

SCRIPTURE AND DOCTRINE

Honor to Whom Honor Is Due

*John Boswell, the Word Paul Borrowed from Moses, and a Mercy That
Does Not Need a New Dictionary*

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A post went up recently in a Lutheran debate group asking Christians to give honor to John Boswell. The writer complained that pastors and preachers lift the work of scholars without credit, and he closed his first paragraph with a fair question: doesn't the Bible say something about giving honor to whom honor is due?

It does. Paul writes, "Pay everyone what you owe him: taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due" (Romans 13:7).

So let us pay what we owe. I want to honor John Boswell in the way a scholar most wants to be honored. I want to take his arguments seriously enough to test them. That is more respect than he gets from people who quote one sentence of his and stop reading, and it is more respect than he gets from people who sneer at his name.

It is also worth noticing which letter that verse comes from. Romans 13 sits in the same letter as Romans 1. If we are going to quote Paul on the duty to honor, we have to let him speak about the rest of it too.

The man

John Boswell was a historian at Yale, a gifted linguist, and a serious medievalist. His 1980 book *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* won the American Book Award for history and changed the shape of the conversation for a generation. He died in December 1994 of complications from AIDS. He was 47. The combination therapies that turned HIV from a death sentence into a manageable illness arrived about two years later.

That is a real loss, and it should be spoken of as one. A Christian who hears of a man dying young of a terrible disease and feels anything but sorrow has not understood the gospel he claims to defend. Boswell, by every account, wanted to belong to the church. Whatever else we say, we will not say it with contempt.

But grief is not an argument, and neither is a long list of languages. The question is not whether Boswell was brilliant. He was. The question is whether he was right.

What the post claims

The post makes two claims. The first is that Boswell settled the language question, showing that the Bible's prohibitions have "little to do with Christian Gays today." The second is that a single quotation from his book is "the core understanding of today's Affirmative Theology." The quotation says there was no word in classical Hebrew or Greek for "homosexual," and that there is no evidence the *qedeshim* of the Old Testament or the *arsenokoitai* of the New were gay people.

Both claims are worth answering. Neither one holds.

1. “There was no word for homosexual”

This is true, and it proves nothing.

Ancient Hebrew and Greek had no word for “homosexual” in the modern sense: a noun naming a kind of person defined by the direction of his desire. The category is modern. But Moses and Paul were not writing about categories of persons. They were writing about acts.

Leviticus does not say, “There shall be no homosexuals in Israel.” It says, “You must not lie with a man as with a woman; that is an abomination” (Leviticus 18:22). There is no temple in that sentence. There is no prostitute, no master and slave, no adult and boy. There is a man, a male, and an act. The absence of a word for an orientation does not make the prohibition of an act disappear. Greek had no word for “alcoholic” either. That term names a condition, and it was coined in the nineteenth century. But Paul had a word for the drunkard (*methysos*), and he put it in the same list. The gaps in a lexicon are not gaps in a moral law.

The claim also underrates the ancients. They were not ignorant of people who seemed drawn by nature to their own sex. In Plato’s *Symposium*, Aristophanes tells a famous myth explaining why some men and some women desire their own sex all their lives. The idea of an innate and lasting same-sex desire was available to the Greek world centuries before Paul. Paul did not lack the concept. He lacked the approval.

2. The word Paul borrowed from Moses

The word at the center of the post is *arsenokoitai*, which appears in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. Boswell argued that it meant male prostitutes, men who sold themselves, and not men who simply lay with other men.

The trouble is where the word comes from. It is a compound of two Greek words: *arsēn*, “male,” and *koitē*, “bed,” the ordinary Greek euphemism for sexual intercourse. Now open the Greek Old Testament that Paul read and quoted, the Septuagint, to Leviticus:

καὶ μετὰ ἄρσεως οὐ κοιμηθήσῃ κοίτην γυναικός “And you shall not lie with a male the lying of a woman.” (Leviticus 18:22, LXX)

καὶ ὃς ἂν κοιμηθῇ μετὰ ἄρσεως κοίτην γυναικός “And whoever lies with a male the lying of a woman.” (Leviticus 20:13, LXX)

There they are, side by side: *arsenos* and *koitēn*. The word Paul uses does not appear in any surviving Greek text before him. The most natural explanation, and the one that has carried the field, is that it was coined in Greek-speaking Judaism straight out of the Levitical

prohibition. *Arsenokoitēs* is a “male-bedder,” a man who does what Leviticus forbids. The British church historian David F. Wright made this case against Boswell in detail in 1984, in a study of the word in the journal *Vigiliae Christianae*. It has worn well.

