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The Priority of Authority: Holy Scripture and Human Sexuality

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Introduction

"We all agree on the authority of Scripture. We just disagree about interpretation."

Over the past several decades, those, or similar, words have been soothingly intoned by countless liberals to countless evangelicals in countless congregational and denominational discussions of human sexuality. To these liberals' credit, the statement is half true: They do disagree with evangelicals about the interpretation of the Bible.

Whether the Biblical passage concerns the creation of the heavens and the earth or the possibility of predictive prophecy, Jesus' bodily resurrection or his insistence that he is the world's only Savior, liberals routinely take interpretative positions that are incompatible with those held by orthodox Christians throughout the history of the Church and upheld by today's evangelicals.

It is the first half of their statement, "We all agree on the authority of Scripture," that is so obviously absurd. For the chasm dividing evangelicals and liberals in their understanding of the authority of Scripture is, if anything, greater than that separating their interpretation of specific passages.

Why would Protestant liberals continue to make a claim that can be so easily refuted? One reason may be that their soothing assertion has gone unchallenged. After all, if the second half of their statement is self-evident, why not accept the first at face value? Another reason may be their realization that if they say something often enough and loudly enough, over time many people will come to believe that it is true despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

But what might happen if the liberal claim "We all agree on the authority of Scripture," were to be carefully examined by evangelicals? What implications would the results of that examination hold for current conversations about the interpretation of Biblical texts dealing with human sexuality?

This article hopes to provide an overview of how Protestants today have come to hold utterly incompatible views of authority in general and Biblical authority in particular and then to suggest strategies for moving forward.

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Part 1, Authority and Humanity, will discuss the nature of authority, contexts in which authority is exercised, the human need for authority both individually and collectively, and the decline of authority in Western culture.

Part 2, Authority and Scripture, will start with the doctrine of revelation then look at what the Bible says about authority. It will then consider the nature of Scripture's authority, giving special attention to the loss of authority that has come with liberalism's denial of God as the Author of Scripture, and to the loss of Christian community that has resulted from this denial.

Part 3, Authority and Interpretation, will explain why and how evangelical Christians can and must uphold the historic Christian understanding of the nature and function of authority in general and the authority of Scripture in particular. It will conclude with a constructive proposal for reuniting the authority of Scripture with the interpretation of Scripture, with specific reference to current conversations in mainline Protestant denominations concerning human sexuality.

I. Authority and Humanity

"The issue of authority has such a bad reputation that a philosopher cannot discuss it without exposing himself to suspicion and malice. Yet authority is present in all phases of social life.… Why is it that men distrust so intensely a thing that without which they cannot, by all evidences, live and act together?" [1]

What is true for the philosopher in secular culture is equally true for the theologian in the Church, and perhaps especially true for an evangelical theologian in the modern mainline: Even bringing up the notion of authority draws immediate and open hostility from those who would rather the issue remain unexamined.

However, if Christians of differing views are to hold meaningful conversations about the interpretation and application of passages of Scripture that deal with human sexuality, authority must be an essential part of the dialogue. Indeed, as the title of this article suggests, discussions of authority, especially the authority of Scripture, must have priority over discussions of interpretation.

But before we turn to the authority of Scripture, it is helpful to discuss the nature of authority and the human need for authority.

The Nature of Authority

Our English word "authority" derives from the Latin word *auctor*, which in turn comes from *augere*, meaning, "to augment, or more generally, to cause to increase, to grow."[2] The Latin *auctor* signifies "one who enlarges, confirms, or gives to a thing its completeness and efficient form." In addition, "As he who gives to a thing that which is necessary for its completeness may in this sense be viewed as the chief actor or doer, the word *auctor* is also used in the sense of one who originates or proposes a thing,"[3] (Building on this etymological understanding, and introducing a theme to which we will return later in the article, *auctor* also underlies the English word "author.")

Thus by definition, "authority" includes the concepts of origination and completion. Far from implying limitation or denial, which both secular culture and Protestant liberalism seem to see as the chief function of authority, the very notion implies bringing to completeness. At its root, the word "authority" connotes origin, growth, and ultimate fulfillment.

One consequence of this definition is that authority implies relationship. I did not originate myself. My existence was not my idea. The fact that I have grown and developed throughout my life is hardly the result of my own unaided effort. Parents and pastors, family and friends, teachers and authors all have contributed to my growth, all by functioning as authorities in some ways. And as much as contemporary culture would like me to believe that I can make myself into whatever I want to become, reality indicates otherwise.

Library shelves are filled with books written on the topic of authority. Most have explored the nature of authority as it is exercised in different spheres. One widely cited taxonomy is Max Weber's distinction between rational-legal, traditional, and charismatic authority.

While Weber's divisions are helpful in many contexts, for the purposes of this article I will use four categories listed by Victor Lee Austin in his recent book, *Up with Authority*: political, social, epistemic, ecclesial.[4] These are not the only possible categories, and, as we will see, there is inevitable overlap between them. Nonetheless, divisions along similar lines are widely accepted and these categories provide a useful starting place for our discussion.

Political Authority

We will begin with political authority because it is likely the sphere that comes most readily to mind when we hear the word "authority." That is because it is the

type of authority that we deal with on a conscious basis almost daily.

Tom Christiano describes three basic types of legitimate political authority: "legitimate political authority as justified coercion, legitimate political authority as the capacity to impose duties, and legitimate political authority as the right to rule."[5] Setting speed limits and collecting taxes may be seen as examples of justified coercion; a military draft as the imposition of duties; and the right to rule as the recognition that a political authority rightly may, among other things, set speed limits, collect taxes, and impose a military draft.

Perhaps most notably, political authority has the power to enforce its decrees, whether by issuing a speeding ticket, seizing your assets, or putting you in jail if you speed, cheat on your taxes, or dodge the draft. In some measure, all of us have experienced political authority. Although we may grumble when we get a ticket or pay our taxes, most of us instinctively recognize the value of political authority for holding a society together.

Unfortunately, as Richard DeGeorge notes, "Assuming political authority as the paradigm with which one begins makes it difficult to provide the conceptual apparatus adequate for rationally evaluating and resolving conflicts that involve various kinds of authority in such realms as education, religion, and the family."[6]

Acknowledging that political authority is neither exclusive nor paradigmatic, we turn to Austin's second category, social authority.

Social Authority

The difference between political and social authority may be illustrated by Aristotle's famous observation that man is a political animal. The Greek word *polis*, from which we get our word "political" means "city." This suggests that Aristotle was not saying that every individual is innately interested in the mechanics of civil government. Rather he is putting into a single pithy sentence what we know to be true from Scripture and experience: we were created to live in relationship with others.

One way of describing the fact that people live in relationship is to say that we live in societies. A society may be described as "a system in which roles must be played, work assigned, responsibilities fixed, and laws or regulations made, interpreted, and enforced. Individuals do all of these things and they can exercise their individuality in all of these roles; but society as such is not just a collection of individuals—[society] is a reality that keeps on going even when the individual dies or refuses to play his role."[7]

A society may also be described as a "community." And, since living in community "involves common action and not merely the coincidence of individual purposes [it] needs some means to unify and bring about its common action."[8] The mechanism that brings about common action may be described as "social authority."

