Bruce Wrenn
Can (Should) Religion be Marketed?

Sheila Hassell Hughes
Homosexuality and Group Boundaries

Peter Browning
Homosexuality, Ordination, and Polity
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Introduction

An interesting article appeared in the New York Times earlier this year concerning Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the 1991 recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. For almost five years now, she has been under house arrest for her leadership in the democracy movement in Myanmar, which is better known by its colonial name, Burma. On February 15, 1994, the military government allowed a group of Americans including a U.S. congressman and a reporter to visit Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi. Entering her house, they saw something unusual: hanging in the hallway were paper banners covered with quotes from her father’s writings on democracy and the rule of law. What was their purpose? During her imprisonment, Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi has been visited regularly by a lieutenant colonel, one of her jailers, who keeps her apprised of the government’s will with regard to her. Asked whether the quotes are directed toward him, she replied with characteristic simplicity, “Perhaps. I thought they might be educational.”

This is a striking gesture, and it speaks eloquently for Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi’s nonviolent quest for justice in her country. It intrigued me at first because I frequently muse about what motto I would have in my own house. (What we have now is a painted tin sign next to the kitchen door that proclaims, falsely, “Homemade Cooking, Pies and Cakes.”) But the guarded house in Myanmar has signs in the hallways not to inspire, and certainly not to decorate, but to effect change, which is a very non-Western way to go about that.

I want to claim Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi’s gesture for us as church leaders, because I think it shows some of the tension inherent in taking a minority view on social issues. To wit: God’s house is regularly attended by the powerful in our society, who do not intend to check their advantages at the door. All of us can play this part, since we very
powerful in comparison with our counterparts in other communities or countries. As such we may think, for example, that the whole world including our churches should be run on all the same principles as a Fortune 500 company. Or we may believe that sexuality has nothing to do with religion, that gay and lesbian Christians should be invisible in the church, and especially that they should be denied access to leadership positions in it.

To the extent that we identify with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, we should challenge those positions, say they are wrong. But prisoners, including prisoners of conscience, cannot compel people to change; nor can they guarantee that their own solutions are error-free. It may be equally problematic to contend that religion and its institutions should have nothing to do with business practices, or that sexuality is the essence of our Christian faith. Instead, like the famous political prisoner, we must surround ourselves with what we believe to be truthful messages. As Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi understands, in the long run they might be educational.

The following essays, therefore, are meant to stimulate some honest reflection on two major topics: the church and business practices, particularly marketing, and the church in its relationship to gay and lesbian Christians. The headline article, by Bruce Wrenn, is a deliberate challenge to both pastors and business leaders. If we redefine the term marketing, we may be able to see its usefulness in the context of the institutional church. Then again, the natural antipathy between church and marketplace may be aggravated by Wrenn's views. You may want to consider using Wrenn's piece to start a discussion in your own parish.

Our core writers have tackled the question of homosexuality and the church, and have done so from a different vantage point than usual. Not one of the three looks at the question of homosexuality in itself, only how it is understood and reacted to in church communities. Sheila Hassell Hughes begins with history, and focuses her essay on how evangelical women have dealt with this issue. Ms. Hughes has written a multi-faceted essay that can orient our thinking, remind us of our origins, and help us understand the difficult choices that men and women in every part of the Christian church must make. Self-definition is a dangerous but necessary business; we would do well to follow her lead and hold these terms loosely in our dealings with each other.

Peter Browning has done a superb job of gathering and organizing
information about the ordination policies of the United Methodist Church and the United Church of Christ with regard to gay men and lesbians. This piece can serve as a reference work and a trustworthy guide to the implications of various decisions reached by church bodies. Finally, Betsy Halsey offers an ethical argument for the inclusion of homosexual men and women in all aspects of Christian ministry. As you will see in the opening pages of her essay, she is not one to shy away from an issue on which she has clear convictions. Written as a senior paper at Wesley Seminary, Rev. Halsey's article was the catalyst for this issue, and it is a fitting conclusion to the two essays that precede it. Whether you find yourself in agreement with her ethical argument or not, by the end of these pages you will know what is at stake for us as a church.

As I close these comments I am deeply aware of the conflict and turmoil embedded in the gospel call. Work out on your own salvation, said Paul, in fear and trembling. And so may we all.

Sharon Hels
Can (Should) Religion Be Marketed?

While marketing has been accepted as a legitimate tool by most not-for-profit organizations, it remains a relatively untried management discipline for most pastors and leaders of religious organizations. This, however, seems now to be changing, as evidenced by the title of a front page article of the *Chicago Tribune*: “Marketing Becomes a Tool in the Business of Religion.”

Despite the recent experimentation by some religious organizational administrators, many pastors, rabbis, and other religious leaders are understandably skeptical of embracing a tool so long associated with the overtly commercial side of business. This healthy skepticism is perhaps grounded in the belief that the philosophical underpinnings of marketing are fundamentally incompatible with those of religion. It is important that religious leaders satisfy such questions before they embrace any new method, technique, or approach to fulfilling their administrative responsibilities. As Thomas Huxley said, “Skepticism is the highest of duties, blind faith the one unpardonable sin.”

This article seeks to engage the debate by defining marketing as applied in a religious setting and exploring some of the commonly held criticisms of the discipline which deter its use by pastors, counselors, and other religious leaders.

We do not presume to address all of the relevant issues related to this issue but rather to present a case for continued discussion. It is

Bruce Wrenn is Assistant Professor of Marketing at Indiana University in South Bend, Indiana. He is the co-author with Norman Shawchuck, Philip Kotler, and Gustave Rath of *Marketing for Congregations: Choosing to Serve People More Effectively* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992).
our belief that marketing, when properly viewed, can find a place in the administrator's “toolbox.” It is the intent of this article to suggest what that place might be. We begin our discussion of marketing's role for contemporary religious organizations by defining the term.

What Is Marketing?

What does the term marketing mean? When this question was put to 300 educational administrators whose colleges were in trouble because of declining enrollments, spiraling costs, and rising tuition, 61 percent said that they saw marketing as a combination of selling, advertising, and public relations. Another 28 percent said that it was only one of these three activities. Only a small percent suggested that marketing had something to do with needs assessment, marketing research, product development, pricing, and distribution.

Like these educators, most people think of marketing as selling and promotion. Indeed, selling and promotion do characterize marketing as it has generally been used by religious organizations. Every great religion had a charismatic founder who attracted and equipped disciples to act as a “sales force.” Evangelization, as done in many churches today, is a form of marketing in the selling sense. Many congregations have a doctrine which they want to persuade others to accept. This is sales-driven marketing. The product exists, and it will not be altered in any fundamental way to meet the needs of the customers. Rather, the customers’ needs must be bent toward the existing product. The pastor of a congregation which has declined from 800 to about 150 in attendance over the past 15 years recently told us, “I’m not a salesman. Selling has no place in the church. I just tell people who visit our church, ‘You are lost, and you must accept Jesus as your Savior. If you don’t, you’ll go to hell.’” What he doesn’t realize is that this is selling—he has the product, now all he wants to do is get people to buy it.

Americans are bombarded with television commercials, “junk mail,” newspaper ads, telephone sales calls, and mass retailing. Someone is always trying to sell something. Therefore, it may come as a surprise to most church administrators that the most important part of marketing is not selling! Selling is only the tip of the marketing “iceberg.” It is only one of several functions that marketers perform, and often not the most important one. In fact, if the appropriate
ministries and services are offered, and pricing, distributing, and promoting them is done effectively, these ministries and services will be supported and utilized without selling.

Peter Drucker, one of the leading management theorists, summarized marketing this way: "The aim of marketing is to make selling superfluous." Marketing is not a peripheral activity of modern organizations but one that grows out of the essential quest to effectively serve some area of human need. To survive and succeed, organizations must know their markets; attract sufficient resources; convert these resources into appropriate products, services, and ideas; and effectively distribute them to various consuming publics. These tasks are carried on in a framework of voluntary action and exchange by all the parties. The organization does not employ force to attract resources, convert them, or distribute them. It does not beg for resources or distribute them carelessly. The modern organization relies mainly on creating, offering, and exchanging values with different parties in order to elicit their cooperation. In short, modern organizations rely on exchange mechanisms rather than threat systems, on the one hand, or love systems, on the other, to achieve their goals.

A professional marketer is someone who is skilled at understanding, planning, and managing relationships with other people in such a way that both parties are benefitted—according to their own definitions of what will benefit them. The marketer knows how to research and understand the needs of the other party; to design a valued offering to meet these needs; to communicate the offer effectively; and to present it at the right time and place. Marketing is a process for making concrete decisions about what the institution is going to do, and not do, to achieve its mission. Marketing is not selling, advertising, or promotion—though it may include all of these. It is the analysis, planning, implementation, and control of carefully formulated programs to bring about voluntary “exchange” with specifically targeted markets for the purpose of achieving the person’s or organization’s missional objectives.

Several things should be noted about this definition of marketing. First, marketing is defined as a managerial process involving analysis, planning, implementation, and control. Marketing can also be looked at as a social process in which the material needs of a society are identified, expanded, and served by a set of institutions. This view is appropriate for those interested in societal values and
public policy but less relevant to pastors, rabbis, and religious leaders facing very practical marketing problems.

Second, marketing manifests itself in carefully formulated programs, not just random actions to achieve desired responses. If a group of volunteers is asked to go out and collect money, this is not a program and is likely to produce disappointing results. The volunteers are without direction about whom to call on, what to say about the organization and its ministries, or how much money to ask for. Their effort is more akin to selling than marketing. Marketing must take place before any selling begins, and it must manifest itself in carefully formulated plans and programs. Understood in this way, the term marketing does not apply to the apparatuses used in most local organization-wide “pledge campaigns.”

Third, marketing seeks to bring about voluntary, mutually beneficial responses. Persons employing marketing seek a response from another party, but it is not a response to be obtained by any means or at any price. Marketing is the philosophical alternative to force, guilt, or fear. When marketing, the person or institution seeks to formulate a bundle of benefits for the target market (the persons whom the institution wishes to serve) of sufficient attractiveness to produce a voluntary relationship of value to both parties.

Fourth, marketing means the selection of target markets rather than a quixotic attempt to be all things to all people. On the surface this may seem to be contrary to the calling some Christian churches take seriously to go “unto all the world” with their message. We are not saying that some groups should be served while others are ignored. Rather, we are suggesting that the most efficient use of scarce resources demands that each targeted group’s needs, perceptions, and behaviors be researched and addressed so that the message communicated to that group will be fulfilling and favorably received. It may also be necessary to prioritize the order in which groups are targeted to most effectively generate new resources to use in reaching out to groups more difficult to persuade. Those who try to be all things to all people generally end up being nothing to anyone. Religious institutions or counselors are more likely to be successful if they target specific population groups with specific needs and set about planning programs which will satisfy those needs. Three of the most famous congregations in North America were launched by a marketing approach. The founders conducted simple market research to discern the needs and intents of the community and designed their ministry to
respond to what they had learned: Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, IL; Saddleback Valley Community Church in Laguna Hills, CA; and the Second Baptist Church in Houston, TX.

Fifth, the purpose of marketing is to help organizations ensure their own survival and continued health through serving their markets more effectively. In the business sector, the major objective is profit-making, while in the nonbusiness sector, other objectives prevail: a park district wants to expand the recreational services and opportunities available to the community; the National Safety Council wants to lower the death and accident rate in the nation; and a pastor desires to enrich the spiritual lives of his or her parishioners or give spiritually grounded counsel to those seeking guidance or succor. Effective marketing planning requires that an organization be very specific about its objectives and in choosing its target groups.

Sixth, marketing relies on designing the organization’s offering in terms of the target market’s needs and desires rather than in terms of the seller’s personal tastes. Marketing is a democratic, rather than an elitist, technology. It holds that efforts that try to impose a product on a market are likely to fail if the market perceives that the product, service, or idea is not matched to its needs or wants. In the commercial world, companies that design products for the market without consulting the market beforehand are often disappointed. Customers will not beat a path to their door. In the noncommercial sector, the same thing holds true. Local governments that design playgrounds or toll roads without studying public needs and attitudes often find subsequent use level to be disappointing.

Effective marketing is user-oriented, not seller-oriented. This does not imply, however, that one’s theology is adjusted to meet a market’s demand. It does mean that the process by which a pastor presents his or her institution’s core doctrines, ministries, and programs should be developed by considering the viewpoint of the prospective user rather than that of the seller. Marketing requires that those in charge put themselves in the “shoes” and mind of the person they want to serve. It requires “outside—in” thinking (the information for planning a ministry comes from the persons the ministry is intended to serve), not “inside—out” thinking (the planners decide they know better what the persons “out there” need). Wrong thinking consists of planning the ministry—and then trying to convince the targeted group what really is best for them.

Seventh, marketing utilizes and blends a set of tools called the
marketing mix—product design, pricing, communication, and distribution. Too often persons equate marketing with only one of the tools, such as advertising. But marketing is oriented toward producing results, and this requires a broad conception of all the factors influencing buying behavior. A church, for example, may do no advertising and yet attract a large following because of other elements appealing to the targeted public’s needs. Without advertising, the First Church of the Nazarene in Salem, Oregon, attracted 1,000 new members from an entirely new market, singles and divorced, by launching a large menu of services targeted to this group. Likewise, Willowcreek Community Church, Barrington, Illinois, has amassed perhaps the largest congregations in the United States with virtually no advertising.

Despite the appeal of marketing based on our definition, marketing has had its share of detractors. The next section looks at some of the criticisms leveled at marketing.

Major Criticisms of Marketing

Modern marketing carries negative connotations that echo criticisms raised even in ancient times. Plato, Aristotle, and other early philosophers thought of merchants as unproductive and acquisitive. Merchants were seen as taking advantage of helpless customers through “buying cheap and selling dear.” In modern times, marketers are accused of getting people to buy what they do not want or need. Customers are seen as victims of high-pressure and sometimes deceptive selling.

Until recently, several professions—medicine, law, accounting—banned their licensed members from engaging in any explicit marketing activities. Their codes of professional ethics proscribed direct client solicitation, advertising, and sharp price cutting. In this way, the practitioners could feel that they were above “selling” their services. They were simply available to those who needed them. The truth is that these professionals were carrying on marketing at a less obvious level. They made it their business to get around, to be in the right places, to meet the right people, to deliver speeches, and to write articles—all of which would bring attention, and, they hoped, produce new clients.

Recently, the Supreme Court decided that the formal bans in the
canons of professional ethics had the effect of reducing competition through depriving firms of the right to inform potential clients about their services, as well as depriving potential clients of useful information about the firms. As a result, advertising and certain other marketing practices are now allowed in several professions.

Many religious institutions come close to the professions in their negative attitude toward marketing. Administrators of religious organizations feel that they must proceed cautiously with marketing activity lest their constituents challenge them. We anticipate six types of criticisms.

**Marketing wastes money given to God.** A frequent criticism of marketing activities is that they are too expensive. Advertising, market research, and fund-raising all cost money. Among administrators of religious organizations it is commonly understood that some independent religious relief programs report spending 70 to 90 percent of all monies raised on their own fund-raising and administration, leaving very little to be used for the purposes set forth in their fund-raising efforts. But this should not, and need not, be the case for religious institutions.

Religious organizations, of course, should not spend money on activities that do not contribute to the organization’s mission and ministry. They should be careful to choose effective, low-cost approaches to marketing research, communications, and the like.

Religious organizations owe their publics an explanation of the benefits they are seeking to achieve through their marketing expenditures. They should not overspend, and they should not underspend. At the present time, religious organizations are more prone to underspend than to overspend on marketing. Religious leaders should, however, be concerned about the “return” on their marketing expenditures.

**Marketing activity is intrusive.** A second objection to marketing is that it often intrudes into people’s personal lives. Marketing researchers or salespeople go into persons’ homes or phone them in an attempt to make a sale or to ask them about their likes and dislikes, beliefs, attitudes, incomes, and other personal matters. For example, a team of Jehovah’s Witness workers appear on the doorstep on a Saturday morning, the only day the family has to clean the house, and attempts to prolong the conversation, to give unwanted literature, to acquire a reluctant commitment.
Ironically, marketing research must be carried on to learn the needs and wants of people and their attitude toward the institution’s current offerings so that it can deliver greater satisfaction to its target publics. At the same time, religious workers must show a sensitivity to the public’s desire for privacy.\footnote{8}

**Marketing is manipulative.** A third criticism is that organizations will use marketing to unduly influence a person’s behavior. Many smokers resent the anti-smoking ads put out by the American Cancer Society as trying to control them through fear appeals. Many people resent the attempts of the Roman Catholic Church to use legal and persuasive means to enforce their views regarding birth control or abortion.

Religious leaders should be sensitive to the possible charge of exercising improper influence when they implement marketing programs. In the majority of cases, the religious organization is seeking a public good for which there is widespread consensus, and it is using proper means.

**Marketing militates against the spirit of leadership.** If one interprets marketing to be that of “responding to the needs and interests of one’s congregation,” this would seem to put the religious leader in a response mode rather than a leadership mode. What if the pastor wants to “fire up” the congregation about an issue, say a church elementary school or AIDS? If they don’t respond, should the pastor keep harping on it? What if the clergy’s preoccupation with a cause drives some members to quit the congregation? Is this being responsive to their needs and interests? Is this tantamount to serving them?

Ironically, marketing in the popular mind is “selling” rather than “responding.” The religious leader who keeps pushing a favorite cause is trying to sell the congregation on embracing that issue. This is not necessarily “bad” marketing. A congregation cannot serve everyone and every interest. “Good” marketing would suggest, however, that the clergy should recognize differences among members in the congregation and aim to generate support for the cause among those who are most predisposed. Instead of making his or her issue a congregation-wide issue, with all the guilt feelings and resistance that this can generate, the pastor might organize a group of interested persons and “fire” them up about the cause. This would amount to more effective leadership than turning off a large segment of the congregation with a personal cause he or she espouses. One needs
only review the history and trends of some of the denominations from
the 1960s until today to understand that this is correct.

Marketing does not mean the death of leadership, but rather it
outlines, through its ideas on segmentation and targeting, a more
effective way to create a motivated cause constituency without
alienating others in the congregation. Marketing, rightly done, is an
ally of leadership and ministry.

**Marketing “desacrilizes” religion.** While the definition of marketing
as selling is somewhat myopic, the use of the term can conjure up the
typical complaints made against certain sales tactics: “Advertising is
deceptive, causes the price of goods to increase unjustifiably, and is
often vulgar and annoying.” “Pushy salespeople can cause people to
buy things they don’t really need or want and frequently can’t afford.”
“Advertising causes people to become materialistically oriented,
prompting them to be avaricious and acquisitive, instead of concerned
with higher spiritual or social goals.” These charges are particularly of­
fensive to those in the religious community who recall many scriptural
warnings of the dangers inherent in the singleminded pursuit of
wealth, which marketing systems seem to **promote.**

These are serious accusations against a management discipline, and
if they accurately describe the entire focus and intent of marketing,
there is good reason to question the legitimacy of its use by a religious
organization. The use of such a method would tend to desacrilize the
religious offering to which it is applied. In marketing’s defense,
stigmatizing the entire marketing discipline as being synonymous with
objectionable practices is a gross overgeneralization. Levy refers to
this as the synecdochic mechanism:

> All group prejudice is a form of over generalizing, or fallacy of
> composition. To identify it here, the **way a part of marketing is**
> **taken for the whole is called the synecdochic mechanism. A**
> **synecdoche is a rhetorical device wherein the singular is**
> **substituted for the plural: here the disapproved marketer is**
> **being used to define the category, substituted for those others**
> **who strive to make a fine product, offer an excellent service,**
> **price fairly, sell helpfully, and communicate honestly.**

Why does marketing stand out among management disciplines as
more suspect and base in its motivations? Levy says:
... marketing is stigmatized because it is associated with the many frustrations of wanting and giving—with material things and guilt over the desire for them, with money and its deflection of direct interest in providing goods and services—leading to the projection of these frustrations onto marketing and marketers, and to the synecdochic equation of the whole field with its worst manifestations.¹⁰

One who misunderstands marketing can be likened to the individual who has seen a hammer being used only as a tool of destruction and who, upon being handed a hammer when asking for a tool to use in construction, wonders if the other person has taken leave of his senses. If marketing has been perceived as only deceptive advertising by dishonest salespersons and as efforts to manipulate demand (tool of destruction), it is doubtful it will be used by individuals or religious institutions when faced with problems that it might help them solve.

It is therefore necessary to separate marketing as a process (facilitating exchange of values) from the sometimes objectionable use of that process. The scriptures are replete with examples of the use of marketing techniques by individuals pursuing honorable ends. When marketing is viewed as an exchange-facilitating mechanism there is nothing inherent in it that would desacrilize religion.

We are not implying, however, that good marketing is all that is needed to generate religious exchanges. We are aware of the Divine admonition that success comes "not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord Almighty" (Zech. 4:6). When we contemplate Zechariah's message, we also recall a somewhat different message:

*The Lord said to Moses, “Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites. . . . When Moses sent them to explore Canaan, he said, ”Go up through the Negev and on into the hill country. See what the land is like and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. What kind of land do they live in? Is it good or bad? What kinds of towns do they live in? Are they unwalled or fortified? How is the soil? Is it fertile or poor? Are there trees in it or not?*

Num. 13:1-2, 17-20
While the Lord could have revealed this information to the Israelites in a dream, he chose to have them use their own powers of observation, analysis, and planning to obtain and use this data. Divine inspiration must join with human action if a religious leader is to be successful in achieving the organization's objectives. When used appropriately, marketing can contribute to the effects of human action, but it cannot be a substitute for God's guidance. Marketing is a means to the desired ends; it is not the desired end.

**Marketing activities are appropriate only at the judicatory level of a church.** Because marketing is most visible at its greatest cost (advertising campaigns, sales promotion premiums, sales force activities, etc.), it is reasonable to assume that it is used primarily by persons in the organization who control large budgets and market over large geographic areas. This also misrepresents marketing as we've discussed it here. Religious organizations attempt to influence an exchange of values at many levels: pastor to congregation, a congregation to former members, an evangelist to prospective members, a church nominating committee to a prospective Sunday school teacher, a stewardship officer to a potential donor, or a congregation to the local community, for example. Marketing can help to inform decision-making when the objective is an exchange between individuals, organizations and individuals, between organizations, or between the Church and society as a whole. However, we again add the disclaimer that we in no way suggest that it is marketing alone which should inform such decisions; we only suggest that marketing principles can help decision-makers at all levels whenever exchange is a goal.¹¹

**Marketing is at odds with the biblical view of persons, message, truth, and source of trust.** In an insightful and thought-provoking editorial in *Christianity Today*, Craig Parro evaluated the appropriateness of marketing for churches.¹² While he commended marketing for its perspectives regarding a focus on people, stewardship, outreach activities, church-based ministry (rather than parachurch organizations), and inclusiveness of faith (recognizing that the church is in competition with lifestyles, philosophies, and organizations that misdirect attention from religious meaning), he also raised four areas where marketing's view of reality is at odds with the biblical view.

