



Will Idolaters, Sodomizers, or the Greedy Inherit the Kingdom of God?

*A Pastoral Exposition of 1 Cor 6:9-10**

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“Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.” (1 Cor 6:9-11; RSV, 1946 edition)

We face a test in the household of faith in the current challenge to the church’s stand on the ordination of practicing gays and lesbians. The level of passion is high. Last August within ten days, I was confronted by two groups, and confronted is the right word. First, one Bible study group demanded to know why the church was pampering the homosexuals when 1 Corinthians 6:9 says so clearly that homosexuals will not inherit the kingdom of God. These were serious people, sincerely concerned that the church must hold high moral standards, angry at what they perceived to be indifference to God’s righteousness in a liberal church. And what was the seminary doing about it?

Just a few days later, I met with the “Committee for Ministry with and among Gay and Lesbian Persons” from the synods of the metropolitan Twin Cities. They were equally intense, but for exactly the opposite reason. They wanted to protest the discriminatory standards of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and

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their homophobic insistence on celibacy for the unmarried. These were also serious people, sincerely concerned that a church which gave no sanction like marriage for same-sex committed intimacy had no business repressing the sexual expression of gays and lesbians. They were angry at what they perceived to be an injustice of a conservative church and seminary. And what was the seminary going to do about it?

The conservatives defend high moral standards, and the liberals call for justice. And all of us advocate our sense of righteousness and fairness, often with more zeal than understanding. And we expect to be vindicated in our views by God, authorized by the gospel, and backed up by the seminary. “If not,” as many from both camps tell me in their letters, “we will withhold our

support.”

And now a local congregation has ordained two of our graduates, neither of whom was certified for ordination in the ELCA, challenging the standards of the church. And what is the seminary going to do?

In one sense, nothing is required of the seminary. This is a matter of church discipline, and the bishops and Division for Ministry carry this responsibility. We are a seminary of the ELCA, and we will support the standards and discipline of the church unless the gospel or conscience requires protest. If this were just an ecclesiastical storm, a tempest about discipline, we could ride it out quietly at the seminary.

But these are our students, your children. Our church’s witness to God’s justice and mercy, God’s law and gospel, is at stake.

The seminary has a teaching office which is neither directly legislative nor juridical. But our church has committed itself to the authority of the Word of God in matters of faith and life and called its teachers to help discern God’s commands and promises. Thus when these are the questions, publicly stated, awaiting adjudication, the seminary and its faculty step to the stand. Others are also on call as witnesses in such proceedings, especially all those ordained to the ministry of proclaiming God’s Word and administering the sacraments.

When the questions are as complex as those we face currently, we know that we will hear angry accusations. Those who seem so confident of their righteousness in these matters are often fearful of their own secrets or protective of others. Nobody is neutral about sex, and everyone has a history. The church has never bought the Playboy philosophy that as long as nobody gets hurt, copulation is just fun, and sex is merely a private matter.

Sexuality is a gift. Amen. We were created male and female for the joy of relationships. Amen, and hallelujah! Loving intimacy and sexuality take as many forms as there are appropriate relationships. There is room in God’s world for lots of kinds of people and cultures and healthy intimate relationships.

But sin has also entered this world and our lives. In freedom and bondage, we experience our intimacy and sexuality. Our most private moments are caught in the compromise, vulnerable to abuse; and the gift may be quickly perverted into compulsion. The very act which produces new life becomes a little death, filled with yearning for redemption.

Now we must seek understanding as people of faith. Before we shout one another down, we must listen to all who study the human condition, including the social scientists, the lovers, and the victims of eros gone astray. And we must be still

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and listen to the Word of God, not demanding that our views be propped up with passages, but hoping to hear what the Spirit will say to the church.

In that spirit, let me return to the question announced as the topic of this presentation: “Will idolaters, sodomizers, or the greedy inherit the kingdom of God?”

Let me emphasize that this unseemly title poses a serious question. Let me then proceed to offer a literal or textual answer, a historical and cultural perspective, and a theological or evangelical answer to the question. My concluding remarks will then echo my opening appeal for serious prayer, study of scriptures, and consultation of the church.

