

GAY AND CHRISTIAN

SoulForce Equality Ride Forum at Wheaton College¹
The Rev. Jay Emerson Johnson, PhD

I'm grateful for the invitation to be here tonight, which is really a homecoming for me. I grew up here in Wheaton and I'm also a proud Wheaton College alumnus of the class of 1983. My father taught here in the graduate school for many years – in fact, I believe the last time I was on this campus was for his funeral, almost twenty years ago now, which took place in the Billy Graham Center auditorium. So it's good to be back home – though I must say, I never quite imagined I would come back for an occasion like this.

While the stellar liberal arts education I received here has served me quite well over the years, my time at Wheaton was not easy. As it still is for many college-aged students today, that was a time for me of coming to grips with what it means to be an adult and therefore a sexual human being. Realizing that I was likely gay prompted an emotional and spiritual crisis, and there were precious few resources available for addressing that sense of crisis; I felt terribly alone and not a little afraid.

After being “out-ed” by my sophomore year roommate, that fear actually materialized as my own community – the people I loved and trusted, my brothers and sisters in Christ – assumed that I had either abandoned my faith or was mentally ill or both. Sadly, I took that message to heart and for far too long I did not believe it was possible to be both gay and Christian at the same time. That sense of conflict created a nearly impossible and unbearable choice between the two. In either case, I assumed that there would always be a part of me that God could not love.

Since that time, after a period of prayerful discernment, therapy and study, I have come to a very different conclusion. Along the way I was also ordained in the Episcopal Church, earned a PhD in philosophical theology, and I am now openly gay as I teach theology at Pacific School of Religion and the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, two member schools of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. I also proudly serve as the programming director for the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry at Pacific School of Religion – the first center of its kind located at a school of theology or a seminary.

All of which is to say that I have traveled here today in part to testify and bear witness, not only to the possibility but to the reality of being happily gay and a deeply committed Christian at the same time. My life is living proof of that reality, and I am only one among many thousands of others.

I'm also here today to encourage and urge this community, which I *still* love, to engage in deeper conversation on human sexuality. Notice that I did not say debate –

¹ These remarks were prepared for the SoulForce Equality Ride visit to Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois and were significantly edited and condensed for the ten-minute oral presentation offered on April 20, 2006, as part of a college-wide forum on human sexuality in the context of that visit.

there's certainly a place for that, but I'm afraid that these days "debate" on this topic too often reduces to lobbing Bible verses at each other, like religious mortal shells.

What we need instead, it seems to me, is to sustain genuine conversation with each other. I don't mean what usually passes for "conversation" today – a brief chat at the water cooler or sharing some gossip over coffee. What I do mean has everything to do with the fact that the words "conversation" and "conversion" come from the same linguistic root. To engage in a genuine conversation, in other words, always carries the possibility of being changed in the process. And if stories from the Bible and the long history of the church are any indication, lifelong conversion is what Christian faith is all about. But that deepening of one's conversion to Christ is not likely to happen if conversation is restricted or institutionally curtailed.

Here at Wheaton College – an institution renowned for its academic excellence and its commitment to the Gospel of Christ – here, of all places, we should have no reason to be afraid of open, genuine conversation and encountering differing points of view. It's precisely from that mix of perspectives that truth emerges. (And in that regard I recommend the recent book by Jack Rogers, a former moderator of the Presbyterian Church USA, who changed his mind on the question of homosexuality and yet remains an evangelical Christian and theologian. Changing one's mind need not be a sign of weakness or infidelity. To the contrary, it can signal precisely the ongoing work of conversion at the hands of the Holy Spirit.²)

In that light, I would like to share with you this evening just a slice of my own "conversational life" that has brought me here today. While there is much more that I could say about such things than time allows, perhaps in this context the critical issue at hand is the role played by the Bible in that conversation. As a pastor, preacher, teacher and theologian, I take the Bible very seriously indeed.