First, Parro charges, marketing's reductionist view sees a "consumer" or a "target," whereas we should see people as created in the image of God and not just in terms of their "felt needs." In
response, we acknowledge that there is a tendency for marketers to use terminology which seems to be reductionistic in approach. However, there is nothing endemic to the use of marketing which restricts its focus to satisfying felt needs. Marketing is concerned with facilitating the exchange of values between an organization and an individual. Satisfying needs, whether incipient, latent, or recognized by the individual, is a function of marketing's attempt to consummate mutually beneficial exchanges. In fact, even commercial marketing is coming to realize increasingly the dangers and inadequacies of transactional as opposed to relationship exchanges. We might add that for religious marketers, the goal is to achieve transformational exchanges. This objective requires that we focus on the whole person and get him or her to see the value of a transcendental experience.

Second, Parro maintains that marketing solicits, woos, and entertains in an attempt to fit the perception of the message's receiver. But religious messages are calls to repentance and commitment. While religious leaders are counseled to design their message with the listeners in mind, this is more to ensure that the psychological processes of selective perception, distortion, and retention do not prevent the message itself from being correctly perceived, remembered, and acted upon. Certainly many other not-for-profit organizations are communicating messages fraught with confrontational appeals—"Stop smoking," "Don't abuse your children," "Give blood," "Don't drink and drive." Effective marketing appeals will arrest the attention of the listener; they should be correctly perceived in terms of the issue at hand, and they may therefore ultimately influence a person's behavior. Even calls to repentance and commitment need to be communicated effectively. Marketing can and should do that without stripping away the spiritual nature of the message. Again, we should avoid confusing the tool with the use to which it has been put. Marketing is about affecting behavior and meeting needs; it is not about entertaining or trivializing the subject of the message.

Third, Parro contends that marketing is an empirical, data-based approach to decision-making, requiring the distillation of lifestyles, communities, and attitudes into summary statistics. Yet to reach people where they are we need to know not just what but why.

To view marketing as merely a data-driven management science is to ignore a major field of marketing—commonly called consumer behavior—which is constantly seeking to answer the question "Why
do people behave as they do?" The use of statistical summaries of a community's demographic and lifestyle composition is no substitute for understanding the processes by which people arrive at choices. Marketers do use statistics, but effective marketers always understand the people and personalities those statistics represent.

Finally, Parro thinks that the call to marketing too often implies that if one studies a market and then makes and implements carefully chosen plans which utilize that knowledge, then success is the natural outcome of this process. God is not a part of the equation.

We, too, share the concern that religious organizations put their faith in technique rather than divine guidance. Ultimately we view marketing's role as one supporting the pastor or rabbi in achieving his or her goals. Marketing is not enough for an effective ministry. More important than marketing, or any management approach, is the spirit of the congregation and the spirituality of the leaders and workers. The best marketing plan in the world cannot compensate for spiritual lethargy or confusion, so that none are able to listen in the silent closets of the heart where God awaits to communicate with us. Nor can a marketing plan counterbalance a lack of vision. Spirituality, vision, discernment, the pastor's integrity—marketing cannot provide these.

Spirituality and vision grow out of one's relationship with God and as a result of a disciplined life, nurtured by God as one gives oneself to the means of grace God has provided God's people. This discernment of God's leading comes through reflection, prayer, and the faithfulness to the disciplines and paths God sets before the leaders and the people. Marketing is no substitute for this. However, there is nothing about marketing that is against this. Indeed, when correctly viewed and used, marketing can be one effective means of helping a spirit-led pastor achieve his or her objectives.

The gulf that separates marketers and religious leaders is perhaps to some degree a function of the different paradigms within which each operates. Certainly, theologians and marketers use similar terminology to discuss quite different ideas: "needs," "self-interest," "values," "cost," etc. These different perspectives need not discourage a dialogue between these two groups. Indeed, marketers could benefit immensely from exposure to religion just as religious leaders can benefit from exposure to marketing. Practitioners and theorists of both religion and marketing may need to seek a new vocabulary, or at least be open to understanding new meanings to familiar terms, in order to
overcome differences in perspective, communicate effectively, and discover common ground. We all must guard against becoming too reductionistic and provincial in our vocations, yet we don’t want to fall prey to the administrative fad of the moment either. When does it make sense for a religious leader to consider marketing as a potentially useful tool?

**Why Should Religious Leaders Consider Using Marketing?**

Religious organizations are facing formidable challenges today. Churches and synagogues confront demographic change—both an aging population and a difficulty in attracting younger members. An aging population can undercut the recruitment of activists and volunteers, who often represent the lifeblood of religious and other voluntary associations. A failure to attract young members can rob an institution of its vitality, dynamism, and capacity for innovation. Within metropolitan areas, particularly urban neighborhoods, population shifts can decimate almost overnight the once stable social bases of a church or synagogue, raising issues of whether to relocate or to stay put and attract a new group of members. Faith Baptist Church in Madison, Wisconsin, for example, planted two daughter congregations on the west side of town in the 1970s. Each has grown to number among the largest churches in the city, while Faith has declined to only 177 members, apparently unable to find its niche in the aging Eastside neighborhood.

The secularization of society is proceeding at an accelerated pace. Traditional values such as planning for the future, sharing a stable community life, and sacrificing short-term, immediate pleasures and gains for the sake of longer-term satisfaction are eroding under the influence of electronic media entertainment, the daily pressures of earning a living, and the growing preoccupation with goods, services, and material gains. The nature of family life is changing dramatically, as evidenced by the rise in divorce, childless couples, singles, and single-parent households. The number of households with children, which once formed the bulwark of congregational membership, is declining. To remain vital, congregations and pastoral counselors must learn how to relate to persons with different life expectations and values.

Religious institutions face competition from a vast number of
organized activities that aim to fulfill, in alternative ways, many of the human needs that were almost the exclusive domain of religious institutions. One type of competition is the privatized and entertainment-oriented experience of the mass media, including videos, computers, the walkman, and compact disc players—all of which may be used as substitutes for the shared communal experience and fellowship of religious institutions. Alternative institutions seek to satisfy human needs of affiliation, belonging, and fellowship: clubs, group therapeutic organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous, organized recreational and fitness activities such as aerobics classes, even groups that form around spectator team sports such as professional football. Pastoral counselors face stiff competition from secular agents such as social workers and community mental health organizations.

Religious organizations often have to reassess their situations not only because of external factors but also as a result of pressures rising from within. Like other organizations, religious organizations change over time, similar to the life cycles of individuals. Institutions arise, grow, mature and, in some cases, slow down and decay. Their original functions may atrophy or disappear. Their structures and procedures may become maladaptive, or dysfunctional. The managing of change itself can become a priority concern for the ministry.

Challenges such as these provide opportunities for new directions in religious organizations. In the face of change and loss, countless individuals and households experience a greater need for a revival of faith and fellowship. Loss of traditional values generates demand for their renewal. Drift and alienation generate the longing for support and community. Excessive pursuit of a single goal can lead to the yearning for balance, harmony, and security.

It seems, therefore, that while many mainline organized religions are taking a beating, the majority of people still have a strong desire to grow in their spiritual lives. They are seeking meaning in their lives and a close relationship with God, but they aren’t sure they can obtain this through organized religious institutions. In the United States today, persons who are not associated with any religion whatsoever or who are connected to a religious tradition other than the traditional Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and Jewish faiths outnumber those who belong to these traditional faith expressions. The baby-boom generation provides us with the first generation of Americans who
have not simply “bought” the faith and ecclesiastical traditions of their parents.14

Pastors and rabbis are seeking to respond more effectively to these new combinations of human concerns and social changes: some are adapting their structures to new patterns of life; others are modifying their practices and counseling activities and are aggressively pursuing new outreach activities; yet others are changing their missions and their physical locations. The most successful are finding that revitalized ministries require a combination of strong leadership; upgraded planning, budgeting, and management; a focus on interpersonal and skill training for staff; and a focused attention to membership needs, involving knowledge of marketing.

For these religious organizations, a marketing perspective, in particular, can furnish rich insights into and valuable tools for designing effective ministries to meet internal and external environmental challenges.

Churches and synagogues need to consider modern marketing practices because organized religion is often a “tough sell” in the 1990s. Comfortable lifestyles among the affluent, general cynicism and ennui among the middle class, and basic survival concerns among the disadvantaged distract many from listening to what religious institutions have to say about the need for God in our lives. In his book *Who Needs God?* Rabbi Harold Kushner makes a persuasive argument that religion is a fundamental need of the human condition, but many seem skeptical of the role of organized religion in their lives. It is frequently difficult to get “trial usage” among “prospective consumers.” This is nothing new. The path to God is intentionally narrow, steep, and rock strewn. While everyone may need religion, it is far from obvious to many that a product so difficult to obtain is desirable and satisfying.

It is not the religious experience itself (the mystery of God’s revelatory communion with humanity) which needs marketing. Rather, it is the religious organization (a collectivity of human agents with common goals and a structure established to achieve them) which could benefit from using marketing as a means to achieve the desired ends. Therefore, while *religion* shouldn’t be marketed, *religious organizations* can be and, given the current turbulent environment, should be.

In conclusion, we find ourselves in agreement with Craig Parro:16
Churches that are both Bible-driven and market-sensitive leave ample room for God's surprises. Marketing is one tool of many that God may use for his glory. If he does, we can humbly thank Him for His goodness.

Notes

1. The original article proposing the use of marketing by not-for-profit organizations was Philip Kotler and Sidney J. Levy, "Broadening the Concept of Marketing," *Journal of Marketing* 33, no. 1 (1969): 10-15. This broadening of marketing was not immediately embraced even by all marketing theorists, as evidenced by another article in that issue: David J. Luck, "Broadening the Concept of Marketing—Too Far," *Journal of Marketing* 33, no. 3 (1969): 53-55. Five years later the application of marketing to not-for-profit organizations was considered a fait accompli; see William G. Nichols, "Conceptual Conflicts in Marketing," *Journal of Economics and Business* 26, no. 1 (1974): 140-3.


10. Ibid.


The stance of an evangelical feminist is a tricky one. It means numbering oneself among the “born again”—those whose experience of conversion, involving repentance from personal sin and commitment to Christ, is central to their understanding of the Christian faith. But as well as testifying to this second birth, it signals a second “conversion”—the recognition of sexism and the advocacy of feminist principles.

Just as twentieth-century evangelicals have struggled to maintain their identity against fundamentalists on the right and liberals on the left, evangelical feminists have sought to maintain a trepidacious space between the sexual hierarchalism of much evangelicalism and the religious liberalism of other Christian and secular feminist movements. While theological and methodological issues distinguish evangelical feminism from these larger constituencies, self-definition among evangelical feminists is also based on other factors. In this discussion of boundaries, homosexuality has been among the most significant and controversial issues. For many, one’s position on homosexuality has served as a “litmus test” for faithfulness to either evangelicalism or feminism.

Sheila Hassell Hughes is working on a Ph.D. in women’s literature and theology at the Institute for Women’s Studies at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.
A Cautionary Tale: The Evangelical Women's Caucus

A look at the recent history of American evangelical feminist organizations reveals how central homosexuality has been to their self-definition. This issue was, in fact, the symbolic crux marking the 1988 split in the original Evangelical Women's Caucus (EWC) and the subsequent formation of Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE) by the end of the 1980s.

Founded in 1974 as an outgrowth of Evangelicals for Social Action, the EWC grew relatively rapidly, drawing eight hundred people to Fuller Theological Seminary for its second national conference in 1978. Nancy Hardesty, one of the prominent “New Evangelicals,” was a founding member. From the beginning, the EWC was an ecumenical group, which drew people from all branches of the church—Catholics, Episcopalians, Luthers, Mennonites, Methodists, Presbyterians, Assemblies of God, the Christian Reformed Church, the Church of the Brethren and the Metropolitan Community churches. Caucus literature stated that it was evangelical in that it believed “that the Gospel is good news for all people,” but it also embraced a more specifically evangelical statement of faith. The statement affirmed, for example: “We believe that the Bible which bears witness to Christ is the Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and is the infallible guide and final authority for Christian faith and life” (EWC pamphlet).

As Esther Byle Bruland points out, it is this which most distinguishes evangelical feminists from their more liberal counterparts: “the sources [and methods] each group considers authoritative for deriving and implementing ethical norms.”\(^1\) Ethics are thus approached from an authority which is seen as transcendent rather than solely immanent (i.e., scripture over experience rather than experience over scripture).

Dialogue and cooperation with liberal Christian feminists were important to many members of the EWC, however. There was also division about the degree of external ecumenism the EWC should participate in. For example, although the caucus had, from the first, affirmed its support for the Equal Rights Amendment, some of those who later rose to leadership positions felt the group should take no stand on political issues.\(^2\) The caucus’s statement of purpose has been interpreted differently by different members. It states:

*Our purpose, therefore, is to present God's teaching on female-male equality to the whole body of Christ's church and*
to call both women and men to mutual submission and active discipleship. (EWC pamphlet)

Some members, Nancy Hardesty explains, “understood this definition to mean working within conservative churches for women’s active participation in ministry and mutuality and equality between husbands and wives.” Others, however, were committed to a more broadly defined political agenda.

The group seemed able to tolerate differences on a number of other controversial issues, such as abortion; and national meetings usually offered workshops in which members could “hash out” the issues in contained, intimate settings. But there was a tension between diversity and unity, and it was homosexuality that brought it to a head. Britt Vanden Eykel posed the question:

_How important is it to require that all members think alike? Could we not, perhaps, agree on our basic ministry—and maintain unity by allowing members some individuality of conscience on particular issues?_

Homosexuality often functions as more than a “particular issue,” however. In the discourse of self-definition it can serve as a symbol of more foundational tenets. In the case of the EWC, it operated as a sign of the difference in “basic ministry.” Bruland summarizes:

... evangelical feminists have a tremendous task before them. They cannot uncritically appropriate the ethical theory, method, or content of either evangelicalism or of broadly Christian feminism. They have begun the task of evolving an evangelical feminist ethic, but it is a disputed process within a contested tradition. Confusion over [its] ... grounds and goals has already resulted in at least one division among evangelical feminists—the 1986 split of the Evangelical Women’s Caucus. Whether to affirm homosexuality as a legitimate Christian lifestyle was a surface issue in the split, but it revealed deeper differences of philosophy, ethical methods, and social change tactics.

In fact, the question was not even whether to “affirm” homosexuality. According to Hardesty, the actual amendment which
was made to the EWC charter at the 1986 annual meeting in Fresno, California, was to "recognize 'the presence of the lesbian minority in EWC' and to take 'a firm stand in favor of civil rights' protection for homosexual persons."6

The conflict which surfaced around this issue, combined with a subtle leadership struggle over the scope of the group's mission and political associations (which would not seem entirely unrelated), led to the split in 1988.7 Shortly after the conference, the Minnesota chapter, which was to have hosted the conference in 1990, withdrew from the EWC. Those involved in the Minnesota leadership promptly formed ties with the British group, Women, Men and God, which is associated with the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity (headed by evangelical leader John Stott). Out of this alliance was born Christians for Biblical Equality. CBE's statement of faith is quite similar to that of the EWC, except that it adds this concluding confession: "We believe in the family, celibate singleness, and faithful heterosexual marriage as the patterns God designed for us" (Priscilla Papers).

Although its mission statement is still relatively broad, the group has tended to restrict its focus to supporting and educating those within evangelical churches.

In addition, the EWC has since changed its name to the Evangelical and Ecumenical Women's Caucus. Hardesty emphasizes that this change was to reflect the actual nature of the group and to distance itself from what is popularly known as "The Religion Right." Apparently there has been no significant change in either the statement of faith or purpose of the group. Hardesty, an "out" lesbian herself, mentions, though, that the group is now "very comfortable for lesbians" (interview).

The most interesting and pressing question regarding this split is why one particular element of sexual ethics, homosexuality, took on so much theological and institutional weight. My first questions in response to this dilemma were formulated along the lines of systematic theology: "Is it possible to fully embrace feminism and maintain a position of evangelical orthodoxy?" "Is it consistent to advocate full Christian equality for women but not for practicing homosexuals?" Instead of addressing these questions, however, I have chosen to begin by focusing this study on issues of practical theology. The intent of this paper, then, is to discover how homosexuality has come to function in the contemporary evangelical feminist discourse of self-definition and to unearth some of the theological,

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methodological, and social assumptions underlying these statements. To appreciate the significance of these contemporary assumptions and discursive practices, it is necessary to place them in historical perspective. A brief survey of the formation and development of evangelicalism and evangelical feminism will outline how homosexuality has been related to “boundary issues.” Attention will be directed at issues of distinctiveness, separation, and doctrinal purity.

Historical Background

Throughout recorded history, sexual ethics have served to distinguish religious groups who sought a marked separation from the surrounding society/ies. In ancient times, the ritual purity codes of the Hebrew Scriptures distinguished Jews from their pagan neighbors, and homosexuality was identified with the idolatry of those gentile nations. In turn, a modified sexual ethic, influenced by Jewish, Stoic, and dualistic concepts, as well as by New Testament writers, set the earliest Christians off from the Hellenistic society in which they found themselves. Gradually, an ethic of celibacy emerged within the church to mark the finer separation between clergy and laity, and with the rise of the Inquisition, homosexual practices popularly ascribed to Muslims were seen as a sign of heresy.

Although Christian sexual ethics underwent radical alteration during the Protestant Reformation, “right” sexual relations continued to function as a sign of spiritual righteousness and theological orthodoxy. The Reformers not only rejected the exclusive priesthood established by Rome on theological grounds but denounced celibacy, its sexual symbol, as an unnecessary temptation to homosexual behavior for church leaders. In a quite sudden reversal, heterosexual marriage was elevated as the creational and spiritual norm. Thus, even in reforms aimed at undoing primary theological distinctions, sexuality continued to function as a primary symbolic separation for Christian believers.

The Early Waves of Evangelicalism. The term “Evangelical” was first widely and controversially applied during the Reformation. Initially a derogatory label, it was generally used to designate the followers of Luther, in contradistinction to the Calvinists, who were called “Reformed.” From that time on it has always generally referred to the
Reformation conviction of salvation through faith in Christ. In fact, as John Gerstner states, "Everything that American Protestants once considered essential in Christian faith was conveyed by the word 'evangelical.' " Philip Schaff has suggested three factors which were essential to early understandings of evangelicalism: the "objective" aspect, biblical authority; the "subjective" factor, justification by grace through faith; and the "social" element, the priesthood of all believers.

Gerstner traces evangelicalism in North America back to the seventeenth-century pietism of the New England colonies. Calvinistic puritanism is certainly one stream in the history of evangelicalism, and it has had a profound influence on subsequent generations. The roots of modern evangelicalism, though, are more commonly traced back only as far as a series of eighteenth-century revivals: Pietist in Germany, Methodist in England, and the Great Awakening in America. Resisting what he perceived as an Arminian abandonment of pietistic roots, Jonathan Edwards pioneered the first great evangelical revival in North America. The radical transformation of North American religious life began with a sermon series he preached in 1734 emphasizing God's pure grace and absolute sovereignty.

Philip Greven's analysis of the "evangelical temperament" offers insights into both the religious and sexual ethos of this movement, although it is important to note that he addresses primarily the more Puritan-influenced stream of evangelicalism—that of Edwards and other eighteenth-century Calvinists.

Greven's portrait of the childhood and family lives of figures such as Edwards shows how their religious doctrines manifested themselves in attitudes and disciplinary practices relating to food, dress, sexuality, etc. The reverse was also true—Greven shows that a childhood spent in such an environment also contributed to the production of religious and political convictions of a certain kind. (Love and fear, Greven states, were central aspects in the evangelical household and faith, and self-suppression was the norm.) Founded upon the Calvinistic doctrine of the corrupt human will, eighteenth-century evangelicalism was committed to conquering and eradicating self-will among its children and converts and replacing it with the monitoring Christian conscience. A broken and submissive will evidenced itself by conformity to the strict disciplines of the body instilled in that conscience:
What one ate, how much one ate, how one dressed, and how one behaved mattered profoundly to evangelical parents, who sought to govern the outer lives of their children according to the values which dominated their inner lives as well.\(^{15}\)

Adherence to behavioral codes was not only evidence of self-control; it was also a method of thought/desire control. Reminiscent of ancient Christian asceticism, this kind of “methodism” was meant to lead to personal freedom—freedom from the tyranny of the sinful self. Human nature, according to Calvinistic doctrine, is utterly depraved, and obedience can occur only in a state of grace. Thus, the natural body was as corrupt as the natural self and was a constant, mortifying testimony. For Edwards, the body was a metaphor: “bowels [are] full of dung, which represents the corruption and filthiness that the heart of man is naturally full of.”\(^{16}\) Self-denial, keeping the body in subjection through deprivation—of sleep, food, or sexual activity—was the only way to transform the meaning of the body-icon. Masturbation, a constant temptation and source of shame for young evangelical men, was forbidden, and homosexual desire was experienced as a “filthy lust.”\(^{17}\)

Though marriage and family were highly valued as religious institutions, young evangelical leaders such as George Whitefield and John Wesley in England struggled over whether or not to marry. Perceiving themselves married first and foremost to Christ, these pietists worried that a wife and children would prove material distractions to their evangelistic mission. Celibacy, it seems, was once again a noble Christian path—at least for men. Both evangelists eventually did marry, but for Whitefield it was not until after some troubling rumors of homosexuality.\(^{18}\)

The metaphor of marriage to Christ and the great emphasis on a submissive stance placed evangelical men in a position rife with feminine connotations. This, too, Greven concludes, worked itself out in measurable, physical ways:

*The acute sensitivity of some evangelicals to any hint of effeminacy, any relationship or appearance that might endanger a precariously established sense of masculinity, could account for the preference for short hair and an abhorrence or fear of wearing the hair too long.*\(^{19}\)
The quest for purity of mind and body extended to the institutional church as well. Greven explains:

*The evangelical impulse always was toward the creation of “pure” churches, containing only those people who could demonstrate to others their own inner grace . . . [they] could tolerate no halfway measures of states of grace.*

Despite its emphasis on inward, personal conversion and individual responsibility, early evangelicalism tended to require external evidence of spiritual health. Measurable norms of behavior—sexual and otherwise—were one source of distinction.