I. A SERIOUS QUESTION

The question of whether idolaters, sodomizers, or the greedy will inherit the kingdom of God is serious because the apostle was serious. And I am serious about the absolute necessity of listening to the scriptural testimony as we seek to understand these matters.

When the church debated the ordination of women 20-25 years ago, we did our scriptural homework. The Pauline passages were difficult, and they still are. Some argued that Paul's literal statements about women keeping silence in the church were so decisive that there was nothing to discuss. Others said that we should just ignore Paul as a first century chauvinist and get on with it. Nevertheless, like the Jews in Beroea, we "examined the scriptures...to see if these things were so."

Instead of assuming that the scriptures simply precluded the ordination of women or that they were irrelevant, we read them together. We identified the significant passages, none of which spoke literally about ordination at all, but all of which led us to understand something anew about the peculiar authority and office of those set aside to preach the Word of God and administer the Sacraments. In time, and it did take time, we concluded that it was the guidance of the Holy Spirit which authorized this new thing.

We also discovered that to hear the Word of God, we needed to read what the Bible actually said. Further, we needed to understand something of the historical situation, the human context to which the words of the text were first directed. Then, as now, Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth was the place to start. Paul was writing to a real place with real issues and problems, and our issues and problems have similarities, even if they are not identical to those in Corinth. And then we had to think and pray about what we overheard Paul saying to our Christian sisters and brothers in Corinth. What did all of that have to say about how God's command or promise speaks to us?

The lecture which might have been given then was on 1 Corinthians 14:34, "Should women keep silence in the churches?" And in fact, many such presentations were made. The church knew that we could not be compelled to change just because a new feminism was alive in the world, even if we were eager to see it come.

Now we are facing a plethora of issues, not merely about homosexuality, but about sexuality. This discussion is also very different from our deliberation of the ordination of women. Now matters of sin, immorality, and repentance are at stake. We do not even agree yet what the questions are and thus cannot assume what the

answers will be. We may be comforted when Paul's discussion about who can inherit the kingdom of God seems so irrelevant to those who demand immediate answers to impossible questions. "Are you ready to affirm homosexual lifestyles with your ministry, or are you homophobic?" "Is homosexuality a sin or not?" Answer! Right now!

I am reminded of the proselyte who came to Hillel and Shammai demanding that he be taught the whole law while standing on one foot. He had no patience for instruction. Shammai drove him away with a stick, which taught him the law after a fashion, but he needed both feet. Hillel taught him the Golden Rule, but that was only the beginning.

It is time for patience, for study, for listening to the Word of God in all of its difficulty. The question is serious, but the answer will require time, wisdom, and understanding.

II. A LITERAL ANSWER

I began by reading from the 1946 edition of the RSV, because that was the text which was placed in my hands last summer by those who believed the ELCA was ignoring the testimony of Scripture. There it says clearly and literally that homosexuals will not inherit the kingdom. Frankly I was shocked, because I had never read that in my Bible.

The first thing to observe in the text, to take it quite literally, however, is that the list of those excluded is considerably longer. One cannot be literal about homosexuals without also including all the immoral, idolaters, adulterers, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, and robbers. The standard of divine righteousness which Paul holds up effectively demonstrates the inclusivity of sin. Don't worry, many other fine people will be on the train to destruction with you.

The second thing to notice, however, is a footnote on the word "homosexuals." It says in the Oxford edition, "Two Greek words are rendered by this expression." The King James Version translated these words as "nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind ... will inherit the kingdom." Come now, "the effeminate?" But why would the RSV generalize with "homosexuals?" The 1973 edition of the RSV refers not to homosexuals but "sexual perverts." And in the Greek text, the two words which create the problem for translators probably refer to the actor and recipient of sodomy. The text was not speaking about men with feminine mannerisms or men with same-sex affections, but about men who used other men for coitus.

The context also makes it very clear that the whole list is speaking of abusive acts and perverted relationships. Paul is not condemning all same-sex intimacy alike. His attack is directed at adulterous and perverse practices, sins against the righteousness of God which enslave their victims.

