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Fear and Self-Loathing in the First Century: Why it Matters that Paul Was Not Gay

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Jesus says nothing about homosexuality. Jesus also says nothing about same-sex desire or behavior. However, Paul does. These are clear and simple facts ignored, perversely, by modern scholars who attempt to explore pre-modern culture and religion. Paul has been and continues to be frequently and consistently cited in the twenty-first century church's on-going attempts to condemn, outlaw and persecute homosexuals. Understood in its *historical* context, Paul's condemnation of "sodomy", or pederasty, or same-sex desire is a manifestation of his anti-Roman political/social position and his desire to preserve the laws of the

Torah. Paul has a clear mission-to define and protect the fragile Christianity of the first century against the persecution of the Roman and Hellenistic world whilst continuing to uphold the elements of Hebraic law that he felt were indispensable. In matters of religious identity, such as circumcision and dietary laws, Paul severs himself neatly from the Torah in order to create a religious community accepting of Gentiles. But in practical matters, and specifically those relating to issues of gender and sexuality (as an act rather than an identity), Paul remains steadfast in his anti-Roman beliefs.

In order to even attempt an understanding of Paul and his stance toward same-sex practices, it is vital to understand his pre-modern (and practically pre-Christian) world. It requires that the modern scholar sheds her/his modern assumptions of identity, especially in this case of sexual identity. There was no such thing as homosexuality identity in Paul's world. In fact, there was no such thing as sexuality identity in Paul's world; only sex, which could then only be categorized as reproductive or non-reproductive. This begs some critical questions. Against what sort of sex acts and sexually active people was Paul protesting? More importantly, why? Furthermore, why is it so important for some people to label both the acts and the people within the modern identity terms that, for nearly 25 years, we have come to understand as invalid to a pre-modern world?

It is completely erroneous to apply the term "homosexuality" to any discussion of the pre-modern world because of its pre-existing associations with a modern understanding of sexuality. The ambiguous and misleading ways in which this term has been used, both in biblical and academic circles, makes it vitally important to ensure that all terms are defined and illuminated, thus closed to potentially dangerous misinterpretation. In his text *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, Martti Nissinen categorically clarifies the appropriate terminology for any ethical trans-historical investigation of pre-, post- and modern societies. He states that the term "homosexuality" cannot be used to describe the same-sex acts of the first century because it has become pseudonymous with sexual orientation rather than sexual act. The term "homosexual" can be used in an adjectival and neutral capacity, to describe acts between persons of the same sex regardless of the perceived sexual identity of those engaging in such acts. And, whilst it can be considered as inappropriate or politically incorrect to use the term "homosexual" as a noun, in order to avoid the reversion to denigrating medical terms or the use of other politically-charged terms, it can be used with caution to describe an individual who "has most or all of his or her erotic needs met in interactions with persons of the same sex" (16). Nissinen presents the term "homoeroticism" as offering the most suitable means of defining "erotic-sexual encounters and experiences of people with persons of the

same sex, whether the person is regarded as homosexual or not" (17). Without complete transparency and appreciation of these terms, it is impossible to investigate fully Paul's writings and the ways in which they have been interpreted and understood by a modern society.

One of the most startling and controversial interpretations for Paul's condemnation of homoerotic acts is the suggestion that Paul himself was a homosexual. Even more shocking is the discovery that this undeniably contentious explanation is widely held within the worlds of religion and academe. Yet even the most rigorous reading of Paul's letters (including the contended pseudonymous letters) reveals absolutely no evidence to suggest that Paul's condemnation of such acts is derived from his own personal struggle with homosexual desire. Despite this, the head of the Episcopal Diocese of Newark, Bishop John Shelby Spong, claims that Paul's sexual negativity, and specifically his opinions towards homoeroticism are born from "feelings of tremendous guilt and shame, which produced in him self-loathing" (117). Spong admits that he can find no evidence of Paul ever having acted upon his homosexual desires, yet continues to take the determined stance that Paul's rhetoric was self-judging and that no other explanation accounts for Paul's position "as well as the possibility that Paul was a gay male" (117). At best, this is a vague and tenuous misreading of Paul's letters, a selective approach to force the text to fit an unsubstantiated and fragile thesis. At worst, it presents homophobia in its most covert and perilous form, performing "historical and epistemological violence" (Stewart) upon the text and even more dangerously "reifying the existing oppression" (Stewart) of the post-modern homosexual.