The way Paul uses the word confirms it. Look at the list in 1 Timothy:

“Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. We realize that law is not enacted for the righteous, but for the lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for killers of father or mother, for murderers, for the sexually immoral, for homosexuals, for slave traders and liars and perjurers, and for anyone else who is averse to sound teaching.” (1 Timothy 1:8-10)

Paul is walking down the second table of the Ten Commandments. Killers of father or mother: the Fourth Commandment. Murderers: the Fifth. The sexually immoral and *arsenokoitai*: the Sixth. Slave traders, that is, kidnappers: the Seventh. Liars and perjurers: the Eighth. The word sits exactly where a man raised on the Torah would put it, under “You shall not commit adultery,” the commandment that guards the gift of sex within the marriage of a man and a woman. Paul is not reaching for an obscure trade term about prostitution. He is reading Moses.

In 1 Corinthians 6:9, *arsenokoitai* is paired with *malakoi*. That second word is broader. It means “soft” and could describe a range of things in ancient usage. I will grant that it is the harder of the two to pin down. But set next to *arsenokoitai*, it most naturally names the passive partner, which is why the Berean Standard Bible renders the pair together as “men who submit to or perform homosexual acts.” Whatever *malakoi* covers, it does not dissolve the word beside it.

3. The *qedeshim* sidestep

The quotation the post leans on also says the *qedeshim* of the Old Testament were not gay people. That is correct. The *qedeshim* (singular *qadesh*) were cult functionaries, generally understood as male shrine prostitutes, attached to the idolatrous worship Israel was forbidden to imitate.

But notice what this does and does not prove. Leviticus 18:22 does not use the word *qadesh*. It does not mention shrines or prostitution at all. It says “a male.” Pointing out that a different Hebrew word in a different passage meant something narrow tells us nothing about the passage that actually addresses the question. It is a sleight of hand, and a scholar of Boswell’s ability should not have needed it.

4. “Against nature”

The post says no one gave a better reading of Romans 1 than Boswell. Here is the text:

“For this reason God gave them over to dishonorable passions. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. Likewise, the men abandoned natural relations with women and burned with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.” (Romans 1:26-27)

Boswell argued that “unnatural” (*para physin*, “against nature”) meant acting against one’s own individual nature. On his reading, Paul is condemning heterosexual people who engaged in same-sex acts, not people whose nature already ran that way. A person with same-sex desire, acting on it, would then be acting “according to nature.”

This is the place where Boswell’s case has fared worst, and the critics are not only conservatives. Richard Hays answered it point by point in 1986 in the *Journal of Religious Ethics*. Bernadette Brooten, a lesbian scholar who has no interest in defending the traditional Christian position, rejected it as well in her 1996 study *Love Between Women*. She concluded that Paul’s language of “nature” condemns same-sex relations as such, and she was candid that she disagreed with Paul rather than pretending he agreed with her. William Loader, after years of detailed work on sexuality in early Judaism and Christianity, reached the same reading of the text.

The text itself shows why. Paul has not been talking about anyone’s personal disposition. He has been talking about creation: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood from His workmanship, so that men are without excuse” (Romans 1:20). Then comes a chain of exchanges. They “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images” (1:23). They “exchanged the truth of God for a lie” (1:25). Their women “exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones” (1:26). The “nature” in view is the order God built into His workmanship, male and female, not the inclinations a particular person finds in himself. And the men did not simply perform acts against their grain. They “burned with lust for one another.” The desire is mutual and it is named.

The post accuses Boswell’s opponents of “anachronism and eisegesis.” Those are exactly the right words. They describe reading a modern notion of individual orientation back into a first-century argument about creation.

5. Where affirming scholarship actually went

Here is the part the post leaves out. Much of the affirming side has stopped defending Boswell’s exegesis.

In 2007, Luke Timothy Johnson, a respected New Testament scholar at Emory, wrote a widely read essay in *Commonweal* in favor of blessing same-sex unions. He did not argue that the church had misread the texts for two thousand years. He granted, in effect, that

Scripture says what it has always been taken to say, and he argued that the church should follow the testimony of human experience instead. He compared it to the church's change of mind about slavery.

I think Johnson is wrong. But he is honest, and his honesty clarifies the real question. The debate is not finally about lexicons. It is about authority. Either Scripture judges our experience, or our experience judges Scripture. Boswell's linguistic case, at this point, is mostly cited by people who have not read what was written in reply to it. The scholars who have read the replies have largely moved the argument somewhere else: not "the Bible doesn't say that," but "the Bible says that, and we should not listen."

A confessional Lutheran has to answer that move plainly. We do not stand over the Word. We stand under it. That is not a rule we made up for this issue. It is the same rule that tells us we are justified freely, which no one's experience would have taught them either.

6. A word about footnotes

The post rebukes preachers for failing to credit their sources, and in principle it is right. Honest citation is a form of honesty, and Christians ought to practice it.