The former drunkard may later stand up at an AA meeting and say, "My name is Sally, and I am an alcoholic." Or the one recovering from greed may confess, "My name is David, and I am a compulsive shopper." Marks of our bondage may be with us for a lifetime, but we know the difference from when we were enslaved.

The text does not speak to the question of homosexual orientation. This text only speaks literally about a behavior between males. It does not offer a judgment

on the complex issues of sexual identity which psychologists and social scientists are now seeking to unravel. It does not enter into the debate about genetic or environmental determinism versus free will. Paul had not heard of David Greenberg's argument that homosexuality is a behavior which is interpreted in different ways by different societies.¹

The text does, however, stress that destructive behaviors like adultery and fornication are enslaving and are also sins against God. Paul quotes the saying which may have been a Corinthian slogan, "All things are lawful for me," and he adds the caveat, "but not all things are helpful." He again repeats "All things are lawful for me," but, he adds, "I will not be enslaved by anything" (1 Cor 6:12). And that is a crucial facet of his argument. To whom do you belong? Who owns you? How is your identity defined? How does it feel to be a slave to booze or sex or possessions? This is not the Christian life.

Paul is driving to the point that the bodies of believers are members of Christ, vessels useful to God for the kingdom. The passage ends with a warning against sexual immorality.

“Every other sin which a person commits is outside the body, but the fornicator sins against (unto) their own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Cor 6:18-20).

Literally—and that is how we are reading it—the text does not make fine distinctions between heterosexual or homosexual sins. All libertine abuse and fornication, all greed, idolatry, debauchery, and thievery fail the standard of divine righteousness. Even more critically, Paul agrees that these are not mere matters of free choice. Human beings are caught in systems and powers which they did not create and cannot understand. The liberation wrought by Christ is a costly emancipation from sin and death, not a license to advocate private rights and freedoms.

Paul explicitly states that “such were some of you.” Even if he is talking about male prostitution in Corinth, which seems most likely, he is not afraid of the sins of the Christian community because he is confident of the washing, sanctification, and justification in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

A literal reading of 1 Corinthians 6, therefore, must not stop with one verse, and certainly not with one example of unrighteous behavior. But neither must those who read this passage be afraid of letting sinners into the church, because Christ died for sinners. Both those who think they are righteous and those who know their need of forgiveness must listen to the whole passage.

III. A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Historical and cultural interpretations must seek to illumine the text, not explain it away. We have all heard the chauvinism which suggests that we enlightened moderns need not be troubled by Paul’s attitude toward women or by the miracle stories of the gospels. But then historical explanations are controlling the text rather than serving its message. I will not insult Paul or this community by

¹David Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988). See the review by Don Browning in *The Christian Century* 106 (Oct. 11, 1989) 911-916.

suggesting that Paul had some kind of hang-up or homophobia which we may discount.

The point is rather that Paul was writing to a Christian community in a very real place—Corinth. His letter was not an abstract essay on morality, sexuality, the body, or sin. Especially in this letter, the apostle was apparently picking up on issues and concerns which had been communicated to him. We only have one half of the communication. We do not know how serious certain of the problems actually were. Was there rampant immorality in the Christian community, practiced in the name of Christian freedom? “All things are lawful for me!” is a strident claim.

We do know that Corinth was a town with a reputation for cosmopolitan airs, for bawdy sex in the marketplace, for crafty dealings among the traders at the port. It was an ancient Hamburg or San Francisco with all of their glitzy wealth, savoir-faire, and cruelty. The human meat markets of every age have looked about the same, and every generation has had its high priests of sexual freedom and pornography. And the sophisticated gnostics of every generation have insisted that their spirituality and their sexuality are thoroughly integrated. The Corinthians

knew all about such superior knowledge and freedom long before the arrogant hedonism of our time.

Paul's Jewish upbringing is evident in his strong conviction that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. He affirmed the spirituality of the human body, but he was not about to use the Christian gospel simply to affirm the sexual lifestyles of the Corinthians.