By the late eighteenth century, however, the churches “awakened” by Edwards and his contemporaries had fallen back into an “orthodox sleep,” as Gerstner puts it. Liberalism—especially Unitarianism—was perceived as the new threat to North American evangelical faith. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, evangelical revival broke out again, this time known as the “Second Great Awakening.” Charles Finney was the prominent North American figure in this era of revival, and with his revivals of the 1820s and 1830s he helped to make Methodism the largest and fastest-growing Protestant denomination.

Finney’s success in gaining converts was partly due to his most radical departure from the Calvinistic heritage of evangelicalism: his emphasis on free moral agency. He was able to convince those awaiting mysterious election by God that salvation was within their grasp if only they would decisively turn to Christ in repentance. This more Arminian view of grace and free will was, according to Nancy Hardesty, an “attempt to modify Calvinism to fit a revivalist methodology.” Focusing on free will rather than on absolute corruption, Finneyites defined sin as “selfishness and wilful disobedience of God’s moral law.” According to this new evangelical doctrine, nature was still depraved (all humans do eventually sin), but the will itself was not (sinning was not necessary). One was just as able to voluntarily repent as to voluntarily sin. Finney’s religion poses a sharp contrast to the sentimentalism sometimes associated with nineteenth-century evangelicalism: if sinners obey, Finney claimed, and submit with the will, the feelings will adjust themselves in due time. It is not a question of feeling but of willing and acting.

While the focus here is spiritual activity rather than behavioral codes, the premise is still reminiscent of the methodism advocated by those of Edwards’s era.
Converts were to expect visible differences in their lives as a result of this spiritual commitment. Finney stressed that the invisible filling of the Spirit set converts apart from others but that this Spirit would become manifest in ways that challenged social norms. They would be called eccentric, but eccentricity was not to be feared, for it was a visible sign of separation more tangible and significant than any uncertain election could be. The Spirit was known to show no favorites, and so Finneyite society was more or less integrated in terms of race, class, and gender. This in itself would be enough for many to brand them as "eccentric."^23

According to Gerstner, evidently a staunch Calvinist, the doctrine of Finney was an "ominous . . . distortion" of the true evangelical faith and was to prove to be "the greatest of nineteenth-century foes of evangelicalism." Perverted irreparably by Arminian doctrines which de-emphasized divine grace and sovereignty, evangelical theology has never regained its "pristine" Edwardsian state.^^ Whether understood as forefather or heretic, Finney and his revivalist theology clearly had a profound influence on North American evangelicalism.

The most significant aspect of Finney's influence for this paper, however, is that his movement was open to the full participation of women. As Hardesty points out, the Arminian shift away from an emphasis on original sin "liberated women from the tyranny of past accusations"—which had stemmed from the supposed uniqueness of Eve's transgression.^^ In addition, a new understanding of the priesthood of all believers leant toward a leveling of social distinctions. Among other "infamies," Finneyites were renowned for being abolitionists. With a profound faith in the power of transformed souls and rightly directed wills, these evangelicals believed that mass conversion of society was the route to social reform.

This new brand of social reform, which was accompanied by more overt political activism, also bore the evangelical mark of "bibliocentricity." Finneyites employed a "common sense" hermeneutic, believing that the Bible was ultimately a reasonable and approachable book. Right doctrine (derived from scripture) was no longer to be a commodity controlled by an elitist "elect" but was open to the scrutiny and reappraisal of all who chose to believe. In readdressing the issue of slavery, then, abolitionists were suspicious of traditional biblical interpretation, which was used to uphold the status quo. They brought a new rigor to exegesis, applying an early form of historical criticism which sought to uncover the spirit of the law.
hidden within the historically determined letter. What they found was a liberating spirit which undermined the literal interpretations to which so many of their contemporaries appealed. 26

This revolutionary hermeneutical approach opened the gate for an early Christian feminism to emerge. Freeborn women had begun to find parallels between the conditions of slaves and their own experience and found, in abolitionist thought, new ways to interpret scriptures relating to themselves. Thus, “the basic egalitarianism of evangelicalism that supported abolitionism,” Donald Dayton explains, “was also extended to women.” 27 While commitment to biblical teaching was central to these movements, doctrinal variations were generally seen as subservient to the greater cause of the gospel. Thus, the Finneyite revivals, the Holiness Movement (a variation on the first, which stressed a second filling and sanctification), the abolition movement, and the “woman’s movement” were all basically ecumenical in nature. Brought together by a commitment to social reform and the basics of “common sense” biblical teaching, they were “bound by no creeds, no doctrinal confessions.” 28 For this era of evangelical action, doctrinal distinction was less significant than was the distinction of social uprightness.

**Evangelical Feminism: the First Wave.** Phoebe Palmer, an eminent Finneyite, helped to break ground for future feminist approaches to the Bible. Criticizing the inconsistent literalism of anti-feminist interpretations, she exercised a hermeneutic which combined her experience as a woman with the authority of scripture. Unlike more liberal women of her day, she was unwilling to dismiss troublesome passages as irrelevant and strongly believed that, as experience illustrates scripture, scripture tests experience. 29 In approaching the Bible, she and her “sisters” employed several tactics: highlighting and listing biblical women who were spiritual and political leaders; reinterpreting specific passages relating to women; emphasizing egalitarian passages, such as Galatians 3:28 (which had been a favorite of abolitionists as well); and appealing to greater scriptural principles, such as “the great commandment,” as the spirit by which to test the letter of other passages.

Frances Willard, “the nineteenth century’s most beloved and respected female leader,” was another Finneyite. Raised in an abolitionist family and involved early on in the temperance crusades, she was like many evangelical women of her era whose work in other areas of social reform served as a training ground for eventual work in
the "woman's movement." Woman suffrage had at first seemed too radical a cause, "connected . . . too much with ridicule and scorn, a thing unwomanly and unscriptural" which, to touch, was "contamination." Despite conservative resistance and condemnation, however, Willard felt called to speak out for suffrage if only in order to promote temperance and thus protect women's homes against the abuses of alcohol. Part of her success and popularity among more conservative women was certainly due to her rhetoric of home and family and her challenge to selfless Christian duty rather than a "selfish" demand for rights. Willard's call was decisive and divisive, however, and she often described her commitment to suffrage as a conversion experience, alternately calling the message her "pet heresy" and "gospel."^3

As already mentioned, the evangelical women's movement was ecumenical in nature. While this reflected the spirit of Finney's revivals, it was troublesome to other evangelical revivals of the era. Willard felt compelled to withdraw from her work with Dwight L. Moody, for example, because of his concern over her less-than-orthodox alignments. He opposed her collaboration with an ardent suffragist and temperance leader who was the wife of a universalist minister. Willard's brand of evangelicalism could not bring itself to make certain distinctions. In a manner more like the tolerance of British revivalist-reformer John Wesley, she wrote to Emma Moody:

> For myself, the more I study the subject, the more I fail to see that it is for us to decide who shall work in this cause side by side with us and who shall not. I cannot judge how the hearts of earnest, pure, prayerful women may appear in God's clear sight, nor just when their loyalty to Christ has reached the necessary degree.\(^3\)

Other women, like Willard, recognized that they risked criticism and alienation by joining in the cause. Banding together with nonevangelical women required the setting aside of prejudices and fears of unorthodox association. For many, however, the goal and call were more compelling than their reservations, and they joined the league of "sisters" in a new and risky familial association.\(^3\)

The rhetoric of sisterhood predominated, but the bonds some women in this movement felt for each other might well have been
more passionate. As Hardesty explains, Willard was among those whose sexuality was ambiguous, at least:

while biographers have been reluctant to term Willard a lesbian, it is clear, as Ruth Bordin puts it: “Women liked Willard. Indeed she was more than liked, she was loved, she was adored. Her intense, almost sexual attractiveness to members of her own sex was a major factor in her success.”

Willard herself wrote, “the loves of women for each other grow more numerous each day,” and spoke of households of “two [feminine] heads in counsel” who had joined hands and “taken each other ‘for better or for worse.’ ” Specifically, Willard had some kind of intimate relationship with Lady Henry Somerest, with whom she shared an “immediate and intense” attraction, and she spent periods of time on her estates in England. Most significant, though, was Willard’s relationship with her life companion, Anna Gordon. Gordon served as partner, secretary, and manager for Willard and worked alongside her in the cause for many years, before becoming her “biographer and legend-maker” after Willard’s death.

There is no sign that rumors of homosexuality attached to Willard as they apparently had to Whitefield a century before. However, there is little evidence to suggest that Christian—or evangelical—attitudes towards homosexual activity in general were any laxer in the nineteenth century. Hewitt summarizes the situation:

At the end of the nineteenth century, therefore, the Church by its silence indicated that it accepted the fact that homosexuality, already the subject of religious condemnation, stood also condemned by medical science. Modesty or confusion, however, insured that references were veiled in religious and even secular publications.

The more likely factor here was gender. As in ancient times, erotic relationships between women may well have been less threatening to a still sexist society because they did not involve, as Derrick Bailey puts it, “any lowering of . . . personal or sexual status.” That is, a woman cannot be degraded by “playing the woman.” In addition, however, another of Bailey’s observations has long been true: “Convention has decreed that women, but not men, may display affection for one
another, or may live together without suspicion." Passionate relationships between evangelical crusaders in the nineteenth century may well be as difficult to discern and name as those between women in the ancient church. The problem of defining what constitutes a homosexual relationship is obvious here.

Another irony is that these very women are often portrayed by male historians as sexual prudes because of their efforts on behalf of sex-crime legislation. Regulation of homosexual acts does not appear to have fallen within their agenda, however, because the goal of this work, like that of temperance, was not to impose a sexual code on society in order to brand it “Christian” but to protect women and children from sexual abuse and domestic violence. It seems that women living together as passionate Christian “sisters,” in particular, were not seen as a threat to the family, which was so much the object of these women’s protective efforts.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, evangelical feminism faded, as did evangelicalism in general. The decline of the broader religious movement has been attributed to a diminishing Protestant majority due to immigration, the rise of Modernism and a new scholarship of doubt, and theological factors. Hardesty claims that the adoption of “Old School, Princeton theology formulations which are antithetical to Finneyite revivalism” was partly to blame, whereas Gerstner places the theological blame on a Finney-influenced liberalization of evangelicalism, to which Princeton orthodoxy and the outgrowth of fundamentalism was a natural reaction. In any case, evangelicals became embroiled in boundary-defining theological issues in relation to both liberalism and the new fundamentalism and struggled internally with Calvinism and Dispensationalism. Evangelicals tended to withdraw and separate themselves from the social issues that the liberal social gospel movement was now addressing.

For a variety of reasons the evangelical feminist fire was simultaneously doused. While Susan B. Anthony “protested, reprimanded, and threatened,” Hardesty explains, “her sisters in the movement continued to get married and to have babies. Life moved on.” The radical ideals and scandalous, flamboyant associates of leaders like Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton also served to alienate many more conservative women, so “the woman’s rights movement became suspect among respectable, middle-class, church-going women.” The national crisis produced by the Civil War...
also served to refocus women’s attention away from gender issues. When Negro suffrage was finally attained but woman suffrage denied, women rallied again, but this time the force was increasingly secular and politicized.39

Embers of the evangelical feminist movement continued to glow, however. Women in the Wesleyan and Holiness traditions, especially, continued to make headway. Women’s ordination, a primary concern, was pursued and achieved in many denominations over the decades of the early and mid-twentieth century. As time passed, however, it was these very denominations that tended to become classified as “mainline,” or liberal. One significant light in the tradition is Georgia Harkness, a woman whose Quaker and Methodist background directed her into a significant leadership role in the more Arminian stream of early twentieth-century evangelicalism. She was the first woman to teach theology to men at an American school and was a significant character at Garrett Biblical Institute (later Garrett-Evangelical Seminary). Harkness did not see herself called primarily to women’s issues, but she served as a valiant example to many women and did struggle for women’s ordination and equality in the academy. While her early theology tended toward liberal “triumphant religion,” her later experience of a “dark night of the soul,” her father’s influence, and the impact of neo-orthodoxy all led her back to a more orthodox evangelical position.40 Committed to both socialism and broad ecumenism, she was still, of course, something of an evangelical anomaly.

Harkness is also another example of a female evangelical leader whose sexuality was perhaps ambiguous. She shared her home for thirty years with Vema Miller, her life-companion. Such arrangements drew no scandal, and the situation had actually been recommended by a minister-colleague of Harkness’s during her “dark night” period of ill health and depression. Verna’s role has been variously described as one of “mothering,” “friendship,” “business manager,” “partnership,” and “hostess” for the more socially awkward Georgia. In any case, Harkness’s biographer concludes that the two women “fulfilled deep personal needs for companionship and caring in each other’s life.”41 Miller, “devoted” and very supportive of Harkness’s career, “took a traditional caretaker, wifely role” and sacrificed her own tenured teaching position to follow Harkness across the country to her new job.

Unlike the women of earlier centuries, however, some of Harkness’s thoughts on homosexuality are known to us. She was near
the end of her life, in her eighties, before she spoke. In 1972, the Methodist church issued a declaration in which it advocated compassion, fellowship, and civil rights for homosexuals but stated that it could “not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider[ed] this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.” Harkness was disappointed and opposed the declaration. In the pulpit, she compared it to the ruling twenty years earlier that women should not preach and predicted that in twenty more years (1992) the church would recognize its error again. By comparing the status of homosexuals to that of women, Harkness extended the original feminist analogy between slaves and free women. It is clear that Harkness was also aware, from experience, of the problems of defining homosexual relationships. In response to a query, she wrote in a personal letter:

*Another factor in the case is that it is so hard to define precisely. A strong attachment between two persons of the same sex may be mutually supporting and have nothing sexy about it, yet the suspicion arises that they are homosexuals especially if they share a home together.*

She also advised that, in churches where conservative opinion prevailed, “one had better not advertise his homosexuality if he wants to be a minister.” Harkness both invoked her own situation and deflected suspicion from herself by using neuter and masculine pronouns. In any case, Harkness’s situation did not seem to arouse enough suspicion to hinder her theological career in evangelical institutions. Setting up home together was still not the same kind of “advertisement” for two women as it might have been for two men.

**Evangelicalism Today: Strands and Features**

American evangelicalism of the late twentieth century has grown out of a complex history. Since World War I it has struggled to define itself against the separatist tendencies of fundamentalism and yet still maintain its distinctiveness from liberalism. Whereas evangelicals identify theological conflicts with liberals, their differences with fundamentalists tend to be matters of methods and extremes. Evangelicals sought to be more cooperative with mainline groups,
trying to maintain a balance between exclusivity and inclusivity. The question which has daunted them is, in Jon Robert Stone's words: "How far ‘left’ could evangelicals drift (doctrinally, socially, ecclesiastically, etc.) and still remain orthodox?" 

Certainly this drift has been negotiated differently by different streams of evangelicals—and there are many. One system of categorization lists fourteen different kinds—including fundamentalist, conservative, reformed, Wesleyan, Black, progressive, radical, and mainline, among others. A more helpful categorization for our purposes is that of Mark Ellingson, who identifies three main strands: conservative, moderate, and radical. These groups are distinguished more by their approach to social issues than by central doctrine. All three groups would adhere to Donald Bloesch's definition of classical evangelical beliefs: "biblical fidelity, apostolic doctrine, the experience of salvation, the imperative of discipleship, . . . the urgency of mission [and] eschatological hope." They would all affirm those theological tenets which distinguish evangelicalism from liberalism: the authority of the Scriptures, the atoning work of Christ on the cross, the miracles and bodily resurrection of Christ, the power of the gospel to save sinners, the necessity of evangelism, and the centrality of the Bible to Christian ethics. What these three groups generally differ on is how to live out biblically based ethics in a modern, secular world.

Conservative evangelicals are the largest group and generally receive the most media attention. Although they include "Moral Majority" types, Ellingson insists that they are not essentially reactionary, for they are in favor of things like "racial justice." It is this group which is most vocal in support of legislation against homosexuality. Moderate evangelicals are more reform-oriented than the Conservatives. While their focus on institutional reform makes them somewhat "liberal" in the eyes of some, they remain conservative on both homosexual and feminist issues. Ellingson selects Carl Henry as representative of this group.

Radicals are those on the liberal border of evangelicalism. Represented by figures and publications such as John Alexander and The Other Side, Clark Pinnock, Ron Sider, Jim Wallis and Sojourners, and liberationist Orlando Costas, they are the most outspoken on social justice issues. Committed to "lifestyle evangelism" and a vision of community which extends beyond the nuclear family, radicals first nurtured the reemerging evangelical feminism of the 1970s. They, too,
however, have tended to maintain the traditional evangelical view that homosexuality is against biblical teaching. They do hold a position, though, which allows greater flexibility in ecumenical endeavors. Unlike conservatives and many moderates (characterized by Quebedeaux as “Establishment” evangelicals), radicals do not accept that “there can be no meaningful solidarity apart from basic doctrinal agreement.”

These radicals seem to be those whom Quebedeaux has in mind in writing of the new, or The Young Evangelicals, and he selects Bruce Larsen as its representative thinker on the topic of sexuality. According to Larsen, sex is to be valued as a wonderful gift from God—to be expressed only within the limits of heterosexual marriage. Quebedeaux points out that contemporary evangelical thinkers in general, like Larsen, have “softened their stand by making the distinction between homosexual orientation and practice. Only the latter they feel, warrants disapproval on the basis of Scripture.” Quebedeaux stresses, however, that many still fail to make this distinction.

In general, no distinction between orientation and practice was made prior to psychoanalytic work on “inversion.” Thus, as Derrick Bailey has stated, “strictly speaking the Bible and Christian tradition know nothing of ‘homosexuality’; both are concerned solely with the commission of sexual acts.” When a third term, “homosexual relationship,” is added to the discourse, distinctions become even more complicated.

But while the distinction was not formally made before Freud, these categories may be used as lenses through which we can see a disjunction in Christian approaches to sexuality that goes back as far as the patristics. Augustine’s conviction that sexuality was compulsive and thus evidence of a corrupt will can be traced through Calvin’s belief that the human will is irreparably warped and symptomatic of utter depravity. Carried on in the Calvinistic branch of evangelicalism (by those like Edwards in the eighteenth century and the Princeton theologians of the early twentieth), this view accounts for the modern sense that homosexuality itself—condition, lifestyle, or activity—is warped and sinful. In contrast, those ancients like Cassian who believed in freedom of the will saw sexual acts as ones of obedience or disobedience. Through an ancient kind of methodism, rigorous control and monitoring of one’s sexual activity was seen as the road to spiritual health. Sexual sin was then a sign of moral failure,
not spiritual depravity. This view, which places a high value on sexuality, can be taken as the precursor of the Arminian theological trend evident in the Second Great Awakening, with its emphasis on free moral agency and the equality of all believers. Today these two trends—Calvinist and Arminian—may well account for the difference between homophobia and heterosexism among most evangelicals. Homophobia, as defined by Bruce L. Mills, is:

_ an intense and exaggerated fear of homosexuality as it is perceived to constitute danger to the individual and to society._

_When a person who is homophobic confronts homosexuality the reaction is one of fear, disgust, nausea, anxiety, and inevitably, defense and prejudice._\(^{51}\)

_Heterosexism_, on the other hand, is the belief that heterosexuality is the proper norm for humanity and that homosexuality is in some way inferior—for spiritual, psychological, social, or other reasons. This belief need not stem from or be accompanied by any sense of disgust at the thought of homosexual acts.\(^{52}\)

Among evangelicals influenced by Arminian thought, heterosexism can often involve sympathy for homosexual orientation and condemnation of homosexual activity. Because of the high value placed on free will and on sexuality, individuals are expected to be able to control their sexual impulses and desires. If heterosexual marriage, so highly valued since the earliest Reformation days of evangelicalism, is not a possibility, then celibacy ought to be practiced. In addition, evangelicals tend to argue that at least _some_ homosexuals can be “healed.” That is, willful obedience might some day be accompanied by psychological conformity. Just as Finney claimed “submit with the will, the feelings will adjust themselves in due time,” Mills explains, “‘Coming out’... is synonymous with volitional immorality and ethical depravity” because it is understood as willful rejection of both heterosexual marriage and celibacy.\(^{53}\)

Despite the Reformation understanding that celibacy was not a practical alternative for most Christians, evangelicals tend to revive the Catholic notion of vocational celibacy in this instance. John Stott, for example, responds in dialogue to David Edwards’s liberal assumption that “sexual intercourse is ‘psychologically necessary.’” This, he says, is a lie promoted by our sex-obsessed culture—“There is such a thing as the call to singleness, in which authentic human
fulfilment is possible without sexual experience." Stott, himself a lifelong bachelor whose singleness has allowed him to serve as an important evangelical ambassador around the world, might well speak from a personal sense of this vocation. He does not expound on this Protestant theology of celibate vocation, however, to explain how we might understand homosexual orientation to represent such a call.

Lewis Smedes is somewhat more accommodating in his approach. He states that the homosexual ought "at least to consider whether his [sic] affliction is a call to celibacy." But, acknowledging that "no one has the right to prescribe celibacy for another person," he considers the path of "optimum homosexual morality" for those who can neither change nor remain celibate. A life of regulated homosexuality, within a caring, committed partnership, he concludes, is not commendable but is better than a life of "sexual chaos." "

The image of chaos is also used to refer to homosexual activity in general because it invokes the state prior to creation, prior to divine differentiation. Fuchs calls homosexuality "a return to original chaos which the creative act of God had repelled" and sees it as a rejection of otherness in general, and thus God's otherness ultimately. Stott calls sexual complementarity a "creational truth," and Stanley Grenz interprets it such that only heterosexual intercourse can constitute "the sex act" which is so spiritually significant. Smedes, Stott, Grenz, and many others who address homosexuality from an evangelical perspective all refer to the Genesis image of "one flesh" to ground their arguments for heterosexism. Otherness is to be embraced and reconciled in the reuniting of sexual difference. As a result, "one flesh" is mysteriously produced in a physical mixing of selves. This emphasis on regulating the mysterious power of sexuality is reminiscent of medieval theological formulations. And the need to protect heterosexual union has been much influenced by Reformation thought.