Social authority is that which unites individuals into a larger group and then moves that group together toward a common goal. Social authority does not need to be as highly structured as political authority. It may take the form of a democracy, with votes and majority rule, or it may simply involve common consent to a particular common good. To cite an often less positive example, one most of us have experienced, peer pressure is a form of social authority.

As Austin concludes, "for a society to pursue its good, there must be determinations of the means to that good. Authority gives a society a particular concretization from amongst the many possibilities that are open to it."[9]

Epistemic Authority

Austin's third category is epistemic authority.

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that studies the nature of knowledge. Epistemology asks questions about what we know and about how we know what we know. Epistemology ultimately concerns truth, which makes epistemological authority of theological as well as philosophical concern. (We will explore the connection between authority and truth in Part 2, when we consider Jesus' trial before Pilate.)

While political and social authority is oriented toward getting things done, epistemic authority is concerned with gaining knowledge. As Austin writes, "In matters of action [social authority] what we need is a leader, but to come to understand the truth [epistemic authority] what we need is a witness.… A witness, unlike a leader, has no power to give orders or to command obedience. A witness simply points: and if you then see what she, the witness, points to, you no longer need her."[10]

Austin's distinction is significant. A leader does not need to rely on truth to gain and guide followers, but may rely instead on Weber's notion of charismatic authority. A classic example of this was Adolf Hitler. The notion of an Aryan master race was objectively false, yet Hitler used this fiction (among others) to

attract a large enough following to drag the world into war.

Underlying the role of a witness is the notion of objective truth. Objective truth may be described as truth that exists independent of me, my mind, my opinions, beliefs, feelings, and experiences. The opposite of objective truth is subjective truth. Subjective truth—which is probably better labeled feelings, beliefs and opinions—may be described as something that "is true for me."

The very existence of objective truth is often a fundamental point of disagreement between liberals and evangelicals. The same meetings in which the words "We all agree on the authority of Scripture" are so piously intoned are often the locus of such statements as "That may be true for you…" or, "That's your truth." The incoherent insistence that something like the law of gravity may be true for one person but not another, that it may be true at one time and place in human history but not another, that truth is merely a matter of personal opinion, is a denial of objective truth.

As we shall see below, this purported denial of the existence of absolute truth is at the root of most disagreements about the authority of Scripture.

Ecclesial Authority

Austin's final category is ecclesial authority, which means authority within the Church or, more broadly, any religious institution. Obviously, it is possible to claim that no Christian need recognize any authority higher than his or her own inclinations at the moment. But it is hard to imagine two or more of those who hold such an opinion remaining gathered long enough to form a congregation, let alone a denomination.

As all church members are aware, there are different types of authority within a local congregation. Some are given authority to sign checks, others to set an annual budget. Some have the authority to choose the color of the carpets, others have the authority to choose a new pastor.

It is at levels above the congregation that the issue of ecclesial authority becomes increasingly interesting. A congregation within a denomination is, at least in theory, required to follow the rules and regulations of that denomination. In the Roman Catholic tradition, the pope is seen as having the authority to declare infallible dogma for the Roman Catholic Church. In many Protestant traditions, governing bodies are given authority to set standards for who will be ordained, and who will retain their ordained status, as ministers within that particular tradition.

Ultimately inseparable from the notion of ecclesial authority is that of the authority of Scripture, to which we will turn in Part 2. But first we will consider the question of whether any form of authority is ever necessary.

The Need for Authority

Almost everyone grants that political, social, epistemic, and ecclesial authorities exist. Their existence raises questions, including: Why should I obey a speed limit or pay income tax if I would rather not? Why should I work with others when I would rather work alone? Why can't I decide for myself what is true in philosophy or physics, in mathematics or morals? Why should I follow any congregational or denominational authority? In short, why is any authority needed at all?

The major premise of Victor Lee Austin's *Up With Authority* answers such questions: "The point of this book is to show that we need authority to be ourselves. We cannot succeed at being human beings—we cannot have a flourishing human life—without the functioning of authority in the multiple dimensions within which we live." He later adds, "The human good requires that there be authorities. This truth is rooted in the social aspect of our nature, that to be human is to be in society with other humans."[11]

Here Austin goes to the heart of the issue by linking the nature of authority with notion of the good. In philosophical terms, Austin shows the inseparability of two of the three transcendentals: truth and goodness. As the third transcendental, beauty, leads us to goodness, so goodness leads us to truth, and truth leads us to God.[12] Absolute standards of truth, goodness, and beauty are grounded in the being of God. Remove any one of the three from the culture or the Church and the result is a path that leads away from God.

We have been made in the image of God, the *imago dei*. At least part of what it means to have been made in God's image is that we have been made to be in relationship. As the three persons of the Trinity are eternally in relationship to one another, so we have been designed to be in relationship with other human beings and with God.

To be in relationship we need order. To maintain order we need authority. Sin disordered the human relationship with God. The incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ—the Word of God Incarnate, the second person of the Trinity—invites those whom God has chosen to participate in the very life of the Triune God. To share in the life of God is to experience the good that God intends. And to most fully share in this reordered reality, we must

acknowledge the authority of God as the giver of the good, we must order our lives in such a way that we live as God, the Author of our salvation, has eternally intended.

The Decline of Authority

For most of a millennia and a half, not only the Church but much of Western culture recognized the God of the Bible as having ultimate authority over human life. The ancient and medieval worlds realized that the universe was rational, that it could be understood by educated individuals. In large measure, this rationality was the function of God (or the gods), who created and sustained the cosmos in an orderly fashion. Particularly in Western culture, the Christian God was understood to be the Creator, thus the ruler, of all that existed. His authority was rooted in the fact that he made the heavens and the earth.

Respect for authority, in the culture and the Church, began to decline with the rise of the Renaissance Humanists. These Renaissance thinkers were not the "secular humanists" we know today. Rather, they saw human beings as the summit and purpose of God's creation and emphasized the relation of human beings to God. Their concern was to define the rightful place of human beings in God's plan, the right relation of humanity to God. However, to accomplish this, they began not with God but with humanity, centering their thought around the *human* relation to the divine, and calling themselves "humanists."

Unfortunately, but not surprisingly given their starting point, Renaissance humanism drifted away from the Christian understanding of both God and man. Gradually, man came to be seen as central and God was pushed to the periphery. This trend accelerated during the Enlightenment, which marks the beginning of the modern era.

Enlightenment thinkers refused to admit the validity of any arguments based on the Bible or Church teaching because, in their eyes, any argument based on the Bible was, by definition, "unreasonable." Christian appeals to the miracles described in the Bible were met with disdain. For Enlightenment thinkers, the "proof" of any position was found either in reason or in human experience. Since miracles failed both tests, they were dismissed as medieval nonsense. The Christian doctrine of revelation was rejected altogether. As one Enlightenment skeptic wrote, "Theology is only ignorance of natural causes."[13]

In *The Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy*, Jeffrey Stout traces the diminishing acceptance of authority in the modern age. In his introduction, Stout writes, "The unifying historical theme is this: that modern thought was born in a crisis of authority, took shape in flight from authority, and aspired from the start to autonomy from all traditional influence whatsoever; that the quest for autonomy was also an attempt to deny the historical reality of having been influenced by tradition: and that this quest therefore could not but fail."[14]

In an observation supported by even the most cursory examination of the modern mainline, Stout later adds, "Reformulations of traditional theism like Deism *and liberal Protestantism* have tended to shade off into atheism, unable to retain enough distinctiveness to justify the use of traditional vocabulary or sustain the interest of the host culture" (emphasis added).[15]

Sadly, for much of the modern era, some in the Church followed the culture in treating authority with contempt and demanding it be replaced with autonomy, literally, "self law." Particularly in the modern mainline, liberals have viewed authority primarily in terms of political authority and almost exclusively in terms of limitation and denial.

This trend is continuing as the Church moves with the culture into the postmodern era, as is illustrated in Phyllis Tickle's *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why*. Tickle writes:

> The new Christianity of the Great Emergence must discover some authority base or delivery system and/or governing agency of its own. It must formulate—and soon—something other than Luther's *sola scriptura* which, although used so well by the Great Reformation originally, is now seen as hopelessly outmoded or insufficient.[16]

As is characteristic of her book, Tickle's sweeping claim of "hopelessly outmoded or insufficient" remains undocumented. But she does at least recognize authority as a central issue. Her careless characterization and flippant dismissal of Scripture's authority leads to our next topic.

II. Authority and Scripture

Not merely shelves but entire libraries could be filled with the books that have been written about authority and the Bible. We will look briefly at how authority is understood in Scripture, at the authority of Scripture, and at liberalism's dogmatic rejection of Biblical authority. But since the authority of Scripture is usually treated under the larger heading of the doctrine of revelation, and since the rejection of divine revelation in general often underlies both Enlightenment philosophy

and liberalism's subsequent rejection of the authority of Scripture, we will begin there.

The Doctrine of Revelation

Theologians use the term "revelation" to describe God's communication of divine truth to his human creation. A good, short definition of revelation is "the significant self-disclosure of God to man."

A slightly longer way of describing revelation is to say that "In his words and deeds God makes known his name, his purposes, his ways, his will, his mysteries, his covenant, and his salvation in Jesus Christ." An essential point to understand is that "in the Bible *revelation is a process initiated by God*; it is a divine gift and bestowal, not a human insight or achievement (1 Cor. 2:9-10)."[17] (emphasis added)

As the word historically has been used in Christian theology, "revelation" means more than merely the transmission of a specific and finite body of knowledge, although it does not mean less than that. Revelation includes "the personal self-disclosure of God within history,"[18] for in Scripture knowing God is never simply a matter of learning information about God but always includes a life-giving personal relationship with him.

With the dawn of the Enlightenment, the historic Christian doctrine of revelation came under frequent and ferocious attack. The Enlightenment may be broadly described as an attempt to base ethics, aesthetics, and epistemology on an "enlightened" rationality. The leaders of the Enlightenment saw themselves as a courageous, elite body of intellectuals who were leading the world out of what they saw as the long period of irrationality, superstition, and tyranny (effectively the Enlightenment summary of Christianity) that they labeled "the Dark Ages."

Representative of this approach was the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798-1856), who declared there was no place for supernatural revelation in an enlightened human consciousness. Comte's theories, which became known as "positivist philosophy," were designed to promote order and progress. Comte announced the development of a new Religion of Humanity to provide an emotional and spiritual foundation for his new philosophy.[19]

Enlightenment philosophy is the source and substance of liberal theology. Rejecting as "unenlightened" the very possibility of divine revelation, mainline liberals have followed Enlightenment philosophers in degrading the Bible from God's self-revelation to a mere collection of human reflections on the religious experiences of certain groups and individuals. For such liberals, the Bible is not, nor does it contain, the Word of God. Therefore, it has no more authority than a novel or a magazine article.

This is a perspective incompatible with Scripture's understanding of its own authority. But before we turn to the authority of Scripture, it is helpful to explore how the concept of authority is treated in Scripture.

Authority in Scripture

In the Old Testament, the concept of authority was so widely understood and accepted that there was no need for a separate discussion of the topic. In the New Testament, the Greek *exousia* is the word most often translated "authority." *Exousia* combines the prefix *ek*, meaning "from," or "out of" to a form of the verb "to be." *Exousia* is thus a power or a prerogative that comes out of someone or something.

In secular Greek, *exousia* was used to indicate conferred power, to convey the idea of "authorization" operating in a designated jurisdiction. In the New Testament, the word most frequently refers to authority that is given by God to his people for the purpose of accomplishing his will. It is a word that is prominent in John's account of Jesus' trial before Pilate.

That account is dominated by discussions of authority. Their opening exchange revolved around the question of whether or not Jesus was a king. Pilate asked, "What is truth?", rightly connecting authority and truth. But he walked out without waiting for an answer. When Pilate returned, and when Jesus, who had declared himself to be the Truth (John 14:6), refused to respond, Pilate flaunted his authority:

> "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:10-11).

As George Beasley-Murray writes, Pilate "was conscious of possessing authority from the most powerful man on earth and representing the most powerful nation on earth. He therefore reminds Jesus that he has authority to release him and authority to destroy him."[20] Jesus never denied Pilate's political authority. What he did was locate the source and purpose of that authority. Again quoting Beasley-Murray:

> [Jesus] was also conscious of authority, and that of an infinitely greater power than the emperor of Rome, namely, the almighty God, who in that very moment was granting Pilate the authority to dispose

> of his life, but in accordance with his own will, not that of his unwitting instrument.… Jesus shows little concern as to what may become of him through Pilate's judgment, but Pilate is bidden to ponder his own situation and its responsibility.[21]

Many in mainline congregations today—evangelicals and liberals alike—would do well to engage in similar reflection. The prevailing understanding of many in the mainline seems to be that the individual is the ultimate authority in any and all matters of faith and practice, whether the issue is the interpretation of Scripture or the ordination of church leaders. This is the flight Jeffrey Stout describes as being from authority to autonomy.

And yet, as Millard Erickson reminds us, we cannot be our own authority. That is because,

> [God] is the only being having the power of his own existence within himself, not dependent on anyone or anything else for his existence. Furthermore, he is the authority because of what he has done. He has created us as well as everything else in the entire world and redeemed us. He is also rightfully the authority, the one who has a right to prescribe what we are to believe and how we are to act, because of his continuing activity in the world and in our lives.[22]

Jesus' words to Pilate are a needed reminder that we are not the source of our own authority; that by definition, all authority ultimately comes to us "from above."

The Authority of Scripture

Throughout most of the history of the Church, most Christians have acknowledged that one of the ways in which God exercises his authority is through the Bible.

If shelves could be filled with books about authority, entire libraries could be filled with those written about the authority of Scripture. A succinct summary of the Church's historic understanding of Biblical authority is offered by Wayne Grudem: "The authority of Scripture means that all the words in Scripture are God's words in such a way that to disbelieve or disobey any word of Scripture is to disbelieve or disobey God."[23]

At the risk of understatement it may be observed that liberalism stridently rejects that understanding.

