

The Metropolitan Community Church: A Brief Analysis and Critique

By: Dr. Alan Branch

I. History and Background

The Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC) was founded in 1968 in Los Angeles by Troy Perry. Though the denomination self-identifies as “Christian,” the group is well-known as a church for Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, and Transgendered (LGBT) people. Specifically, the church markets itself as a safe place for people from diverse sexual backgrounds. While heterosexuals are welcome, the MCC is definitely associated with people who identify as “Gay Christians.” The group now claims to have 250 affiliate congregations in 23 countries around the world.

The founder of the MCC is Troy Derooy Perry who was born in 1940 in Tallahassee, FL. Perry’s father died when he was very young and his mother remarried a man who was abusive. As a result, Perry ran away from his home and lived with several relatives, returning to his mother when she divorced her second husband. Having settled in Winter Haven, FL, Perry was licensed to preach by a local Baptist church at age 15. He quickly moved to affiliate with the Church of God (Cleveland, TN) and became an evangelist. Married at 18 to Pearl Pinion, he soon moved to Illinois to study at Midwest Bible College while pastoring a Church of God in Joliet. Soon thereafter, he was caught in a homosexual affair and dismissed from the Church of God. Perry quickly moved to affiliate with the Church of God of Prophecy. Perry transferred from Midwest Bible College to Moody Bible Institute (1960-1961), then moved to California without completing a degree and starting pastoring a church in Santa Ana. Eventually, he became more heavily involved in the homosexual lifestyle and divorced his wife, with whom had also fathered two sons. After serving in the U.S. Army from 1965-1967, Perry settled in Los Angeles and soon began his church as an outreach to homosexuals.

Troy Perry shares his own journey in his book *The Lord is My Shepherd and He Knows I’m Gay*, first published in 1972. According to Perry, he attempted suicide in 1968. Soon thereafter, his mother encouraged him not to give up on religion and to start a church for homosexuals. So, he placed an add in the *Advocate*, a magazine for homosexuals, announcing the start of his church. The first service was in his living room with twelve people on October 6, 1968. Perry’s book is a non-systematic summary of his own theology. In one of the more bizarre passages, Perry reflects on his pre-conception existence and says:

One thing is certain about me: I feel I have a total sense memory that predates my birth by a good long time. It’s like being a seedling soul in two parts, your mother’s and your father’s genes. I have an awareness of having been a seedling – a physical presence in my father’s sperm and in my mother’s ovum before they were united.¹

¹ Troy Perry, *The Lord is My Shepherd and He Knows I’m Gay* (Los Angeles: Nash Publishing, 1972), 10.

Perry is apparently making an attempt to build a case for his view of sexuality which is somehow tied to his “male” and “female” aspects. He goes on in the next paragraph to suggest that people are in fact born gay. The tenor of his book is that this is good, blessed by God, and should be celebrated. Perry has argued many times in the ensuing decades that Jesus never condemned homosexuality and that Old Testament passages condemning homosexuality are internally inconsistent or misunderstood. Perry was invited to the White House by President Jimmy Carter in 1978 and, more recently, by President Bill Clinton. He retired as the moderator of the MCC in 2005.

The bylaws of the MCC are readily available at the group’s website (www.mcccchurch.org). The MCC claims that its doctrinal convictions are within mainstream Christianity, making specific reference to both the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed. The church states the following about Jesus Christ: “Christianity is the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and is the religion set forth in the Scriptures. Jesus Christ is foretold in the Old Testament, presented in the New Testament, and proclaimed by the Christian Church in every age and in every land.”² The statement of doctrine goes on to affirm a vague form of trinitarianism and says, “We believe in one true God . . . of one substance and of three persons: God, our parent-Creator; Jesus Christ, the only begotten son of God, God in flesh, human; and the Holy Spirit, God as our sustainer.”³ Noticeably absent is reference to God the Father. Concerning Jesus, the group further states: “We believe that Jesus . . . the Christ . . . historically recorded as living some 2,000 years before this writing, is God incarnate, of human birth, fully God and fully human, and that being one with God, Jesus has demonstrated once and forever that all people are likewise Children of God, being spiritually made in God’s image.”⁴ Again, while this statement sounds somewhat orthodox at outset, the last line reveals a commitment to universalism and confuses Christian belief in the *imago Dei* with the New Testament terminology of “children of God,” a title only properly used of those who have been converted. This confusion about salvation is further seen when the group says, “We are saved from loneliness, despair and degradation through God’s gift of grace, as was declared by our Savior.”⁵ Completely missing from the group’s confession of faith is any mention of sin. Salvation is only about freedom from psychological impairment (“loneliness,” “despair”).

I have briefly summarized the MCC’s history and doctrine. The rest of my paper will address the hermeneutics of the MCC church in relation to human sexuality with special reference to homosexuality in the Biblical text. At points, I will cite authors friendly to the MCC, but who are not directly related to the MCC.

² *Bylaws of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches*, Article III: Doctrine.

³ *Ibid.*, Article III.1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Article III.3. Elipses in original.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Article III.6.

II. Hermeneutical Foundations

Before examining how the MCC addresses specific Biblical passages, it is important to understand their three hermeneutical foundations: gender as a social construction, literary deconstruction and liberation theology.

Prior to the last half of the twentieth century, all societies considered one's gender to be decided at birth. People are born either male or female and should then, in a best case scenario, be raised in a manner that affirms the uniqueness and goodness of their gender. From a Christian perspective, the gift of gender is part of the goodness of God's creation. While on rare occasions some people may be born with genitalia that reflect both sexes (hermaphrodites), these are the exception and not the rule. Such cases are considered anomalies similar to many other challenges faced by people living in a fallen world.

In complete contrast to this view, the MCC considers gender to be a social construct and in so doing aligns itself with the most extreme components of modern secular and religious thought. The MCC offers the following definition for gender:

Gender: A set of complex and often contradictory socially constructed signifiers associated with a person's masculinity or femininity. Includes but is not limited to genitalia, gonads, chromosomes, hormones, secondary sex characteristics, psychological or emotional self-understanding, roles, clothing, mannerisms, interests, and language. Gender is and can be assigned at birth, assigned by others interpreting these signifiers, or claimed for and expressed by one's self.⁶

Note that in this definition, gender can be something each of us claims for one's self. In this world, men may self-identify as women and women may self-identify as men based on their own self-understanding.

At a most basic level, the assumption of gender as a social construct opens the way for an ever-expanding list of sexual self-identification. Furthermore, the MCC fails to address the most basic difference between genders: childbearing. Women become pregnant and carry children to term and then nurse them after birth. Men cannot become pregnant or nurse children. So, it is difficult to comprehend how the MCC can say childbearing is a social construct. Outside the MCC, other authors have gone further and claim that heterosexuality is merely a social construct as well. For example, Dr. Robert Minor, professor of religion at the University of Kansas, argues that heterosexuality is forced upon people. He bemoans the fact that no one is asking, "What is the cause of heterosexuality?"⁷ Perhaps heterosexuality is "caused" by the simple fact that although men and women are created differently, their anatomical structures correspond to each other and are designed for mutual giving of love and the conception of children. In stark

⁶ "Trans-Glossary," an electronic resource provided by the MCC available at <http://www.mcccchurch.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Transgender2&Template=/CM/HTMLDisplay.cfm&ContentID=1054#Gender>. Accessed 2/20/08.

⁷ Robert N. Minor, *Scared Straight: Why It's So Hard to Accept Gay People and Why It's So Hard to Be Human* (St. Louis: Humanity Works, 2001), 130.

contrast to the MCC, historic Christianity has affirmed that both of these aspects of human sexuality should be expressed in heterosexual and monogamous marriage.

A second foundation for MCC hermeneutics is literary deconstruction. Literary deconstruction is a movement which gained momentum in the late twentieth century. Major facets of literary deconstruction include a “reader-centered” interpretation of major texts and the corresponding disregard for authorial intent. A presuppositional commitment to literary deconstruction is clearly seen the MCC pamphlet, “Our Story Too . . . Reading the Bible with ‘New Eyes.’” A reader-centered hermeneutic is clearly advocated and the author says:

Most modern gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) people are either afraid of the Bible or unfamiliar with its content, thinking that the Bible has only bad news for them. While it is true that the Bible was written in the context of patriarchal, heterosexist cultures, the message of God’s unconditional love in Christ can also be the “power of salvation” for our GLBT community.

A bold, proactive reading of the Bible offers new life for GLBT individuals, their families, and their friends. Consensus is growing among respected scholars of Scripture that the Bible does not condemn such relationships. Contemporary GLBT Christians have focused on proving that the Bible does not condemn homosexuality. It is time to move beyond defending this position. It is not enough for the Bible simply not to condemn homosexuality. We must be able to say, “Yes, it is . . . OUR STORY, TOO!”

Liberation theology and feminist biblical critique have shown that the Bible, in order to empower all people, must be read with new eyes from the vantage point of oppressed peoples. When we read the Biblical stories through today’s experience, they come alive with new relevance. What if we just assume that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people were always in the Bible? Their historical counterparts followed Moses and Miriam in the Exodus, and walked with Jesus by the Sea of Galilee. We are everywhere, and always have been, even when silent and closeted about our sexuality.⁸

Note that the original context of the Bible is considered to be “heterosexist”: In other words, the authors had unfair preference for heterosexual behavior and an unjustified bias against homosexual behavior. To overcome “heterosexism,” we are encouraged to read the Bible through the lens of the modern experience of GLBT people.

In response, it must be said that literary deconstruction as a hermeneutical device violates the law of non-contradiction. A text cannot both affirm and reject contradictory claims and still be consistent. Furthermore, literary deconstruction can prove to be dangerous to the civil rights of all people. By this, I mean that individual and self-centered readings of the Biblical text lead us away from consensus and promote the views of special interest

⁸ Nancy L. Wilson, “Our Story Too . . . Reading the Bible with ‘New Eyes,’” Electronic resource available at www.MCCChurch.org. Last accessed 2/20/08. Emphasis and elipses in original.

groups who desire to have their own agenda pressed upon others. While the MCC may believe this is actually advantageous to them in the current environment, what is to keep violent homophobic activists from saying, “Reading the Scripture through our eyes, we discover a legitimization of our own need to hurt other people in the name of God. We have a special interest in cruelty towards homosexuals. This is really consistent with our current experience.” Such a conclusion should be rejected by right-thinking Christians because it is inconsistent with any system of hermeneutics taught within the boundaries of orthodoxy. However, MCC hermeneutics leave one with the conclusion that no interpretation is better than any other interpretation as long as we can validate our own experience.

Liberation theology is the third foundation for MCC hermeneutics. Gustavo Gutierrez is most commonly considered the “father” of liberation theology. A multi-faceted movement, liberation theology is essentially a blend of Marxism and Christianity. The key premise is that all relationships are characterized by a struggle between oppressors and the oppressed. According to this system, God always sides with the oppressed. A favored theological system among radical feminist theologians, liberation theology is also essential to the MCC understanding of themselves as oppressed people who are unfairly subjected to cruelty by the systemic evil of patriarchal and heterosexual churches.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an extensive critique of Liberation Theology. While the movement as a whole has rightly pointed out the tendency of Christians to focus exclusively on personal sin while avoiding problems of systemic evil, the entire framework of Liberation Theology is flawed. First, evangelicals have not been silent on the subject of systemic evil. For example, as early as 1947, Carl F. H. Henry published a significant work on the topic of systemic evil, *The Troubled Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*. Liberation theology is flawed because it always assumes that God sides with the poor and the oppressed. In fact, Scripture is quite clear that some people are poor and suffer because of their own personal choices. Liberation theology is also flawed because it assumes that every relationship between a majority and a minority must be adversarial. In fact, it is possible for a majority tradition to affirm a strong disapproval of certain behaviors while treating people involved in those behaviors with kindness.

With these three foundations noted, we will now address the MCC interpretation of some major texts addressing human sexuality and various hermeneutical errors in their position.

III. The MCC and Major Biblical Texts Addressing Homosexuality

I will discuss the MCC approach to six Biblical passages relating to homosexuality: Genesis 1 & 2; Genesis 19; Leviticus; the Ministry of Jesus; Romans 1; and First Corinthians 6.

The MCC and Genesis 1 & 2

The literature available on the MCC website does not address Genesis 1 & 2 in relation to homosexuality. This is unfortunate because the Christian doctrine of creation is the foundation for a correct understanding of Gender and sexuality. Genesis 1:26 – 28 emphasizes that both males and females share equally in the image of God, thus affirming the goodness of the gift of gender. Genesis 2:24-25 is the foundational passage of Scripture for marriage and clearly emphasizes that sex is to be reserved for marriage between a man and a woman. Sex is designed by God to be shared in the marriage covenant between a husband and a wife. Any deviation from this standard is sin. In his teaching about divorce, Jesus Christ reaffirmed Genesis 2:24-25 as the correct starting point for understanding marriage (Matthew 19:4-6). The MCC has a flawed starting point because of its failure to engage these texts in a rigorous way.

The MCC and Genesis 19 and “to know”

Genesis 19 and the Sodom story receive a great deal of attention among homosexual activists and this is especially true for the MCC. The text in question says:

Before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, surrounded the house, both young and old, all the people from every quarter. And they [men of the city] called to Lot and said to him, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may have relations with them.”

But Lot went out to them at the doorway, and shut the door behind him, and said, “Please, my brothers, do not act wickedly. Now behold, I have two daughters who have not had relations with man; please let me bring them out to you, and do to them whatever you like; only do nothing to these men, inasmuch as they have come under the shelter of my roof. . . . Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven, and He overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. **Genesis 19:4 – 8** (NAS)

The MCC denies claims that this passage reflects a divine disposition against homosexuality and says, “Some ‘televangelists’ carelessly proclaim that God destroyed the ancient cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because of homosexuality. Although some theologians have equated the sin of Sodom with homosexuality, a careful look at Scripture corrects such ignorance.”⁹ The MCC basically says that this passage is concerned with rape and is not a condemnation of two homosexual people in a loving committed relationship. Using a tactic common among homosexual activists, the MCC overstates the importance of the lexical breadth of the word “to know” (*yada*): “The Hebrew word for ‘know’ in this case, *yadah*, usually means ‘have thorough knowledge of.’ It could also express intent to examine the visitor’s credentials, or on rare occasions the term implies sexual intercourse. If the latter was the author’s intended meaning, it

⁹ Don Eastman, “What the Bible Does and Does Not Say – Homosexuality: Not a Sin, Not a Sickness, Part 2,” Electronic resource available at www.MCCChurch.org. Accessed 2/20/2008.

would have been a clear case of attempted gang rape.”¹⁰ The MCC seems to be arguing from two different directions here. First, they seem to be suggesting that the request was not sexual in nature, a claim common among homosexual activists. Secondly, even if the request was sexual, it could only be classified as a case of rape, and not a blanket condemnation of two homosexuals in a loving, committed relationship.

What does the text mean? How valid is the MCC’s interpretation? The key phrase in this passage is in verse 5 when the men of Sodom demand to “have relations with” the angelic visitors. The NIV is more direct and simply says, “That we may have sex with them.”

The original Hebrew text says: וַיִּדְעוּ (that we may know). The specific verb in question is a Qal imperfect of יָדָע (*yada*) which is used in most contexts to refer to “getting to know someone.” However, it is used occasionally as a euphemism for sexual intercourse. For example, Genesis 4:1 says, “Now the man had relations (יָדָע) with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain, and she said, ‘I have gotten a manchild with the help of the LORD.’” Lot definitely understood a sexual connotation to the Sodomites’ demand because his immediate response was to offer his two daughters who “have never slept with a man” (Genesis 19:8, NIV). The same verb, *yada*, is used to describe the fact that Lot’s daughters are virgins. It is with this sexual connotation in mind that the KJV simply translates the Sodomites’ demand in Genesis 19:5 as, “Where are the men which came in to thee this night? Bring them out unto us, that we may know them.”

The MCC interpretation is not new. Theologians or activists who contend that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was not specifically homosexual behavior frequently do so based on the broad lexical meaning of the Hebrew verb יָדָע (*yada*). It is in fact the case that the basic meaning of the word is “to know.” Occurring 944 times in the OT, it “is used in every stem and expresses a multitude of shades of knowledge gained by the senses.”¹¹ Thus, revisionist interpreters suggest that this basic meaning of *yada* is how we should understand the request by the men of Sodom “to know” the visitors in Lot’s house. Sherwin Bailey, perhaps the first person forcefully to question the traditional understanding of Genesis 19, commented in 1955, “Our ignorance of local circumstances and social conditions makes it impossible to do more than guess at the motives underlying the conduct of the Sodomites; but since *yada*’ commonly means “‘get acquainted with,’ the demand to ‘know’ the visitors whom Lot had entertained may well have implied some serious breach of the rules of hospitality.”¹² Bailey goes on to contend that Lot actually precipitated the mob scene outside his door by flaunting the expected standards of behavior for someone who was not a citizen proper of Sodom, but merely a sojourner. He contends that Lot should have informed the city leaders of the presence of his guest. Since Lot did not do so, the men of the city came to his home out of concern for their own safety. Bailey then summarizes his own view and says:

Is it not possible that Lot, either in ignorance or in defiance of the laws of Sodom, had exceeded the rights of a *gēr* [sojourner] in that city by receiving and

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Jack Lewis, “*Yada*,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, Harris, Archer, Waltke, eds. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 366.

¹² Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*, 3-4.

entertaining two “foreigners” whose intentions might be hostile, and whose credentials, it seems, had not been examined? This would afford a natural and satisfactory reason for the investment of Lot’s house by the citizens, and for their demand: ‘Where are the men which came in to thee this night? Bring them out to us, that we may know them’—that is, take cognizance of them, and enquire into their *bona fides*.¹³

Bailey goes on to say that Lot’s plea for the men of Sodom “not to act wickedly” towards his guests is simply the plea of a good host attempting to avoid an embarrassing social occasion.

Why then were Sodom and Gomorrah destroyed? Bailey claims his “re-interpretation” in no way affects the legitimacy of the judgment which ensued. He says, “The lawless commotion before Lot’s door and the boorish display of inhospitality (coupled, no doubt, with other signs of wickedness which would not escape their scrutiny) could well have been sufficient to satisfy the angels that the report was true – and judgment followed accordingly.”¹⁴

Most people assume that Lot’s offer of his daughters to the men of Sodom confirms the sexual nature of their demand. Bailey sidesteps this and says, “Not doubt the surrender of his daughters was simply the most tempting bribe that Lot could offer on the spur of the moment to appease the hostile crowd.”¹⁵ Bailey believes that the desperate nature of Lot’s offer suggests Lot’s tacit admission to his own fault in causing the commotion.

Finally, when all is said and done, Bailey does not even believe the event recorded in Genesis 19 actually occurred! According to Bailey, the story of the destruction of the cities of the plain was invented as ancient people superimposed divine motives onto natural phenomenon. In short, Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by an earthquake, but “the people of that time who, being ignorant of the scientific explanation, would inevitably tend to ascribe the disaster to supernatural agencies.”¹⁶ The tale was further expanded into a morality tale to warn people that sometimes divine beings visit them in the form of strangers. While the original moral to the story was related to hospitality, Bailey says “the association of homosexual practices with the Sodom story is a late and extrinsic feature which, for some reason, has been read into the original account.”¹⁷

Bailey’s arguments have been very influential and widely repeated. For example, John Boswell affirmed Bailey’s re-interpretation and said, “Since 1955 modern scholarship has increasingly favored [Bailey’s re-interpretation], emphasizing that the sexual overtones to

¹³ Ibid., 4.

¹⁴ Ibid., 5.

¹⁵ Ibid., 6.

¹⁶ Ibid., 7. Bailey later says, “It is clear that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was an historical event, and that it was due to natural and not supernatural causes.” Ibid., 8.

¹⁷ Ibid., 8.

the story are minor, if present, and that the original moral impact of the passage had to do with hospitality.”¹⁸

In response, let us say first of all that both Bailey and the MCC have a defective view of Biblical Inspiration. Sherwin Bailey views the story of Sodom and Gomorrah from a “history of religions” approach. It is simply one myth among many similar myths in the ancient world. In contrast, Jesus Christ affirmed the historical reality of the event (Matthew 10:14-15). Second, it is in fact the case that the citizens of Sodom were definitely inhospitable!

Third, of the 10 clear uses of *yada* in a sexual context, half are in Genesis. As was stated earlier, *yada* is used 944 times in the OT and it indeed has the basic meaning of “to know.” It is occasionally used as a euphemism for sexual intercourse. Outside of Genesis 19:5 and Judges 19:22, it is used 10 times in clear reference to sex. These ten occurrences are quote below from the NKJV because it translates *yada* as “know” in every context.

Genesis 4:1: Now Adam **knew** (*yada*) his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, and said, “I have acquired a man from the LORD.”

Genesis 4:17: And Cain **knew** (*yada*) his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch.

Genesis 4:25: And Adam **knew** (*yada*) his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth.

Genesis 19:8: [Lot said] See now, I have two daughters who have not **known** (*yada*) a man; please let me bring them out to you, and you may do to them as you wish.

Genesis 24:16: Now the young woman was very beautiful to behold, a virgin; no man had **known** (*yada*) her.

Genesis 38:26: So Judah acknowledged them and said, “She [Tamar] has been more righteous than I, because I did not give her to Shelah my son.” And he never **knew** (*yada*) her again.

Judges 11:39: And it was so at the end of two months that she [Jephthah’s daughter] returned to her father, and he carried out his vow with her which he had vowed. She **knew** (*yada*) no man.

Judges 19:25: But the men would not heed him. So the man took his concubine and brought her out to them. And they **knew** (*yada*) her and abused her all night until morning.

¹⁸ John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 93.

I Samuel 1:19: And Elkanah *knew* (*yada*) his wife, and the LORD remembered her.

I Kings 1:4: The young woman was very lovely; and she cared for the king, and served him; but the king did not *know* (*yada*) her.

Bailey himself agrees that these ten passages demonstrate the use of *yada* in an unambiguously sexual way. Of these ten occurrences, six are in Genesis and one is in the very passage in question! Furthermore, to claim a sexual connotation to these ten passages which refer to heterosexual intercourse and reject a sexual connotation to Genesis 19:5 and Judges 19:22 when homosexual activity is in question is a selective application of hermeneutic on the part of Bailey.

Fourth, the arguments of Bailey and the MCC do not adequately explain why Lot offered his daughters. Bailey's argument concerning Lot's daughters seems especially weak. One is left to wonder why Bailey agrees to a sexual use of *yada* in 19:8 and rejects such an interpretation in 19:5, other than a predisposition to remove moral stigma from homosexual acts. Christians do not attempt to expunge Lot from guilt: his offer of his daughters is cowardly and cruel. Yet, the context does indeed favor the idea of a sexual offer of his daughters instead of sex with the visitors to his home. Also, if the Sodomites were only concerned about hospitality, one is hard pressed to understand why they did not seem the least bit puzzled at a sexual offer of two young women. Instead, they became more insistent and violent, requiring angelic deliverance for Lot.

Finally, if the MCC is correct, the reinterpretation which denies the sexual request of the Sodomites makes God unjust. Essentially, God destroys the cities because of a misunderstanding of ancient hospitality protocols. In fact and in contrast to the MCC, Sodom later became the Biblical paradigm for sinful behavior in opposition to God. The public celebration of their homosexuality hastened judgment. Thus, the prophet Isaiah could say, "And they [Judah/Jerusalem] display their sin like Sodom; they do not even conceal it" (**Isaiah 3:9**). Furthermore, the wickedness of Sodom extended beyond sexual immorality to economic exploitation of the poor (**Ezekiel 16:49**).

Genesis 19 and Ezekiel 16:48-50

The MCC also suggests another way of avoiding the implication that God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah for sexual immorality. In an interpretation frequently suggested in the broader homosexual community, they say:

Ezekiel 16:48-50 states it clearly. The people of Sodom, like many people today, had abundance of material goods. But they failed to meet the needs of the poor, and they worshipped idols. The sins of injustice and idolatry plague every generation. We stand under the same judgment if we create false gods or treat others with injustice.¹⁹

¹⁹ Don Eastman, "What the Bible Does and Does Not Say."

The text in question says, “Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy. Thus they were haughty and committed abominations before Me. Therefore I removed them when I saw it. Ezekiel” (16:49-50 NAS). Pro-homosexual advocates frequently claim Ezekiel 16:49-50 teaches that Sodom was punished for failing to help the poor, not because of homosexual behavior. Another recent twist on this revisionist approach was suggested by Brian Doyle, who states:

What then were the people of Sodom really after? They wanted “to know” but not in the ‘biblical’ sense! [i.e., no sexual content to their sin] Their sin was ultimately one of hubris. Ezekiel, arguably the first to offer serious exegesis of the narrative in Genesis 19, places ‘pride’ at the top of the list of Sodom’s vices. The people of Sodom were not out on a frenzied search for sexual gratification, their ultimate plan was ‘to know’ the divine presence and thereby rise above the divine in act of hubris.²⁰

In either case, failing to help the poor or pride, the net result of revisionist arguments based on Ezekiel 16:49-50 is that Sodom was not punished for sexual immorality.

This argument is appealing to many people because homosexual activists appear to be following the principle of allowing scripture to interpret scripture. However, on closer inspection, one sees that revisionist arguments pose a false dichotomy and say we must choose either abuse of the poor or sexual immorality. In reality, Ezekiel’s comments indicate that a hedonistic culture contributed to class exploitation. Alexander agrees: “Sodom’s chief sin had been pride and self-exaltation. This stemmed from her abundant materialism (food), given to her from God (Gen. 13:10), which had resulted in false security, apathy, a luxurious life of ease, and the corollary disdain and neglect of the poor and needy. This material ease fostered sexual perversion.”²¹

It is also the case that revisionist arguments typically ignore verse 16:43 which states, “Because you did not remember the days of your youth, but enraged me with all these things, I will surely bring down on your head what you have done, declares the Sovereign LORD. Did you not add *lewdness* to all your other detestable practices?” The word *lewdness* is *zimma* (זִמָּה). According to Wold, it refers to premeditated sexual crimes (Lev. 18:17, 20:14, Judges 20:6, Ezekiel 16:27, 58, 22:9, etc), is applied to deliberate sin, and sometimes stands parallel to words for lust and harlotry in Ezekiel. Ezekiel’s purpose is not to diminish the sins of Sodom, but to illustrate the seriousness of Israel’s rebellion. In context, he is referring to lewd sexual behavior, thus making a reference to Sodom most appropriate.²²

²⁰ Brian Doyle, “Knock, Knock, Knockin’ on Sodom’s Door: The Function of הַחֲדָלָה in Genesis 18-19”, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 28.4 (2004): 438.

²¹ Ralph Alexander, *Ezekiel*, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 817

²² Donald J. Wold, *Out of Order: Homosexuality in the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1998), 88.

Homosexual activists and the MCC tend to take verse 49 out of context and ignores verse 50. Verse 50 states that the people of Sodom committed “abominations.” This is the word תועבה (to’ebah). This is the same word used in Leviticus 18:22, “You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination.” While we should be clear and state that the prophets referred to a great number of things as abominations, it is obvious that sexual immorality was one of those things.

Finally, Jude 7 clearly states the sexual nature of Sodom’s sin: “Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, since they in the same way as these indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh, are exhibited as an example in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire” (Jude 7 NAS). This verse clearly teaches that sexual immorality was central to the judgment Sodom and Gomorrah underwent. The phrase translated “indulged in gross immorality” is one word in Greek: εκπορνεύσασαι (*ekporneusasai*). A. T. Robertson comments that this passage refers to “horrible licentiousness, not simply with women not their wives or in other nations, but even unnatural uses (Romans 1:27) for which the very word ‘sodomy’ is used (Genesis 19:4-11).”²³

Bailey argued that Jude does not “ascribe the punishment of the Sodomites to the fact that they purposed to commit homosexual acts *as such*; their offence was rather that they sought to do so with “strange flesh” – that is, with supernatural, non-human beings.”²⁴ Richard Hays of Duke University makes the same assertion and says, “The phrase ‘went after other flesh’ . . . refers to their pursuit of nonhuman (i.e., angelic!) ‘flesh.’ According to their argument, the expression *sarkos heteras* means ‘flesh of another kind’; thus, it is impossible to construe this passage as a condemnation of homosexual desire, which entails precisely the pursuit of flesh of the *same* kind.”²⁵

This argumentation concerning Jude 7 fails in the several ways. First, the contention that Jude has the angels in mind when he refers to “strange flesh” is a stretch at best. Second, though Bailey admits the sexual nature of their sin, he downplays the strong nature of the term “indulged in gross immorality.” Third, what might possibly be true when the terms “indulged in gross immorality” and “strange flesh” are used on their own, is far less likely when the terms are used together. Fourth, Jude 4 reinforces the sexual nature of the sin. Finally, much of Bailey’s argument in particular only works if one assumes the Bible does not advocate a uniform view of sexual morality.

²³ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the Greek New Testament*, vol. 6 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1933), 189.

²⁴ Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*, 16.

²⁵ Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 404. Emphasis in the original. One should note that Hays does not advocate an overall approach towards homosexuality that is as radical as Bailey or Boswell.

The MCC and Leviticus 18 and 20

Leviticus 18:22 says, “You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination (תועבה).” This prohibition is repeated in Leviticus 20:13 “If there is a man who lies with a male as those who lie with a woman, both of them have committed a detestable act; they shall surely be put to death. Their bloodguiltiness is upon them.” While the prohibition of homosexual behavior seems clear enough, the MCC says: “Given the strong association of *toevah* [abomination] with idolatry and the canaanite religious practice of cult prostitution, the use of *toevah* regarding male same-sex acts in Leviticus calls into question any conclusion that such condemnation also applies to loving, responsible homosexual relationships.”²⁶

In fact, the MCC does not tell the whole story of the context for these verses. The first half of Leviticus records regulations primarily related to public worship. A distinct shift in emphasis begins in chapter seventeen, and the ensuing regulations address individual morality and religious expression. After addressing individual religious practices in chapter seventeen, chapter eighteen begins to set out the fundamentals of Israelite morality and specifically defines which sexual unions are compatible with worship of the one true God.²⁷ In the midst of the sexual-ethical imperatives of chapter eighteen, the Israelites are reminded seven times (18:3 (2x); 18:24; 18:26; 18:27; 18:29, 18:30) not to imitate the practices of the surrounding nations which worship false gods. This call to separation is emphasized even further by the phrases “I am the LORD your God” or “I am the LORD” six times (18:2; 18:4; 18:5; 18:6; 18:21; 18:30). Wenham captures the relationship between worship of the one true God and sexual morality inherent in Leviticus eighteen when he says, “Israel’s sexual morality is here portrayed as something that marks it off from its neighbors as the Lord’s special people.”²⁸ As a component of a distinctive sexual morality, God explicitly and categorically prohibits homosexual behavior.

The MCC asserts an overly narrow interpretation and claims the Levitical passages are only concerned with homosexual acts as part of pagan worship. In context, several other destructive behaviors are condemned in Leviticus 18, such as incest and burning children. Does MCC mean that these practices are acceptable as long as they are not part of pagan worship? Homosexual activists will also seize upon the death penalty mentioned in Leviticus 20 and will say, “If you evangelical Christians affirm the moral precepts in the holiness code, then you must be in favor of capital punishment for homosexuals!” This is a case of *argument in absurdum*. This argument fails to understand the distinctions between civil, ceremonial, and moral law in the Old Testament.²⁹

²⁶ Don Eastman, “What the Bible Does and Does Not Say.”

²⁷ Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus in The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 250.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Robert Minor, professor of religious studies at The University of Kansas, rejects the tripartite division of the law, saying it is “historically unsupportable.” Robert Minor, *Scared Straight: Why It’s So Hard to Accept Gay People And Why It’s So Hard to Be Human*, 19. In fact, there is a rich tradition in Christian hermeneutics affirming this approach.

The MCC and the Ministry of Jesus

The MCC and other homosexual activists frequently will claim, “Jesus never once explicitly condemned homosexuality! Therefore, you are being unfair to quote Bible verses that seem to say homosexuality is sin!” In fact, this is possibly the most common argument one will hear from the “Christian-Gay” movement. In this form of revisionist argument, pro-homosexual advocates argue that Jesus never specifically condemned homosexuality. Sometimes, they will actually grant that other texts teach that homosexual acts are sin, but they claim to follow Jesus instead of Scripture on this issue. One MCC document says, “While the Bible is an important witness to the relationship between God and humanity, it is not the ultimate revelation of God—Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh is. We must guard against what some scholars have called bibliolatry—making an idol out of Scripture.”³⁰

In response to the MCC, we must first be clear that they are making an argument from silence. For example, let us apply their form of argumentation to wife-beating. The Gospels do not record Jesus ever specifically saying, “Thou shalt not beat your wife.” However, no one would argue that wife-beating is acceptable. Second, Jesus affirmed the inspiration and authority of the Old Testament and the Old Testament clearly defines homosexual behavior as sin. Third, Jesus condemned sexual immorality in general and raised the standard even higher (See Matthew 5:27-30). Finally, this argument poses a false dichotomy between Jesus and the rest of Scripture.

The MCC and Romans 1

According to the MCC, the apparently clear condemnation of homosexual acts in Romans 1 does not apply to loving, committed homosexual relationships between persons who are constitutionally homosexual; Paul only condemns “unnatural” homosexual activities. Romans 1:24 – 27 says:

Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. (NASB)

The MCC comments on this passage and says, “[Paul] is not attempting to give an ethical teaching concerning homosexuality. He is trying to meet his gentile audience on their terms; using the example of some people who are not upholding the dominant/submissive model as an opportunity to talk about all persons’ need for the saving grace of Jesus

³⁰ Mona West, “The Bible and Homosexuality.” Electronic resource available at www.MCCChurch.org. Accessed 2/15/08.

Christ.”³¹ Boswell and others, such as the MCC, have suggested that in Romans 1, Paul is not condemning a loving committed relationship between two people who are genuinely homosexual. Instead, the claim is made that here Paul is condemning heterosexuals who pursue homosexual relationships in rejection of their heterosexual nature.³²

At this point, the MCC may be at their weakest hermeneutically and seems to be engaging in wishful thinking instead of serious exegesis. In Romans 1:18-32 Paul details humanity’s rejection of God (1:18-23) and the ensuing consequences of this rejection (1:24-32).³³ The severity of God’s judgment on fallen humanity is emphasized by three-fold repetition of the phrase “God gave them over” (1:24; 1:26; 1:28). One of the first consequences of rejecting God is sexual immorality, with specific reference to homosexuality. The word translated “impurity” in verse 24 is *ακαθαρσία*; it carries a clear moral sense, with special emphasis on sexual immorality. This is clearly seen in Galatians 5:19-21, where impurity/ *ακαθαρσία* is placed between “sexual immorality” and “debauchery” among the works of the flesh. Paul’s position is unambiguous: In Romans 1:24-27, homosexual acts are a form of impurity.³⁴ This passage is also the only explicit reference to lesbianism in the Scripture. Karl Barth catches Paul’s idea here and says that when humanity rejects the Creator and worships the creation, “Everything then becomes Libido: life becomes totally erotic.”³⁵ In the final conclusion, Romans 1:18-32 teaches that sexual immorality, of which homosexual behavior is a subset, is both a form of idolatry and a result of idolatry. Furthermore, Paul’s critique is closely related to the view of gender presented in Genesis because advocacy of homosexuality by a society is a sign that that culture as a whole has been worshipping idols and that its God-given male-and-female order is being fractured as a result.³⁶

Why does Paul choose to place strong emphasis on homosexuality in this passage? Thomas Schreiner answers this question and says Paul addresses homosexuality here because it functions as the best illustration of that which is unnatural in the sexual sphere. He says, “Idolatry is ‘unnatural’ in the sense that it is contrary to God’s intention for human beings. To worship corruptible animals and human beings instead of the incorruptible God is to turn the created order upside down. In the sexual sphere the mirror image of this ‘unnatural’ choice of idolatry is homosexuality.”³⁷ Since the MCC

³¹ Mona West, “The Bible and Homosexuality.”

³² Some self-professing evangelicals have suggested ideas very similar to the MCC. See Lewis Smedes, *Sex for Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1976), 72 -73.

³³ Cranfield says, “That in this sub-section Paul has in mind primarily the Gentiles is no doubt true. But it may be doubted whether we shall do justice to his intention, if we assume—as many interpreters seem inclined to do—that these verses refer exclusively to them.” C. E. B. Cranfield, *The International Critical Commentary Romans*, vol. 1, rev. ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2001), 105.

³⁴ James D.G. Dunn agrees that Paul is unambiguous here. See James D.G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 38a, *Romans 1 – 8* (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 74. Dunn is convinced Paul was influenced by Stoic philosophy in his moral critique, a claim I find unpersuasive.

³⁵ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., Edwyn C. Hoskyns, trans. (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 52.

³⁶ I’ve borrowed this language from N.T. Wright, *The New Interpreters Bible*, vol. X, *The Letter to the Romans* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 435.

³⁷ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, vol. 6, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 94.

has a defective view of sin (noted earlier), they also have a flawed understanding of the context of Romans 1 and the corresponding condemnation of homosexual acts.

The MCC and I Corinthians 6

1 Corinthians 6:9-11 is part of the larger textual unit of 1 Corinthians 6:1-11 in which Paul chastises the Corinthians for bringing disputes between Christian brothers before pagan courts. The text says:

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters nor adulterers nor *male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders* nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God. (NIV)

The MCC argues that using the word “homosexual” in translating this passage is actually a sign of homophobia. They also suggest, much like their interpretation of the Levitical passages, that if Paul is prohibiting homosexual behavior, he is only prohibiting it in the context of prostitution, and not a loving, committed relationship. Much of the MCC argument flows from the flawed argumentation of John Boswell; he contended that *malakoi* may or may not refer to homosexuality. Similarly, the word *arsenokoitai* may simply mean “males who have intercourse” and is thus, according to Boswell, used here merely to refer to male prostitutes in general. According to Boswell, “The argument that in I Corinthians 6:9 the two words ‘μαλακοι’ and ‘αρσενοκοιται’ represent the active and passive parties in homosexual intercourse is fanciful and unsubstantiated by lexicographical evidence.”³⁸

Are modern translations of 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 homophobic? David Garland summarizes the way 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 fits the larger context when he says, “In the concluding segment (6:9-11), Paul reminds them that the unjust, who include the judges in these courts, will have no part in the kingdom of God.”³⁹ In 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Paul lists ten vices that are characteristic of the wicked. The list here repeats some vices Paul has already mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:10-11, and it bears resemblance to the works of the flesh listed in Galatians 5:19-21. The non-Christian nature of these vices is further emphasized by the way Paul uses the phrase “kingdom of God” to bracket the list. If “kingdom of God” basically carries the idea of the reign and rule of God, then these ten vices are illustrative of what a life outside of God’s reign looks like. It is significant that all ten of the Greek words found in this vice list are also found in the LXX. Thiselton forcefully argues that here in I Corinthians 6:9-11 (as well as in Romans 1:26-31) Paul is making common ground with Deuteronomy 27-30, Hosea, and many other parts of the

³⁸ Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*, 341.

³⁹ David Garland, *1 Corinthians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 194.

Old Testament which teach the axiom “that idolatry corrupts holy identity, which in turn leads to moral collapse.”⁴⁰

In contrast to the claims of the MCC, two terms in the vice list have specific reference to homosexuality. First is the word “male prostitutes” (NIV) or “effeminate” (NASB), both translations of μαλακοι (malakoi), a word which literally means “soft”. Gordon Fee suggests what I consider to be an unnecessarily narrow interpretation of *malakoi* and says, “It [malakoi] also became an epithet for men who were ‘soft’ or ‘effeminate’ [KJV], but most likely referring to the younger, ‘passive partner’ in a pederastic relationship – the most common form of homosexuality in the Greco-Roman world.”⁴¹ In contrast, Thiselton notes that the evidence for restricting the term to contexts of pederasty linked with male prostitution is at best indecisive and at worst unconvincing.⁴² One must remember that *malakoi* does not occur in isolation here, but is joined with *arsenokoitai*. In this context, it most certainly refers to the passive partner in male homosexual intercourse. The second term in question is “homosexual offenders” (NIV) or “homosexuals” (NASB), both translations of αρσενοκοιται (arsenokoitai). While the word *malakoi* had history of usage prior to the New Testament, this is apparently the first historical use of the word *arsenokoitai*. The word is a compound of two words: “male” + “intercourse.” A strong case can be made that the background for the term is the LXX of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. Here, it is an apparent reference to the “active” partner in male homosexual intercourse.

On closer inspection, the MCC/Boswell interpretation is a case of “divide and conquer.” Gordon Fee comments on Boswell’s argument and states, “What may be true of the words individually is one thing. But here they are not individual; they appear side by side in a vice list that is heavily weighted toward sexual sins.”⁴³ Furthermore, the MCC has strained the text to a point of impossibility. D. F. Wright comments: “[*Arsenokoitai*] denotes (males) ‘who lie or bed with males’ (not, as Boswell argues, ‘males [prostitutes] who lie with’ (males or females), which linguistically is impossible). Whether Jewish or Christian—even a Pauline—neologism, the term picks up the Levitical ban, which did not have pederasty in view. Even if what Paul has chiefly in mind is pederasty, his choice of this word, at best very rare, depicts it as sinful in the generic context of males having sex with males.”⁴⁴

In context of the entire vice list, homosexual behavior is one sign of moral autonomy and radical rejection of God’s rule and reign. Thiselton comments on Paul’s emphasis on the dangers of radical moral autonomy present in this text and says, “What is clear from the connection between 1 Cor. 6:9 and Romans 1:26-29 and their OT backgrounds is Paul’s endorsement of the view that idolatry, i.e., placing human autonomy to construct one’s

⁴⁰ Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 446.

⁴¹ Gordon Fee, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: First Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 243.

⁴² Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 449.

⁴³ Fee, *First Corinthians*, 244.

⁴⁴ D. F. Wright, “Homosexuality,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 414.

values above covenant commitments to God, leads to a collapse of moral values in a kind of domino effect.”⁴⁵ Paul’s rejection of radical moral autonomy characterized by all the vices in this list is reinforced when he says in 1 Corinthians 6:19, “You are not your own.”

IV. Conclusion

The interpretations of Scripture suggested by the MCC are grounded in a theology based on a defective view of human sinfulness and influenced by the unsustainable interpretive approach of deconstruction. Their specific interpretations of Biblical passages pertaining to homosexuality are flawed by a selective use of evidence, incomplete references to background material, sloppy handling of the lexical background of words and grammar, and, at times, a complete disregard for context. Logically, they frequently engage in arguments *ad hominem* (everyone who disagrees is a homophobe) and an unfortunate tendency to favor false dichotomies.

A clear reading of Scripture indicates that homosexual acts in both their male and female expressions are contrary to the will of God. While violence against anyone simply because of their sexual behavior is clearly antithetical to the New Testament, we are in fact mandated to call people involved in homosexual behavior *along with all other forms of sexual immorality* to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. A sign of surrendering to the rule of Jesus Christ in one’s life is separation from homosexual behavior.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 452.