This central focus on sexual acts allows for the sanctioning of homosociality, however. Because it is "the act" which matters, all other factors in the relationship are disconnected and judged separately. Grenz states: "Within this primary bond of the community of Christ bonding between persons of the same sex can occur, as they develop close, even intimate friendships, albeit excluding sexual intimacy in the form of genital relations." "

This statement is somewhat ambiguous. Is sexual intimacy restricted to genital relations? What about kissing, or nongenital
“petting”? What about emotional intimacy which is experienced as “romantic”? Bonding takes place on many levels. Stott makes a similar proposition: “Same sex friendships should of course be encouraged which may be close, deep and affectionate. But sexual union, the ‘one-flesh’ mystery, belongs to heterosexual marriage alone.” Stott complicates this permission, however, by prescribing that people of homosexual orientation should abstain from “homosexual practices and partnerships.” If “practices” are abstained from, what distinguishes a deep and affectionate friendship from a “partnership”? Degrees of commitment and loyalty? Domestic arrangements?

Whatever is encouraged or deemed possible, however, homosexual relationships are usually viewed as less than deeply loyal partnerships. Quebedeaux, for example, provides a list of reasons beyond the “one-flesh” argument to oppose homosexual behavior: first, “it is yet to be demonstrated that the gay life as a whole is either happy or fulfilled”; second, “at least among males, raw sex appears to be the single most important aspect of homosexual life”; and third, gay men are known for promiscuity and the failure to maintain long-term partnerships: “legal sanction not withstanding, ... homosexual couples do not grow old gracefully together.” This is obviously problematic if meant as a critique of a Christian homosexual ethic. First, many of the same criticisms could be leveled at secular heterosexual men; and second, this is clearly meant to describe gay men. Once again, lesbian relationships are omitted from consideration.

It should also be mentioned that there are evangelical groups committed to promoting acceptance and affirmation of homosexuality. Evangelicals Concerned, for example, works to promote and support monogamous relationships between homosexual Christians. And the Metropolitan Community churches, first founded by Moody Bible Institute graduate Troy Perry, are committed to an evangelical defense of homosexuality and to social action on behalf of gays and lesbians. Thus, while some conservative evangelicals would take what Hewitt calls the “Rejecting-Punitive” stance, and some Radicals would take the “Qualified Acceptance” stance exemplified by Smedes and some even the “Full Acceptance” position, a large percentage of evangelicals would fall into the “Rejecting-Nonpunitive” stance in regards to homosexual behavior. It is this position, as well, which has so often emerged as central to evangelical-liberal dialogue on social issues. Just as in the Great Awakening, measurable norms are seen as necessary to set evangelicals apart socially from liberals. As dialogue
and ecumenism increase, as they did in the nineteenth century, these distinctions become more problematic; and evangelicals tend to divide over these border-keeping issues.

**Conclusion: Back to the Future**

We can now return to the question of why homosexuality has served as such an issue in the self-definition of contemporary evangelical feminists. This study points to several possibilities. First, homosexuality is still a socially defining issue for evangelicals in general. Most evangelical feminists are likely more tolerant on this issue than many of their non-feminist counterparts, however. As Bailey points out, women in general tend to be less disturbed at the very thought of homosexuality—to exhibit homophobia, that is. The Wesleyan-influenced ones would be more open to the value of experience as well. As feminists, these same women are well aware of the dangers of discrimination. Many still do advocate heterosexism, however. But why heterosexism requires separation, why it marks an impassable boundary precluding collaboration with non-heterosexists, is a somewhat different question.

First, evangelical feminists committed to working within conservative denominations and organizations fear the rejection which lesbian associations might bring. Hardesty has pointed out, for instance, that from its inception the EWC was castigated by fundamentalists for being a “lesbian support group.” For many, cooperation constitutes endorsement, and endorsement, identity. Regarding the EWC split, some have emphasized the civil rights focus as problematic because of both its “liberal” and political nature, but others have emphasized the problem of giving recognition to lesbianism. It appears that the cohabitation of Christian women is still acceptable, that quiet lesbianism can be tolerated. To publicly name and acknowledge it, though, removes it from the protection of ignorance.

It is also necessary to indicate why lesbianism, rather than homosexuality in general, has been so central to conservative criticism. Since lesbianism did not challenge historical “gender expectations” it was less threatening, but this may no longer apply. Despite evangelical feminist gains, gender expectations still do play a role in how feminists interact with other evangelicals. Women’s
demands for rights are often labeled “strident,” and the image of lesbians among conservative denominations is often masculine, power-hungry, and separatist. This leads to the second modern problem of lesbianism for evangelicals. It is often understood as “political lesbianism.” Perceived as working against the sexual and social complementarity of the sexes stressed by many evangelical feminists, lesbianism is understood as a separatist rejection of men, so representing a threat to gender relations. As it did for John of Chrysostom, homosexuality upsets the divine social order of cooperation between the sexes. Thus, for many evangelical feminists, homosexuality is the new “contamination”—the issue associated too much with radicalness and compromise. Some, like Frances Willard and her colleagues, are able to set aside prejudices and enter into collaboration on other issues. Others, however, feel their evangelical identity stretched beyond its limits by such solidarity. It is this sense that Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott address in calling up the story of Simon Peter in Acts 10 and 11. Commanded by God in a vision to eat foods declared contaminating in the Levitical holiness code, Peter resisted. To accept such a pronouncement and to obey God’s command was agonizing for Peter, but he eventually did so—obeying the vision’s message by extending the gospel to Gentiles. Extending the gospel, the essential evangelical message, in such a way as to accept homosexuality could be equally as agonizing—and as necessary—Scanzoni and Mollenkott assert.

Evangelical feminists have long celebrated the dissolution of certain barriers: between Jew and Gentile, between clergy and laity, between slaves and free persons, between men and women. Sexuality, however, has tended to remain the one symbolic differentiation—a tool for negotiating the delicate terrain bordering on liberalism and secularism. In this way, sexual ethics have shored up theological barriers. With mounting social activism and awareness, however, this ethical stance is facing increased pressure. Whether this last buttress and symbolic distinction will be dismantled or abandoned by future evangelical feminists, and what the toll on evangelical theology might be, is yet to be seen.
Notes


7. Hardesty outlined these various factors in a telephone interview, April, 1993.

8. There are a few areas which my method will permit me to address only rather crudely, and these deserve to be identified. One is the problem of distinguishing between homosexual orientation, activity, and relationship—all relatively recent additions to the discourse. Another problem relates to gender issues within the discourse on homosexuality. Despite the centrality of lesbianism to the contemporary evangelical feminist concern very little of the relevant material on homosexuality—either historical or contemporary—addresses lesbianism as seriously as it does male homosexuality. Most sources, in fact, deal almost exclusively, if not solely, with gay male sexuality. This requires some additional assumptions that introduce problems into the study but do not undermine its integrity. I will try to indicate these junctures wherever possible.

Finally there is the problem of definition. Because of the nature of the questions guiding this study, I refrain from offering introductory definitions of my key terms: "evangelical"; "feminist"; "evangelical feminist"; and "homosexuality." I do not expect my readers to suppose that I use these terms without some understanding and bias of my own, but I do intend to hold these terms loosely, in a grasp as tentative as possible. My aim by doing so is gradually to disclose the various and often contesting functional definitions applied to these terms in the current discussion of these issues.


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16. Ibid., 67.

17. Ibid., 129, 134.

18. Ibid., 137-139.

19. Ibid., 140.

20. Ibid., 146.


23. Ibid., 66-68.


27. Ibid., 89.


29. Ibid., 73.

30. Ibid., 14, 112.

31. Ibid., 19, 51.

32. Ibid., 21.

33. Ibid., 147.

34. Ibid., 24.


41. Ibid., 233-235.

42. Ibid., 296.

43. Ibid., 297.


John Boswell has concluded that the historical failure to distinguish between terms is a sign of acceptance, and that the rise of a distinction between sexual orientation and activity is the result of prejudice (see Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality, p. 59). This is a troubling assessment for several reasons. First, while designations like “negro” and “invert”—or even “Christian,” “evangelical,” and “methodist”—may have arisen as labels or derogatory epithets pinned on minorities by the dominant culture, their functions have clearly not been so limited. Such labels may be embraced and turned into empowering and protective identities. And as history unfolds, regardless of whether the minority gains dominance or remains marginal, few groups are willing to relinquish all categorizations—as demonstrated by women in the EWC who sought to be recognized by their lesbian identity. History may show, as well, that the identification of sexual orientation ultimately offers more to counteract prejudice than to reinforce it.

I am aware that this distinction is considered insidious by some activists and advocates of homosexuality, as it is seen to diffuse the power of the more popular label, homophobia. As well, it may be argued that heterosexism has its deepest roots in an obscured homophobia. Since the latter term would seem to identify a personal, psycho-emotional condition rather than an ethical or theological position, however, I find the distinction helpful here. I would add that I think it parallels, in some ways, a distinction between sexism and misogyny.
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Homosexuality, Ordination, and Polity

What impact does a gay or lesbian Christian's membership in a denomination have on his or her efforts to be ordained? How are the struggles different for gay and lesbian Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, United Methodists, or Disciples of Christ?

Choosing two mainline Protestant denominations, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Methodist Church, I wish to sketch the role that denominational identities play in shaping decisions about the ordination of homosexuals. Much discussion of gay and lesbian ordination focuses on ethical arguments for or against homosexuality. Certainly, such discussion is important; however, more attention should be given to the influence of different ordination traditions and church structures on this controversy.

The case of the United Methodists and Disciples of Christ provides an illustration of denominational practices which are as important as attitudes toward homosexuality in determining whether gays and lesbians are ordained. In a recent survey of members in twenty-four Christian denominations, Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney asked respondents to indicate agreement or disagreement with the following statement: "Homosexuality is not always wrong." Twenty-three percent of United Methodists polled agree while only 18 percent of the Disciples concur.1

A reasonable interpretation of the data suggests that more Disciples of Christ believe that homosexuality is wrong than do United Methodists by a margin of 5 percent. If this belief were the

Peter Browning is Chaplain and Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Drury College, Springfield, Missouri.
determinative factor for the ordination of homosexuals in these
denominations, then one could assume that opportunities for the
ordination of gays and lesbians within the United Methodist Church
would be slightly greater than such opportunities within the Christian
Church (Disciples of Christ).

Yet, as most are aware, that assumption would not be correct. The
United Methodists do not permit "practicing self-avowed
homosexuals" to be ordained, while there is the possibility, however
small, of such ordination within the Christian Church (Disciples of
Christ).

What accounts for this difference? While there are many factors
which could be considered, this essay proposes to examine three:
ordination theologies, denominational polities, and church ethical
decision-making structures.

To set the stage for this analysis, let us briefly review the two
denominations' discussion of homosexuality and ordination.

The United Methodist Church

The UMC has debated the issue of homosexuality and ordination for
over twenty years. In 1972 the General Conference voted to include a
statement in The Book of Discipline which affirmed homosexuals as
"persons of sacred worth" but condemned homosexuality as
"incompatible with Christian teaching." Four years later, the General
Conference delegates banned funding for any organization advocating
on behalf of gays and lesbians. In 1982 a test of denominational
practice occurred when Bishop Melvin Wheatley appointed an openly
gay minister in Denver to serve as a director of Christian education.
This episcopal decision was challenged and brought before the
Judicial Council, where it was eventually upheld with a judgment
stating that The Discipline, as it stood at that time, did not prohibit the
ordination or appointment of practicing homosexuals. The technical
loophole was closed at the General Conference in 1984, when The
Discipline was changed to block the appointment of anyone who was
a "self-avowed practicing homosexual."

Four years later the 1988 General Conference created a committee
for the study of homosexuality under the auspices of the General
Council on Ministries; in 1992, the committee made its report with
majority and minority recommendations. The majority concluded that
there was not enough information available at this time to reject homosexuality as inconsistent with a Christian lifestyle. The minority took such lack of conclusive information as a sign that official denominational disapproval of homosexuality should not be withdrawn. However, neither recommendation was approved for modification of The Discipline, and the committee's study materials were referred to local congregations for discussion over the next four years.

Throughout this debate, various groups emerged favoring and rejecting gay/lesbian ordination. Chief among the supporters were the Methodist Federation for Social Action and Reconciling Congregations, an unofficial United Methodist gay and lesbian advocacy network with seventy-one participating local churches. Leaders in the opposition movement were two evangelical organizations, "Transforming Congregations," created in response to the "Reconciling Congregations," and "Good News," a theologically and politically conservative group which publishes a journal by the same name.

**Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)**

In the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) resolutions about homosexuality began to appear in the mid-seventies at the General Assemblies, which meet every two years. A Task Force was established to study homosexuality in 1975 with a mandate to report back to the 1977 General Assembly. The report, which was approved, suggested that biblical condemnations of homosexuality were problematic in light of modern biblical insights and new evidence about sexuality within the fields of biology, sociology, and psychology.

In 1979 the General Board of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) recommended that decisions about homosexual candidates for the ordained ministry continue to be resolved through the individual regional Commissions on Ministry. Some gay and lesbian candidates for ministry were approved throughout the 1980s, although only one of the thirty-five regions went on record as not excluding "practicing" homosexuals from consideration for ordination. In October 1991, the homosexuality and ordination issue was confronted dramatically when the nominee for General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).
Church (Disciples of Christ) failed to receive the two-thirds vote required to obtain office, in part, because of his membership in Gay and Lesbian Affirming Disciples (GLAD). While the nominee did not offer an opinion on gay and lesbian ordination, his very association with the group contributed to a conservative backlash which resulted in his defeat.

GLAD’s role is similar to the gay/lesbian advocacy role played by the United Methodist group “Reconciling Congregations.” The counterpart to “Good News” and “Transforming Congregations” within the Disciples of Christ denomination is “Disciple Renewal.” A group which began in the mid-eighties, it is committed to renewal of the church through a perceived return to biblical roots.

This review of two denominations’ struggles with homosexuality and ordination demonstrates similarities and differences. Both mainline Protestant churches have a two-decade history of debate; both are largely restrictive in their views of homosexuality; both have organizations actively fighting for or against gay and lesbian participation in the ordained ministry.

Yet they each possess different mechanisms and traditions which shape their debates and lead to different outcomes: the United Methodists blocking ordination and the Disciples of Christ theoretically permitting it. The differences become more understandable when greater attention is paid to the denominations’ distinctive understandings of ordination, church structure, and ethical decision-making.

**Ordination: Opportunities and Obstacles**

On a superficial level, there is an obvious distinction between ordination within the United Methodist Church and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The UMC has an explicit statement in *The 1988 Book of Discipline* which requires ordained ministers “to maintain the highest standards represented by the practice of fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness” and which prohibits “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” from being “accepted as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.” The Disciples of Christ include no such direct prohibition of homosexuality or the ordination of gays and lesbians on the general level, although many regions have such a statement.
Certainly, this fundamental distinction explains much of the difference between the two churches on ordination. Yet an analysis of the churches' understandings of ordination demonstrates other influences which shape the debate. Two are especially critical: first, the different levels of authority attributed to ordination, and second, the different expectations for the ordained to model a particular moral pattern.

**Ordination and Authority.** Within the United Methodist Church, ordination is for those Christians who are "called of God and set apart by the church for the specialized ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Order." As Methodist theologian Dennis Campbell argues in his 1988 study of United Methodist ordination, *The Yoke of Obedience*, "Ordination is the way Methodism sets some apart for sacramental ministries." The Wesleys never wavered ... from church teaching that only ordained ministers administer the sacraments.

This authority is not mirrored in the Disciples of Christ tradition. As Disciple church historian Newell Williams contends, the Disciple heritage, especially as seen in the writing of the founder, Alexander Campbell, displays a deep suspicion of the ordained minister's exclusive authority over sacramental ministry. For Alexander Campbell, the functional distinction between ordained and laity is modest. Any Christian "may of right preach, baptize, and dispense the supper ..." While most contemporary Disciples churches have the sacraments administered by ordained clergy, it is common for lay elders to participate in the administration of the Lord's Supper and to preside in the absence of an ordained minister.

The question of the distinctive authority of the minister and the church is a perennial one in the life of the Disciples of Christ communion. In his 1983 study, *What is Our Authority?* Disciples New Testament scholar William Baird claims

> Within the congregationally governed churches, a crisis exists in regard to the authority of the ordained minister. Frustrated by a lack of authority, many move out of ministry or into denominations where the lines of authority appear, bewitchingly, to be more clearly drawn. This exodus represents a failure to understand how authority functions in the divine-human relationship.

For Baird, the minister's authority is grounded "in his or her expertise
in interpreting the scripture and tradition which witness to God's
revelation in Christ.’ However, he admits that such authority is more
ambiguous than the authority which comes from a more hierarchical
ecclesiastical tradition.

Contrasting the Disciples and United Methodists, one can argue that
the lines between ordained and laity are sharper for the United
Methodists. While both bodies affirm the “priesthood of all believers”
tradition which militates against clericalism, there is a deeper
awareness of the ordained minister’s status as a person “set apart”
within United Methodism.

The consequence for the discussion of homosexuality and
ordination is indirect but significant. Both denominations recognize
the “sacred worth” or inherent dignity of gays and lesbians; both
welcome them into the congregational life of the church. As Disciples
Regional Minister Nathan Smith notes in a letter to the 211 churches
in his region:

> Several congregations in our Region do have “openly” gay
> and lesbian members. Several serve as elders and/or members
> of the diaconate. Pastors of these congregations have often
> reported to me of the faithfulness and commitment of these
> members. This does not weaken or threaten the congregation's
> strong affirmation of the heterosexual family as the primary
> unit of the congregation, but it affirms that there is more
> diversity in the human family than most of us realize.

If it is the case that homosexual Christians are welcome into the
congregational life, and even given leadership roles, then a theology
of ordination which does not distinguish as sharply between ordained
and laity will have a more difficult task in explaining why gays and
lesbians may become church members or church leaders but not be
considered for ordination. Since such an ordination theology is more
characteristic of the Disciples of Christ than the United Methodists, it
is reasonable to contend that the Disciples tradition of ordination and
ministry creates a context in which gay and lesbian ordination
becomes more difficult to reject than is the case with United
Methodism.

**Moral Representation.** The significant role of differing ordination
practices becomes even more apparent when the second factor of
moral representation is considered. For the United Methodist Church
there is a deep tradition of concern over the moral behavior of clergy. As Dennis Campbell argues, “Wesley believed that the moral lives of pastors should be exemplary.” A review of the Wesleyan questions for ordination in *The Discipline* reinforces such a concern. Wesley’s historic examination asks persons seeking admission into full connection as an ordained minister: “Are you going on to perfection?” and then offers a detailed list of questions about behavior requiring assent before ordination will be granted. This examination is explicit in declaring expectations of a Methodist minister. It continues a long-standing tradition relating back to the foundation of the “United Societies,” when Wesley gave precise rules for moral behavior to all participants.

Certainly, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) tradition also places great importance on the moral character of the candidates for ordination. Local congregations which recommend candidates are expected to judge the moral standards of those Christians. However, the tradition of precisely defined expectations so characteristic of John Wesley’s historic questions for ordination and his United Societies does not exist to the same degree within the Christian Church.

The Disciples’ criteria for ordination include a short description of “personal fitness”; “mental and physical capacities, emotional stability and maturity, and standards of morality.” Given its concern for congregational autonomy, the denomination intentionally avoids defined statements of morality. Disciples church historian Ronald Osborn, a central figure in the restructuring of the denomination in 1968 and a leading interpreter of the tradition, both argues against ordination of homosexuals and adamantly rejects the effort by some to mandate such a policy for the whole church.

*Such actions single out a particular form of conduct and seek to deal with it by enacting a law. This is contrary to the genius of the church and the spirit of the Disciples of Christ. By leaving the commission [on ministry] free to exercise its responsible judgment in individual cases, the church maintains a stance of openness and an opportunity to deal with candidates for ordination on an individual basis.*

The willingness of United Methodists to articulate particular features of moral behavior and the unwillingness of the Disciples of Christ to do so create a situation which makes pluralism over moral questions
more possible within the latter denomination than the former. Disciples regions are given some more freedom in interpreting the ordination criteria than United Methodist conferences. Consequently, gay and lesbian Disciples benefit from greater ecclesiological openness on moral questions.

**Polity**

The ordination of gays and lesbians is also influenced by the church structures of the respective denominations. Two factors deserve special attention in this category as well: first, the pattern by which ordained ministers are chosen to serve in particular ministries; and second, the structures which oversee the practices of the ministry.

**The Call and Appointment Systems.** One of the essential differences between United Methodist and Disciples of Christ ministers is the pattern of selection for ministerial service. Members of the United Methodist ordained ministry are appointed by their bishops to serve in particular ministerial settings. Disciples of Christ ordained ministers must be called by a local congregation.

As ministers are fully aware, there are blessings and curses associated with each option. United Methodist ministers often complain of the modest power they have in determining their destiny. In particular, they are unhappy about the dramatic disruptions which often occur when a bishop requires them to move to a new parish, even when they would prefer not to move. Disciples of Christ pastors frequently complain of the opposite situation. In a call system ministers are beholden to their congregations, which may behave sensitively or insensitively, democratically or autocratically.

The appointment and call systems have distinctive influences on the efforts of gays and lesbians to be ordained and to serve in ministry. The appointment system is often used as a vehicle for the restriction of homosexual Christians in the ministry. Pragmatically, full membership in an Annual Conference entails an appointment, yet a very limited number of congregations would be willing to accept an openly gay or lesbian minister. Thus, it is argued, it would be unworkable to accept into the Annual Conference a person with a lifestyle condemned by the vast majority of church members. Why ordain a person who is unappointable?

A similar argument could be made by authorities within the
Disciples of Christ, but the power dynamics are very different. Gay and lesbian candidates for ministry may be ordained in a few regions, but they have no guarantee that they will be called to serve. The fundamental difference is the lack of denominational obligation to provide ordained pastors with congregations. While a denominational office is available to help with placement, the minister is finally responsible for obtaining a congregational call. It is the local congregation which calls the pastor, and no congregation is under a mandate to accept anyone.

One of the consequences of this pattern is a reduced level of congregational self-interest in rejecting ordination candidates the congregation itself would not call. While a United Methodist congregation not wishing to have a gay or lesbian pastor would have an immediate stake in a policy which barred homosexuals from ordination, an anti-homosexual Disciples of Christ congregation can simply reject homosexual candidates who seek a call from the church. That distinction plays an important role in allowing some gay and lesbian Christians to be ordained by the Disciples in spite of the fact that the denomination’s members are quite conservative about homosexuality.

If the United Methodist Church ever changes its moral evaluation of homosexuality and thus permits certain “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” to be ordained, the appointment system may work in precisely the opposite manner. That is, some churches which might otherwise reject gay or lesbian leadership could be encouraged through bishops and district superintendents to accept such persons for appointment.