To cite one example, in an article excerpted in the Spring 2004 issue of *The Covenant Connection*, the newsletter of the militantly pro-gay-ordination Covenant Network of Presbyterians, L. William Countryman offers the following comments on Mark 10:2-9, where the Pharisees tested Jesus about divorce:

> Jesus wasn't a biblical conservative. But he wasn't a biblical liberal either. He expected something important from Scripture: he expected to be challenged and surprised by God. And he also expected that when you are challenged and surprised by God, some of the details enshrined in the sacred text will be revealed for what they are, as concessions to hardness of heart—and they will have to go.
>
> But how do you decide which ones to discard? That's still the scary question for us, isn't it?… When Scripture seems to confirm your own hardness of heart, it's wrong. Ditch it, just the way Jesus did.[24]

Countryman's assessment is so deeply flawed on so many counts that it is hard to know which error to identify first. At least he is honest in announcing his desire to "ditch" those parts of Scripture that he finds incompatible with his current inclinations.

But to read into Jesus' words and deeds in Mark 10 his own desire to discard God's revelation is an astonishing exercise in eisegesis. Countryman simply asserts, rather than defends, his claim that Jesus expected to be challenged and surprised by God in his reading of Scripture. His insistence that Biblical authority be made subservient to individual autonomy is similarly unsupported.

Countryman's insistence that Christians must discard those portions of Scripture they find personally problematic, although articulated with unusual clarity, is quite in keeping with the direction of liberal Protestant theology since the Enlightenment. As noted earlier, a fundamental doctrine of Protestant liberal theology is the belief that Scripture is not the result of divine revelation but a purely human product.

In other words, liberals reject the authority of Scripture because they reject God as Scripture's Author. They reject the Bible's testimony that "All Scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Of course, today's liberals are not the first to reject God as the author of the Bible. In the early days of the Protestant Reformation, long before liberalism emerged, John Calvin wrote, "we need not wonder if there are many who doubt as to the Author of the Scripture; for, although the majesty of God is displayed in it, yet none but those who have been enlightened [a prescient choice of words] by the Holy Spirit have eyes to perceive what

ought, indeed, to have been visible to all, and yet is visible to the elect alone" (*Institutes*, I.vii.3, 4).

Although those words were written nearly 500 years ago, Calvin's insights are quite timely. For in distinguishing between those who accept and those who reject God as the Author of Scripture, Calvin identifies the issue at the core of many conflicts in the Church today: the authority of Scripture.

Anyone who has been even tangentially involved in discussions of Scripture with liberals recognizes that there are those in our congregations and denominations who refuse to recognize the authority of Scripture precisely because they refuse to recognize God as its author. There are those in positions of leadership in our congregations, governing bodies, denominations, and seminaries who quite casually declare that the Bible is entirely of human origin; that the Bible is a record of human efforts to reach out and touch "the divine" and that the Bible may not, indeed must not, be considered God's revelation of himself to his human creation.

Calvin reminds us that Scripture is our authority for Christian faith and life because God is the ultimate author of Scripture. Scripture derives its authority from its author—God. Calvin also reminds us that those who have not "been enlightened by the Holy Spirit" will not see God as Scripture's author.

To quote from Calvin's *Institutes* one final time:

> [The Scriptures] attain full authority among believers only when men regard them as having sprung from heaven, as if there the living words of God were heard. …
>
> It is utterly vain, then, to pretend that the power of judging Scripture so lies with the church that its certainty depends upon churchly assent.… The testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason. For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men's hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. (*Institutes*, I.vii.1)

Calvin assures us that the authority of Scripture, God's special revelation intended for our salvation, is sealed in our hearts and minds by God himself, who is both the author of Scripture and the author of our salvation.

Describing the continuity of today's evangelicals with the Church throughout history, Donald Bloesch writes:

> With the Reformers…and against the Christian rationalism of the Enlightenment and its modern representatives…we hold that the revelation in Scripture is not open to general reasonableness but is disclosed only to the ears and eyes of faith.… It is only when the Spirit opens our eyes from within that we can perceive the message on the window and receive it into our hearts. The truth of revelation is objectively given in biblical history, but revelation also encompasses the interior work of the Holy Spirit by which this truth is gratefully acknowledged and received (cf. Eph. 1:17-18; Gal. 1:12).[25]

Authority and Community

Without a common understanding of authority, no community can thrive, or even long survive. As Jesus told his first disciples, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand" (Matt. 12:25). That is true whether the community is a society, a congregation, or a denomination.

When a society rejects long-shared notions of political, social, and epistemic authority—when there is no longer agreement about whether stoplights should be obeyed, taxes must be paid, or murder is to be punished—that society tears itself apart from within. When a congregation or denomination rejects the authority of what God has revealed, when their leaders succumb to the primordial temptation "Did God really say…?" and entice others to follow their example, the fellowship (from the Greek *koinonia*, meaning "in common") once shared is quickly ruptured.

Authority as designed and intended by God enlarges the common good. Such authority allows a community to grow both in strength and in number. Those who will not accept a common authority divide and diminish the community. A community is divided even more forcibly when those who reject the formerly agreed upon authority describe those who fail to join in their rebellion as "schismatic." A community is divided even more quickly when the rebels seize political authority and use it to expel all who will not submit to their ideology.

Whether within the culture or the Church, the abandonment of a common authority inexorably results in the dissolution of community. That is one reason why many congregations and denominations are struggling to survive. At the root of many such struggles is the rejection of authority in pursuit of autonomy. And in an effort to obscure the fact that its rejection of Biblical authority is causing such painful divisions, liberalism has tried using such obviously inaccurate statements as "We all agree on the authority of Scripture" to shift the focus of the debates to Biblical interpretation.

III. Authority and Interpretation

"Before the late seventeenth century," Jeffery Stout writes, the Bible was "the one authority all Christians could agree upon as an authority. It may be difficult to interpret, but its authority as God's word is final. The Renaissance complicates matters." Come the Enlightenment, "*No longer does interpretation consist in the attempt to make oneself and one's vision of reality conform to the text*; it now consists in the attempt to discern the text's meaning and determine the truth of its claims by considering all the relevant evidence, internal and external."[26] (emphasis added)

Following the Enlightenment, liberals replaced the authority of Scripture, which derives from God as the author of Scripture, with the activity of the interpreter.

Relocating Biblical Authority

As we enter the 21st century, liberalism is taking the next step in its abandonment of Biblical authority, moving beyond its Enlightenment mentors and embracing a postmodern literary theory known as deconstruction.

Deconstructionist literary theorists, following their founder, Jacques Derridá, begin by rejecting what they label "authorial intent," the (almost) universally recognized reality that a writer is able to convey some specified meaning to a reader. As Rebecca Goldstein writes, "In deconstruction, the critic claims there is no meaning to be found in the actual text, but only in the various, often mutually irreconcilable, 'virtual texts' constructed by readers in their search for meaning."[27]

Deconstructionists dogmatically declare that any written work—whether a student essay, the U.S. Constitution, or the Bible—means only what the *reader*, never what the writer, thinks it means. As a result, any written work may have as many meanings as it has readers, even if the meanings are contradictory. Similarly, a single reader may assign a different meaning to a text every time he reads it.

The deconstructionist declaration that there is no objective truth, only an infinite number of subjective interpretations, fits nicely into liberalism's commitment to locating the authority of Scripture not in God as its author but in each individual reader. To be sure, not all Protestants who believe in interpretative autonomy do so because they are convinced by the arguments of deconstructionist literary theorists. In fact, many who accept this approach may not even know the word "deconstruction." But they have heard professors and pastors who have preached this dogma in their classrooms and congregations. And the leaders of the movement toward subjective interpretation are keenly aware of the path they would like their adherents to follow.[28]

By rigidly separating interpretation from revelation, liberalism attempts to relocate authority from God as the author of Scripture to each individual who reads Scripture. Uncritically accepting the deconstructionist dogma that there is no such thing as "authorial intent," that it is impossible to convey an intended meaning to a reader, liberalism insists that there is no authority higher than the individual, which is, of course, the definition of autonomy.

