did not consider the possibility of 'loving, committed, same-sex relationships'. Since the situation of the biblical writers is not ours, what the Bible has to say about homosexuality is not relevant for Christians today. The logic of the argument goes farther. If Paul had known about people who were not capable of heterosexual relations and if he had known about loving, committed, same-sex relationships, he would have approved. The whole point of [Romans 1](#), it is suggested, is that people should be true to who they really are—whether heterosexual or

homosexual. The problem that Paul had was with heterosexuals who were false to themselves by engaging in homosexual acts.

Like many influential but misleading arguments, this one contains an element of truth. David Greenberg's [p. 68](#) *The Construction of Homosexuality* (University of Chicago Press, 1988) is a standard reference on these matters. Greenberg, who is himself sympathetic to the homosexual movement, emphasizes that the category 'homosexual' is a late-nineteenth-century invention. Prior to that time, people did not speak about 'the homosexual' or about 'homosexuals' as a class of people. There were simply men who did curious things, including engaging in homogenital acts, that were viewed—in different cultures and to varying degrees—with puzzlement, tolerance, or (usually) strong disapproval. So the element of truth in the claim of the Boswell revisionists is that Paul, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Calvin, and a host of others who lived before the nineteenth century indeed did not know about a 'homosexual community' in which people are involved in 'loving, committed, same-sex relationships'.

Historical 'what ifs' are of very limited usefulness, but we might ask ourselves, What if Paul did know about homosexuality in the way that it is commonly presented today? What if he knew about a significant number of people, constituting a sizeable subculture, who engaged only in homogenital sex and found heterosexual relations personally repulsive? If he believed that homosexual acts are contrary to nature and nature's God (the plain meaning of [Romans 1](#)), it would seem not to make any difference that there are a large number of people who disagree, who engage in such acts, and whose behaviour is supported by a subculture and its sexual ideology. Nor would what today is called 'sexual orientation' seem to make any difference. Sexual orientation means that one's desires are strongly (in some instances exclusively) directed to people of the same sex. This would likely not surprise Paul, who was no stranger to unruly and disordered desires. It was Paul who wrote, 'I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.... Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!' ([Rom. 7](#)).

Revisionism takes other interesting twists. Episcopal bishop John Spong, a prominent champion of the gay movement, is not alone in claiming that Paul was a repressed and frustrated homosexual. Leaving aside the anachronistic use of the term 'homosexual', one cannot conclusively demonstrate that Paul did not experience sexual desire for men. (Proving a negative is always a tricky business.) But, if he did, this would then have been one of the 'orientations' to evil against which he so heroically contended. Gay advocates who adopt the Spong line should take care. If Paul was a homosexual in the current meaning of the term, then it demonstrates precisely the opposite of what they want to demonstrate. It would demonstrate that Paul knew exactly the reality experienced by homosexuals and urged upon them the course he himself follows—resistance, repentance, conversion, and prayer for the grace 'to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called' ([Eph. 4:1](#)). [p. 69](#)

CASE FOR CHRISTIAN ORTHODOXY

The revisionism being advanced today is influential, misleading, and deeply confused. Robert L. Wilken, the distinguished scholar of early Christianity at the University of Virginia, describes Boswell's book as 'advocacy scholarship'. By that he means 'historical learning yoked to a cause, scholarship in the service of a social and political agenda'. Wilken notes that Boswell's subtitle is *Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*. If, as Boswell insists, there were not 'gay people' (in the contemporary meaning of the term) in the ancient world, and therefore

Paul and other Christian authorities were only criticizing heterosexuals who engaged in homosexual acts, how can one write a history of gay people in that period of history? Wilken puts it gently: 'Boswell creates historical realities that are self-contradictory, and hence unhistorical.' Boswell writes that in antiquity there were no prejudices directed 'to homosexual relations as a class'. The reason is obvious, observes Wilken: as Boswell himself elsewhere recognizes, 'the ancients did not think there was a class of people with sexual "preferences" for the same sex.'

Wilken writes, 'The notion that there is a "class" of people defined by sexual preference is a very recent idea that has no basis in Western tradition. To use it as an interpretive category is confusing and promotes misunderstanding. Where there were laws or social attitudes against homosexuals, they had to do not with homosexuals as a class but with homosexual acts. Even where certain homosexual acts were tolerated by society (as in ancient Greece), there was no suggestion that sexual preference determined behaviour or that certain people were thought to belong to a distinct group within society. Even when tolerated (for example, between an adult male and a youth), there was no social approval given an adult male who played the "passive" role (the role of the boy).'