Paul had good company in his diatribe against sins. The list of unrighteous behaviors in 6:9-10 corresponds closely with the list in 5:10-11, and such catalogs of vices were common to the literature of the era, especially the moral exhortations of the Cynic and Stoic philosophers. The Jewish catalogs were more interested in idolatry, and some of the sensationalistic Greek and Roman historians took great pains to share the lurid details of the sexual abuses of the high and mighty. These were vices everyone was against.

Historically that means two important things about this passage. First, Christians like Paul were further defining shared community values in their lists of unrighteousness. Jewish traditions had a particular aversion to sodomy, largely in protest against the Hellenistic culture of the gymnasias. The public nakedness, baths, and sexual relationships between teachers and pupils scandalized Jews. In some cases, Jews who were striving to make it in the Greek world sought ways to disguise their circumcisions at athletic events. But modesty and family values were enough to distance most Jews from such settings.

What is interesting to note, historically and culturally, is that sexual practices have long been fundamental to community identities. Any group which sees itself as "set apart," maintaining a distinctive set of values in the midst of a dominant culture, must define its sexual mores carefully. Those standards must be defended in terms which are close to the heart of the identity of the community. Thus Jewish and Christian community sexual values had to be identified carefully, lest they simply be swallowed up in the mainstream of Hellenistic culture.

The second historical insight, however, is that the Greek moralists joined the Jews in railing against sexual abuses. The issue would not have been who can inherit the kingdom of God, but what kinds of sexual relations are unnatural or unworthy

of the wise? Every culture and generation will insist that it is the business of the community to define the standards of acceptable behavior, whether on theological or merely moral grounds. Perhaps only a culture like ours, which places such an immense weight on the rights of the individual, would object to informal and formal sanctions on sexual behaviors.

Conversely, this historical lesson anticipates the political efforts of those advocating the rights of gays and lesbians. Those who believe that the prevailing mores are unjust or oppressive must either garner the authority of the institutions which articulate and maintain the moral standards of the community or they must challenge that authority. Institutions such as seminaries, congregations, and church offices steward their legitimate authority in these matters more by persuasion than coercion. They must listen to the arguments of those who believe the standards are inept for the many or unjust to the few.

And these institutions must also speak and teach. They cannot abdicate their responsibility to articulate and defend the mores of the community they represent. Beware of the challenge which merely intends to produce change, not crediting the moral and theological seriousness of the community. And beware of the church where dissent is silenced.

IV. A THEOLOGICAL ANSWER

The historical analysis did not yield an answer to the question of whether idolaters, sodomizers, or the greedy will inherit the kingdom. That is not an accident. I belong to the school that thinks history is not decisive on normative questions, yet interesting, informative, and important for understanding reality.

But the question is finally a theological question, not merely unpacked like a historical riddle or even solved like a textual proof. The way Paul sets up the question demands humility of all of us, taking the measure of our preconceptions by the canon of the will of God.

Will such as these inherit the kingdom of God? That is not merely a speculative question about what might or might not happen. It is the ultimate question of what will happen in terms of what God wills.

All you who are called to discern the Word of God, to distinguish the law and the gospel, take notice. We have now shifted from a discussion of the letter of the law, the literal prescription which kills and condemns. We have left the discussion of community mores and the need for human institutions to exercise a stewardship of a moral order. We have moved into the question of the ultimate fulfillment of the righteous reign of God and whether sinners will be admitted.

As long as we were discussing community standards and institutions, we were talking about the law. Issues of fairness and moral standards and public persuasion and politics were under consideration. By the way, the community's responsibility to decide to whom the public office of ministry should be entrusted also fits that context. Those are properly the arenas of church legislation.

But now Paul is asking about the standards of God's reign, and this is the vision and exercise of God's peculiar majesty which holds the Christian community together. This is the good stuff.

I commend to you Roy Harrisville's commentary on 1 Corinthians, especially

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his remarkable ability to press for the evangelical and theological center of Paul's letter. Two of his observations go directly to the heart of our subject.