On the face of it, Spong's claims seem well-intentioned and anything but homophobic. His attempts to label Paul as a "gay male" initially appear to be a way of denouncing homophobic hatred and promoting tolerance towards a modern homosexual community. This would be laudable if it could be claimed with any authority that a cohesive homosexual community was anything more than a figment of the imagination. Even the very notion of a homosexual community suggests in and of itself, a state of otherness, a separate entity to be tolerated rather than absorbed inclusively into a complete post-modern society. Just what evidence does Spong use to forward his argument? Primarily, his proposal is hinged on Paul's views towards marriage, more specifically, the directions concerning marriage that are found in First Corinthians. Paul declares his wish for all to remain "in whatever condition [they] were called" (1 Cor 7: 24), that the unmarried should "not seek a wife" (1 Cor 7:27) and "that all were as I myself am" (1 Cor 7: 7). Paul has a clear eschatological theology sustained throughout his letters. He firmly believes that the end of times is not merely predicted, but imminent, and it is the immediacy of this which drives his urgent desire to create a cohesive (even if geographically diverse) community of Christ-followers. For Paul, marriage is a means to an end; it is an institution that exists only to sanctify and authorize reproduction. In expressing his disapproval of marriage, he is reiterating the unimportance of the fulfillment of any physical need. If the end time is forthcoming, then the need to marry and to reproduce not only becomes redundant, but presents a dangerous distraction: "the married man[']s...interests are divided" (I Cor 7: 34). In order to argue that these words point towards Paul's homosexuality, Spong makes the bizarre claim that Paul's apocalyptic view had no influence upon his directions for marriage and, in fact that "there was in Paul's mind a gradual waning of the immediacy of the second coming"

(Spong 115), despite the fact that such claims directly contradict Paul himself, who clearly tells his Corinthian readers that "the present form of this world *is* passing away" (I Cor 7: 31) (my emphasis). How does Spong make the leap from Paul's clearly stated eschatological beliefs to claim that Paul is instead a self-tormenting and repressed homosexual? If his thesis rests only upon Paul's unmarried status, then surely the next logical step is the assumption that all men choosing to remain unmarried are repressed homosexuals with similar degrees of self-loathing.

How would this thesis be applied, for example, to priests of the Catholic Church who are required to remain unmarried? Does he believe them also to be homosexual? There is no viable explanation or textual verification for Spong's claims about Paul's sexuality other than loosely based, uncorroborated conjecture; his poorly constructed and flimsy argument is easily challenged. However, he appears to be the only voice formalizing such a ludicrous claim about Paul's sexuality. Spong acknowledges that "others have suggested that Paul was plagued by homosexual fears" (116), yet offers no sources for his claim other than to suggest that such "an idea was so repulsive to Christian people that it could not be breathed in official circles" (116). Other scholars have pointed to Paul's generalized anxiety about sexuality but none link this to a proposal of his homosexuality. However well-intentioned Spong's argument may be (and he certainly has a history of championing a more liberal approach to the controversial biblical texts), it nonetheless perpetuates a perilously homophobic perspective. Spong tackles Paul's vehement condemnation of homoeroticism as part of a greater attempt to encourage acceptance of those identifying as homosexuals in modern society. But his effort falls short of the mark as he fails to address the real issues at stake to modern society—issues of equality and civil rights. Instead, Spong's argument turns to Paul's search for the acceptance which he found in the only one who "could... love this judged, driven, homosexually orientated Paul" (121). That one, of course, was Christ. In Christ, Spong reasons that Paul finds an acceptance that enables him to shift his self-loathing and condemnation from a state worthy only of death into a state of grace with God. It sounds beautiful, but Spong's message is frighteningly transparent. Christ *tolerates* homosexuals. Christ is even capable of *loving* homosexuals, and within the safety of the love of Christ and the grace of God, the pitiful, self-loathing homosexual can begin to love their previously unlovable and repulsive self—and maybe even enough to renounce their homosexuality and be freed from the terrible chains of self-torture. Aside from the injurious implication that homosexuality automatically equates to self-hatred, Spong's final insinuation is dangerously homophobic: homosexuality is a disease, and if not a cure, Christianity at least provides necessary relief.

Not only is this a terrifying prospect, but it also fails to recognize the obvious differences between Paul's pre-modern society and modern society. Homosexuality did not exist as a valid form of self-identification in Paul's first century world, as it did not exist in the medieval era or in the Renaissance. Modern scholars and philosophers such as Havelock Ellis, Michel Foucault, and David Halperin¹ have added greatly to a contemporary understanding of sexuality by defining systems of classification and identity, but it is critical to note that in order to remain ethical, these systems can and should only be applied to a modern society. The application of a term such as homosexuality to anything other than a modern culture is wholly unappreciative of pre-modern regimes of categorization. Robin Griffith-Jones describes the word "homosexuality" as "far too clumsy for use by a Greek thinker" (398),

advising that "we do not share [their views] on the physiologies of men and women and on their nearness to – or distance from – the ideal of (male) humanity" (398). The subtleties of Hellenistic homoerotic acts and the ways in which they maintained hierarchical systems of gender, dominance and subordination cannot be accurately captured by such generic and maladroit vocabulary. Given the evident establishment that homosexuality as it is now understood, did not exist in Paul's world, to what exactly was Paul in such opposition? Paul's most vehement condemnation of homoerotic sexual practices comes in Romans, where he not only viciously reviles "women [who exchange] natural intercourse for unnatural" (Rom 1:26), and "men [who commit] shameless acts with men" (Rom 1: 27), but additionally issues the merciless conviction "that those who practice such things deserve to die" (Rom 1: 32). It is difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile such an uncompromising position with a man who claims to advocate the love and tolerance of Christ. Regardless of the fact that the Gospels (and therefore, Jesus) had nothing to say about sexuality in any form, many scholars, including Raymond Brown, have attempted to put words in Jesus' mouth and propose that his opinions would have corresponded with those of Paul. This is perilously precipitous terrain. To propose that like Paul, "Jesus himself, walking among us in our times, would not be frightened by being considered sexually and politically 'incorrect'" (Brown 530), is a dangerously misguided perspective. Jesus and Paul were only alike in as much as they were both Jewish. Their backgrounds and biographies were evidently different and it is an injustice to both to assume that their opinions would have been uniformly alike. Ethical modern scholars cannot and should not attempt to put words in the mouth of one who cannot speak for himself and in this instance, the argument that Jesus would have shared Paul's opinions must be set aside as inherently flawed.

Paul's words are Paul's alone and to understand them and his position requires a close examination of his motivations. Rather than a reflection of his own sexual torment, Paul's obdurate stance denotes a manifestation of his desire to distance himself both individually and theologically from the ethnic and religious communities to which he no longer belonged. As a Jew, Paul could never wholly be accepted as a Roman; simultaneously, his position as a tax collector placed him at the peninsula of the Roman Empire and no matter how hard he tried, this prevented him from being the perfect Jew that he had aspired to be. His pre-conversion persecution of Christians demonstrates a desperate attempt to prove his Judaic credentials; Paul was radical at both ends of his disparity. Following his conversion, Paul's need to protect and identify the newly-emerging community of Christians required him to distinguish that community from both the Greco-Roman world and the Jewish community, yet his departure from Hebraic law was far from absolute.