To use Austin's categories from earlier in this article, without openly stating, let alone defending, their assumption, liberals take for granted that there is no external epistemic authority, thus there can be no single interpretation of Scripture that is true for everyone everywhere at every time. Of course, this unstated, therefore unexamined, presupposition invokes the very level of epistemic authority that liberals insist does not exist. They demand that evangelicals accept without question that it is absolutely true for absolutely everyone everywhere at every time that there is no absolutely true interpretation of Scripture.

Of course, it must be acknowledged that liberals have never been very good about shouldering the burdens they would lay on others. In the name of the Enlightenment's cardinal virtues of tolerance and inclusivity, they often seek to silence and punish (usually by exclusion) those who refuse to elevate human autonomy above divine authority.

It almost seems as if such liberals are opposed not to authority per se but to authority being exercised by any who do not march in ideological lock step with their views. Recent history within the modern mainline suggests that those most adamantly opposed to Biblical authority are often the most eager to invoke ecclesial authority. Having rejected the authority of Scripture as a behavioral norm, they demand that their personal preferences be enshrined as ecclesiastical law.

Perhaps it is not as easy, or as desirable, as liberals appear to believe to abandon the notion of authority.

Reuniting Biblical Authority and Human Sexuality

Drawing together threads that have been running throughout this article, Donald Bloesch writes, "The question of authority is indubitably at the center of the tensions and conflict in the churches today. Is authority to be placed in human wisdom or cultural experience, or is it to be located in an incommensurable divine

revelation that intrudes into our world from beyond?… is it a word personally addressed to us, calling us to repentance and obedience?"[29]

Within the modern mainline, divisions between liberals and evangelicals about Biblical authority have been especially evident during congregational and denominational discussions of human sexuality. The tension and conflict Bloesch describes is exemplified in Terence E. Fretheim's 2006 article, "The Authority of the Bible and Churchly Debates Regarding Sexuality."[30]

Fretheim, an ordained minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, served on the ELCA Task Force on Sexuality from 2002-2005. In his article he asks "how can we speak of biblical authority when the text itself, again and again, allows for differing interpretations of textual detail?" [26]

With postmodern deconstructionists, Fretheim effectively argues that meaning lies not in the text but with the interpreter [28] and that the authority of Scripture lies not with God as the author of the divine revelation but in each individual reader's "encounter" with the text [35]. Following Fretheim, today's liberals cannot accept the Biblical view of the authority of Scripture because the Bible's teaching about its own authority cannot be reconciled with their own view of themselves as the ultimate authorities on all matters concerning Christian faith and life.

Liberals cannot accept the authority of Scripture because it would supersede their authority to impose their views (which reject what Scripture reveals) of human sexuality on all other Christians, not merely those in their own denominations but on those around the world. To put it bluntly, if God is the ultimate authority, liberals are not. And for liberals openly to acknowledge that reality would be to acknowledge that the beliefs and practices they propose constitute a counterfeit Christianity.

The authority of Scripture and the interpretation of those passages of Scripture that deal with human sexuality cannot be separated. That is because the rejection of the authority of Scripture and the embrace of sexual behaviors that Scripture calls sin share the same root causes: the desire of individuals for ultimate autonomy; the consequent rejection of God's authority as a constructive good; the willful yielding to the serpent's temptation, "You will be like God."

In dealing with attempts to separate authority from interpretation, evangelical Christians must insist that they remain together. We must recognize and emphasize the priority of authority.

Restoring Community

Given the depth of the division concerning the authority of Scripture, should evangelicals continue to engage liberals in discussions of Biblical interpretation? Absolutely. The Church has debated the interpretation of Scripture from its earliest days. Those debates have added breadth and depth to our understanding of God's written revelation. As the culture moves from the modern to the postmodern era, Christians must continue to freely and frankly discuss what the words of Scripture mean and how we can articulate that timeless meaning in a time of rapid change.

But evangelicals should harbor no illusions concerning the results of debates with liberals about the interpretation of Scripture. Absent a shared recognition of and commitment to the authority of Scripture, discussions of Scripture's interpretation cannot rebuild community. For even if there were to be agreement that the Bible says adultery and homosexual behavior are sinful, that agreement would be of little consequence to those who had decided beforehand that, whatever the decision, the Bible would have no authority over their beliefs or behavior.

This outcome is hardly hypothetical. I once heard an Old Testament professor acknowledge that there was no question that the plain meaning of the Old Testament Hebrew is that homosexual behavior is sinful in God's eyes. However, he concluded, "The Bible is simply wrong at that point."

Can congregations and denominations grow, thrive, and come to "completeness and efficient form" if every member has the right to decide where Scripture is wrong? Can congregations or denominations continue to function, or even long exist, in the absence of a common notion of, and shared commitment to, political, social, epistemic, and ecclesial authority? The Biblical evidence is not encouraging.

Early in Israel's history was the time of the judges. "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). Rather than following the covenant God had established with his people, rather than obeying God's instructions concerning how they were to live in relationship with him and one another, every Israelite took it upon himself to decide what to believe and how to behave.

This period in Israel's history was a repeating cycle of apostasy, oppression, calling out to God, deliverance, a period of peace, and, again, renewed apostasy. As God's people turned away from God, their fortunes declined. Judges repeatedly led them back toward God, but the people's pattern was to seek autonomy. They seemed unwilling to learn from their past mistakes.

As the time of the judges came to an end, many in ancient Israel, like many in our congregations today, wanted to look less like a people set apart by God and more like the culture around them. In response, God told his prophet Samuel, who had repeatedly revealed God's word to his people, to give them the king they desired: "Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them" (I Sam. 8:7).

God gave Israel kings, some of whom were wise and faithful rulers. Unfortunately, others chose to worship carved images of a fertility goddess, to celebrate sexual immorality, rather than to obey the God who had brought them out of Egypt and revealed his law to them. Rejecting God's authority and insisting on their own autonomy, these leaders of God's people tore Israel apart from the inside. And as the people followed the leaders they had so desperately desired and turned aside from God, the people were carried off into captivity.

The early church was not immune to similar problems. In Corinth, a city noted for its sexual immorality, some in the church came to believe that they possessed a superior spirituality, one that allowed them to disregard God's laws concerning sexual behavior. The church began to divide over this and other issues. Letters from the apostle Paul, who had planted the church in Corinth, addressed these divisive beliefs and practices.

Now as in the time of the judges, we have those among God's people who want to do what is right in their own eyes. Now as in the time of the kings we have those who want to reject God's leadership and look like the society that surrounds them. Now as in ancient Corinth we have those who presume their own spiritual level is so superior to their peers and predecessors that they may behave in ways forbidden by God. Now as then, the results of these beliefs and behaviors are leading God's people into division and disaster.

Those who know the history of God's people should not be surprised to find some people in today's congregations and denominations who reject God's authority in favor of their own autonomy. Jesus told his followers there would be weeds among the wheat (Matt. 13:24-29). He warned that his church would be plagued by false prophets, who "inwardly are ravenous wolves" (Matt. 7:15).

Those who know the history of God's people also know that, despite the repeated faithlessness of those whom God has chosen as his own, despite false prophets and false teachers promoting counterfeit Christianities, there is good news. The same Bible that shows certain behaviors to be sinful in God's eyes also shows that our God is a God who heals and restores.

The healing may not take place exactly as we envision. The restoration may not be to the institutional form that characterized the time of the rebellion. Judges may be replaced by kings; the *synagogue* by the *ekklesia*. But God will not leave himself without a witness in the world. A crucial part of that witness is his written Word. And a crucial part of our witness is to recognize, uphold, and proclaim the authority of God's written revelation.

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1. Yves R. Simon, *A General Theory of Authority* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962), p. 13.
2. Victor Lee Austin, *Up With Authority: Why We Need Authority to Flourish as Human Beings* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2010), p. 67
3. http://www.ancientlibrary.com/smith-dgra/0179.html, accessed 3/13/11.
4. Austin, *Up with Authority*, Chapters 2-5.While I do not share all of Austin's conclusions, his approach is often helpful. And I will return to one of his key insights later in this article.
5. Tom Christiano, "Authority," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/authority/, accessed 6/28/2011.
6. Richard T. DeGeorge, *The Nature and Limits of Authority* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1985), p. 1. As if to illustrate DeGeorge's concern, Christiano's encyclopedia article titled "Authority" deals only with political authority.
7. C. Ellis Nelson, *Where Faith Begins* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1987), p. 37.
8. Austin, *Up With Authority*, p. 24.
9. Austin, *Up With Authority*, p. 38.
10. Austin, *Up With Authority*, p. 38.
11. Austin, *Up With Authority*, pp. 1, 38.
12. I have discussed the third transcendental, beauty, at length in an earlier volume of this journal. See "Beauty, the Beholder, and the Believer," *Theology Matters* vol. 15 no. 5, Nov/Dec 2009.
13. Cited in Gloria K. Fiero, *Landmarks in Humanities* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006), p. 305.
14. Jeffrey Stout, *The Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2006 [orig. 1981]), pp. 2-3.
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17. John Jefferson Davis, *Foundations of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), pp. 75-76.
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19. http://faculty.fullerton.edu/nfitch/history110b/posit.html accessed 2/10/10.
20. George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word, 1987), pp. 339.
21. Beasley-Murray, *John*, p. 339-40.
22. Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), p. 270.
23. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), p. 73.
24. L. William Countryman, "Jesus Interprets the Scriptures," *The Covenant Connection*, Spring 2004, p.3.
25. Donald Bloesch, *Evangelical Essentials, Vol. I*, (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1998) p. 54.
26. Stout, *The Flight from Authority*, pp. 111-112.
27. http://www.thefreedictionary.com/deconstructionism, accessed 10/7/2011.
28. That deconstruction, as a literary theory or a philosophy, is incoherent in theory and unworkable in practice doesn't seem to bother its practitioners. A wonderful illustration of this comes from Derridá himself, who issued 93-page reply to philosopher John Searle's 11-page critique of an earlier article by Derridá. In his reply to Searle, Derridá insisted that what he wrote in his original article had been *misunderstood* and *misrepresented* by Searle, claims that would be

impossible to make, let alone sustain, if deconstructionism were true, as Derridá insists it is.

29. Donald G. Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit: Authority and Method in Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), pp. 184-185.
30. Paragraph numbers refer to the online version of the article, available at http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Journal-of-Lutheran-Ethics/Issues/April-2007/The-Authority-of-the-Bible-and-Churchly-Debates-Regarding-Sexuality.aspx, accessed 3/14/2011.

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A Consistent Biblical Ethic

By G. Thomas Hobson

In contemporary ethical debate, it is common to hear commands from the Bible being indiscriminately lumped together. We hear people say, "The Torah forbids homosexual behavior, but it also forbids wearing mixed fabric, and eating leavened bread during Passover. It's all a hopeless jumble, useless as any reliable source of ethical guidance." Many are those who claim that the Bible teaches no consistent sexual ethic, but endorses polygamy, concubinage, prostitution, and even incest.

Or consider the words of Barack Obama during the 2008 primary campaign: "Which passages of scripture should guide our public policy? Should we go with Leviticus, which suggests slavery is OK and that eating shellfish is an abomination? Or we could go with Deuteronomy, which suggests stoning your child if he strays from the faith? Or should we just stick to the Sermon on the Mount?"[1] Obama went on to call Jesus' Sermon on the Mount "a passage that is so radical that it's doubtful that our Defense Department would survive its application." Again, the aim in such an argument is to portray the Bible to be wildly and hopelessly diverse, and then conclude that it is useless as a moral or ethical guide.

How do we sort through the laws given in the Old Testament (OT) and discern which laws are only for Israel, and which ones are still God's word to us today? And what about the moral teachings of the New Testament (NT)? How do we sort out the various mix of data given to us by the NT writers? Is some of that teaching culturally relative rather than timeless? And if so, how can we tell? Does the NT lead us to believe that all sins are equally dangerous? Or does it warn us that some sins put our souls at higher risk than others? How do we know when the NT is merely lifting us to a higher plane of morality, and when it intends to warn us against plunging over steep drop-offs?

I would argue that, despite a chorus of different voices in the Bible that sound different notes, there *is* a consistent Biblical ethic, as I have argued in my recent book *What's on God's Sin List for Today?*, an expanded version of this article.[2] As we read the OT law, we find a category of particularly serious offenses (as indicated by the penalties attached to them) that are reaffirmed as valid moral issues by the NT. As we read the NT, we find a number of sin lists where certain behaviors are consistently ruled out of bounds. And as to the question of whether a NT command may be culturally conditioned, we may presume that if our cultural situation is comparable to the world in which God spoke, God's word to us is the same as God's word was to them.

It is claimed that the Bible's ethical teaching is hopelessly contradictory. But are these contradictions fundamental or only apparent? In his book *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament*, John Goldingay identifies at least four possible forms of contradiction in the Bible: formal, contextual, substantial, and fundamental.[3] All of the first three types of contradiction may coexist in one consistent Biblical message. The first two types are only apparent contradictions. The third allows for contrasting positions that do not necessarily rule each other out.

Only the fourth category (cases such as Yahweh versus Baal) cannot allow for two or more options to be simultaneously true.

Which OT Commands Are Still For Today?

Consider our first example above, where the revisionist critic wishes to construe three Torah commands (forbidding homosexual behavior, wearing mixed fabric, and eating leavened bread during Passover) as all being of equal seriousness. The problem with this type of argument is that it confuses three types of prohibitions, all of which carry different penalties. The first prohibition carries a death penalty, the second carries no explicit penalty, and the third calls for the offender to be "cut off from his/her people" (known in Judaism as the *kareth* penalty). Such a wholesale mixture of texts is not a legitimate way to handle the Torah's teaching, because it ignores distinctions in Israelite law that are clearly signaled in the text itself.