To be sure, as your provost Stanton Jones has rightly noted elsewhere, there's certainly more than one way to "take the Bible seriously." So I want to offer just a few observations about how I engage with Biblical texts. Obviously, time does not allow for a full exegetical lecture this evening. Instead, I'd like to outline briefly just a few of the aspects of what I believe a genuine conversation about the Bible and human sexuality entails. In good preacher fashion, I'll do this with three points.

I.

First, let me urge you to resist the idea that this conversation can transpire according to the "plain sense" of scripture. The texts of the Bible are far from "plain" and are in fact remarkably complex. Those of you who have struggled with translating the original Hebrew and Greek versions of those texts know quite well that the meaning of those texts is not necessarily self-evident; indeed, even the act of translating is already an act of interpretation.

² Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006). Among other similar and helpful resources, see Walter Wink, ed., *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

As I'm sure you realize, what we have learned from geology and biology present some challenges in our reading of the opening chapters of Genesis. Likewise, what we now know about astronomy creates some problems for dealing with the ancient story of the "sun standing still" (Joshua 10:13). How do we translate and interpret such an image in a post-Copernicus world? A more subtle example comes from the Acts of the Apostles where, we are told, early Christians "shared all things in common" (2:44, 4:32). This certainly stands in rather stark contrast to the dynamics of free-market economies with which all of us live, and rather uncritically I might add, today.

Dealing theologically with biblical texts proves even more difficult with reference to the metaphorical and analogical language used for God. Relatively few Christians today pause to consider the metaphorical character of the word "father" with reference to God, yet readily admit such metaphorical usage in the prophetic literature, where God is described as an "angry she-bear" (Hosea 13:8), or in the gospels, where Jesus refers to himself as a "mother hen" (Matthew 23:37, Luke 13:34). Even those who insist on dealing with the "plain sense" of scripture do not erect images of grizzly bears or chickens in their churches.

The challenges presented by human sexuality are no less complex than the ones presented by geology, astronomy, economics, and by metaphorical and analogical language for God. In all these areas and more it behooves us as God's people to respect the complexities of biblical texts by bringing all the resources at our disposal – from science to philosophy, art and culture, as well as our own experience – to the task of interpreting scripture.

But let me be clear on this point: acknowledging and addressing the complexity of biblical texts does not in any way diminish the "authority of scripture." To the contrary, the significance of those texts is only enhanced in such an approach as we bear witness to the rich and deeply textured interactions of God with God's own creation. As soon as we reduce such richness to neat and tidy packages we are no longer dealing with the living God but with an idol.

The complexity of scripture to which I am referring here is certainly evident in historical and philosophical theology, my own field of study. Even within the development of "orthodox" Christian theology biblical texts are employed in remarkably diverse ways. The differences, for example, among Augustine, the Cappadocians, and John of Damascus on Trinitarian doctrine are quite pronounced indeed, even though all of their views belong under the umbrella of "orthodoxy," and each of them freely employs biblical texts to make the case for their diverse points of view. Closer to home, in the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther and John Calvin relied on scripture to develop significantly different approaches to such basic touchstones in Christian faith and theology as justification, sanctification and free will.

More to the point at hand this evening, few of us today can read the creation accounts in Genesis apart from the interpretative lens for those accounts provided by Augustine in the fifth century. Supposing that sexuality itself belongs to humanity's "fallen nature," Augustine understood the act of sexual intercourse to be the means by which "original sin" is passed down from one generation to the next (a supposition that is really quite alien to the biblical texts themselves). In that light, the best Augustine seems

able to say about sex is that if you really must do it, then just don't enjoy it too much. Surely today Christians would want to say a bit more than that about God's gift of sexual intimacy and communion.

I find it a bit ironic that I learned this critical and contextual approach to the Bible here at Wheaton. Ironic, because it doesn't seem to apply to the topic we are here to discuss this evening. Wheaton faculty members in the physical sciences know only too well the challenges of reading the bible in the light of contemporary geological and biological research. This school has managed to navigate the thorny terrain around "creationism" without sacrificing either the biblical witness to God as creator or the evidence of science, and you should be commended for that integrity. However, I fail to understand why human sexuality is so often the exception to that critical/contextual approach to scripture.