First, Paul is not merely a moralist, building a new moral order. "Paul left intact whatever Judaism or Hellenism regarded as good, moral, natural, and ethical; the only criterion was its usefulness for the other—a more radical critique than any of his contemporaries had advanced."²

Paul does not argue with the slogan, "All things are lawful for me!" but he makes all such claims to rights and freedoms accountable to the needs of the neighbor. Will your exercise of freedom be helpful? Will it serve the faith of the neighbor? Later he expands this argument in reference to food offered to idols. "Food will not commend us to God," he says. "We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. Only take care lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak" (1 Cor 8:8-9). And again, he insists that he has the freedom and rights of an apostle, including rightful claims for remuneration, "nevertheless we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ" (1 Cor 9:12).

This is the moral logic of the kingdom, requiring behavior which is above reproach not in order to qualify for the kingdom, but out of concern for the other. This is the higher moral

standard of the disciple which is grounded in the apostolic commission. The youth worker may be free to drink a beer with her own softball team, but she will refrain when with the kids. The pastor will visit the young widow in her grief, but he will also take every precaution to avoid even the appearance of inappropriate intimacy. Modesty is not so much a Christian virtue as it is an expression of God's love and care for the vulnerable.

Secondly, Paul anchors his appeal for morality in his confidence in the good work which God has begun in the Christian community. That confidence, that faith puts everything in a new light. "The imperatives which Paul addresses to his readers are not sprung principally from anguish over the gulf between what is and ought to be, but from the confidence that the one to whom his readers have been joined is at work in them to close the gap."³

The theological answer to the question of whether idolaters, sodomizers, or the greedy will inherit the kingdom is a resounding yes, but only by the grace of God. Immoral behaviors are hardly qualifications for entrance—"and such were some of you." Paul joins the moralists in disapproving, but Paul has a more radical remedy than the moralists. He knew that progress in moral perfection will never qualify anyone either. Self-righteousness remains the fatal flaw of moralism. Instead, the entry into God's kingdom depended solely upon the dynamic power of the Spirit. This is the righteousness and sanctification of God at work dynamically in the name of Jesus Christ, transforming bondage to freedom, putting sin to death and renewing the justified sinner to life.

V. A CALL FOR TEACHING AND PASTORAL CARE

We are back again to proclaiming the hope of the world which is revealed in the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. Christ Jesus died for sinners, so that the

²Roy Harrisville, *I Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987) 94.

³*Ibid.*, 96.

idolaters, sodomizers, and greedy might inherit the kingdom. The righteous, if there be such, need no forgiveness, but it is those who have been enslaved to a wide range of destructive and perverse behaviors who have received God's washing, sanctification, and justification in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

None of us may measure our progress toward moral perfection, except at mortal peril, and none of us may merely affirm our lifestyles as if we needed no redemption. Our compulsions, temptations, and frailties remain with us, even when Christ has redeemed us from our bondage and as the Spirit continues to strengthen us. We are confident of God's constancy, and empathetic for the weakness of others, even those who are susceptible to bondages which differ from ours. And above all, we are conscripted, commissioned, called by the Christ who died to redeem us to declare, convey, and represent this liberation to all the other idolaters, sodomizers, and greedy folk like us.

Now let us not force our righteousness, our morality, our justice agenda on one another, as if we were without sin. Let us neither demand our rights nor smite those who struggle with their secrets. We have no cause for pride. Justified sinners that we are, our only boast is in God's mercy. Our moral standards are means to protect the vulnerable, including us.

And let us study the Scriptures—literally for what they say, historically for the real human

situations they address, and evangelically for the word of mercy they proclaim in Christ Jesus.

The ELCA is a very young church, stirring with a new sense of evangelical mission in this pluralistic culture. We might do especially well to study what the apostle said to the Christians in Corinth, as their witness was tested by challenges within and beyond the community. We do not possess all of the wisdom we need, and we will do well to call upon our teachers and pastors to help us listen, speak, and pray together.

And we must pray now for our church, for our congregations and candidates, and for those who conducted the ordination in protest of the standards of the church. Many people and their families are in pain, struggling with secrets and histories, outraged and disappointed. Our pastors face profoundly difficult issues of mercy and morality, and the Holy Spirit must guide us to proclaim clearly God's commands and promises, the law and gospel of the kingdom we would inherit.