Edwin Good writes, "A society's values may be negatively attested in its punishments for the crimes it most detests. The more serious the punishment, the more the offense represents the negation of what the society holds most dear. On this logic, those crimes for which the offender is put to death represent the most blatant rejection of the common values."[4]

If Good is correct, the death penalty signals the most serious offenses in the Torah's system of crimes and punishments. We understand what the death penalty is. But what is the meaning of the penalty "cut off from (one's) people," a penalty declared for 19 separate offenses in the Torah? While Wold and Milgrom have defended the rabbinic view that this penalty was a divinely-imposed extermination curse consisting of premature death, no afterlife, and no descendants,[5] I have argued in my recent dissertation that "cut off from (one's) people" is a form of "punitive expulsion" from the Hebrew community, a view shared by von Rad, Zimmerli, Westermann, Elliger, and Levine.[6]

The implications of this conclusion are huge for Christian ethics. If "cut off from one's people" is normally a less severe penalty than the death penalty, that creates a distinction between two categories of offenses. Laws that carry a death penalty prove to be timeless and universal, and are reaffirmed as valid moral issues for Christians by the NT. Let us be clear, it is *not* the death penalty itself that is timeless and universal, it is the laws to which the death penalty is applied. The death penalty is a *signal* that a particular law is a "Class A felony" with God, as it were. By contrast, laws where the penalty is punitive expulsion are laws that are only intended for Israel, and that are not reaffirmed by the NT as laws that are still binding on Christians today. So the requirement to circumcise, or the law against eating leaven during Passover, are penalized by expulsion from the Hebrew community. These laws are only for Israel, while murder, adultery, and other capital crimes in the Torah are still binding moral issues for us today.

Every Torah command that carries a death penalty, is reaffirmed by the NT as a binding moral principle. The NT does not command us to execute incorrigible teenagers, but it does affirm the command, "Honor your father and mother." Commands in the Torah that do not carry a death penalty, such as the kosher food laws, are not reaffirmed in the NT, and may be taken as commands that are just for Israel. Indeed, the kosher food laws are among numerous examples of Torah commands that carry no penalty whatever, being merely didactic rather than coercive.

(Curiously, "Do not steal" is reaffirmed in the NT, but carries no death penalty in the Torah. The Torah's penalties for stealing are entirely in the pocketbook. We in 21st century society usually throw the book at property crime, but decriminalize most sexual immorality. The Torah, reaffirmed by the NT, does the reverse.)

What about the NT? A closer look at the NT sin lists can help us in our current debate about sin. A quick search through the NT yields a number of major passages where sins are itemized, which give us an apostolic consensus on what is sin. There are the two parallel passages where Jesus identifies the sins that come from the heart that defile a person (Matt. 15:18–20; Mark 7:20–23). There is Paul's portrait of Gentile decadence in Romans 1. There is Paul's warning not to associate with believers who are in serious sin (1 Cor. 5:11), coupled with a similar list of persons who "shall not inherit the reign of God" (1 Cor. 6:9–11) if they continue in their behavior. There is Paul's catalogue of "deeds of the flesh" in Galatians 5:18–21; again, we are reminded that "those who keep on living this way shall not inherit the reign of God." In Ephesians and Colossians, there are deeds "because of which the wrath of God is coming" (Eph 5:3–5; Col 3:5–6). There is Paul's list of those for whom the Law is written in 1 Timothy 1 (paralleling the 10 Commandments). There is Paul's detailed description in 2 Timothy 3 of what people will be like in the last days. Finally, there is the double list of people who are excluded from the Holy City in Revelation 21:8 and 22:15.

Upon examination, some recurrent patterns emerge:

Matt 15	Mark 7	1 Cor 6	Gal 5	1 Tim 1	Rev 21–22
Phonoi	*Phonoi*			*Androphonoi*	*Phonoi*
Moicheiai	*Moicheia*	*Moichoi*			
Porneiai	*Porneiai*	*Pornoi*	*Porneia*	*Pornoi*	*Pornoi*
Klopai	*Klopai*	*Kleptai*			*Kleptai* (9:21)
	Pleonexia	*Pleonektai*			
		Eidololatria	*Eidolalatria*		*Eidololatrai*
	Aselgeia	*Arsenokoitai*	*Aselgeia*	*Arsenokoitai*	*Kynes* (Deut 23:18)
			Pharmakeia		*Pharmakoi*
		Methusoi	*Methai*		

In addition to these, sins such as drunkenness (*methusoi*) and wild partying (*kōmoi*) also merit mention on these sin lists and others.

Note what is not on these lists. Sabbath-breaking, for instance, although it carries an OT death penalty, is nowhere to be found on these lists of potentially deadly sins. Neither is one of today's moral felonies, domestic violence, which is condemned only on Paul's lists of qualifications for leadership in 1 Timothy 3:3 and Titus 1:7. (One could also argue that domestic violence is an extension of *phonos*, murder.) Meanwhile, theft and greed, which are not punishable by death in the Mosaic law, do appear on these lists of serious moral offenses.

One critical issue for interpretation is what Paul means by the term "inherit the reign of God." To say that certain sins endanger one's salvation seems to contradict Paul's theology of salvation by grace. One can only guess at what Paul means here, but it would appear that Paul is warning his readers that certain behaviors must by all means be avoided because they tend to particularly alienate a person from God. Paul could also simply be saying that such sins are a living contradiction of the Lordship of Christ.

Sex in the First Century AD

The sin that appears on these lists more than any other sin is *porneia*, sex apart from marriage. Every NT writer but James rules *porneia* out of bounds. Avoiding *porneia* is the first lesson in morality that Paul gives the brand-new Christians at Thessalonika after they stopped worshipping idols (1 Thess 4:3–8). He tells the Corinthians that *porneia* is a sin against one's own body and a violation of the one-flesh relationship for which God created sex (1 Cor 6:16–20). He tells the Ephesians (Eph 5:3) that *porneia* should not even be considered as a valid Christian lifestyle option.

Porneia is condemned as an extension of *moicheia* (adultery), one of the OT death penalty crimes. While premarital sex is not explicitly condemned in the OT (probably because there was no swinging singles' scene in ancient Israel), Judaism vociferously rejected the premarital sex that it saw in the Gentile world. Such strong conviction did not arise out of a vacuum. It is argued here that by forbidding *porneia*, the Jews were simply making explicit what they had always assumed (which we are now forced to do again today in our present debate).

Arsenokoitai is a word first used (coined?) by Paul as a translation of the words "he (masculine) who has *koitos* with a male" in Leviticus. It is a purely generic term, with no abusive relationship implied. Homosexual behavior is also the shocker on Paul's portrait of human depravity in Romans 1:26–27. It also seems to be alluded to by a coded term on the sin list in Revelation 22:8, harking back to Deuteronomy 23:18.

Jesus and other Jewish sources in the NT assume the validity of the Mosaic law on this subject and apparently felt no need to be more explicit on what they considered to be an uncomfortable subject. Nevertheless, on his sin list in Mark, Jesus includes the term *aselgeia*, a term used by Jews to refer to the most shocking sex crimes forbidden in the Torah (since Jesus has already named fornication and adultery on this list, he is most likely referring to homosexual behavior, incest, and bestiality).[7] *Aselgeia* is used ten times in the NT, including Romans 13:13, 2 Corinthians 12:21, Ephesians 4:19, 1 Peter 4:3, 2 Peter 2:7, and Jude 4. Notably, it is never used where *arsenokoitai* is used.