In more than a few quarters, including here at Wheaton, the importance of contextualizing scripture has already been learned regarding the role of women in both church and society. Surely by now we have also realized the tragic mistake of those who supposed the "plain sense" of scripture supported the institution of slavery. Even so, we still have much to learn about the dynamics of both sexism and racism and we have hardly even begun to learn those biblical lessons with reference to human sexuality.

II.

Second, I encourage you to notice that the kind of understanding of human sexuality and gender operating in the ancient Mediterranean world – the world of the biblical texts – is really quite different, and in some respects, dramatically different from our understanding of those things today. That is not to say that there are no similarities at all between people having sex in the ancient world and people having sex today. We cannot assume, however, that what such an act *means* and *signifies* and the role it played in cultural and religious sensibilities were exactly the same for biblical writers as they are for us today, many centuries later.

Unfortunately, I cannot take the time here to offer a full list of the ways in which the construction of sexuality and gender differed in the ancient Mediterranean world compared to our own day and how those differences shape our reading of the Bible. As just one example, and generally speaking, in ancient Mediterranean cultures the gender of one's sex partner was virtually irrelevant. What mattered much more was the *social rank* of that partner. Sex, in other words, was one of the ways, and in some contexts the primary way, to maintain cultural relations of dominance. This is why, in part, ancient depictions of military victories frequently show conquering armies raping those they have conquered, both men and women. And indeed, something similar is at work, with reference to social dominance, in the biblical story of Sodom. I can't imagine any of us today would understand much less embrace the meaning of sexual intimacy within such social hierarchies of value – at least I hope not.³

³Just a few representative samples illustrate the vastness of the scholarship on these issues and topics. For the complexities involved in dealing with the meaning of sexuality and gender in the ancient Mediterranean world, see for example: David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other*

In light of the many differences between ancient and contemporary cultural contexts, it's high time we stopped translating particularly difficult biblical passages on this issue with the modern word "homosexuality." That word was invented by German sexology researchers and is only about 135 years old. To be sure, the challenges in biblical translation often require "dynamic equivalents" in rendering ancient concepts and practices into readable English. But "homosexuality" simply does not work to describe whatever it was those biblical writers had in mind. Indeed, many gay and lesbian people today – including me – reject that word as inadequate to describe our lives, relationships and experiences. "Homosexuality" is not only foreign to the world of the Bible; it's also foreign to many in the contemporary communities that it supposedly categorizes.

III.

Third and finally, I invite you to consider that what human beings do with their body parts in sexual intimacy mattered very little if at all to biblical writers compared to the qualities of human relationship and the fruits of fidelity. I find it rather striking how today's sexuality debates so frequently focus on what people do with their genitals while very little attention is paid to the desired fruits of a given relationship – hospitality, generosity, faithfulness, love, kindness, and so on – the very things, in other words, that biblical writers employed to evaluate those relationships.

In that regard I would urge you to adopt a healthy amount of skepticism toward both media portrayals and statistical reports on the supposedly rampant promiscuity, exotic sexual practices and drug abuse among lesbians and especially gay men. Characterizing a whole class of people based on the behavior of some will always lead to distortions. After all, if I wanted to conduct a study of heterosexual marriage and limited my field of inquiry to Las Vegas wedding chapels I suspect my results would be interesting but not very useful for making generalizations about marriage.

There is just as much diversity among lesbian and gay people as there is among "straight" people, none of which can be reduced to what people do, or do not do, with their body parts. I cannot imagine that those of you here tonight who are married would describe your marriage solely with reference to what you do with you partner in bed; please don't make that same mistake in talking about lesbian and gay couples.

Restricting the conversation to sexual practices at the expense of intimate and faithful relationships only diminishes the humanity of all of us; it reduces us to anatomical machines. This reductionistic approach is clearly evident in the assumed

Essays on Greek Love (New York: Routledge, 1990), and *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); and Leo G. Perdue, et. al, ed., *Families in Ancient Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997). For the challenges these complexities present to biblical interpretation and the history of Christianity, see for example: Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983); L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed and Sex :Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988); Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997); and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family: Ruling Ideologies, Diverse Realities* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

“complementarity” of the sexes. In this view, men and women are by nature – biologically and anatomically – “fit” for each other.⁴ Much more needs to be addressed about this claim than I can offer here. At the risk of sounding crude, let me say this: To suppose there’s any ultimate significance to whether or not “Tab A” naturally fits into “Slot B” is a great illustration of Aristotelian logic, but it’s not very biblical or even theological. Not even Thomas Aquinas would have supposed that “natural law” provides for such a crudely mechanical model of human intimacy.⁵

A genuinely biblical and theological approach, by contrast, would instead recall that Jesus urged us to judge a tree by its fruits (Matthew 7:16-20). That is exactly what Peter did in defending his decision to baptize Cornelius, a Roman centurion. No one, Peter argued, should “withhold the water for baptizing those who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have” (Acts 10:47). This is likewise the approach Paul adopts in arguing for the inclusion of Gentiles in the Christian community (Acts 15:8-9) – and unless there are some Jewish Christians here tonight, that means all of us.

Here it seems to me is one of the many reasons why we can and should be thankful for the biblical witness to divine grace, which offers a truly radical vision of human mutuality and equality in the midst of an ancient world of social oppression. In Christ, Paul wrote to the Corinthians, there is a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). The old order of creation, of violent ethnic divisions, of cultural hierarchies of dominance, and even of gender disparity is swept away. For in Christ, Paul argues, “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female” (Galatians 3:28). If that were not true, Paul realized, then Christians shouldn’t even share a meal with each other.

It would seem that Christian churches today have mostly overlooked the revolutionary implications of this biblical vision for human relationships. Regarding marriage, for example, the ideal of the American nuclear family cannot be found in any of the biblical texts. We certainly can’t find it in the Old Testament, where more often than not marriage meant polygamy – one husband with many wives and as many concubines as he could afford.

Likewise, the two primary figures in the New Testament – Jesus and Paul – are both unmarried and childless. Paul even suggests that such a life is the ideal for Christians and proposes marriage only for those who cannot control their lust (1 Corinthians 7:9). Jesus not only critiques the cultural institution of marriage as it was practiced in his day but also removes biological families from their position of social and

⁴ This approach to complementarity shapes most of Robert Gagnon’s recent work on this topic. According to Gagnon, biblical texts reflect “the simple recognition of a ‘fittedness’ of the sex organs, male to female” (*The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000], 364). Given the remarkable diversity of body types in the human species and the complexity of biological, neurological, anatomical, and psychological factors involved in sexual intercourse, whatever Gagnon urges us to recognize would hardly qualify as “simple” except perhaps as an abstract philosophical generalization.

⁵ The frequent and often careless references to Thomistic notions of natural law in today’s debates over human sexuality deserve thorough and thoughtful scrutiny. See for example Mark D. Jordan’s analysis of the cultural, historical and philosophical treatments of “nature” in Aquinas (*The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology*, 136-158).

religious privilege. When told that his family was waiting to see him, Jesus replied that “whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:35).⁶

For centuries thereafter Christians took this radical biblical vision to heart by locating the meaning of family, not in the bonds of matrimony but in the baptismal covenant of church. In that covenant, as Paul said, what matters most is faith, hope, and love. And the greatest of these, of course, is love. While that famous passage from 1 Corinthians 13 is most often heard in Christian wedding ceremonies, Paul was not referring to marriage in that passage but to the touchstones of the Christian community called “church.”

Again, these three points represent just a small slice of the conversation that has brought me to the point of coming back home and being here with you this evening. Whether or not you find these perspectives compelling or persuasive, I do hope you will carve out some space for genuine, open conversation about the issues raised here. To conclude these remarks let me suggest why I think such a conversation is so important.

First, the controversy over lesbian and gay people in Christian churches has made at least this much perfectly clear: for too long sexuality itself has been the proverbial elephant in Christianity’s living room. This was first made evident back in the 1960s as Christian churches struggled with the issue of divorce. Sadly, for many Christian communities not much has changed since then as relatively few Christians know what to say – if anything – about the theological and spiritual significance of sexual intimacy. The debates over lesbian and gay people today present a rich opportunity for Christians to engage in a much broader theological conversation about human sexuality and gender identity.

In that regard let me note briefly here that a biblical and theological conversation about the significance of sexual intimacy need not start from scratch. Whether we turn to biblical texts like the Song of Songs or to the development of incarnational theologies or to the positive role of desire in spiritual practices (even in Augustine!) or to the Medieval mystics, there is plenty of rich and mostly overlooked material within historic Christian traditions for a truly fruitful conversation – a conversation that is sadly long overdue.⁷ As just one example, in strolling through your bookstore earlier today I noticed among the required textbooks a collection of writings by St. John of the Cross. If you are unaccustomed to dealing theologically with sexual intimacy, those writings ought to

⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether makes a similar observation rather pointedly by contrasting the rhetoric of Focus on the Family and the rhetoric of Jesus in the gospels. Whereas the former seeks to help people “discover the founder of homes and the creator of families – Jesus Christ,” according to Luke (14:26), Jesus insists that whoever “does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters...cannot be my disciple” (*Christianity and the Modern Family*, 3).

⁷ Among the many good resources for this kind of biblical and theological conversation, see David M. Carr, *The Erotic Word: Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999); Kathy Rudy, *Sex and the Church: Gender, Homosexuality, and the Transformation of Christian Ethics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997); and Charles Hefling, ed., *Our Selves, Our Souls and Bodies: Sexuality and the Household of God* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1996).

come with a warning label as they turn explicitly not only to erotic but also to same-gender erotic imagery to describe humanity's relationship with God.

Second, there is more at stake in this conversation than whether gay and lesbian people should be included in Christian churches. To be clear here, that aspect of the conversation is critically important and I am personally committed to that work of inclusion. In the meantime, however, how this conversation transpires cuts to the heart of what it means to be God's people in the world and witnesses to the gospel of reconciliation.

This world knows only too well what it looks like for human communities to divide and fracture over disagreements. For many, such divisions are just part and parcel of human nature. What the world does *not* know is what it looks like for people to stay committed to each other in love even when they disagree with each other. This is precisely the gospel challenge facing my own Anglican communion today. If Christians could learn to say to the world "yes, we disagree with each other but we are willing to learn from our disagreements because of our love for one another," that would present a remarkable and urgently needed witness to the Gospel in a world of violence.

Third, and finally, when you do engage in this conversation please remember that what you heard from me tonight did not come from someone who is grudgingly gay, as if being gay is something I have to put up with in my life of faith. My sexuality is not a thorn in my side – it's a gift from God. I am happily a gay man and a committed Christian at the same time. Not least among the reasons for that, which has been rather surprising to me, is that being gay has given me fresh and lively insights into the Bible and theology and into the good news of Christian faith that I simply would not have had otherwise.

I'm saying all of this especially for the gay and lesbian students who are here tonight – and I know you're here even if you can't say so. Please know that you are not alone and that God loves and cherishes you as God's own lesbian and gay children. More than that, and even if you cannot believe it now, I'm here to tell you that while there may be some struggles ahead, a joyous adventure of faith awaits you, not in spite of being lesbian or gay but *because* of it.

Let me also say to Dr. Jones and the rest of the Wheaton administration and staff, thank you. I am very grateful for the gracious hospitality you have extended to us and for your willingness to make this event tonight happen. It gives me a great deal of hope. And for me, that has made this homecoming particularly rich. Thank you.