And, as we have seen, Paul and the early Christians departed from the Greeks in judging homosexual acts per se to be unnatural and morally disordered.

'In some cases', Wilken notes, 'Boswell simply inverts the evidence to suit his argument.' For instance, Boswell writes that in antiquity some Roman citizens 'objected to Christianity precisely because of what they claimed was sexual looseness on the part of its adherents.' They charged, among other things, that Christians engaged in 'homosexual acts', and Boswell says that 'this brief seems to have been at least partly rooted in the fact'. As evidence Boswell cites Minucius Felix, a third-century writer who was answering charges brought against Christians by their Roman critics. Among the items mentioned by Minucius Felix, Boswell says, is the charge that Christians engage in 'ceremonial fellatio' (the text actually says 'worshiping the genitals of their pontiff and priest'). What Boswell fails to say is that this charge—along with others, such as the claim that Christians sacrificed children in the Eucharist—was manufactured out of whole cloth and historians have long dismissed such claims as having nothing to do with Christian behaviour. p. 70

G. W. Clarke, the most recent commentator on the passage from Minucius Felix writes, 'This bizarre story is not found elsewhere among the charges reported against the Christians.' It is, says Clarke, the kind of invention that the opponents of Christianity 'would have felt quite free to use for effective rhetorical polemic'. It is noteworthy, observes Wilken, that no such charges appear in any of the texts written by critics of Christianity. They appear only in Christian writings (such as that of Minucius Felix), perhaps because they were slanderously passed on the streets or because their obvious absurdity gave Christian apologetics greater force. The situation, in short, is entirely the opposite of what Boswell suggests. While the passage from Minucius Felix gives no information about Christian behaviour, it does undercut the burden of Boswell's argument. Boswell seems not to have noticed it, but the passage makes clear that, for both Romans and Christians, it was assumed that to charge someone with fellatio was to defame him. Both the Christians and their critics assumed that such behaviour is a sign of moral depravity. This is hardly evidence of early Christian 'tolerance' of homosexual acts.

It is the way of advocacy scholarship to seize upon snips and pieces of 'evidence' divorced from their historical context, and then offer an improbable or fanciful interpretation that serves the argument being advanced. That is the way egregiously exemplified by *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*. David Wright, the author of the pertinent encyclopedia article on homosexuality, wrote in 1989: 'The conclusion

must be that for all its interest and stimulus Boswell's book provides in the end of the day *not one firm piece of evidence* that the teaching mind of the early Church countenanced homosexual activity.' Yet the ideologically determined are not easily deterred by the facts. As the churches continue to deliberate important questions of sexual morality, be prepared to encounter the invocation, as though with the voice of authority, 'But Boswell says ...' p. 71

The Church and Polygamy A dialogue with Omodo

Walter A. Trobisch

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1978).*

In this complex and agonizing dialogue, the author raises the question as to who faces the greater predicament, the pastor or Omodo. Marriage alliances that are less than the biblical ideal, whether polygamous, serial or homosexual carry their own consequences.

Editor

On one of my trips I worshipped in an African Church where nobody knew me. After the service I talked to two boys who had also attended.

'How many brothers and sisters do you have?' I asked the first one.

'Three.'

'Are they all from the same stomach?'

'Yes, my father is a Christian.'

'How about you?' I addressed the other boy.

He hesitated. In his mind he was adding up. I knew immediately that he came from a polygamous family.

'We are nine', he finally said.

'Is your father a Christian?'

'No', was the typical answer, 'he is a polygamist.'

'Are you baptized?'

'Yes, and my brothers and sister too', he added proudly.

'And their mothers?'

'They are all three baptized, but only the first wife takes communion.'

'Take me to your father.'

The boy led me to a compound with many individual houses. It breathed an atmosphere of cleanliness, order and wealth. Each wife had her own house and her own kitchen. The father, a middle-aged, good-looking man, tall, fat and impressive, received me without embarrassment and with apparent joy. I found Omodo, as we shall call him, a well-educated person, wide p. 72 awake and intelligent, with a sharp wit and a rare sense of humour. From the outset he made no apologies for being a polygamist, he was proud of