Contrary to those who claim that there are multiple inconsistent Biblical teachings on sex, the Bible has one consistent central teaching on sexuality, found in three key locations: in the Torah's creation story (Gen 2:24), reaffirmed clearly by Jesus (Matt 19:3–6, Mark 10:6–9), and reaffirmed a third time by Paul (1 Cor 6:16; Eph 5:31): *"the two* (man and woman) *shall become one flesh."* In other words, God proclaims that sexual intercourse shall be heterosexual, exclusive of other partners, and shall bind the partners in a lifelong bond that cannot be erased.

Genesis, Jesus, and Paul clearly teach one consistent Biblical sexual ethic. This teaching is enunciated a total of three times, in the teaching of three leading authorities (the Torah, Jesus, and Paul), and it is presented in contexts where it is treated as foundational, not as a stray detail. This teaching serves as a coherent core that supports and explains the Bible's prohibitions on fornication, adultery, incest, homosexual behavior, and bestiality, while also serving as a corrective judgment on behavior that the Bible otherwise appears to condone, such as polygamy and divorce. The centrality of the one-flesh sexual union even comes through in the incest legislation in Leviticus, where whole classes of potential partners are ruled out because these partners are "your own flesh" (*she'ēr besarō* – Lev 18:6), including even in-laws. (That chapter, by the way, makes it a nightmare to even consider polygamy, with all the in-laws that one is forbidden to marry.) Note: whenever Jesus had the opportunity to correct or overturn one of these laws, he had the courage to do so.

Other Sins On the NT Sin Lists

Substance abuse appears on these lists both as alcohol abuse (*methusoi*) and as *pharmakeia*, a form of witchcraft involving the use of drugs, potions, and poisons. *Pharmakeia* was illegal under Roman law (partly because it often involved the poisoning of others), and any kind of witchcraft was punishable by death under Mosaic law. Opium was commonly used to kill pain in NT times; marijuana was known, but not commonly used.[8] Jesus refuses the drug he was offered by the soldiers who crucified him (Matt. 27:34), which was probably either opium, hemlock, or absinthe, judging from the term's use in the Septuagint. Drunkenness carried no penalty under OT law, merely censure, but the NT recognizes it as a threat to one's spiritual health.

It is no surprise that death penalty crimes like idol worship (*eidololatria*), blasphemy (*blasphemia*), and reviling God (*loidoroi*) appear on the NT sin lists. What is mildly surprising is the appearance of *pleonexia*, greed, the desire for more. While greed is a thought crime rather than an act, Paul rates it as a form of idol worship. And with greed go concrete expressions such as theft and swindling (*harpages*), all in a context where Paul argues against believers suing one another. We who live in a day where economic pressures push us to break every word from God (Prov 28:21— "For a piece of bread, a person will do wrong") should not be surprised that *pleonexia* and its symptoms can seriously alienate us from God.

Also, while we are not surprised that *phonos* (murder) appears on these lists, what do we do with John's statement that no murderer has eternal life in 1 John 3:15? Perhaps we should understand that persons who have eternal life are highly unlikely to commit the crime of murder after they have come to faith. But note that John ties murder solidly to the thought crime of hatred as a natural expression thereof. We must also consider here the implications of the issue of abortion, and whether persons who have eternal life may still be capable of resorting to this act in moments of weakness. Either way, it is clear that here we have an act with tremendous potential to alienate one from God.

What about the other New Testament sin lists? Romans 1 seems to be a sweeping indictment that aims at convicting everyone of sin that deserves judgment; thrown into the mix are quite a few thought crimes and character qualities that are hard to measure or define. The same is true for Paul's description of human depravity in the last days in 2 Timothy 3. By contrast, Paul's checklists of leadership standards in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 present us with exemplary qualities to strive for rather than moral felonies. Failure to be hospitable need not disqualify one from office, but we might draw the line at drug or spouse abuse.

Are the NT Commands Still For Today?

The revisionist critic would argue that the NT is as outdated as a source of ethical teaching as the OT, that it was written in a time and culture so different from ours that its prescriptions are no longer valid or relevant for us. Why should our ethical beliefs be dictated by the opinions of some dead Bronze Age Jewish males? Such an approach bears no resemblance to the Christian doctrine of the authority of Scripture.

A strong case can be made that "Greet one another with a holy kiss" is a NT exhortation that is strongly conditioned by the time and culture in which it was uttered. But what about "It is a shame for a man to have long hair" (1 Cor. 11:14)? To determine what Paul meant by "long hair," one may wish to take a look at the culture in which he spoke, where crew cuts were only for effeminate boys, and where shoulder-length hair for men was apparently the norm. Where Paul does not permit women to teach or have authority over men (1 Tim 2:12), we may observe that no one but the Pythagoreans, the Epicureans, and the Isis cult put women in any comparable teaching position; in this regard, the first-century Church was in a position much like it is in present-day Pakistan, a culture not yet ready for women in religious authority.

However, whenever the ancient cultural situation is much like our own, then God's word to us must be the same as God's word was to them. A key example is the sexuality issue. The NT world was characterized by as much sexual freedom, both gay and straight, as we have

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today, arguably much more. Voices from the past, like the pro-gay speakers in Plato's *Symposium* and Callicratidas in Pseudo-Lucian, speak of same-sex love that is mutual, committed, and immutable, despite modern claims that the ancients did not have our understanding of same-sex orientation. One may reject historic Christian teaching on fornication and homosexuality, but one cannot dismiss it as outdated or as any more unrealistic (I would argue, countercultural) than the age in which God spoke these words.

Jesus and his apostles are the authoritative interpreters of the Torah for Christians. The Sermon on the Mount may be taken, not as "law," but as Jesus' statement of controlling values by which our hearts should be governed. They are like a video game that can never be mastered, because there are always higher levels to attain. Anyone can recognize that applying "Do not resist one who is evil" on an international scale will lead (and has led) to the most unspeakable bloodbaths. To apply Jesus' words this way is almost certainly not what Jesus intended.

So where does that leave us? The Bible is not a hopelessly confused and outdated jumble of human ethical opinions. God has indeed given us a consistent Biblical ethic. Any OT command that is accompanied by a death penalty, and/or is reaffirmed by the NT and where our cultural situation today is comparable to the world in which the NT was written, must be taken as God's word to us today.

1.http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/06/24/evangelical.vote/index.html.

2. Tom Hobson, *What's on God's Sin List for Today?* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2011). This book also contains discussions of gambling, abortion, obscene language, and Old Testament laws that are not discussed in the present article.

3. John Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1987), 15–25.

4. Edwin Good, "Capital Punishment and Its Alternatives in Ancient Near Eastern Law," *Stanford Law Review* 19 (1966–67): 947.

5. Donald John Wold, "The Meaning of the Biblical Penalty 'Kareth,'" Ph.D. diss., University of California at Berkeley, 1978; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 457–60.

6. G. Thomas Hobson, "Cut Off From (One's) People: Punitive Expulsion in the Torah," Ph.D. diss., Concordia Seminary St. Louis, 2010.

7. See G. Thomas Hobson, "*Aselgeia* in Mark 7:22," *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 21 (2008): 65–74.

8. See Hobson, *Sin List*, 46–7.

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