As United Methodist ethicist Tex Sample argues, the call system typically allows more gays and lesbians to be ordained, but it does not help them serve. The appointment system frequently blocks ordination but has greater potential for gay and lesbian integration into the ministry when cultural mores change.34

**Ecclesiastical Structures of Authority.** Another crucial polity influence lies in the ecclesiastical structures of authority for ordination within each denomination. Decisions about ordained ministry within the two denominations are made by similar groups which function in very different ways. For the United Methodists they are the boards of ordained ministry within annual conferences and for the Disciples of Christ, the commissions of ministry within regions.35
The major difference lies in the fact that regions have more freedom than annual conferences to determine ordination practices. One can see this distinction when one observes the activities of annual conferences and regions sympathetic to the gay and lesbian community. There are four United Methodist conferences and boards of ordained ministry which are on record as affirming of gay and lesbian Christians. They are the Annual Conferences of Northern Illinois, New York, Troy, and Nevada. Some of the chairs of the boards of ordained ministry within these conferences are especially influential in their efforts to open doors for gay and lesbian ordained ministry; however, the power of those individuals is limited by an obligation to obey The Discipline.

When Disciples of Christ regions and commissions on ministry choose to permit gay and lesbian candidates to be considered for ordination, they are not as controlled by the ecclesiastical structure. For instance, the Region of Northern California-Nevada has a formal statement which indirectly welcomes gay and lesbian participation in the ordained ministry. As the region's ministry statement proclaims, "In all of its procedures concerning the Order of Ministry, the church affirms a policy which singles out no particular human condition as an absolute barrier to ordination." While no congregations are forced to accept gay and lesbian pastors, opportunities for ordination are greater.

It is important to remember, however, that the Northern California-Nevada Region is an exception. In other regions where gay and lesbian persons have sought consideration for ordination, they generally have met with resistance and rejection. Some commissions on Ministry simply do not raise questions about sexual orientation when interviewing ordination candidates but reject candidates when their homosexual identity is mentioned. Other commissions do ask about sexuality and are particularly concerned that no homosexual candidates be permitted ordination. Much of the diversity is dependent on the members of the commissions and the cultural patterns of the region. It is no accident that more open practices are to be found on the east and west coasts, where general attitudes toward homosexuality are more favorable.

The argument that greater freedom is available with the Disciples of Christ should not be interpreted to suggest that there are no structures within the United Methodist episcopal system which could provide opportunities for gay and lesbian ordained ministry. The influence of particular individuals within the ecclesiastical hierarchy cannot be
dismissed. Perhaps the most famous case is that of Bishop Melvin Wheatley, who in 1982 appointed Julian Rush to serve a congregation in the Rocky Mountain Conference.

Mark Bowman, director of Reconciling Congregations, the unofficial UMC network of congregations welcoming lesbian and gay persons, suggests that various bishops and chairs of boards are being helpful in the effort to place gay and lesbian candidates. Their actions are not public, yet they are having an impact. Since the language of “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” is open to interpretation, there is still freedom within the conferences for persons to engage in ministry as long as they continue to function ecclesiastically “within the closet” although they may unofficially have a fairly open lifestyle.

The openness of interpretation, however, does not always work in favor of gay/lesbian ordination. For instance, in June of 1990 the Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference passed a statement in closed sessions which defined “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” as persons “who verbally acknowledge themselves, to the (conference) Board of Ordained Ministry to be emotionally, mentally, spiritually or physically practicing as a homosexual.” This definition would mean that even celibate gays or lesbians could not be ordained ministers.

In spite of the genuine authority granted to United Methodist annual conferences, it is clear that Disciples regions have greater flexibility in determining qualifications for ordination. Thus, Disciples authority structures permit greater opportunity for exceptions to the majority’s condemnation of gay and lesbian ordination.

Structures of Ethical Decision-Making

The final dynamic for consideration involves the structures of ethical decision-making. In this study, a distinction shall be made between official and unofficial structures. Both play significant roles.

Formal Ethical Decision-Making Structures. For the United Methodists, the center of the formal decision-making structure is The Book of Discipline, an ecclesial document which is amended at every General Conference and which requires obedience from all ordained UM pastors.

Thousands of petitions are heard at any given General Conference, and the resulting votes regularly create modification in The Discipline.
Although United Methodist studies of homosexuality shape decision-making within the wider church, and the Board of Church and Society has a critical role to play, it is ultimately the judgments approved by vote at the General and Annual Conferences which dictate the policy and practice of the denomination.

When controversies over interpretation of *The Discipline* emerge, the final arbiter is the Judicial Council. Over the history of the debate on homosexuality and ordination, there have been several related Judicial Council rulings. The most visible occurred in 1984 and was responsible for confirming the acceptability of an exclusion for “self-avowed practicing homosexual” candidates seeking ordination and/or appointment.

Since all ministers, from local pastors to bishops, are obliged to follow *The Discipline’s* guidelines or risk loss of good standing, *The Discipline* looms large whenever any ethical controversy emerges. When ministers violate this church legislation, they make themselves vulnerable to ecclesiastical trial.

In 1987, three years after the formal General Conference decision against “self-avowed practicing homosexuals,” Rose Mary Denman, an ordained minister in New Hampshire, tested the ruling by openly declaring her lesbian identity. In April of that year, Bishop George Bashore informed Denman that her Board of Ordained Ministry had chosen not to extend her another appointment on the grounds that her lesbian partnership was inconsistent with United Methodist ordination requirements. Before Denman could transfer her ordination to another denomination, the Unitarian Universalist Association, she received a formal complaint asking that her ordination be rescinded. Denman requested an ecclesiastical trial.

At that trial theologians Virginia Ramsey Mollenkott, Marvin Ellison, and Burton Throckmorton spoke on her behalf. In spite of this support she lost her case and received a suspension of ministry until the 1988 General Conference.

Within the Disciples of Christ denomination, regional commissions on ministry do have the right to terminate ministerial standing, but there is no judicial structure for a formal trial. In general, the authoritative structures within the Disciples of Christ are much less powerful. Regional ministers operate without authority to appoint ministers or to require funding from local churches. The Regional and General Assemblies, comparable to Annual and General Conferences, function as bodies which enact policies but intentionally avoid
requiring obedience on most controversial ethical issues. Resolutions related to ethical matters which are passed at Disciples assemblies have a symbolic and community value, but they do not have the authority which emerges out of *The Book of Discipline*. They are understood as statements which reflect the views of the assembled, not as legislative judgments requiring uniform obedience.\footnote{43}

**Informal Ethical Decision-Making Structures.** While judicial councils, episcopal authorities, conference petitions, assembly resolutions, and offices of church and society play important roles in shaping decisions about controversial ethical issues, there are powerful forces which exist outside of the official dialogue and create tremendous pressures. One of the most important indirect factors is financial.

Both denominations are seeing a decrease in funding to their central offices. For the smaller Disciples of Christ communion, this reduction in support of the general church is having a devastating effect.\footnote{44} But the same pattern is occurring among United Methodists.

The result of this budgetary problem is an increase in informal authority given to those congregations which send more money to the denominational general offices, either in mandated apportionments (UMC) or in voluntary contributions (Disciples). It is noteworthy that both Disciples and United Methodist churches which are “open and affirming” or “reconciling” tend not to be large. Thus, their financial clout in the denomination remains modest.

Given the legislative authority available within the United Methodist Church, it is likely that large, wealthy congregations will continue to play a critical role in shaping policy. For the Disciples, this role will be played by large suburban churches and by smaller, often rural, congregations which align themselves with Disciples Renewal. The Disciples of Christ are very nervous about these small, conservative, rural congregations which are debating whether the general office is still worthy of financial support. Unlike the United Methodists, whose churches could not simply continue to exist as a part of the denomination if they refused to pay into the national office, Disciples churches can continue to be Disciple without offering any money to the central denominational fund.

The budgetary issue may become even more crucial to decisions about homosexuality and ordination in the future. When denominations must work to keep the majority of congregations...
satisfied, they often choose to avoid or downplay controversial moral commitments.

Conclusion

As this brief sketch of two denominations suggests, there is reason to see the debate over homosexuality and ordination in a denominational context. Homosexual Christians seeking ordination do so in particular denominations, and the contours of those denominations create opportunities and obstacles.

For United Methodists, ordination, polity, and ethical decision-making structures lead to greater caution. Ordination carries greater authority sacramentally and morally; thus, qualifications for ordination are scrutinized more carefully. Polity is connectional and episcopal. With a practical guarantee of appointment for full conference members, the ordination of controversial individuals is more problematic since it is harder to place them. Finally, the role of The Discipline in ethical decision-making creates a legislative pattern which requires church consensus and ministerial obedience. Currently, that consensus works against gays and lesbians; but, at a later time with a different set of cultural assumptions, it could function in a more supportive manner.

For the Disciples of Christ, ordination, polity, and ethical decision-making structures suggest greater opportunity for the ordination of persons, such as gays and lesbians, who may be controversial in the eyes of the denomination. Ordination theology does not stress a separation between the ministry of the ordained and the laity. Moral requirements for ministers are intentionally defined in a vague manner. A modified congregationalist polity encourages greater diversity for ministers, regions, and local congregations. Finally, the advisory approach of the general and regional assemblies makes ethical decision-making structures less authoritative, and thus more open to pluralism.

As gay and lesbian Christians continue to seek ordination, it will be important for future discussion to focus on both the ethical questions associated with homosexuality and the ecclesiological questions associated with ordination and church practice.
Notes


3. According to the “Report of the Committee to Study Homosexuality,” there were three separate reports adopted at the 1976 General Conference. “The first ordered ‘that no board, agency, committee, commission, or council shall give United Methodist funds to any ‘gay’ caucus or group, or otherwise use such funds to promote the acceptance of homosexuality.’ The second mandated the use of resources and funds by boards and agencies ‘only in support of those programs consistent with the Social Principles of The United Methodist Church.’ The third prohibited ‘funds for projects favoring homosexual practices.’ ”


7. Report of the Committee to Study Homosexuality, pp. 32-33. The majority opinion states: “The present state of knowledge and insight in the biblical, theological, ethical, biological, psychological and sociological fields does not provide a satisfactory basis upon which the church can responsibly maintain the condemnation of all homosexual practice.” The minority opinion counters: “The present state of knowledge and insight in the biblical, theological, ethical, biological, psychological and sociological fields does not provide a satisfactory basis upon which the church can responsibly alter its previously held position that we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.” Seventeen members supported the majority report; four backed the minority report.


13. See Regional Assembly decision of Northern California-Nevada.

14. For an articulation of the GLAD stance, see the organization’s newsletter, Crossbeams, edited by Alan Harris, associate minister at Park Avenue Christian Church in New York City. Also see the editor’s statement, “Why Churches Should Be Open and Affirming of Lesbian and Gay Persons,” in Disciples Renewal, Vol. 6, No. 3 (March 1991): 1, 15.

15. For an analysis of a church’s decision to become a part of the GLAD organization, see Debra Peevey, “Becoming Open and Affirming of Gay and Lesbian Christians—One Church’s Story, Chicago Theological Seminary (Spring 1991): 32-38.

16. Disciples Renewal publishes a newsletter by the same name and is a critical force in organizing disenfranchised evangelical churches within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). It has suffered great controversy and alienation from the wider church because many denominational leaders believe that the organization is recommending to its members that they not support the financial arm of the denomination, Basic Mission Finance (BMF). As BMF monies decline, the general office of the church, located in Indianapolis, loses the funding it needs to carry on the ministries of the church. Disciple Renewal organized a campaign against the nomination of Michael Kinnamon to be General Minister and President. Their efforts were largely successful in keeping Dr. Kinnamon from winning office.


18. Ibid.


20. Ibid., 51-52.


23. Ibid.


25. Dennis Campbell, The Yoke of Obedience, 54. In making this statement Campbell quotes from John Wesley, “They (pastors) are supposed to go before the
flock (as in the manner of the eastern shepherds to this day) and to guide them in all the ways of truth and holiness . . .” [“A Caution Against Bigotry,” Works, Bicentennial Edition, vol. 2, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 74].


27. See John Wesley, “The Rules of the United Societies,” in John Wesley, ed. Albert C. Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 178-79. “It is therefore expected of all who continue therein, that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation: First, by doing no harm, by avoiding evil in every kind; especially that which is most generally practised. Such is the taking the name of God in vain; the profaning the day of the Lord, either by doing ordinary work thereon, or by buying or selling; drunkenness, buying or selling spirituous liquors, or drinking them, unless in cases of extreme necessity; fighting, quarreling, brawling; going to law; returning evil for evil; or railing for railing; the using many words in buying or selling; the buying or selling uncustomed goods; the giving or taking of things on usury; uncharitable or unprofitable conversation . . .”

28. “Policies and Criteria for The Order of Ministry, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Department of Ministry, Division of Homeland Ministries, 1988, p. 2

29. Ronald E. Osborn, “Ordination for Homosexuals? A Negative Answer Qualified by Some Reflections,” Encounter (Spring 1978): 261. For an exploration of the often selective questions asked by Disciples of Christ commissions on ministry when interviewing candidates for ordination, see another article in this edition of Encounter, “Ordination for Homosexuals? Yes,” by David Ray Griffin, 265-72. Griffin is especially helpful in showing the inconsistency of selecting homosexuality for rejection when there are so many other “sinful” behaviors which the commissions ignore when interviewing candidates. (See especially p. 267).

30. As Ronald E. Osborn notes in The Faith We Affirm: Basic Beliefs of Disciples of Christ (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication Press, 1979), 91, this commitment to diversity and noncoercion is so strong that the Disciples were unwilling to modify the “Provisional Design” to require all congregations not to discriminate on the basis of race, although the vast majority of the church leadership was deeply committed to the civil rights movement. The final compromise in the “Design” encourages churches “to voluntarily demonstrate their concern for the mission and witness of the whole church [and] . . . to grow in understanding that the church is a universal fellowship, transcending all barriers within the human family such as race and culture.”


32. R. Sheldon Duecker, Tensions in the Connection (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 43. One of the major problems is the growing conflict of married ministers who cannot simply move without greater family disruption. “The female spouse role, as redefined by society, has had a sobering effect on the appointive system. Currently more than half of the married women in American society work.” Thus, the old pattern of a married male pastor with family ready to move when asked is anachronistic.

34. This judgment was shared with me while I was visiting the Saint Paul School of Theology in October 1992.

35. For information about the workings of the board of ordained ministry, see Jack Tuell, *The Organization of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985). For information about the commissions on ministry, see "Policies and Criteria for the Order of Ministry, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)."

36. For a regular listing of the growing group of Reconciling Congregations, regions, and church bodies, see *Open Hands*.

37. This quotation from a 1975 Regional Assembly statement has been incorporated into the regional assembly's own "criteria and policies for ordained ministry." The information was provided to me in a telephone conversation with the Regional Office.

38. Until recently, an exception to this pattern was the Northeastern Region of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). In a telephone interview with the Regional Minister, the Rev. Charles Lamb, I was informed that the region has ordained openly gay ministers over the past decade and that one openly gay man is serving as the associate minister of a large Disciples of Christ church in New York City. He also reported, however, that a resolution sponsored by the Hispanic Disciples Convention of the Northeast, which barred the ordination of openly homosexual candidates, was passed at the June 1992 Regional Assembly. Controversy arose in the past year because of a decision on the part of the Northeastern Region's Commission on Ministry in 1990 to ordain an openly gay man. Significantly, at the time of the June 1992 Regional Assembly, an openly gay ordination candidate had just been given permission by the Region to be ordained. In spite of the passing of the resolution, he was allowed to be ordained. As the Rev. Lamb indicated, this pastor will join a number of other pastors who are gay, but who have chosen not to share their identity with regional leaders in spite of the fact that most of their congregational members are fully aware of their sexual orientations.

39. The interview with Northeastern Regional Minister Charles Lamb indicated that other regions were asked to accept resolutions condemning the ordination of openly gay or lesbian Disciples of Christ in the last month, but that they had chosen not to do so. On October 15-17, 1992, the Pacific Southwest Region defeated a measure asking the body to "not knowingly ordain gay and lesbian candidates." Not only was the resolution rejected, but another resolution passed which discouraged litmus tests of candidates for ordination. On October 16-18 the Southwest Regional Assembly (largely in Texas) committed for additional study a resolution which requested the denial of licensing or ordination to homosexuals. Finally, Mr. Lamb noted that the Louisiana Region recently said no to a similar resolution.


41. See *The Proceedings of the Judicial Council of the United Methodist Church*, No. 490 (Request of General Conference for a Ruling on the Constitutionality of a Study Document on Human Sexuality), No. 491 (Right of an Annual Conference to Create a Task Force to Study Homophobia), No. 513 (Legality of Ordination of Probationer of Same-Sex Preference), No. 542 (Whether Ordination and Appointment of Self-avowed and Practicing Homosexuals is Precluded by Amendment of Pars. 404, 414, 420, 423, and 431 of the Discipline), and No. 597 (Right of the General Conference to Direct a Study of Homosexuality to Be conducted by the General Council on Ministries and Funded within the Budget of That Council).

42. Gail Hovey, "In the Matter of Rose Mary Denman: Life and Times of a
Minister, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 47, No. 16 (Nov. 9, 1987). In the same issue, also see Burton H. Throckmorton, "One summer day in New Hampshire"; Marvin M. Ellison, "Faithfulness, morality, and vision"; and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, "Human rights and the Golden Rule," 380-85.

43. In the "Special Rules of Procedure for the General Assembly," *Business Docket and Program, General Assembly Christian Church (Disciples of Christ, 1987)*, 399, approved resolutions are considered as "expressions of the General Assembly" which "are developed for the guidance of the Christian Church in its program operation, for the consideration of the congregation and members of the Christian Church, and for a Christian witness to the world." Resolutions are not seen as binding judgments requiring obedience.

44. For the year 1992 receipts from Basic Mission Finance, the central funding source for the Christian Church, indicates a decline of 3.6 percent. See "BMF down 3.6 percent," *The Disciple* (November 1992): 35.
Betsy L. Halsey

What Does the Lord Require of Us?: Ministries to and with Gays and Lesbians

In July 1990, I was appointed to my first charge, a small church in rural Maryland. I soon discovered that most of my congregation were uncomfortable with language that affirmed lesbians and gay men; only in hushed and disparaging whispers did they utter the word *homosexual*. When the lectionary prescribed Ephesians 2:11-22, I took the opportunity to seek to raise the consciousness of my congregation. My sermon, entitled “All in the Family,” began as follows:

Who is welcome in the family of God? Most of you are probably thinking, “Why, everyone, of course!” But are you aware that a controversy is raging right now in our own denomination over who is welcome in the family of God? The issue at the heart of the debate is whether lesbians and gay men should be ordained ministers in the United Methodist Church. And it’s not just the UMC that is dealing with the issue, but the other mainstream denominations as well. The controversy is raging: Who is welcome in the family of God?

Betsy L. Halsey is a United Methodist clergywoman in the Baltimore-Washington Conference.
Controversy over who is welcome in the church is nothing new. Women did not get full ordination rights in the Methodist Church until 1956, after struggling for rights in the church for over a hundred years. And in the 1800s, the slavery issue led to the division of the Methodist Church in the 1840s. Because of the great controversy over whether the church should be racially inclusive, the Methodist Church was not united again until 1939.

Does the family of God include African Americans? Does the family of God include women? Does the family of God include gay men and lesbians? These questions are all just variations on an age-old theme. And the theme, repeated in different days in different ways, is “Who belongs in the family of God?”

Although I had not expected a warm or enthusiastic response to this sermon, my congregation’s reaction was disheartening. Whereas generally everyone wants to get a hug from me after the service, on this day, few people came by for a hug. As I walked back through the church, my lay leader said to me, “The day they let those people become leaders in the Methodist Church is the day I leave the Methodist Church.”

Weeks later, during the fellowship time after church, I heard several ladies talking about afternoon television shows. When the “Oprah Winfrey Show” was mentioned as a favorite, one lady responded, “I usually like Oprah, but last week she had homosexuals on her show. We all know they are out there, but we don’t need to have them brought into our own living rooms.”

These responses indicate the prevalent attitude toward lesbians and gay men in many churches, and in fact, in much of society. As a result of these judgmental attitudes and the policies and actions that spring from them, society frequently inflicts great pain and suffering upon gay men and lesbians. Many lesbian/gay youth provide tragic evidence of this pain: some studies indicate that 20 to 30 percent of lesbian/gay youth attempt suicide at least once.1 A great need exists among lesbians and gay men for a liberating word—a message of love, acceptance, and hope.

Yet too often this is not the message gay men and lesbians receive from the institutional church. Many lesbians and gay men have been taught by the church that their sexual orientation is sinful or sick.
Some have given up on God because they believe God has given up on them. Some gay Christians strive to grow spiritually and long for support from other Christians but are isolated from the traditional source of such spiritual nourishment, the institutional church. Gay men and lesbians need the message of God's unconditional love. Unfortunately, it is rare for lesbians and gay men to hear this message and experience unconditional love in the United Methodist Church.

Ministry that is faithful to the biblical witness and the gospel mandate necessitates the full integration of everyone, including gay men and lesbians, into the life and ministry of the church. The official stance and prevalent attitude within the United Methodist Church with regard to lesbians and gay men are out of harmony with the biblical witness, and the gospel mandate. Faithfulness requires repentance and reconciliation that include deliberate ministries to and with, including the ordination of, gay men and lesbians.

**United Methodist Church Position and Polity**

Since this paper offers a critique of United Methodist policies, it is important to review the official teachings of the UMC with regard to homosexuality. Human sexuality is discussed in the “Social Principles” in *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Par. 71F). This official church teaching states:

> We recognize that sexuality is God's good gift to all persons. We believe persons may be fully human only when that gift is acknowledged and affirmed by themselves, the Church, and society. . . . Further, within the context of our understanding of this gift of God, we recognize that God challenges us to find responsible, committed, and loving forms of expression. . . .

We insist that all persons, regardless of age, gender, marital status, or sexual orientation, are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured. . . .

Homosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are individuals of sacred worth. . . . Although we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching, we affirm that God's grace is available to all. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.
Noting that “the interpretation of homosexuality has proved to be particularly troubling to conscientious Christians of differing opinion” and that “important biblical, theological, and scientific questions related to homosexuality remain in dispute among persons of good will,” the 1988 General Conference established a study process for the 1988-1992 quadrennium.2 The Committee to Study Homosexuality reviewed previous General Conference debates and actions, listened to personal vignettes, and explored various theological/ethical positions and scientific understandings pertaining to homosexuality.