But citation cuts both ways. Honoring a scholar means citing what he got right and also reckoning with what others showed he got wrong. Quoting one paragraph from a 1980 book, with no mention of the four decades of response, is not honoring scholarship. It is skipping it. And it is hard to lecture others on sources in a post that admits, in its last lines, that it relied on AI for its facts about the very man it is honoring.

I mention this not to score a point, but because the subject deserves better. People's lives and consciences are bound up in this question. They should be given the whole conversation, not the most convenient sentence from it.

What the church owes

Now I want to turn the light the other direction, because the post is not wrong about everything.

It speaks of verses used to "bash gays," and it is true that the church has sometimes done exactly that. It has preached Romans 1 as though it were a description of other people. It has quoted Leviticus with relish and passed quickly over the gluttony, greed, gossip, and drunkenness in its own pews. It has made same-sex desire into a special category of sin, worse than the rest, and treated the people who carry it as if they were outside the reach of the gospel. That is a sin too, and it should be confessed as one.

Paul saw it coming. Romans 1 is not where his argument ends. It is the setup for a trap, and the trap closes on the reader who has been nodding along:

“You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on another. For on whatever grounds you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.” (Romans 2:1)

Paul’s list in Romans 1 does not stop at verse 27. It goes on to envy, strife, deceit, gossip, slander, arrogance, boasting, and disobedience to parents. No one reads that list from the outside. By chapter 3 the verdict is universal: “...Jews and Greeks alike are all under sin. As it is written: ‘There is no one righteous, not even one’” (Romans 3:9-10). The law speaks “so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God” (3:19).

That is the right use of the law. It is not a club for one group to swing at another. It is a mirror, and it shows every one of us the same face. The Smalcald Articles say that the chief office of the law is to reveal original sin and all its fruits, to show us how deep our corruption runs so that we despair of ourselves (SA III, 2, 4). The law does not do that work only on some sinners. It does it on all of us.

And that is exactly why the affirming project, for all its talk of compassion, cannot finally be compassionate. If same-sex acts are not sin, then the man who carries that desire and fights it has nothing to confess on that score, and nothing to be absolved of. Revising the law does not free him. It takes away the one word that can. You cannot forgive what you have declared innocent. A church that will not name the sin will soon have no reason to preach the cross.

The gospel does not need a new dictionary. It needs a Savior, and it has one:

“But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been revealed, as attested by the Law and the Prophets. And this righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 3:21-24)

No distinction. Not between the man with same-sex desire and the man with a bottle in his desk drawer, or the woman who cannot stop talking about her neighbor, or the pastor who preaches against all of them and secretly loves his own reputation more than Christ. All have sinned. All are justified the same way, freely, by grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Paul knew the people he was writing to. After the list in 1 Corinthians 6, the list that includes *arsenokoitai*, along with thieves, the greedy, drunkards, and swindlers, he writes the sentence that every one of us needs to hear:

“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 our God.” (1 Corinthians 6:11)

Some of you were. The church in Corinth had men in it who had done what Leviticus forbids. Paul did not tell them they had misunderstood the word. He told them they had been washed. That is the word a struggling Christian can stand on: not “God never minded,” but “God has forgiven, and the water is on you.” The same Christian may still feel the old desire tomorrow. So may the drunkard. So will I, in my own way. The baptized do not stop being sinners in this life. They stop being condemned ones.

The treasure

The post ends by asking whether we should forget “the priceless treasures” Boswell left us. Boswell left us a serious book, and it should be read seriously, alongside the serious answers it received. That is honor rightly paid.

But the church has a treasure that does not depend on any scholar, living or dead. It does not depend on winning a lexical argument on Facebook, or on how many languages anyone mastered. It is the word Paul passed on to Timothy right after the list in which *arsenokoitai* appears:

“This is a trustworthy saying, worthy of full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst.” (1 Timothy 1:15)

Honor to whom honor is due. To Boswell, the honor of being answered. To Christ, the honor of being believed: not as the One who lowers the bar, but as the One who cleared it for us, and who says to every sinner who comes to Him, of every kind, *you were washed*.

Scripture quotations are from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB). Septuagint text of Leviticus is given in Greek with a literal rendering.

For further reading: David F. Wright, “Homosexuals or Prostitutes? The Meaning of ἀρσενokoῖται (1 Cor. 6:9, 1 Tim. 1:10),” Vigiliae Christianae 38 (1984); Richard B. Hays, “Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell’s Exegesis of Romans 1,” Journal of Religious Ethics 14 (1986); Bernadette J. Brooten, Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism (University of Chicago Press, 1996); Luke Timothy Johnson, “Homosexuality & the Church: Scripture & Experience,” Commonweal, June 15, 2007 (print issue; posted online June 11).

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