It would be naive and incorrect to assume that Paul's continued observance of Jewish laws in matters relating to gender and sexuality stemmed from an inability to fully distance himself from his Jewish upbringing. Where homoerotic acts are concerned, it is far more likely that Paul was driven by the problematic distortion of gender lines. Female homoeroticism was primarily condemned because it involved an attempt (whether perceived or actual) by one female to surpass her submissive and subordinate role as a woman and endow herself with the elevated status of a man. Whilst some male homoerotic acts were acceptable and even expected, other male homoerotic acts (such as anal penetration) were subject to similar revulsion not because of the act itself, but because it required one man to submit himself to a

lower societal status than that of a woman. Bernadette Brooten suggests that Paul's opinions of homoeroticism sit closely with those of Philo of Alexandria. Much of the terminology used by Philo is shared by Paul, particularly the term "unnatural"; both sentence the participants in these gender-deviant acts to death, and both discuss problematic physical appearances (primarily the appearance and style of the hair) as another mode of divergence from pre-modern gender norms. Paul's concern is not with the physical acts themselves, but with the ways in which these acts obscure otherwise clearly distinguishable gender roles: "the gendered order of society is at stake...ancient sources condemning same-sex love are very concerned with maintaining gender boundaries and the subordination of women and superordination of men" (Brooten 85). In describing homoerotic acts as unnatural, Paul is not limiting himself to a single interpretation of that word. Any sexual act outside of marriage is, for Paul, considered to be unnatural, regardless of the sex of the participants; sex exists to facilitate reproduction and marriage is the only environment in which reproduction is sanctioned. But not only do homoerotic acts infringe upon this construct, they also violate the pre-modern world's gender rules, creating a further level of deviance.

Homoerotic acts fall into triple-jeopardy when placed alongside the Hebraic denunciation of idolatry. In the first of the Ten Commandments, the nucleus of Hebraic law, God declares to Moses and to the Jewish community that follows, that "I am the Lord your God... you shall have no other gods before me.... You shall not make for yourself an idol whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath" (Ex 20:2-4). In First Corinthians, Paul makes numerous references to idolatry as a crime of equal significance as fornication or sexual immorality. Paul frequently uses the body as "a simple and rather obvious metaphor for any assembly of members united into a community" (Crossan & Reed 281), and in both First Corinthians and Romans expands upon this metaphor in considerable detail, likening the contribution of community members to parts of the body. When this metaphor is situated beside the well-known Old Testament analogy of sexual immorality and infidelity to God (as seen in Isaiah and Ezekiel), further impetus for Paul's concentration upon homoeroticism appears. As his Corinthian arguments against marriage confirm, Paul is principally concerned with humanity's abandonment of God, an abandonment that can be likened to infidelity. In Paul's eyes, this infidelity takes place on both a spiritual and physical plane and homoerotic acts represent the ultimate demonstration of humanity's unfaithfulness; not only do such acts advocate unnatural non-reproductive sex and gender deviance, but they also create idols in human form, the ultimate form of betrayal against God.

Interestingly, Bishop Spong uses Paul's imagery of the body to support his allegations of Paul's homosexuality, albeit in a quite literal way. Spong provocatively insinuates that Paul's reference to members of the community instead refers to the physical male member, the penis, concluding that Paul's Roman dialogue corroborates his status as a troubled, but through the grace of God, a now reformed homosexual. Paul's words "just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification" (Rom 6: 19) are taken entirely out of context and interpreted to suggest that Paul is speaking not only to an impure homosexual audience but also including himself in that audience, once again intimating that reformation from homosexuality is the desired state.

Whilst well-meaning, any suggestion of Paul's homosexuality is ultimately both destructive and homophobic. The lack of credibility of such claims destabilizes efforts to attain equal rights for homosexuals in contemporary society by suggesting that forced tolerance and reformation are acceptable alternatives. Additionally these suggestions insidiously remove the ethical and humanitarian aspects of the argument for equal rights; liberty, equality and justice are replaced by charitable forbearance. But this is not where the greatest damage is caused. The identification of Paul as a homosexual places him outside a heteronormative society and locates him within the community of tolerated "others". Whatever the rationale, whether self-hatred or not, accountability for Paul's homophobic words remains with Paul. As such, the community of "others" – in this case the imagined homosexual community – becomes responsible for its own persecution and subjugation. The real perpetrators, homophobic heterosexuals, are conveniently absolved of any responsibility.

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¹ It is beyond the scope of this paper to engage in a detailed exposition of pre-modern sexual practices. Refer to Foucault, Halperin, Nissinen and Williams for excellent and thorough discourse in this area.