The majority of the committee came to the following conclusions:

a) that the seven biblical references and allusions cannot be taken as definitive for Christian teaching about homosexual practice because they represent cultural patterns of ancient society and not the will of God;

b) that the scientific evidence is sufficient to support the contention that homosexuality is not pathological or otherwise an inversion, developmental failure, or deviant form of life as such, but is rather a human variant, one that can be healthy and whole;

c) that the emerging scholarly views in biblical studies, ethics, and theology support a view that affirms homosexual relationships that are covenantal, committed, and monogamous; and

d) that the witness to God's grace of lesbian and gay Christians in the life of the church supports these conclusions.3

Based on these conclusions, the majority of the committee recommended that the last two sentences of Paragraph 71F be deleted and the following language substituted for the deletion:

We acknowledge with humility that the church has been unable to arrive at a common mind on the compatibility of homosexual practice with Christian faith. Many consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. Others believe it acceptable when practiced in a context of human caring and covenantal faithfulness. The present state of knowledge and insight in the biblical, theological, ethical, biological, psychological, and sociological fields does not provide a
satisfactory basis upon which the church can responsibly maintain the condemnation of all homosexual practice. The church seeks further understanding through continued prayer, study, and pastoral experience. In doing so, the church continues to affirm that God's grace is bestowed on all, and that the members of Christ's body are called to be in ministry for and with one another, and to the world.

The 1992 General Conference did not adopt this language and instead retained the original language in Par. 71F. However, the Committee to Study Homosexuality also recommended, and the 1992 General Conference added, a paragraph (Par. 71G) on the rights of homosexual persons:

Certain basic human rights and civil liberties are due all persons. We are committed to support those rights and liberties for homosexual persons. We see a clear issue of simple justice in protecting their rightful claims. Moreover, we support efforts to stop violence and other forms of coercion against gays and lesbians.

In the polity governing the General Council on Finance and Administration, *The Book of Discipline* mandates the following (Par. 906.12):

The council shall be responsible for ensuring that no board, agency, committee, commission, or council shall give United Methodist funds to any "gay" caucus or group, or otherwise use such funds to promote the acceptance of homosexuality.

Finally, *The Book of Discipline* is very specific with regard to ordination and homosexuality. Paragraph 402.2 says that those called by God and set apart by the church for the ordained ministry are "to maintain the highest standards represented by the practice of fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness." *The Discipline* continues, "Since the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be accepted as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church."

The Discipline recognizes "that sexuality is God's good gift to all..."
persons," asserts that "homosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are individuals of sacred worth," commits to support basic human rights and civil liberties for homosexual persons, affirms "that God's grace is available to all," and commits us "to be in ministry for and with all persons." Yet, it does not allow United Methodist funds to go "to any 'gay' caucus or group, or... to promote the acceptance of homosexuality." Moreover, it prohibits "self-avowed practicing homosexuals" from being "accepted as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church."

A Christian ethic based upon the totality of the biblical witness yields a hermeneutic of justice-love. The official teachings and policies of the United Methodist Church should be examined through this interpretive lens. The justice-love hermeneutic results in the following injunction: Whatever in The Book of Discipline embodies genuine love and caring justice, that bears authority for us; whatever in the Discipline violates God's commandment to do love and justice, that must be rejected as ethical authority.

A Matter of Christian Ethics

Although scripture has frequently been employed to condemn homosexuality, the biblical approach that is commonly used in this effort lacks integrity. As Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen write in The Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life, "One cannot with integrity enter dialog with the scripture over ethical issues if the biblical warrants appealed to are narrow selections that have not been tested against the totality of the biblical witness." This is precisely the approach used by many to condemn homosexuality. Biblical texts can be used to condemn homosexuality today only by ignoring critical linguistic, historical, and contextual factors.

The Christian ethic delineated here takes into account the totality of the biblical witness. Patterned after the being and action of God, three guiding principles emerge: the goodness of created existence, the standard of God's covenant love, and the example provided by the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. These principles form the basis for a hermeneutic of justice-love. Each of these principles will be examined separately.

The Goodness of Created Existence. According to Christian ethicist Phil Wogaman, "The goodness of creation is affirmed throughout the
biblical tradition, beginning with the very first chapter of Genesis: 'And God saw everything that (God) had made, and behold, it was very good.' Many of the psalms celebrate the goodness of creation. God is the creator; therefore, the creation is good. Similarly, we are created in the image of God; we reflect the being of God.

The principle of the goodness of created existence has important implications for developing an appropriate church position with regard to homosexuality. In affirming with God that created existence is good, Christians can also affirm and celebrate the differences within the creation that reflect God's creativity. God did not create human beings to be exactly the same; each person is a unique child of God. Our sexual being is only one of the differences among us that unite us as unique creations of God.

Whether we are homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual, we are a part of God's good creation. Our entire being, including our spiritual, physical, and sexual natures, is sacred and should be respected and cherished, not denied. The principle of the goodness of created existence enables Christians to exclaim, "Isn't it marvelous how the Divine Creator gave humanity this infinitely varied and complex capacity for sexual identity! Let us thank the Divine One. Let us celebrate our own and others' orientations.

The Standard of God's Covenant Love. God's action and being are revealed in the principle of covenant love. God's covenant love is attested to by both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, the concept of covenant love arises in God's relationship with Israel, God's chosen people: God makes a covenant with them to be their God and they are to be God's people. New Testament writers proclaimed "that in Jesus Christ, God has fulfilled the covenant with the Hebrew people as it ought really to have been understood, as one 'written on the heart' and as not confined to the biological descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but offered to all who have faith." For both the Old and New Testament writers, God is a God of love, and it is a faithful love that characterizes God's relationship to us. From the totality of the biblical witness, we discern that covenant love is God's continuous orientation toward humankind.

In his book *Love and Conflict: A Covenantal Model of Christian Ethics*, Joseph Allen identifies "six characteristics of God's covenant love: God (1) binds us together as members of a covenant community, (2) affirms the worth of each covenant member, (3) extends covenant
Because God's action and being are revealed in the principle of covenant love, and because we are created in the image of God and thus capable of patterning our lives after God's action and being, the principle of covenant love is central to a biblically based Christian ethic. A closer look at each of Joseph Allen's six characteristics of God's covenant love reveals that this principle demands the full inclusion of gay men and lesbians into the life and ministry, including the ordained ministry, of the church. We will examine each characteristic in turn.

(1) "God binds us together as members of a covenant community." God's covenant is social because God's creation is social. ... We become selves (to be contrasted with mere biological beings with human genes) only in community." One of the requirements of covenant relationship is that people maintain peaceful and just relations with one another. The violence which is perpetrated towards gay men and lesbians cannot be tolerated under this principle. The United Methodist Church, by teaching that "homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching" and prohibiting the ordination of lesbians and gay men, sustains the general social prejudice and violence towards homosexuals.

(2) "God creates and affirms the worth of each covenant member." God affirms the worth of our very being. We are affirmed as ends, not merely as means. God values each person individually, irreplaceably, and equally. This is a position of affirmation for all individuals; gay men and lesbians cannot be excluded.

(3) "God extends covenant love inclusively." No boundaries exist as to the persons to whom God extends covenant love. Therefore, as Christians patterning our actions after God's action and being, we should have no boundaries or exclusions in extending covenant love. The early church battled with this principle. Paul had to convince the church at Jerusalem that the gospel should be preached to the Gentiles and they should be received into the church without circumcision. To extend covenant love inclusively, our ministries must be fully inclusive of gay men and lesbians, including their ordination.

(4) "God's covenant love seeks to meet the needs of the members of the covenant community." Because God creates and affirms the worth of each covenant member, God also seeks to meet the needs of each individual. If adhering to an ethic patterned after the action and being
of God, Christians should seek to meet the needs of each individual. Without deliberate ministries to and with gay men and lesbians, the needs of a large population remain unrecognized and unaddressed.

(5 & 6) "God's covenant love is steadfast and reconciling." God's love for humans is faithful. "Faithfulness—enduring loyalty—is a necessary expression of covenant love, even as God's love never ceases. . . . It is a commitment to the being of the other to whom God has already unalterably made commitment." This steadfast love leads to the seeking of reconciliation wherever alienation exists. With regard to issues of homosexuality, we must ask whether our love is steadfast and inclusive, or is it extended only to those who conform to what we consider the norm? Obviously, the attitude of many heterosexuals towards homosexuals creates great alienation; church policies prohibiting the ordination of homosexuals institutionalize this deep alienation. To be in accord with the principle of God's covenant love, the church must fully integrate lesbians and gay men into its life and ministry.

The Example of Jesus Christ. As Christians, the life and teachings of Jesus Christ are normative. Through his life and teachings, Jesus reveals the nature of God's being and action; he provides the example to which faithful Christians aspire. Hence, a wholistic understanding of Jesus' public ministry is central to this biblically based Christian ethic.

Three crucial elements can be highlighted. These features of Jesus' public ministry are based on his life and associations, his teachings, and his judgments. Each of these will be considered in turn.

In all of the Gospels Jesus is portrayed as a friend of the friendless. His association with the poor and outcast, with tax collectors and sinners is a critical aspect of his ministry (Mark 2:15-17; Matt. 9:10; Luke 4:18; 15:1-2; 19:1-7). He also made friends with women (Luke 8:1-3; 10:38; Matt. 27:55-56), a revolutionary fact considering that during that time women were regarded as little more than property of men.

The account of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-42) provides a beautiful example of how Jesus associated with the outcast. When the Samaritan woman came to the well to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." The Samaritan woman was surprised by Jesus' request and asked him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" In spite of a shared heritage, the Jews regarded Samaritans as a people foreign to themselves. They
observed different legal traditions regarding the cleanliness of vessels and, in general, they avoided contact with one another. Jesus broke this cultural barrier and reached out to this Jewish outcast. His actions, however, were shocking not only to the Samaritan woman but also to his disciples: “They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman . . .” (4:27). In this one account, Jesus broke Jewish traditions to surmount both ethno-religious and gender discrimination. Hence, modeled on Jesus’ actions, faithfulness requires Christians to surmount the cultural and religious barriers erected against lesbians and gay men; discrimination against those with a same-gender orientation must be overcome.

In addition to Jesus’ actions, which provide Christians with a model for breaking stereotypes and discrimination, Jesus’ teachings also set standards which Christians should strive to attain. Just as Jesus’ life built bridges instead of walls, so, too, do his teachings admonish Christians to do the same. Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a wedding banquet (Matt. 22:1–10) or a great dinner (Luke 14:15-24) to which everyone is invited—including the good and the bad, the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. God’s invitation is issued to the “least” of society. As Christians, we are judged on our ministry to the “least” among us (Matt. 25:31-46): “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (25:40). The key to the kingdom of God rests in our faithfulness to God, and our faithfulness to God depends on our love of neighbor (Luke 10:25–28). The familiar parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37) teaches that societal evaluation of a person is not important (contrast a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan); what is crucial is the way persons treat each other. The good Samaritan showed mercy and compassion. As Christians, we are to “go and do likewise.” Certainly gay men and lesbians can be considered to be in the ranks of “the least.” Actions towards gay men and lesbians that violate their personal privacy and physical safety indicate that they are considered somehow less than human. According to a 1987 survey released by the National Institute of Justice, a unit of the U.S. Justice Department, “homosexuals are probably the most frequent victims” of hate-motivated violence. Christians are called to reach out to their gay and lesbian neighbors, to stand with them, and to extend to them the compassion and mercy of Christ.

Finally, Jesus’ words of judgment are significant and instructive.
Jesus’ harshest words fall upon the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 23; Luke 11:37–53). Repeatedly, Jesus denounces them saying, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” In addition to “hypocrites,” he calls these Jewish religious leaders “blind guides,” “blind fools,” “you snakes,” “you brood of vipers.” Jesus’ judgment against the scribes and Pharisees includes the following:

They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. . . . (They) lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For (they) do not go in themselves and when others are going in, (they) stop them. . . . (They) have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. . . . (They) clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.

In addition to these judgments against them, Jesus also issues warnings about them (Mark 12:38; Matt. 16:5-12): “Beware of the scribes. . . . “Watch out, and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

So long as these statements are not viewed in an anti-Semitic light, Jesus’ judgments and warnings concerning the scribes and Pharisees contain valuable instruction for modern Christians. Legalistic attitudes and judgments of others are “heavy burdens, hard to bear” laid upon the shoulders of others. Not only does condemnation seek to lock the condemned out of the kingdom of heaven but it also prevents those who judge from going in themselves. In imposing legalistic standards and definitions of righteousness that exclude gay men and lesbians, the weightier matters of justice and mercy are neglected.

The three principles described above—the goodness of created existence, the standard of God’s covenant love, and the example provided by the life and teachings of Jesus Christ—form the foundation for a Christian ethic which is patterned after the action and being of God and grounded on the totality of the biblical witness. Based on these principles, a hermeneutic of “justice-love” emerges.

What Justice-Love Demands

The law of love mandates that all interpretations and all forms of ministry be in accord with the great commandments to love God and
to love neighbor as self. The connecting of justice and love emphasizes that genuine caring for human well-being cannot be content with a privatized, sentimentalized kind of loving. The love that is demanded is a love expressed in actions that seek justice and right-relatedness with self and others. Justice-love seeks to correct distorted relations between persons and groups and to generate relations of shared respect, shared power, and shared responsibility. The General Assembly Special Committee on Human Sexuality of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) advocates for a justice-love hermeneutic with this to say:

_We are persuaded that what is of God enhances human dignity, strengthens community, and deepens our capacity to celebrate the goodness of life and life’s Creator. God’s intention is for the full flourishing of all creation. We human beings are responsible to God for living and acting in ways that help realize, rather than frustrate, that goal... Justice-love knows full well that where there is injustice, love is always diminished. To be a faithful people means to love justice, to yearn for God’s shalom passionately, and to dream of a radically transformed world._

Does a Christian ethic based on the principles of the goodness of created existence, the standard of God’s covenant love, and the example set by Jesus Christ imply that “anything goes”? Specifically, with reference to human sexuality, does it mean that all sexual behavior is acceptable? Certainly not! However, a Christian ethic based upon these principles supplants prescribed rules governing sexual conduct. All sexual behavior is subject to the justice-love hermeneutic.

The justice-love hermeneutic condemns certain sexual relationships. Relationships that are marked by violence, abuse, threat, intimidation, manipulation, and domination are by their very nature sinful from the perspective of justice-love. Specifically, certain acts that would be condemned by this hermeneutic would include the following: incest, sexual abuse of children, battering of spouse or lover, rape, and knowingly exposing a sexual partner to any sexually transmitted disease, including HIV, the AIDS virus. Sexual relationships that are destructive to an individual’s emotional, physical, and spiritual wholeness are denounced by this principle. On
the other hand, sexual relationships that are mutual, respectful, and life-enhancing (including gay and lesbian relationships) are affirmed.

The standard of justice-love calls Christians to a far more difficult task than merely abiding by some prescribed set of rules. Justice-love necessitates the building of community—even when this involves embracing others who are different. Justice-love requires standing against institutional structures of domination and subordination—even when these structures form the very fabric of our society, and combating them can be unpopular, even dangerous. Justice-love demands respect for all relationships of equality, mutuality, and respect in which each person’s being is enhanced and nurtured—even when religious authorities and societal customs prevail against it. Justice-love requires that good news be preached to the poor, release proclaimed to the captives, and freedom given to the oppressed—even when such actions challenge conventional propriety and undermine positions of power and privilege.

Justice-love demands that the policies of the United Methodist Church be amended to affirm wholesome gay and lesbian relationships, to allow the ordination of gay men and lesbians, and to support financially gay caucuses and groups that are “insist(ing) that all persons, regardless of . . . sexual orientation, are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured.” Justice-love necessitates that these changes in official church policy be made—even when such changes will engender controversy and division within the church. Justice-love demands the full integration of gay men and lesbians into the life and ministry, including the ordained ministry, of the church.

Conclusion

The current policies and prevalent attitudes in the United Methodist Church (and in most mainstream denominations) alienate gay men and lesbians. Many lesbians and gay men feel judged by Christians and unwelcome in church. Many give up on God altogether as the result of the judgment and oppression in church and society. Gay and lesbian Christians often struggle with their relationship to the institutional church—wanting to grow spiritually, wanting community but frequently feeling hurt by the brand of community and spirituality they find there.

Although many Christians use scripture to condemn homosexuality,
a Christian ethic based on the totality of the biblical witness stands in judgment of church policies and positions that are not fully inclusive of gay men and lesbians. A biblically based Christian ethic reveals certain fundamental principles: the goodness of created existence, the standard of God's covenant love, and the example of Jesus Christ. The being and action of God are reflected in these principles. From this Christian ethic emerges a hermeneutic of justice-love.

When evaluated from a justice-love hermeneutic, central policies of the United Methodist Church regarding homosexuals are exposed as being unfaithful to the biblical witness and the gospel mandate. Faithfulness requires significant changes in the polity and positions of the United Methodist Church. These imperative changes include accepting as candidates, ordaining as ministers, and appointing "self-avowed, practicing homosexuals" who are called by God to the specialized ministries of Word, Sacrament, and order, and whose "callings are evidenced by special gifts, evidence of God's grace, and promise of usefulness" (*Discipline*, Par. 108). A common standard must be developed and applied to both heterosexual and homosexual candidates for ministry—the standard of justice-love which affirms sexual relationships that are mutual, respectful, and life-enhancing. In addition, the UMC must back up its commitment to support "rights and liberties for homosexual persons" (Par. 71G) by revoking Par. 906.12 and by providing for the financial support of groups that promote the acceptance of gay men and lesbians and of ministries that are fully inclusive of gay men and lesbians.

A coherent biblical ethic patterned after the being and action of God and its resulting justice-love hermeneutic demands that the institutional church change. It is not enough to wait, hope, and pray for these changes; our faithfulness demands that we speak out in support of the ordination of lesbians and gay men in our local churches and that we work for the just treatment of gay men and lesbians in the church and society.

Notes


3. Ibid., 27.

4. Ibid., 32.


10. Ibid., 61.

11. Ibid., 62.

12. Ibid., 66.

13. Ibid., 80.


15. Whitlock, 4.


More than a dozen years have passed since Rabbi Harold Kushner published his little book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People.* Immensely popular, it achieved best-seller status in the United States and three other countries and translation into nine other languages. In his appreciative critique in *God and Human Suffering*, John Douglas Hall attributes this popularity to two elements: first, Kushner takes seriously the reality of human suffering; and second, Kushner speaks simply but profoundly, in a style accessible to a wide audience. Burton Cooper identifies a critical third element: In taking suffering seriously, Kushner also takes seriously the modern consciousness. By modern consciousness Cooper means that worldview informed "by those philosophically powerful ideas of the physical sciences that have entered our culture and affect the basic way we picture and behave in our world."

Kushner’s book is filled with genuine insight and pastoral sensitivity born out of much experience with suffering. Praise has centered on its practical wisdom. Kushner knows the anguish and pain and doubt that people experience in the face of human suffering. He also knows the questions that are raised about life and meaning and God when such suffering seems capricious or undeserved. Most criticism of Kushner’s book has focused on its theological assumptions and simplicities. Kushner takes up the perennial question of theodicy: If God is all-benevolent and all-powerful, why do human

*Byron C. Bangert is Pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Bloomington, Indiana.*
beings suffer so? Kushner rejects classical theology’s attempts to answer this question by resorting to arguments about the Self-imposed restraints that God accepts for the sake of human freedom. Rather, he finds the traditional assumption of God’s all-powerfulness to be unwarranted. We must abandon the idea that God can do anything. We must accept the idea that God may not be able to alleviate the particular human suffering we find so undeserved.

From the perspective of this brief essay—offered less as a thorough critique than as a proposal for reformulation—Kushner’s book is neither quite as helpful in its practical wisdom nor quite as flawed in its theology as is generally supposed. The book’s theological failings are less those of conceptual inadequacy than of careless imprecision and inconsistency. The book’s chief weakness, if it is to embody practical wisdom about the actualities of life as we experience them, lies in its refusal to speak about the ambiguous but irrefutable realities of sin. That is to say, Kushner talks about “good” people as if they are unqualifiedly good. He implicitly regards them as if they are “righteous” and wholly undeserving of any affliction or misfortune. He recounts the stories of these “good” people as if there is nothing about them and the way they have lived that might in any way implicate them in their suffering. Theologically speaking, Kushner’s universe is marked by chaos and the imperfections of incompleteness, but there is nothing “fallen” about it. No one is ever held accountable for the suffering that Kushner describes.

The Question of Suffering and Its Relation to Sin

Kushner begins with the biblical question: Why do the righteous (and the innocent) suffer? Reframing the question heightens its existential urgency: Why do bad things happen to good people? Kushner knows that the question cannot finally be answered. He titles his book not “Why” but “When Bad Things Happen to Good People.” Somewhat incidentally a book about theology, it is primarily a book about coming to terms with suffering and tragedy and pain and loss. Kushner reminds us with the most eloquent of examples that our sufferings are hardly the measure of our sins. He regards attempts to assign fault or blame as misguided and counterproductive. Above all, he encourages those who suffer to move from “questions that focus on the past and on the pain—why did this happen to me?—and ask
instead the question that opens a door to the future: Now that this has happened, what shall I do about it?' (p. 137). Kushner writes:

*It is gratuitous, even cruel, to tell the person who has been hurt, whether by divorce or death or other disaster, "Maybe if you had acted differently, things would not have turned out so badly." When we say that, all we are really telling them is, "This is your fault for having chosen as you did." . . . If we want to be able to pick up the pieces of our lives and go on living, we have to get over the irrational feeling that every misfortune is our fault, the direct result of our mistakes or misbehavior. We are really not that powerful. Not everything that happens is our doing.⁴*

"Not everything that happens is our doing." How very true! But many things are. There is a complexity in our suffering that Kushner does not acknowledge. Much of our suffering is brought on by ourselves and others. Herein lies the greatest weakness of Kushner’s book: he does little to develop a conception of sin or help us understand the relationship between suffering and sin. This is a matter that well-educated people of the late twentieth century seek almost studiously to avoid. When Jesus tells the paralytic whose friends have brought him to be healed, "Your sins are forgiven," the local religious are scandalized that anyone but God would presume to forgive sins (Mark 2:3–12). We of the twentieth century are more likely to be scandalized at the suggestion that suffering may signify sins to be forgiven! But this is not an easy matter to speak about without misunderstanding.

The relationship between sin and human suffering receives brief comment by Jesus in the Gospel of Luke (13:1–5). Two incidents are recounted, one the slaughter of some worshiping Galileans by the Romans, the other the accidental death of eighteen people struck by a collapsed tower in Siloam. One of these incidents involves human action, the other a physical disaster. The Galileans are intentionally killed; the Siloam eighteen are victims of a mishap. Jesus says the same thing about both incidents: the victims were no worse sinners than those who were not so killed. That some Galileans have suffered a terrible death or that eighteen people were crushed by a falling tower tells us nothing about the measure of their sinfulness. (And thus offers the survivors no basis for assuming a superior moral or spiritual state.)
Ralph Sockman faced the difficult question of sin and suffering squarely when he began his book *The Meaning of Suffering* with the observation: "It is not possible for people to know how much of their suffering is due to sin." That means it is not possible for people to know how much of their suffering is due to their own sin; it is not possible to know how much is due to the sins of others; and it is not possible to know how much cannot be accounted for by sin at all.

As a matter of fact, we suffer in varying degrees from all sorts of sin. Most of us suffer from the way we treat our bodies. We suffer from our failures in our relationships with others. We suffer from our anxieties, our jealousies, our fears, our hate, our greed, our selfishness, our pride, our want of spiritual graces. We suffer from the heedlessness and carelessness and selfishness and cruelty of others. We suffer because of the corporate structures and patterns of society, structures of prejudice, class-consciousness, economic exploitation, racial and gender discrimination. We suffer from past mistakes and present follies, from budget deficits, polluted environments, depleted resources, wars and rumors of war. And, if we have any fellow-feeling, we suffer because others are suffering. We suffer because many are starving, many are homeless, many are oppressed and persecuted and tortured and abused. We suffer because some of our friends are dying, and some are in pain, and some are unhappy and unfulfilled. We suffer because of so many terrible things happening in our world.

Kushner's selective examples of suffering, suffering that seems obscure to human action and intention, distract us from seeing that some of our suffering is due to sin. Some of the guilt and some of the anger in our suffering is justified. Kushner rightly tries to draw us away from preoccupation with fixing blame, whether it be on ourselves or others, toward getting on with life. Truly there is no direct correspondence between human suffering and human sin. But in most of our suffering there are elements of what we have done or failed to do. All our suffering is not our fault, but seldom are we altogether innocent. In most of the suffering we witness we also find elements of what others have done and failed to do. If there is any value in a true understanding of our condition, then some recognition (and confession) of the reality of sin and its consequences in human suffering is surely needed. It is needed to help us get beyond our past and guide our future actions in hope that we will not be unwitting agents of our own and others' future suffering. It may sometimes be
needed precisely for us to find forgiveness for that in our suffering for which we are in some measure responsible. But it may even be needed in circumstances where no responsibility can be identified.

Reflecting on his experience with cancer, Arthur Frank observes, “The idea of forgiveness is one of the most perilous and important to apply to those who suffer. The peril to which all pastoral visitors should be sensitive is that of insult. I did not feel I needed to be forgiven for having cancer.” Nonetheless, Frank maintains, “forgiveness is needed” because suffering constitutes an assault on the integrity of the self. Restoration requires the individual “to confront the [existential] fault in his or her being, and to reconstruct the self out of that confrontation.” In other words, suffering is often a mystery that eludes all moral and ethical calculation, yet challenges the moral and spiritual integrity of the sufferer. It is a feature of the human condition that transcends individual culpability, yet requires religious response by the individual in order to be transcended. Much suffering comes to us from beyond ourselves, yet calls us to abandon our self-defenses in order to avail ourselves of a spiritual power much greater than ourselves. In the divine mercy, we may hope to overcome the self-fragmentation that our suffering has inflicted upon us.

**The Question of Theodicy**

A profound intellectual and spiritual difficulty remains in the experienced fact that human suffering is not an evident measure of human sin. Human suffering neither corresponds to nor is commensurate with human sin, making the world seem neither just nor fair. Here Kushner is far more helpful than his theological critics generally acknowledge, for he takes seriously what Burton Cooper calls the modern consciousness. He does not try to defend God’s honor by explaining why God allows suffering in the world. Just as everything that happens is not our doing, neither is it God’s doing. Kushner understands that the alternative to a deterministic universe, whether understood in theological or scientific and philosophical terms, is not the classical theological universe in which everything in creation except human beings must obey the laws of nature’s God. It is an indeterministic (some might prefer probabilistic) universe, in which human freedom is the most obvious but by no means only instance of activity that God is not able fully to control.
Furthermore, and contrary to classical theological arguments about Divine Providence and human freedom, this limitation in God's ability is not Self-imposed. It is not that God refuses to intervene for the sake of human freedom, but that God cannot intervene, both by virtue of who God is and by virtue of the way things are. John Douglas Hall argues against Kushner that the limitation on God is not one of ability; rather, "God's problem is that God loves!" That is why God does not run roughshod over creation, infringing upon human freedom (p. 156). Were this true, however, it would hardly be sufficient explanation for all the evil in the world. Human suffering is occasioned not only by moral evil (Romans killing Galileans) but also by what has traditionally been called natural evil (towers, or better, avalanches and mudslides, falling upon people). Hall's otherwise perceptive treatment of human suffering virtually ignores natural evil, despite his acknowledgement of its primordial existence as primeval chaos (p. 111). Kushner, despite theological conceptions that tend to be simplistic and somewhat inconsistent, excels at facing natural evil, especially as it comes in the form of illness and disease. The critical dilemma posed by natural evil is precisely that we have no one to blame for it unless we blame God. Because most of us consciously shrink from blaming God, and because we often find it easier to bear a suffering we think we deserve than one for which we have no one to blame, we tend unwittingly and to our own detriment to blame ourselves. Kushner shows us a theological way out, in which neither God nor the sufferer need be blamed.

On Accidents

Unfortunately, Kushner becomes careless when he speaks of chaos and randomness in the world (cf. p. 53), maintaining that many things happen to us for no reason at all (ch. 3). So far as actual experiences of human suffering are concerned, it is better to speak of accidents. Most of us believe that accidents do happen—unless for theological reasons we hold that there are no real accidents with God, that God determines everything, in effect picking up where cause and effect leave off and completely filling in all the gaps of what science views as indeterministic activity. One may still say, as H. Richard Niebuhr did, that "God is acting in all actions upon us." But one cannot say
that God's action is sufficiently effective, or efficacious, to determine all outcomes.

To put the matter in common sense terms: accidents are events that are unintended, unplanned, and unforeseen, but they are not uncaused. Philosophically speaking, they are events that lack intentionality, though not necessarily absolutely so. To be sure, there is an element of randomness in them, as in all events, for no event is fully comprehended by its causes. But accidents are not purely random events. For example, one is much more likely to be struck by an automobile while driving or standing on the highway than while hiking in the woods, and one is more likely to be bitten by a rattlesnake or to step in a hole and sprain an ankle while hiking in the woods than while moving down the highway.

Accidents involve some human element, but also some element of chance. Perhaps the tower of Siloam fell due to design or construction flaw, but it was chance that when it fell there were people beneath it who were crushed. It can make all the difference in human suffering and pain whether the car brakes fail while you are backing out of the driveway or when you come upon an intersection in heavy traffic, and yet that difference is a matter of accident or chance. There are reasons why accidents happen, but they do not fully account for when and where and why they happen. Kushner's way of thinking about God and suffering allows for a world in which accidents can happen. Sketchy as they are, his theological conceptions cohere with contemporary understandings of our indeterministic or probabilistic universe.

The Persisting Ambiguity of Suffering and Sin

The real moral and spiritual dilemma in all our suffering remains: "It is not possible for people to know how much of their suffering is due to sin." We must, therefore, never simply assume that one's suffering follows from some sin. But neither is it wise to suppose that one's suffering bears no moral significance. It is thus gratuitous of Kushner to speak of suffering happening to "good" people, as if no morally significant connection exists between our suffering and our own actions, including our sin.

With respect to natural evils, and with respect to accidents, the extent to which we are morally implicated in what happens to us may be extremely marginal ("I should have seen it coming"); "if only I had
checked the brake fluid"; "if we had only gone the day before"). Let us not chastise ourselves for mishaps, even tragedies, that we could hardly have foreseen, that come upon us as accidents or matters of circumstance. But let us acknowledge that there is also much suffering in which we are substantially involved.

We can hardly regard all our suffering as wholly meaningless and undeserved. Nor can we honestly say that all our suffering is unequivocally "bad." Of course, there is much suffering so terrible and final that it refutes all rational efforts toward its redemption or justification. But most of what we suffer admits of some remedy. Few of life's painful circumstances are so devoid of reason or purpose as to be without any hope of redemption. Some good may come of them. It can be gratuitous, even cruel, to say to those who suffer, "Things are really not so bad." Nevertheless, we must realize that even what seems like the most pointless pain may serve some greater purpose. The pervasive presence of evil in our world is undeniable, but it is seldom unambiguous. We are not so much confronted with bad things happening to good people as we are with not-so-good things happening to people who are not-so-bad. Nonetheless, we truly suffer because there are so many not-so-good things happening to so many not-so-bad people around us and in our world.

Finding Meaning through Our Suffering

The sources of suffering are many: natural evils, physical disasters, accidents, mistakes, the unrelieved sufferings of others, as well as all our individual and social sins. It is hardly possible to trace all the sources of our suffering. It is quite impossible to say how much of our suffering is due to sin. There is no easy, simple, or final answer to the question Why?

But that is hardly a satisfactory response to the question of our suffering. What we really want to know is What are we to do about it? What does—or can—it mean? Viewed only in isolation, apart from what precedes or follows, suffering has no meaning—it is simply bad luck. Or, viewed only as consequence, it has only the meaning of judgment, punishment, and guilt—the wages of sin; or it is the concomitant of our finitude—the sting of death. Either way, viewed apart from what is to come, all suffering is "bad." To understand the meaning of our suffering, a longer view is required.
Remember how the brothers of Joseph, jealous and angry toward him, throw him into a pit to die, then sell him into slavery. Years later Joseph rescues them and many others from widespread famine. Finally the moment comes when Joseph reveals himself to his brothers. He says, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life...So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt" (Gen. 45:4, 5, 8). Later, Joseph says to his brothers, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good" (50:20). The meaning of what happened to Joseph is not just the evil that the brothers intended and the suffering that they inflicted. For in the evil that they did God was able to purpose a good, and through the suffering that Joseph endured, God was able to accomplish that good.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Romans those familiar words, "We know that in all things God works for good" (Rom. 8:28). This hardly means that all things are good. It does mean that some good can come out of anything. Moreover, Paul says that God works for good "with those who love God, who are called according to [God’s] purpose" (Rom. 8:28). Insofar as we love God and are called according to God’s purpose, God works not only through us but together with us. We become participants with God in the redemption of all the suffering and evil in the world.

Our sufferings in and of themselves are opaque; they have no clear meaning. We hardly know to what extent they are accident or chance, to what extent the consequences of others’ sins or our own. When not-so-good things happen to not-so-bad people, we wonder, Why? But the question we really need answered is, as Kushner wisely understands, What do we do now? Where do we go from here? Our sufferings become meaningful as we give ourselves in faith and hope and love to that One whose tasks are larger and whose purposes are more enduring than our own. For in and through all our sufferings the loving and forgiving God is ever working to accomplish some ultimate good to give meaning to all our days.
Notes

2. God and Human Suffering (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 150-158.
A biblical sermon should help parishioners answer two questions: “What does this piece of the Bible say?” and “Why should we care?” This summer’s Samuel lections offer special problems and possibilities on both counts. On the exegetical side (“What does it say?”), we need to be aware that these readings are snippets of a long and tightly woven story. When we tear them out of that narrative, we leave many threads hanging. Thus, you would do well to read through the story of the monarchy’s founding, from I Samuel 1 through I Kings 2, before preaching this lectionary sequence. This will make it easier to identify connections between the lessons and the larger story. In turn, the congregation will learn about a much larger portion of the Bible than they hear in the actual lessons.

Hermeneutically (“Why should we care?”), the problem is that David’s story seldom or never presents us with neatly defined moral illustrations or theological lessons. This part of the Bible does not show us “good guys” on God’s side doing the right thing versus “bad guys” opposing God in sinful action. Instead, we find mixed motives and actions on every side. The great potential for preaching is that this
looks so very much like our own world. God's best beloved are still
sinners, while the most ungodly occasionally surprise us with deeds of
love and faith. The books of Samuel reassure us that God is at work
behind the scenes in a world with the same moral features as our own.

Each individual reading has distinctive connections and points to
make, but before we turn to a lection-by-lection discussion, let's look
at the literary context and theological agendas which affect the entire

The Books of Samuel (which were originally a single book) sit in
the middle of a large composition which scholars call the
"Deuteronomistic History," since it shows how the principles of
Deuteronomy (which serves as a kind of preface or introduction to the
narrative) play themselves out in Israel's subsequent history. It
includes the books from Joshua through 2 Kings, except for Ruth. The
final version probably comes from just after the fall of Jerusalem in
587 (since 2 Kings ends with the Judean king a prisoner in Babylon),
but it includes large chunks of older narrative.

What are the principles which this history illustrates? Deuteronomy
lays them out quite explicitly, casting them as Moses' final sermon to
a people who stand on the border of the Promised Land. Moses
stresses that this people have one God and one alone, the LORD
(Yahweh), whom they are to love with all their being (Deut. 6:4-5).
This love must pervade all their lives (Deut. 6:6-9), but its official
expression in sacrificial worship shall be confined to one single place
which God will choose (Deut. 12:5).

We need to take special note of this feature, since we ourselves
believe that God can be worshipped anywhere. The idea that God
wants one and only one altar does not seem to have been obvious even
to the Israelites—the Bible mentions many places of worship. Even
the great temple builder, Solomon, makes his dream request for
wisdom not in Jerusalem at the ark but at a "high place" in Gibeon (1
Kings 3:3-15). So why does Deuteronomy lay such stress on a single
center? Perhaps because religious and political unity were so difficult
for the Israelites to achieve. A single national temple helped them
consolidate on both counts.

When Jesus cites Deut. 6:4-5 (Mark 12:29-30) as the greatest
commandment he pairs it with the commandment from Leviticus to
love one's neighbor (Mark 12:31=Lev. 19:18, 33). This connection
between faith and ethics is equally strong in Deuteronomy, which
assumes that love for God will express itself in personal morality and
social justice. Deuteronomy displays a painful awareness that rich, powerful people quickly become faithless towards God and oppressive towards their neighbors. Thus, the book stresses that even the king which God will allow the people (Deut. 17:14–15) must observe God’s Torah (law or teaching, Deut. 17:18–20), obeying the commandments of love for God and neighbor.

Deuteronomy denies that this teaching is inherently impossible to obey. On the contrary, the book asserts, the word is present in the very hearts of the people so that they can do it (30:11–14). If they respond in faithful obedience, the book promises, God will bless them with prosperity. If they turn away, a curse will descend (30:15–20). The people may not blithely assume that the land they are about to possess will remain theirs. Their tenure depends upon their obedience to God.

These, then, are the key themes of Deuteronomy: (1) one God to be loved with the whole self and worshipped in one place; (2) love of neighbor in personal morality and social justice; and (3) the people’s determination of their own fate (blessing or curse) by their obedience to God’s will. Now, how do these themes play out in the history?

It gets off to a good start in the Book of Joshua. God fulfills the divine side of the bargain by bringing Israel into the land. But Judges shows us a disastrous downward spiral as—over and over—the people disobey and are then punished by foreign oppressors. When they cry out, a divinely appointed deliverer (“judge”) saves them, but by the final chapters of Judges disunited tribes begin to make war on each other. “In those days,” the book concludes (Judg. 21:25), “there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (NRSV).

Already at war with one another, the Israelite tribes make easy prey for attackers such as the Philistines. They need a king for protection from outside enemies and internal squabbling. Is this God’s will? When the people propose it, both Samuel and God regard it as ungrateful (1 Sam. 8:6–9). Yet Samuel declares Saul God’s designated deliverer (1 Sam. 9:16–17; 10:1). Such ambivalence about kingship persists throughout the history. Kings can be channels for divine protection and justice—but too often they act like Pharaoh, thumbing their noses at the Lord and oppressing the Israelites.

What is the difference between a king and a judge? Both, according to the biblical account, are divinely chosen. But the judge leads a volunteer militia, while a king can conscript troops and tax the people for money to hire mercenaries. A judge’s child may or may not
succeed to the parent’s role, but kings routinely bequeath power to their own offspring. In short, a king is more powerful, more expensive, and more permanent than a judge.

Saul doesn’t quite make the grade. The writers of the history attribute this to his disobedience, per the blessing/curse formula of Deuteronomy, but it is also true that he is asked to do a king’s job without the taxation and conscription powers of a normal king. At any rate, Saul falls; and the throne passes to a charismatic, talented, popular young upstart named David. David subdues the surrounding nations and establishes a new capital for Israel in Jerusalem, near the boundary between the northern and southern tribes—a capital that comes to be understood as the promised place chosen by Yahweh for worship. But David’s personal problems endanger his throne within his own lifetime. His sons begin murdering one another. The winner of the power struggle, Solomon, builds the temple but also commits all the oppressions Samuel had warned the people about. When Solomon dies, the northern tribes revolt and form a separate kingdom of their own. The Books of Kings trace a continuing decline in both kingdoms (a number of prophetic books tell the same story) as greed and powerlust shoulder aside the obligations of faithfulness to God and God’s values.

The history which began around 1200 BCE with entry into the land and saw David’s anointment around 1000 BCE slides precipitously downhill to the fall of the Northern Kingdom (Israel) in 721 BCE and finally Jerusalem’s own fall in 587 BCE. It ends with an implicit question: will the fallen people return to their LORD, that God may circumcise their hearts and reactivate the blessing (Deut. 30:1–10)?

The David portion of this story incorporates four themes of continuing relevance for Christians. First, it is a meditation on power. The narrative assumes that political and military power are necessary parts of human social life and can be used for good, yet it is profoundly realistic in its assessment of how easily, even inevitably, they will be misused. This ties intimately to the second theme, reflection on human character. David’s story is one of mixed motives, of actions which might be attributed to either selfless faith or shrewd, tightly calculated self-interest. It refuses to resolve cleanly in either direction.

The complexity of the narrative’s reflections on power and human character is matched by the complexity in its treatment of the third theme, providence. In this part of the biblical story, God works not
through flashy miracles but through the gritty realities of politics and personal life. The writers give mixed messages about God's role in particular details of these events. On the one hand, they seem to assume that whatever happens—be it an evil spirit possessing Saul or a baby's death—must be attributed to God's will (1 Sam. 16:14; 2 Sam. 12:15). Yet they also give clear indication that some human actions defy God's wishes (2 Sam. 11:27).

God's guidance can be seen in the muddy history that results, but never so decisively and unambiguously as we might wish. The possibility represented by the nation and its kings collides with a bitterly disappointing human performance. It reconfigures in hope that someday a Davidic king will arise who truly carries through the divine program. This is the fourth theme, the promise to David that we declare fulfilled in a new and different kind of king a thousand years later, Jesus the Christ.

Many interpreters have spoken of the David stories as "eyewitness accounts," the most intimately detailed and accurate history-writing in the entire Bible. Others feel that these realistic-sounding narratives have been heavily distorted by the propaganda concerns of their own and subsequent times. Whatever one's assessment of their historicity, they present a rich opportunity for human-interest preaching. We need to see David and the characters around him with clear-eyed love: a love which affirms their humanity in both its brokenness and its nobility, while holding tight to God's own love for them. A God who loves and works through David can embrace our own lives as well.

July 10: David Brings the Ark to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19)

Second Samuel 6 offers two intriguing foci for preaching: Uzzah's death and David's quarrel with Michal. The lectionary omits both of them. Uzzah's absence (vv. 6-12a) is particularly problematic, since any parishioner who follows the reading in a printed Bible will notice Uzzah's death and wonder why you have ignored it. Read the whole chapter as you prepare and restore at least some of the missing material to the service's scripture lesson. For while David's actions are certainly important, we need Uzzah, Michal, or both to get perspective on what the king is up to.

This is a key moment in the Deuteronomistic history: establishment
of David’s new capital, Jerusalem, as a religious center—the promised spot where the LORD will make his name dwell. The ark represents Israel’s traditions. It contains the tablets of the Ten Commandments and a sample of manna as material reminders of the people’s history with God. David and Jerusalem represent a new order, one with tremendous promise and equally obvious dangers. When David brings the ark into Jerusalem, the new order claims the sanction of the old. Favorably interpreted, David’s action shows his respect for the old tribal traditions. Suspiciously interpreted, it is cooptation of the old traditions to support a radically different program. If we take the whole chapter into account, we cannot rest cleanly with either of these interpretations. Truth lies somewhere in the middle.

We last saw the ark in 1 Sam. 4:1–7:2 (which you should now read). These chapters remind us that the old order was not all faith and obedience. By Samuel’s time, even the priests who cared for the ark were corrupt. And so Israel lost the ark—or, perhaps, it chose to leave Israel. Its adventures in 1 Sam. 5–6 show that it had not lost its power. When it returned, the uneasy Israelites simply left it “in retirement” for twenty years.

Placing this spiritually and physically powerful object in Jerusalem will powerfully legitimize David’s reign. No wonder he rejoices as he escorts it in a great military parade (“chosen men,” 6:1). Then something goes wrong. The oxen stumble. A priestly escort reaches out to keep the ark from falling—and dies on the spot.

Why? At first glance this looks like mana, sacred power which is not conscious but simply saturates an object, delivering a fatal jolt to anyone who touches it. We find a similar idea in Exod. 19:21–24. There God does not want to “break out” (same word as our story) against the people—that is why God warns them!—but it seems that God’s power will devastate trespassers nonetheless.

Others rationalize the incident, arguing that Uzzah violated protocol: the ark was supposed to be carried on poles and not touched (Num. 4:5–6, 15). By this interpretation God punishes Uzzah because Uzzah doesn’t obey the rules. I am uneasy with this: first because I believe the rules were actually written much later, and second because God didn’t mind having the ark on a cart back in 1 Samuel 6. However, canonically speaking, it is a workable explanation.

Your congregation will most likely imagine the scene in terms of the movie Raiders of the Lost Ark—and this may be fairly close to the biblical understanding. In the movie, like the Bible, the ark is an
object of dangerous power. Its possessors believe they can manipulate it. Instead, it destroys them. It is not clear whether this happens because they violate protocol or because the ark refuses to be manipulated. The prisoners (Indiana Jones and his companion) are spared. The ark, like the God it represented, had a certain fondness for underdogs—or was it just that they had covered their eyes?

(If you do mention the movie in a sermon, be prepared for questions about the biblical fate of the ark. There are various legends about the matter, but the Bible itself does not tell us what happened to it.)

David, like the Nazis in the movie, treats the ark as a tool for his own use. Uzzah’s death shows him otherwise. At first he is angry (v. 8), as kings tend to be when their purposes are thwarted. Then he is, quite reasonably, afraid (v. 9). He abandons his plan and leaves the ark with Obed-edom.

But the ark is not merely—perhaps not even primarily—an object of raging destruction. It brings blessing (health, wealth, and good fortune) to Obed-edom and his family. Hearing that, David returns to his original plan—but with considerably more caution. He has learned that the ark of God must be respected, not simply manipulated. This time, he succeeds in installing it in the city.

What troubles us about this line of explanation is the unfairness. Why should Uzzah die when the real offense lies in David’s arrogance? We might indict Uzzah as an accomplice, put his death on his own head because he did not set David straight about proper treatment of the ark. But a simpler explanation lies in the nature of sin—especially sins of power. The ugly truth, biblically and in our own world, is that such sins are not merely a problem for the sinner’s relationship to God. They have consequences in this world as well—consequences which are more often than not suffered by others. That is why we so urgently need for people with power to use it responsibly. That is why we pray, “Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.”

The theme for an Uzzah sermon might then be this: God does not live in a box to be carted about for the purposes of selfish and powerful people. Uzzah’s death shows the danger of trying to manipulate God. It also shows how we are bound together, so that hubris (arrogance against God) on one person’s part can bring death and suffering on others as well. Yet even as God resists manipulation, we find God working in unexpected places for peace and blessing.

One may also approach this chapter with an eye to David’s
relationship with his wife Michal. This daughter of Saul had long ago fallen passionately in love with David (1 Sam. 18:20). He presented an extravagant bride-gift for her but whether he loved her or merely wanted to be the king's son-in-law remains unclear (1 Sam. 18:27). Shortly thereafter, the young wife betrays her father to save her husband's life (1 Sam. 19:11-17).

David departs for long years, during which Michal is married off to someone else (1 Sam. 25:44). Her father dies. We next hear of her when David demands her return as proof of the general Abner's goodwill. Abner makes good on the request, and Michal is returned to David. We get only one glimpse, but an unforgettable one, of her second husband Paltiel weeping as he follows her (2 Sam. 3:12-16).

After the present passage, the Hebrew text mentions Michal one more time, in 2 Sam. 21:8—but the man named in connection with her is Adriel, her sister Merab's husband. Thus, most English versions change Michal's name in this verse to Merab. But possibly the error is in the husband's name, not the wife's—in which case Michal's relationship with David comes to a truly bloodcurdling end as he kills all her sons in a public sacrifice. (It is not clear whether 2 Sam. 6:23 means that Michal never bore any children, or that she bore no more children from that day forward. Retaining her name in 21:8 obviously requires the second interpretation.)

In the present chapter, Saul's daughter watches David cavorting and despises him. Interpreters, partisan on David's behalf, tend to dismiss her response as jealous caviling. But she has a point. Uzzah's death alerted us to problems in David's attitude toward the ark. We now notice that David's second parade, more frenetic than the first, bears troubling resemblances to a Canaanite fertility festival. For the king to act as priest (offering sacrifices, v. 13) is a Canaanite custom, not an Israelite one (this is one of the sins for which Saul was deposed—1 Sam. 13:8-14). Michal's words suggest that David's dance has sexual overtones; he does not dispute this (6:20, 22). "Raisin cakes" (v. 19) appear elsewhere only in the Chronicles parallel (1 Chron. 16:3), in the Song of Solomon as a food of lovemaking (2:5), and in Hosea as a food associated with the worship of other gods (3:1). Even the motif of the woman looking out the window has Canaanite connections, but this particular woman has no desire to play the goddess in a sacred marriage.

Is she right or wrong in her assessment of David? Most interpreters have taken David's brash response at face value, praising his piety and
explaining Michal’s subsequent barrenness as God’s punishment for her wrong attitude. But the Bible does not say that God prevented her from having children, although the Hebrew language is quite capable of expressing such a thought (e.g. Gen. 20:18). In this Testament at least, God does not make people pregnant unless they have intercourse. Michal might have had no children because David henceforth avoided her—or because she locked her door against him. Even if this is a divine punishment, it punishes David as surely as Michal. A child of this union would have united the old Saul allegiances with the new David allegiances even more effectively than the ark’s presence in Jerusalem. David succeeds in bringing up the ark, but he is denied the heir who would have had clearest right to the throne.

What might we say, then, in a sermon focused on Michal? We would be reminded that the transition to kingship in Israel was a difficult process, full of personal pain even for the families that seemed to benefit most directly. We would notice that David had to create his own precedents. There was no Israelite tradition for how to be a successful king (Saul was not successful). For lack of such tradition David looks to Canaanite models, and this brings him, in his hour of seeming triumph, to a tragic break with the old order’s closest and most attractive representative. We want to see David as a true and pure saint. We want this shepherd boy to remain God’s darling (the lectionary censors the story’s boundaries to achieve this). But the full story brings an unwelcome reminder that only God is truly good. All people—even God’s chosen one, David—fall short of the mark.

That ancient history has clear implications for our own day. One parallel lies in the question of who speaks for God. Many powers claim to be God’s agents in the ordering of our society, and in fact they may be speaking God’s truth. But this story reminds us that even leaders designated by God make mistakes. Self-interest creeps in under the mask of piety; the ways of the world prove too tempting to resist. David’s argument with Michal reminds us that in arguments over God’s will, both parties may speak truth, and both parties may suffer from distorted vision.

Alternatively one might talk about the nature of change itself: from Israelite times through the present day, faithful people have had to accommodate to new times and new needs with new ways. Something is always gained, and something is always lost—but history goes forward.
Whether we focus on the character of those who claim to speak for God, or whether we look at change itself, the bottom line is the same. The text’s word of hope: Even flawed, sinful persons can carry forward God’s intentions. Its word of caution: The fact that someone carries forward God’s intentions does not make all their actions right. God alone deserves our trust and worship.

July 17: Your Throne Shall Be Established Forever (2 Samuel 7:1-14a)

With ancient (ark) and new (Jerusalem) traditions joined, God makes an extraordinary promise: God adopts David’s family (“house”) in perpetuity. The lectionary cut here is simply dishonest: the biblical unit extends through verse 17 and should be read accordingly. To stop at 14a leaves the impression that this is a straightforward prediction of Jesus. But the verse goes on to say, “When he commits iniquity . . .” What are we to make of that? Here is a golden opportunity to teach congregations about the richness of biblical prophecy. Without denying the relevance of these words for Christianity, we may also insist on their meaning for their own time. This ancient meaning gives depth and content to the later application of the words to Christ.

The promise itself presents no great riddles. Grateful for the peace and prosperity God has granted and eager to supply God with all the trappings of a national patron, the king thinks, “I’ll build a house for God’s ark.” God replies, via the prophet Nathan, “You won’t build a house for me. I’ll build a house for you.” (In the Hebrew Bible everyone—even God—loves puns.)

Possibly God suspects a touch of manipulation in David’s offer, for the reply begins with a reminder that God has led the people quite effectively for some centuries now and that David’s own position is due to the work of a God who does not live in a house. But then the chiding note gives way to a full-fledged promise of support for David and his dynasty: “Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.” Not David, but one of his offspring (Solomon, to a first approximation) will build the house for God’s name (note the echo of Deuteronomy). God is realistic about expectations: God knows that kings go astray, so in verse 14 God reserves the right to discipline the king. But the bottom line will be steadfast love (v. 15).
Verse 10 makes a key point about all this, and we must be careful not to pass over it too quickly. The promise to David is not merely for David's sake but belongs to God's larger care for the people. They have come into the land, but hitherto their hold has not been secure. God has raised up leaders (judges) for them, yet again and again violence has afflicted them. For the people, a king represents security and peace: protection from external enemies and adjudication of their internal conflicts. Americans easily forget this, since our own tradition portrays kings as an oppression to be rebelled against. Thinking about the violence suffered for lack of a strong central government in places like Somalia or former Soviet territories may make it easier for us to appreciate the positive side of a stable monarchy.

In Samuel, David responds with a prayer glorifying God. He then proceeds (ch. 8) to accomplish the promised rest for the people by subduing the nations round about, as well as administering justice and equity to his own people (8:15).

We should take seriously the notion that God wants people to benefit from security and just government in their earthly lives, while also hearing the warning note: human rulers may be expected to commit iniquity. By the time the Deuteronomistic history was finally assembled, this latter fact had become quite clear to the Israelites, and they saw that God's promise to David's line was no blanket guarantee for national survival. What the promise did (and does) provide was/is hope that God's steadfast love, rather than God's discipline, will have the final word (v. 15).

We proclaim that God has raised up one of David's offspring in a way quite beyond what this passage envisages. Yet we continue to live in a world plagued by violence, insecurity, and abused power. For us, as for those ancient Israelites, the pledge to David provides hope that violence and iniquity will not have the final word. In the interim, its portrayal of a ruler's responsibility provides a goal for worldly users of power and a standard by which to assess them.

July 24: Sexual Harassment and Murder (2 Samuel 11:1–15)

As we noted in the general overview, Deuteronomy calls for both personal morality and social justice. The king stands under these demands as surely as any of his subjects. Our own preoccupation with sexual sin inclines us to think of 2 Samuel 11 as a story about personal
immorality. Certainly it involves this: David commits adultery, and nowhere does the Bible look favorably on such activity. But David also uses his royal position to commit murder (note that 2 Sam. 12:9 holds David personally responsible for the death). We must not miss the fact that this is, like other stories about David, a tale about the exercise of power.

Our clue comes in the very first line. It is "the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle." Now, it happens to be historically true that spring was the season for campaigns, but we need to ask another question: why does the writer mention it just here? Well, what do kings do in the spring? Go to battle. Where is David? Remaining (the Hebrew says "sitting"!) in Jerusalem, although his general, Joab, and his servants and "all Israel" (a phrase often used to designate the army) are away fighting the Ammonites. What does this say about David's kingship? Right. This will be the story of a king who does not act as a king should act.

As he strolls he sees a woman who is "very beautiful." The Bible seldom tells us what people look like. A comment on someone's beauty often signals trouble to follow (e.g. Gen. 39:6; 2 Sam. 13:1; 14:25). Controversy rages over whether Bathsheba led David on. "What was she doing up on that roof?" skeptics ask. "What was he doing staring at her?" others reply. The characterization of Bathsheba in 1 Kings 1–2 suggests someone who in younger days might well have resorted to seduction, yet biblical characters do change over time, and the description of her mourning and eventual marriage to David in 2 Sam. 11:26–27 gives the impression that the initiative was David's. The bottom line is this: The story as given in Samuel (Chronicles omits it entirely) does not give enough information to determine Bathsheba's attitude, because her attitude does not matter. It is wrong for David to lie with her whether or not she is willing. An alluring glance from a woman docs not relieve a man of his own moral responsibility. Whether or not Bathsheba invited trouble (and I am inclined to believe she did not), it is David's job to leave his loyal officer's wife alone. Instead, he takes advantage of his royal position to conduct an affair.

One sin leads to another, and another. David summons Uriah, desperately hoping the pregnancy can be attributed to a husband's visit home. (We are told in v. 4 that Bathsheba was "purifying herself from her uncleanness," which suggests a ritual bath a week after cessation of her menstrual period. This tells us both that she was not pregnant
when Uriah left and that she was quite likely to get pregnant when she lay with David.) Uriah—whether because he is a paragon of virtue or because he suspects what has happened and refuses to aid the cover-up—will not go home to lie with his wife. (His adherence to the customs of Israelite warfare is especially noteworthy since he is not Israelite but Hittite!) Frustrated, David sends him back to Joab with fatal orders in his hand.

The assigned lection ends here, but you may wish to go on to Joab's response in vv. 16–21. General Joab is a hardened realist who tends to take on David's dirty work (e.g. 2 Sam. 3:20–30). But even he has no stomach for betraying an innocent man. His instructions to the messenger (vv. 19–21) give the distinct impression that Joab suspects what has happened and does not approve. The reference to Abimelech stings at two points. It refers to an abortive Israelite flirtation with kingship which resulted in nothing but violence and betrayal (Judg. 9). Furthermore, as Joab pointedly mentions, Abimelech was finally brought down by a woman.

This is not a story about God's faithfulness. This is a story about human perfidy. Many people, including some seminary students, know David only as the shepherd boy who killed Goliath and later as the sweet harper of Israel. They have never attended to this ugly story of adultery and murder. But we need to balance our picture of David, to understand that even the great saints of the Bible were, like ourselves, sinners. The human race does not divide into neat categories of "good" and "bad" people. To be beloved of God does not guarantee virtue. Even God's chosen must beware the seductions of power. And once again we see that when power's seductions are not resisted, it is often others who suffer.

**July 31: Because He Had No Pity (2 Samuel 11:26–12:13a)**

Nathan's confrontation with David concludes chapter 11's tale of adultery and murder and sets a frame for the remainder of David's story. "He shall restore the lamb fourfold," declares David when he hears Nathan's parable. He declares his own doom, for by the time he dies four of his own sons (the baby by Bathsheba, Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah) have perished. God's forgiveness does not erase the consequences of David's action. Yet the story also has aspects of hope,
for God does forgive, and Bathsheba subsequently gives birth to the child promised in 2 Sam. 7:12–15.

The lectionary picks up last week’s story at the end of chapter 11. The biblical writer pointedly refers to Bathsheba as “Uriah’s wife” and Uriah as “her husband.” We knew already that David’s actions were beyond the bounds of acceptable behavior, but our narrator nails down the point with one terse comment in 11:27: “The thing that David had done displeased the LORD.”

The prophet Nathan comes to David, but this time he does not bear words of love and promise. Neither does he confront the king directly. Instead he appeals to the king as arbiter of justice (recall that this is one of the duties of the king). Nathan presents what looks like a case for decision. The parable is not a precise allegory for the situation at hand (David’s situation involves no wayfarer, and it is Uriah, not Bathsheba, who dies), but it converges at one essential point. Both David and the rich man of the parable have abundant wealth and power, a surfeit of the blessings of life. Instead of enjoying what is their own, they grasp for more, seizing it from another who has far less.

David’s response warns us once more against easy generalizations about good people and bad people. By now your congregation has quite likely abandoned the Sunday school image of “David the innocent and faithful” in favor of an equally simplistic “David the corrupt, heartless sinner.” But David’s sense of right and wrong has not been destroyed. He responds in outrage to the story, “As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing and...” (the final phrase bears repeating several times) “... because he had no pity.” David recognizes that doing the right thing is a matter not only of law but of compassion.

Now Nathan drives the point home. “You are the man!” Nathan could have stopped here, but he (or the Deuteronomistic theologians speaking on his behalf) cannot resist the opportunity for a lecture. God pointedly recalls the divine generosity which placed David in his present position, with special reference to the abundance of wives a king enjoys. (This is the only place where we hear that David took Saul’s wives. Is Ahinoam in 2 Sam. 3:2 the same woman as Ahinoam in 1 Sam. 14:50? We need to remember that marriage was used to seal both international and internal alliances; this is why kings tended to have so many wives.) God’s speech stresses David’s ungratefulness,
greed, and abuse of power, not simply his sexual misconduct. The predicted punishments have a tit-for-tat character: David will be treated as he has treated his neighbor. He struck down Uriah; therefore, members of his own house will be struck down. He took someone else’s wife; therefore, his own wives will be violated (a prediction fulfilled in 2 Sam. 16:22).

To all this, David replies in a single line: “I have sinned against the LORD.” He does not make excuses as Adam, Eve, and Saul did (Gen. 3:12–13; 1 Sam. 13:11–2; 15:15). Perhaps this is our clue to David’s greatness: not that he never sinned but that he was willing to admit his sins.

Although the assigned reading ends with David’s confession, any congregant with an open Bible will notice that the paragraph continues for another two-and-a-half verses, in which Nathan declares that although David’s sin is “put away,” Bathsheba’s child will die. This needs to be dealt with. Why should the child die for David’s sin? Why, for that matter, should David’s wives be subject to taking (12:11), as if they had not already suffered enough from him?

Biblical writers do tend to treat a man’s wives and children as extensions of the man himself. They seem to regard smiting a man’s child as little different than cutting off his hand. They do not seem to have regarded children as independent persons in the way we do. This is one explanation for the seeming unfairness of the baby’s death.

But we should also notice that the Samuel writers seem to use God as an all-purpose explanation for events. This tendency shows clearly in 2 Sam. 24:1, which cites God’s anger as the cause of a census for which God then punishes David (24:12–13). The Chronicles parallel (1 Chron. 21:1) makes Satan, not the LORD, the cause of this census! If the same action can be assigned to both the LORD and Satan, we need to think twice about how we understand the Samuel books’ attribution of events to the LORD. Perhaps the child simply died (infant mortality was very high in those days), and the writer worked backward from that fact to the conclusion that the LORD did it as punishment.

Both of these explanations may be true, but neither is very satisfying. The best response to questions about the baby’s fate—or David’s wives’ fate—may be the one given in Uzzah’s case: we may not like it, but this is an accurate depiction of the reality we experience. People do suffer for other people’s sins and errors. Fetal alcohol syndrome, highway fatalities, and drive-by shootings show that the dynamic continues in our own world. It isn’t fair. But the
alternative would be a world in which we had no genuine effect upon, and connection with, one another. That would not be right, either.

The clear import of Nathan's words in v. 13b is that God forgives David. Yet the baby will die. What does forgiveness mean then? Not that the consequences of our actions are erased: we know that from our own experience as forgiven sinners. We, and those around us, must still deal with the messes we have made. What forgiveness does seem to do is stop the downward spiral. In chapter 11 David dug himself in deeper and deeper. In chapter 12 he breaks free. He must still suffer the consequences of his actions as the baby dies in 12:15b–23. But the relationship with Bathsheba can now become healthy—12:24 refers to her for the first time not as Uriah's wife but as David's. He consoles her, and she bears another child: Solomon, beloved of the Lord. The final assurance of healing comes in 12:26–31, where David returns to a king's proper business of ensuring his people's security. No longer do we see the trouble-fraught picture of a king in Jerusalem while his army bivouacs in the countryside (11:1). This time when David comes home he brings his people with him (12:31).

Harsh as it is, this picture of a forgiven sinner dealing with consequences is good news. It will strike with special sharpness on those members of a congregation who are or have been involved in extramarital affairs (statistics suggest this will be a significant percentage). It recognizes what they already know: repentance and forgiveness will not magically make everything right. Forces have been set in motion which must now be dealt with. Yet it offers the hope that pain is not the final word. Repentance and divine forgiveness allow a new direction, a path upward to healing. God does not abide sin—but God stands ever ready to help us rebuild.

**August 7: Absalom, My Son, My Son (2 Samuel 18:5–9, 15, 31–33)**

For all the deep human interest of our other Samuel lections, each also has a familiar place in salvation history. In addition, chapters 6, 7, 11, and 12 give us explicit reports of God's actions, words, and feelings. Today's story moves in a different direction. It is a story of endings, not beginnings. We trace not the positive line of David's lineage but a branch cut off. We see deep human suffering, but where is God?

The narrative pivots on David's relationship with his handsome son Absalom. Their conflict reaches back to chapter 13, where David's
oldest son Amnon rapes Absalom’s sister Tamar. David takes no action, so Absalom himself kills Amnon, then flees to a neighboring kingdom. Joab persuades David to summon Absalom home (2 Sam. 15), but relations between father and son remain strained. Absalom involves himself with the administration of justice and endears himself to the people (15:2–6, perhaps hinting that David was remiss in this regard?). Finally, from the ancient capitol of Hebron, he initiates a coup d’état (15:7–12).

David abandons Jerusalem, and both sides engage in an intricate game of intrigue (15:13–17:29). Finally, in chapter 18, David prepares for battle. With the mixed mind he has always shown toward Absalom, he gives strict orders not to harm the prince. A fierce battle ensues. At last Absalom is trapped in the jungle-like vegetation of the upper Jordan valley. (Tradition says he was caught by his hair. The Bible does not actually say this, but 2 Sam. 14:25–26 seems to foreshadow such an outcome.)

His captors are reluctant to strike Absalom, but after several verses of argument (which the assigned lection omits) Joab’s armor-bearers close in (18:15). Further wrangling ensues over who shall carry the news (the lesson skips over this as well). Finally David learns of his son’s fate (2 Sam. 18:31–33). To the Ethiopian soldier who brings the message, it seems joyous news: “Good tidings for my lord the king!” But David wants to know only one thing: “Is it well with the young man Absalom?” When he hears that his son is dead, he attempts to keep his composure until he can reach a private place. But on the way, he breaks down, and his words ring out fresh as though three thousand years had never passed: “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!”

The story energetically protests David’s innocence—so energetically that it sounds like propaganda, issued against rumors that the king too hastily executed his popular heir. Perhaps it was originally composed for such a purpose, but that is stale politics now. For our day, the most important point is a simple one: biblical history was enacted not by pawns on a chessboard but by real people immersed in the flesh-and-blood relationships of real human life, suffering all the joy and grief appertaining thereunto. As in previous weeks, the point comes through more clearly if we reach beyond the lection’s limits. As it stands, we see simply the pathetic grief of a bereaved father. But there is another side, hinted at already by the messengers who attribute this victory to the Lord (18:28, 31). Painful as it is, this death results from the working out of David’s God-given
rulership. (The idea that God's realm can set parents against children is not new with the Gospels.) Miserable as he may be, David cannot afford to lose himself in grief. Crusty old Joab reminds him gruffly of his duties (19:1-7): “You have covered with shame the faces of all your officers who have saved your life today. . . . I perceive that if Absalom were alive and all of us were dead today, then you would be pleased. So go out at once and speak kindly to your servants; for I swear by the Lord, if you do not go, not a man will stay with you this night.” Heavy with grief, David nonetheless goes on with his life, as we all must.

For More Help

Many books have explored the significance of these readings from Second Samuel. The ones listed below provide good starting points for further research.

Alter, Robert. The Art of Biblical Narrative. New York: Basic Books, 1981. While not focused specifically on the David stories (it does discuss Michal), this book provides invaluable help in following the nuances of biblical narratives. Reading it is likely to improve your biblical understanding and preaching across the board.


Sternberg, Meir. The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading. Indiana Literary Biblical Series. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1985. Don’t let the title put you off; the book’s scripture index will point you to several fascinating discussions of David stories. Sternberg provides excellent commentary on the verse-by-verse building of suspense and perceptive insights into what the Bible does and does not tell us.
Quarterly Review is a publication of The United Methodist Publishing House and the United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry.