

## **A Review of *Reconciling Scripture for Lutherans: Sexuality & Gender Identity* by Austen Hartke and Emmy Kegler**

**Dr. Thomas Egger, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis**

### **A. Initial Assessment and Description**

*RSL* does not carefully listen to and apply the Bible as God's authoritative Word to the matter of homosexual behavior, but rather *offers creative ways to employ Biblical language and theological categories to confirm a set of convictions that have been arrived at on other grounds.*

The booklet *Reconciling Scripture for Lutherans: Sexuality & Gender Identity* (*RSL*) is aimed at a broad, popular audience, and it is rhetorically effective, especially in striking a humble, honest, inquiring tone. In its cumulative impact, it invites readers to set aside the scriptural passages that condemn homosexual behavior (which it characterizes as ambiguous, culturally-conditioned, or superseded by Jesus and the Gospel). It invites readers to soften any stark duality between the categories of male and female grounded in Genesis 1 and 2, in part by attending to stories of eunuchs in the Bible as representatives of diverse "in-between" categories of gender identity. Lastly, it invites readers to privilege Bible passages that speak of the profound welcome and inclusion which God has extended to all people in Jesus Christ.

The authors offer to help the church "apply a Lutheran interpretation of the Scripture in regard to LGBTQ+ individuals and communities" (7). They thereby attempt to reconcile eight passages of Scripture that seem to prohibit homosexual behavior with the contemporary societal acceptance of homosexuality and diverse gender identities. In the introduction, *RSL* describes these eight texts (Gen. 1; Gen. 2; Gen. 19; Lev. 18 & 20; Deut. 22:5; Deut. 23:1; Rom. 1; and 1 Cor. 6:9/1 Tim. 1:10) as "clobber passages"—implying that some Christians have used these passages to "clobber" homosexuals. The first half of the booklet is titled "Passages Used to Exclude" (with a picture of a closed door), and it provides a 2–3 page discussion of each of these eight texts. The second half of the booklet is titled "Passages Used to Welcome" (with a picture of an open door), and it takes up eight other Bible passages (Ruth; Ps. 139; Isa. 56; Matt. 22; Acts 8; Acts 10 & 11; 1 Cor. 12; and Gal. 3). This latter discussion of "welcoming" texts has two persuasive purposes: to further disqualify the applicability of the initial eight "exclusion passages" and to invite readers to a confident, "scriptural" acceptance of homosexual (or other diverse sexual) lifestyles in the church.

In what follows, I first situate the *RSL* booklet alongside some other works which exhibit a similar approach to Scripture ("Three Hermeneutical Parallels"). I then summarize and respond to the authors' commentary on the first four (of eight) "Passages Used to Exclude." Third, I comment on three themes which recur throughout the *RSL* booklet. Finally, I reflect briefly on the *RSL* booklet's use of four Lutheran principles of interpretation.

## B. Three Hermeneutical<sup>1</sup> Parallels

In noting that the *RSL* booklet *offers creative ways to employ Biblical language and theological categories to confirm a set of convictions that have been arrived at on other grounds*, three projects came to mind which illustrate this same dynamic.<sup>2</sup> In my mind, these three “hermeneutical parallels” are revealing.

First, in a surprisingly blunt address given at the 1998 international meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Helsinki, Lutheran theologian Krister Stendahl discussed the role of the Bible in constructing a helpful Christian theology of religions. The title of his essay is “Dethroning Biblical Imperialism in Theology.” (Take a moment to chew on the meaning of that title.) In his opening remarks, Stendahl approvingly cites two quotations from Heikki Räisänen’s *Marcion, Muhammad, and the Mahatma*: “One should face the possibility that curious (and problematic) ideas may also be found even in central places in the Bible,” and “One should in fact be free to decide against all biblical options if need be.”<sup>3</sup> As his address continues, Stendahl reminisces about his development of a sharp hermeneutical distinction between “what a text meant” and “what a text means” during his early days as a professor at Uppsala University:

The issue was the ordination of women in the Church of Sweden. And the triggering factor was the signing of a public statement to be signed by the New Testament teachers in Uppsala and Lund Universities. They declared ordination of women to the priesthood to be contrary to the Bible—with no if, and or but! It was the early 1950s. I was a doctoral student at the time, also part of the teaching staff. When asked to sign, I found myself in a strange position. **I was quite convinced that the ordination of women was the right thing, and that for many reasons. At the same time, I found the arguments of my teachers and colleagues exegetically sound.** I did not want to make Paul and/or Jesus into proto-feminists. Certainly the overwhelming biblical perception of the role of women could not be easily brushed aside, for example by reference to those

---

<sup>1</sup> The term “hermeneutical” and the related noun “hermeneutics” refer to principles or frameworks for the interpretation of texts.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to the three parallel approaches to be discussed below, another highly-relevant reading is Eryl W. Davies, “The Morally Dubious Passages of the Hebrew Bible: An Examination of Some Proposed Solutions,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 3 (2005): 197–227. Davies surveys various “proposed solutions” (reading strategies) for resolving the tension between certain Bible passages and contemporary moral convictions. In the end, he finds all of them lacking integrity and logical coherence, and reluctantly recommends a “reader-response” approach that reads texts “in an openly critical, rather than a passively receptive, way” (218–19). In introducing his article, he explains: “Were it not for the fact that [the Hebrew Bible] has been granted canonical status, it could be regarded as simply another random collection of books from antiquity that could be read and valued just like any other body of literature. But the fact is that the Hebrew Bible is part of the authoritative Scripture of the Church, and Christian believers might therefore expect these writings **to confirm their beliefs, practices, and values**. If so, it is likely that they will often be disappointed, for **its teaching at times appears to be at best irrelevant, and at worst, morally perverse. It is thus not surprising that biblical scholars have sought various ways to mitigate the offending passages of the Hebrew Bible**, and the purpose of the present article is to offer a critique of some of the strategies that have been proposed” (198–99; emphasis added).

<sup>3</sup> Krister Stendahl, “Dethroning Biblical Imperialism in Theology,” in *Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Helsinki*, ed. Heikki Räisänen, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, R. S. Sugirtharajah, Krister Stendahl, and James Barr (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 61–68. Here, Stendahl is citing Räisänen, *Marcion, Muhammad, and the Mahatma: Exegetical Perspectives on the Encounter of Cultures and Faiths* (London: SCM, 1997), 6, 202.

docile women in Luke's gospel. I had to give reasons for not signing on, and when you are in a minority of one, you have to think harder. **Hence the urgent need to take the hermeneutical gap more seriously.** To counteract the imperialism of biblical scholars I assigned to them/us the limited role of what I called the descriptive task....The more clearly the primary role of biblical scholars [was] limited to their giving access to "original" meanings, the greater the need for other members of the theological team, not least creative systematic theologians.<sup>4</sup>

Stendahl is not the author of the *RSL* booklet, nor is he or his exegetical approach invoked by the booklet's authors. Nevertheless, I would suggest that *RSL* exhibits an impulse and approach similar to that described here by Stendahl. While the authors claim to offer commentary "which takes into account biblical integrity and knowledge, key Lutheran interpretive lenses, and the diverse experiences of the LGBTQ+ community" (7), their approach actually seems to spring from clear initial convictions derived from last category mentioned—experience—from which they proceed to creatively employ "Lutheran lenses" to establish hermeneutical distance between the teaching of certain biblical texts and contemporary life.

A second example exhibiting parallels to the hermeneutical approach of *RSL* is a short essay by Ted Grimsrud titled, "Is God Nonviolent?"<sup>5</sup> Grimsrud is a professor of Theology and Peace Studies at Eastern Mennonite University. His essay opens with the question-and-answer: "Is God nonviolent? My short answer is that I *believe* God is. But the evidence is ambiguous." Still in the first paragraph, he provides the outline for his essay: "Let's think in terms of the standard sources for theology: scripture, history or tradition, and present experience."

As Grimsrud reviews the scriptural evidence, he begins by acknowledging that the Bible seems

clearly to present God as directly involved in violent acts as well as commanding some human beings to commit violence against others. The evidence is so well known and so massive that we really don't need to say much about it. If we draw our conclusions from the perspectives of many specific biblical references read in isolation, we have to say that the God of the Bible is violent.<sup>6</sup>

If we were to pile all these texts together, Grimsrud suggests, "it would likely become clear that I was proving too much. That is, the violence of God in the Bible becomes too much to believe." After moving to demonstrate that there are also biblical texts which "contain other evidence," Grimsrud concludes the section by emphasizing "the **ambiguity** of the Bible's portrayal of God in relation to violence."<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Stendahl, 62–63. Emphasis added. Later in the essay (p. 65), Stendahl again says explicitly: "To me it became increasingly important to widen the gap between original meanings and what came to be or what may now be the meanings, **often driven by moral sensitivities and insights not found in the text.**" Emphasis added.

<sup>5</sup> Ted Grimsrud, "Is God Nonviolent?" *The Conrad Grebel Review* 21:1 (Winter 2003): 13–17.

<sup>6</sup> Grimsrud, 13.

<sup>7</sup> Grimsrud, 14. Emphasis added.

In surveying the Christian theological tradition, Grimsrud acknowledges that Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin all “portray God as having a dark, violent side.” Yet there have also been minority voices that “witnessed to the lack of perfect consensus in the Christian tradition.” Thus, he concludes that the testimony of history and tradition to the question is also ambiguous, at least “depending on how one weighs the evidence.”<sup>8</sup>

Present-day, empirical investigations into the question of whether nature as a whole or human beings specifically are “violent by nature” have generated mixed results. Therefore, Grimsrud concludes, “we cannot draw evidence from the realm of nature or of human experience to prove that God is violent or that God is not violent.”<sup>9</sup>

Grimsrud’s entire persuasive appeal in his essay rests on **demonstrating the ambiguity and inconclusiveness** of Scripture, tradition, and experience in answering the question “Is God Nonviolent?” He subtitles the final section of his essay “Vision,” and here he suggests that we can and must affirm that God is nonviolent and that God thus calls us individually and as a society to eschew all violence. At the center of Grimsrud’s “vision” are the “life and teaching of Jesus” and the eschatological end of humanity—“what it is that we are meant to be (and will become).”<sup>10</sup> All other sources of knowledge regarding his topic—including the Bible—are declared ambiguous. This allows Grimsrud to dismiss biblical evidence that God is not always “nonviolent.”

In a similar fashion, in discussing the first eight Bible passages, the rhetorical aim of the *RSL* commentary is not to offer greater clarity of understanding but rather to upend the clarity and traditional understandings of these passages, so that the reader must at least conclude that the passages “might not” be saying what they seem to be saying. This is often accomplished by phrasing observations as questions. For example, with the prohibition of men wearing women’s clothing in Deuteronomy 22:5, they conclude:

“Some transgender and gender-non-conforming people have this verse quoted to them when it comes to their gender expression, but *it’s possible that it may not apply*. If trans folk are not wearing clothing as part of a ritual worshipping other gods, or to damage their relationship with God or with their neighbor, is it really the same thing as the practice this verse was originally referring to?” (28)

Similarly, “the abomination of Sodom and Gomorrah *might not* be same-gender sexual activity” (23).

Like Grimsrud’s essay on a non-violent God, the *RSL* booklet also uses the person and ways of Jesus as a key interpretive lens by which to approach biblical passages which challenge their position. The *RSL* authors cite Luther’s observation that the Old Testament text is the manger which holds Christ, and then suggest that perhaps some OT instructions are merely straw, which may be dispensed with: “How do these laws compare with what we know of Christ? Do they

---

<sup>8</sup> Grimsrud, 14–15.

<sup>9</sup> Grimsrud, 16.

<sup>10</sup> Grimsrud, 17.

correspond with the God we know in Jesus, or are they instead like the straw that held the baby?” (24)

A third parallel is more precise and can be presented more briefly. A blog associated with the Old Testament course “Queer Bible Hermeneutics” at the Perkins School of Theology (SMU) introduces a post titled “Leviticus 18:22” as follows:

“You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.” [Lev 18:22] It is not a surprise that this verse seems to say that gay male sex is forbidden in the eyes of God. The dominant view of western Christianity forbids same-sex relations. This verse is one of the *clobber passages* that people cite from the Bible to condemn homosexuality. This essay first looks at the various ways the verse is translated into the English Bible and then explores some of the **strategies used to create an affirming interpretation of what this passage means for the LGBTQ community.**<sup>11</sup>

The authors of the *RSL* booklet are engaged in a similar project. The goal of the booklet’s commentary on Scripture is not to hear the Word of God clearly, on its own terms, but rather to employ interpretive strategies which will bend the scriptural witness to their pre-determined ethical conclusions.

## C. The *RSL* Discussion of Four “Clobber Passages” – Summary and Response

### 1. *Genesis 1: “Through the Dialectic of Law and Gospel”*

The *RSL* booklet suggests that it is misstep to take “male and female he created them” as “Law,” thus “excluding people with gender- and sex-diverse identities.” (16) It is true that the original human creation and divine blessing are more “Gospel-like” than “Law-like”—that is, they display God’s undeserved kindness at work on behalf of humanity, making “new *creation*” a fit metaphor for the Gospel of Christ in the NT.

However, much of the rest of this section is not derived from the text of Genesis, and much of it distorts the Genesis text. The authors say that God’s creation of humanity as “male and female” does not suggest that there are *only two* sexes any more than the separation of land and sea denies the existence of “such things as swamps, estuaries, or reefs” (16). They conclude that “male and female” should be taken “as a summary of every point along [a] spectrum, rather than as two distinct boxes” (16). In the text, however, there is clearly a man and a woman, and no one else. Their “man-ness” and “woman-ness” will become *the basis for marriage* in Genesis 2:24, a clear point of the text the *RSL* booklet does not touch upon. It is a biological fact that the blessing of fruitfulness and multiplication, mentioned in this text, depends upon this maleness and femaleness.

---

<sup>11</sup> Accessed online on Sept. 16, 2020: <https://blog.smu.edu/ot8317/2016/05/11/leviticus-1822/>. The italics are original, the bold font emphasis is added.

In anticipation of this latter objection, the authors reinterpret “be fruitful and multiply” as a “command towards all kinds of fruitfulness...art, or food, or medicine, or affordable housing, or new communities of faith!” (17) This is a clear distortion of the text. “Be fruitful and multiply” specifically refers to *biological reproduction and population growth*, as evidenced by (a) the fact that the same blessing is directed to the fish on Day 5 (Gen 1:22); (b) it is related to the mandate “and fill the earth” (Gen 1:28; cf. the fish in 1:22: “and fill the waters in the seas”); (c) the repetition of this blessing to Noah and his family, coming out of the ark after the decimation of the earth’s population by the Flood (Gen 9:1, 7; and repeated to the animals and birds coming out of the ark in Gen 8:17); and (d) the allusion to this language in Exodus 1 as the population of the Hebrews provokes oppression by the Pharaoh (Exod 1:7–9: “the sons of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly and they multiplied...so that the land was filled with them....[The king of Egypt said:] ‘The people of Israel have become too many and too mighty for us.’”).

Finally, in their closing discussion of the image of God in this section, the *RSL* booklet states: “God is calling us into our divine nature as individuals and communities who can work together with God to create a more just and loving world. No matter what we do or who we are, none of us will ever lose that mark of grace—the stamp of God’s nature on our very being” (17). Here they strongly imply that the divine image and nature belong to us, after the fall, simply because of who we are, without mention of Christ—and assure us that this image of God in us cannot be lost. While claiming a Lutheran hermeneutic, the authors here ignore the dynamics of Law and Gospel, the lens of the Gospel of Christ, the testimony of the rest of Scripture, and the clear teaching of the Lutheran Confessions that the most important aspect of the image of God, original righteousness, was profoundly effaced and thoroughly lost after the Fall, and is restored only in Christ.

## 2. *Genesis 2: “Through the Metaphor of the Manger”*

Genesis 2 is the clearest passage in all of Scripture for describing God’s (man-and-woman) design for marriage, with its “Therefore/For this reason (עַל־כֵּן)” in Gen 2:24. The leaving and cleaving and one-flesh of marriage will continue to happen throughout history *because God created woman out of man* (Gen 2:22–23). The Bible’s entire sexual ethic, in all its parts, revolves around protecting the divine gift of marriage between man and woman and designating marriage as the sole intended place for sexual activity.

In discussing Genesis 2, the *RSL* booklet focuses on the phrase “one flesh,” which the authors of the booklet use to deconstruct the biblical emphasis on marriage as “male-female pairs whose differences complement each other” (19). Since Adam rejects all animals as appropriate companions and rejoices that the woman is “bone of my bone, etc.,” and since the text goes on to culminate in the expression “one flesh,” the real emphasis on marriage in Gen 2, they argue, is “a desired ‘sameness.’” Although the authors do not complete their argument here, the logical conclusion of their argument is that a *homosexual* relationship is a genuine (and perhaps even more genuine) expression of God’s plan for a close bond between “sames.”

Of course, there is a truth here: marriage *is* a bond between two *humans* (same), not between a man and an animal. But marriage in Genesis 2 is also clearly and specifically between a man and a woman—the woman was newly created for the man. The OT will later forbid a man to lie with

an animal—immediately after forbidding a man to lie with another man as one would with a woman (Lev 18:22–23).

In any case, the core of the expression “one flesh” is not “sameness.” It is *permanent, inseparable union and togetherness*. The man and the woman were two, but in marriage God makes them one—a union to be honored and preserved by the couple and all those around them (“let man not separate,” Matt 19:6).

The interpretive lens claimed in this section is “the metaphor of the manger,” that is, reading the Scriptures and especially the OT as normed by the person, ways, and words of Jesus. But other than mentioning that Jesus quotes Genesis 2, indicating that he “felt strongly about this one-flesh union” and “emphasizes God’s agency” in marriage, the authors do not really attempt to use this hermeneutical lens in relating Gen 2 to questions of sexuality and gender identity. Instead, they rely on a forced interpretation of isolated details within the text and then shift at the end to an emotional appeal.

The closing paragraph of their very short discussion of Genesis 2 is poignant: “When Christians seek to exclude same-gender couples from entering this kind of relationship, we are in fact creating the problem that God intended to solve in Genesis 2. We force our LGBTQ+ siblings to live in loneliness rather than celebrating the kind of commitment that Jesus himself recognized as foundational and God-given” (20).

There is a real human struggle and pastoral challenge identified here for our brother or sister with same-sex attraction. How should Lutheran pastors and people respond to those who identify as gay or lesbian or who are transgender? In terms of sexual activity, if they seek to live as Christians, must they be directed to a life of celibate singleness? For many Christians who face this challenge, this is indeed the wisest, most honest counsel. Does such counsel “force our LGBTQ+ siblings to live in loneliness”? Here, the *RSL* authors imply that the only God-given provision for overcoming human loneliness is marriage. But the vocation of husband or wife is not the only avenue to community and companionship. For Adam, there was *no other person*; he was “alone,” without a single human companion. But now, through the God-given fruitfulness and multiplication of the human family, the world is full of potential friends, companions, collaborators, co-workers, teammates, family members, and so forth (to say nothing of fellow Christians in the body of Christ)—for single people as well as married people.

The Church should welcome sinners, all kinds of sinners. There are different kinds of “welcome” which the Church can extend to same-sex-attracted people. The *RSL* booklet implies that the only genuine welcome the Church can extend is the assurance that the Scriptures can be “reconciled” to allow homosexual intercourse and even to celebrate it as “God-given.” However, a faithful reading of the Scriptures calls us to a different kind of welcome: offering same-sex attracted people genuine love, friendship, care, and camaraderie; even as we call them to join us in repenting of all our sins before God, hearing with joy his word of pardon, and seeking divine grace to live a new life in Christ and to conform our lives to his will. Here, as in all matters, God would have us speak the truth in love.

### ***3. Genesis 19: “Through the Canon of Scripture Interpreting Scripture”***

The third “clobber passage” addressed by *RSL* is the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen 19. The demand by the men of Sodom to have sex with the two angels visiting Lot’s home “has been interpreted by some as a biblical condemnation of homosexuality” (21). The authors hope that by offering a more nuanced understanding of the sin of Sodom, they can demonstrate that “the abomination of Sodom and Gomorrah might not be same-gender sexual activity” (23).

It is important to say, in framing a response to *RSL* regarding Gen 19, that the main rhetorical function of the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative (along with the retrospective reflections on this narrative elsewhere in Scripture) is indeed not, narrowly, the condemnation of homosexuality. Rather, this biblical episode is a key revelation of the justice of God and his decisive power to punish human wickedness. As Peter puts it, God condemned Sodom and Gomorrah to extinction, “making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly” (2 Pet 2:6). Just as the day of the great Flood came, so also the day of reckoning came for Sodom and Gomorrah (...so also the day came later for Jerusalem in 586 B.C, and so also the Last Day will come for all humanity when Jesus comes again in judgment). The main point of the story is God’s just judgment of the wicked. Nevertheless, the *brazen wickedness of Sodom is epitomized in the narrative by their shameless homosexual proclivities*, as later scriptural references will note. Thus, while the central theme of the narrative is not the condemnation of homosexuality in a direct sense, *it nevertheless assumes and depends upon a recognition of the wickedness of such sexual perversion, and thus serves indirectly to reinforce this recognition*.

The authors of *RSL* set out to engage Gen 19 with the reading strategy of “Scripture interpreting Scripture.” While they do indeed draw numerous other passages from the Old and New Testaments into their reflections, the arguments that they build upon these intertextual relationships are empty and illogical.

In their discussion of Sodom and Gomorrah, the *RSL* authors stress the biblical portrayal of these cities as sinful and thus condemned by God. Yet they argue that other biblical texts call into question *whether their homosexual lust and actions* are specifically regarded as sinful and abominable. The discussion here in *RSL* unfolds in five brief intertextual arguments, somewhat haphazardly ordered. I will note each briefly and offer a response.

First, they point to Ezek 16:49–50, which looks back on Sodom’s sins as pride, excess, failure to help the poor, and doing abominable things. They conclude that this passage does not view Sodom’s offense as sexual activity but rather as injustice and greed. Response: A reputation for additional sins does not exclude the Bible’s clear censure of their homosexual lust and actions, and the expression “performed an *abomination* before me” in Ezek 16:50 is likely a reference to their sexual sin, perhaps even an allusion to their homosexual sin, specifically (compare the term “abomination” (תועבה) in Lev 18:22).

Second, *RSL* points to Jesus’ warnings in the Gospels that the day of judgment will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah than for cities which reject Jesus and his claims (Matt 10:1–15; 11:20–24; Luke 10:1–12). The authors note, without further argument or explanation, that “The sins of these cities are not sexual but are about a refusal to hear Jesus’ message or to be



welcoming to his followers” (22). Their implication seems to be that the main sin of Sodom and Gomorrah must not have been sexual either.

Response: Jesus is not drawing a parallel between Capernaum and the OT cities of Sodom and Gomorrah based on the specific kind of sin, but rather based on their shared fate of devastating divine judgment. They are both wicked, but Jesus’ point assumes that the guilt and sin of Capernaum (rejecting the Christ) is something *even greater than the very-great depravity of Sodom*. Although the guilt and judgment of Sodom is lesser than that of Capernaum, Jesus’ rhetoric of warning depends upon the shocking greatness of Sodom’s guilt and judgment: Capernaum, your sin is *even worse* than Sodom’s! Again, the fact that Jesus invokes the fate of Sodom to warn the people of Capernaum does not mean that he was suggesting the nature of the sin and guilt was the same. Thus, the fact that Capernaum’s sin was not specifically sexual has nothing to do with the question of whether Sodom’s sin was specifically sexual, or included sexual immorality.

Third, they acknowledge that Jude *does* characterize the sin of Sodom as sexual in nature.<sup>12</sup> They cite a portion of the indictment in Jude 1:7: “indulged in sexual immorality and went after other flesh.” Regarding this twofold expression, they simply assert: “neither of which are sins specific to same-gender sexual activity” (22).

Response: This undefended assertion is remarkable. Jude’s statement here is, in fact, read by many *as specifically referring* to same-gender sexual activity. The sinful act “went after ‘other’ flesh (σάρκὸς ἑτέρας)” may have the angelic nature of the visitors in view (they sought to have sex with “transcendent” beings, as BDAG puts it). But some interpreters see this as a euphemism for homosexual desire and pursuit, which is perhaps in view in the ESV rendering of Jude 1:7 “...and pursued *unnatural* desire” (cf. Rom 1:26–27). This latter interpretation is strengthened by the fact that Jude makes this accusation not only against Sodom (where the incident with angelic visitors and mob sexual coercion occurred) but against “Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities” (Jude 1:7), suggesting that an ongoing lifestyle of “pursing-other-flesh” sexual sin is in view. Furthermore, once the booklet cites Jude and notes its focus on the sexual sin of Sodom, it is unclear what the point has been in previously downplaying the sexual aspect of Sodom’s guilt with reference to the statements of Ezekiel and Jesus.

Fourth, the authors present a catena of OT passages that invoke the fiery judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah as a warning for Israel at various times in their history. As they cite and describe the circumstances in Deut 29:22–23; Isa 1:9–11; Jer 23:13–15; and Amos 4:1–11, they stress that the sins of Israel in these passages are never sexual immorality, much less homosexuality, but rather violation of the covenant with God; faithless sacrifices; adultery, lies, and injustice; and empty worship. They conclude: “The fiery judgment of Sodom is not limited to same-gender sexual acts” (22).

---

<sup>12</sup> Alongside the Jude reference, they could have also cited (but do not) 2 Pet 2:7: “[God] rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by *the sensual conduct* of the wicked.” The Greek word translated “sensual” in the ESV rendering of 2 Pet 2:7 is ἀσέλγεια, which BDAG defines as “lack of self-constraint which involves one in conduct that violates all bounds of what is socially acceptable, self-abandonment.” BDAG goes on to note that this word is used “esp. of sexual excesses,” a sense under which it lists 2 Pet 2:7.

Response: There is nothing to this argument. See point 2 above.

Fifth, the authors shift the discussion to the matter of the non-consensual nature of the sexual sin in Gen 19, emphasizing that the wickedness here is not simply homosexual desire and pursuit but *non-consensual stranger rape*. They pair this biblical story with the rape of the visiting Levite's concubine by the men of Gibeah in Judg 19. Response: This is the only argument in the chapter that has any weight. However, its legitimacy is only apparent. In both stories, the coercive aspect of the sexual sin *amplifies* the sense of the people's wickedness. In the context of the pan-biblical conviction regarding the sinfulness and unnaturalness of same-sex intercourse, the *male* citizens' sexual perversion is also and already exhibited by their request to "bring out *the men/the man*...so that we may 'know' *them/him*" (Gen 19:5; Judg 19:22). In both Gen 19 and Judg 19, the narrator describes those making this demand as "men" twice—"the *men* of the city, the *men* of Sodom...surrounded the house" (Gen 19:4) and "the *men* of the city, *men* of worthlessness, surrounded the house" (Judg 19:22). Non-consensual coercion by mob threat greatly heightens and compounds the wickedness of the men's homosexual lust, but both aspects of their behavior contribute to the overall portrayal of the Sodomites as the epitome of wickedness and of their sins as "very grave" and "so grievous" (Gen 18:20, ESV and NIV, respectively).

#### **4. Leviticus 18 and 20: "Through the Metaphor of the Manger"**

Whereas Genesis 1–2 stand as the clearest scriptural foundation of the nature of marriage as the union of a man and woman, two passages from Lev 18 and 20 stand as the most direct biblical prohibitions of homosexual intercourse. Therefore, these are key passages for *RSL* to attempt to "reconcile."

Lev 18:22: "You shall not lie<sup>13</sup> with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination."

Lev 20:13: "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them."

In discussing these texts, *RSL* adopts the interpretive approach of "the metaphor of the manger," which looks to Jesus (his work and teaching) as the determining factor according to which OT passages must be heard and applied. This in itself is appropriate, and certainly Lutheran. However, having cited these two Leviticus passages, the authors then query: "How do these laws compare with what we know of Christ? Do they correspond with the God we know in Jesus, or are they instead like the straw that held the baby?" (24) This latter question is not a truly Lutheran question. God as he is revealed in the OT Scriptures *does not contradict* "the God we

---

<sup>13</sup> Oddly, the *RSL* booklet has an identical error in citing each of these verses, quoting them as "You shall not *like* with a male as with a woman..." and "If a man *likes* with a male as with a woman..." (24).

know in Jesus.”<sup>14</sup> Neither does the Christ-centered nature of the Bible give us license to regard God-breathed statements of OT Scripture as mere “straw.”<sup>15</sup>

In pursuing their question “How do these laws compare with what we know of Christ?” the *RSL* authors explain that “Jesus’ relationship with the Mosaic Law is complex.” He affirms it (Matt 5:17), deepens it (Matt 5:21, etc.), and “creates a system that more actively breaks down oppression, injustice and hatred” (25). But Jesus also “directly contradicts” the Law of Moses, particularly the Sabbath law. When presented with “the chance to fulfill Moses’ command to put a sexual sinner to death” (the woman caught in adultery in John 7:53–8:11<sup>16</sup>), *RSL* emphasizes, Jesus “refuses to condemn the woman and sends her on her way” (26).

The *RSL* authors conclude that

Jesus’ complex relationship with the Law of Moses, at the very least, does not support modern-day violence against a man who has sex with other men. It also calls into question how we apply the laws of the Hebrew Scriptures, and whether they are as a whole an absolute norm of faith and life – or whether they require new interpretation in the same way that Jesus offered (26).

Response: Jesus’ “new interpretation” of OT laws pertaining to marriage and sexuality does not abrogate these laws. While he did not take up homosexuality directly, his teaching regarding sexual purity deepened rather than dismissed these OT laws – even looking at a woman lustfully was adultery, divorcing one’s spouse and marrying another was adultery. Jesus does not cast a stone at the woman caught in adultery, but neither does he condone her sin. He sends her away with the loving admonition: “Go, and from now on *sin* no more” (John 8:11).

The themes of marriage and sexual purity are important in Jesus’ teaching, and he affirms that the OT teachings in this regard reflect God’s will for human life. So also the Jerusalem Council, when wrestling with the continuing applicability of the OT Law to Gentile converts, concluded that this “yoke” should not be put on them, but that they *should* be exhorted to follow certain key abiding aspects of the OT law: “abstain from the things polluted by idols, and *from sexual immorality*, and from what has been strangled, and from blood” (Acts 15:20).

By the end of this section, it is unclear where the authors’ argument has taken us, in terms of concrete application. Does the law against adultery likewise require new interpretation? Does God no longer call Christians to avoid adultery, and no longer call adulterers to repentance? Should those who are active in adulterous relationships be welcomed and affirmed by the

---

<sup>14</sup> In this respect, consider the line from Luther’s famous hymn: “Ask ye, Who is this? Jesus Christ it is, Of Sabaoth Lord, And there’s none other God.” (*Fragst du, wer der ist? Er heißt Jesus Christ, der Herr Zebaoth, und ist kein andrer Gott.*) This line boldly confesses Jesus as the only God, the same God revealed in the OT. The expression “of Sabaoth Lord” captures the common OT title for the God of Israel: “Yahweh of Sabaoth,” which means “Yahweh (or LORD) of hosts/armies.” In a very real sense, the prohibitions against sexual immorality in Lev 18:19–23 should be regarded as spoken *by Jesus*.

<sup>15</sup> Luther’s metaphor of the OT as Christ’s manger was intended to *elevate* Christian reverence for the OT Scriptures, not to relativize the authority of the OT. This will be discussed further toward the end of this review, in Section E.4.

<sup>16</sup> The *RSL* booklet incorrectly cites this as John 8:53–9:11.

church? Should the church welcome active adulterers to serve as pastors, publicly preaching and teaching and administering the sacraments? Do the OT laws against incest and bestiality likewise “require reinterpretation”? Or is it only laws prohibiting same-gender sexual activity that the church must reconsider? But why these alone?<sup>17</sup>

## D. Some Key Notes in the *RSL* Booklet

Throughout the *RSL* booklet, a few key notes struck me as worthy of brief reply.

### 1. *Homosexuality should be acceptable because “Jesus”*

First, the discussion of these passages continues to highlight the example of Jesus as a key standard against which to affirm or set aside other statements of Scripture. However, their use of this “metaphor of the manger” principle at times ignores clear scriptural statements, at times is used to deny clear scriptural statements, and at times strays into jumps of logic that are simply puzzling.

The authors note that inclusion of the outsider Ruth into the people of Israel resonates “with the stories and work of Jesus” (42), who welcomed Samaritans, sinners, and other outsiders. Certainly true. But the scriptural portrayal of the stories and work of Jesus reveal to us more about Jesus than that he was welcoming. The overarching message of Jesus’ public ministry was “Repent!” He offered forgiveness and welcome, but he also taught and exhorted people to turn away from their sin. He welcomed tax collector Zacchaeus, a dishonest and despised man, but Jesus’ mercy and welcome led Zacchaeus to reject and make amends for his former dishonesty. The author’s portrayal of a welcoming Jesus unconcerned about sexual (or other) sin, is a partial and distorted portrayal of “the stories and work of Jesus.”

In discussing Psalm 139, *RSL* affirms that God has created each of us “wonderfully,” including the brain “matter and synapses that make up our sense of self, our sexuality, and our gender identity” (45). The authors then relate this OT psalm to Jesus:

---

<sup>17</sup> Once the biblical prohibitions of same-sex intercourse are set aside, it becomes difficult to argue for the continuing validity of any biblical commandments regarding marriage and chastity. As an example, in 2011, in order to open their ministerium to individuals in same-sex relationships, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) made a telling revision in their standards for ordination. They deleted their constitutional requirement that all ministers, elders, and deacons live “in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness.” In place of these clear biblical directives, clergy now must “submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life.” In a churchwide newsletter communicating this change, PCUSA officials stated: “This decision begins with an **unequivocal affirmation** that ordained office will continue to be rooted in each deacon, elder, and minister’s ‘joyful submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life’” (my emphasis). This is an astounding characterization of this revision, which is, in fact, **nothing more than an equivocation** on the expression “submission to...Jesus Christ.” The previous standard of “fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness” was the church’s explanation of one aspect of “submission to...Jesus Christ.” The new wording allows everyone to hold to their own version of what such submission should look like, unmoored from the clear expressions of God’s will for marriage and chastity in the Holy Scriptures. See “Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) approves change in ordination standard,” May 10, 2011. Accessed online on November 5, 2020: <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2011/5/10/presbyterian-church-us-approves-change-ordination/>.

For Christians, who read all of scripture with Christ's words and actions in mind, it may be helpful to remember that Jesus cared deeply about the whole being of a person, always healing someone's body and then also restoring them to the community they've been cut off from, holistically attending to needs that include their bodies, minds, and souls (ex: Matt 8:1–4). Therefore, we must also attend to the needs of the whole person of our neighbor, not asking them to cut off pieces of themselves in order to be accepted (45–46).

There is no logic here, at least if the most basic elements of biblical theology are assumed. The argument seems to be as follows. God has created all people, mind and body. People's sexual identity and behavior stems from their minds. It is acceptable to change or modify the bodies God has given us if it helps "to make us more whole and more healthy"—as with eyeglasses, removing a diseased appendix, hormone therapy, and gender-reassignment surgery (the authors call it "gender-confirmation surgery").<sup>18</sup> Jesus demonstrated care for people's whole being—bodies, minds, and souls. *Their conclusion: Following Jesus' example means affirming people as they are without asking them to examine their lives, recognize and repent of their sin, and turn away from past ways of wickedness.* This is a logical labyrinth, and the conclusion drawn does not follow, and is not consistent with how Jesus or the New Testament authors speak.

## 2. Eunuchs

I will forego any attempt to summarize *RSL*'s interesting presentation of a biblical theology of eunuchs. It is, however, one of the more stimulating elements in the discussion, and it serves as an example of how different readers with different experiences and priorities will notice and place more emphasis on different aspects of the biblical witness. It seems to me that the trajectory of increasing and radical inclusion of eunuchs across the relevant texts discussed does indeed serve as a beautiful picture of the nature of Christ's Gospel. It may also be the case that the situation of eunuchs can offer a rough "gender-in-between" parallel which might be useful in pastoral care for gender-confused Christians or for transgender people who have already undergone surgery/ies.

However, I fail to see how the Bible passages about eunuchs stand as a parallel to sexually-active homosexuals, bisexuals, and so forth. In the ancient world, men were neutered to render them less-inclined-toward and incapable of sexual intercourse. Jesus says that some are eunuchs from their birth, some have been made eunuchs by others, and some "have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 19:12). Ultimately, the illustration of eunuchs in Christ's own teaching does not point toward a category of God's people who pursue various gender-in-between versions of extra-marital sexual fulfillment, but rather Christians who for the sake of the kingdom of heaven—or perhaps even because of the way that they have been "wired" from birth or childhood—do not marry and instead live lives of godly *celibacy*.

## 3. They didn't know what we know

---

<sup>18</sup> I certainly do not intend in this paragraph to question the moral acceptability of surgical procedures and other therapies for individuals who are born with malformed or sex-ambiguous genitalia.

In scattered places, *RSL* asserts that if the biblical authors knew what we know now, they would not have prohibited homosexuality. These statements span both halves of the booklet.

In discussing the prohibitions in Leviticus 18:19–23 against sex during menstruation, adultery, man-with-man sex, and bestiality, *RSL* comments:

Some scholars think that ancient cultures, including the Israelites, thought that semen was limited. Sex with animals, same-gender sexual activity between men, and sex during a woman’s menstrual cycle all would have ‘wasted’ the chance at a child. Depriving a wife of children (most men receiving these instructions were married!) would not have been an act of love. Today, since we know more about the reproductive process (and aren’t desperately trying to survive in the desert!), we know that semen isn’t limited—but we do talk about the importance of consent (51).

Suggesting this rationale for these prohibitions is pure speculation on the part of a few scholars. The rationale for prohibiting intercourse with a woman during menstruation is elaborated further in Leviticus 20:18. The explanation there is, frankly, obscure, but it has nothing to do with the *RSL* booklet authors’ suggestion regarding a limited supply of semen. Furthermore, the God who gave these commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai was not in the dark about this aspect of human reproduction.

Leviticus 18:19–23 indicates the illicit nature of these acts under various labels: “uncleanness,” “abomination,” and “perversion,” using the term “abomination” for man-with-man sex.<sup>19</sup> Immediately following these prohibitions, Leviticus 18:24–30 warns that God ultimately judged the Canaanites—devastatingly—in part because of *these* immoral sexual practices (adultery, man-with-man sex, and bestiality), which polluted the land so that it “vomited them out” (Lev. 18:24–30). God admonishes the Israelites not to practice “these abominations” lest they pollute the land and the land vomit them out also. Within this warning, the phrase “these abominations” is repeated four times. Since the term “abomination” was used only in describing man-with-man sex in the preceding verses, it is clear that, while not focusing exclusively on homosexuality, God’s warning in Leviticus 18:24–30 has homosexual behavior prominently in view.

The authors of *RSL* suggest that “because we know more” than the Old Testament writers, we have greater moral clarity, at least regarding the sexual morals commanded in Leviticus 18:19–23. However, rather than assuming that we have a better cultural vantage point and base of knowledge to make moral determinations about sexual ethics, it would be wise for us to consider whether the cultural winds around us are returning us to the moral blindness of the ill-fated Canaanites. “To the Torah and to the Testimony!” Isaiah exhorts us. “If they will not speak according to this Word, it is because they have no dawn” (Isa. 8:20).

The Apostle Paul, too, *RSL* claims, lacked the knowledge that would have better positioned him to speak to the matter of same-sex and gender-diverse sexuality. “Paul...did not have a concept

---

<sup>19</sup> The Hebrew terms here are טָמֵא “to be(come) unclean” (Lev 18:19, 20, 23); תּוֹעֵבָה “abomination” (Lev 18:22); and תְּכֵל “confusion, perversion” (Lev 18:23). BDB further explains this last term as a “violation of nature, or the divine order.”

of ‘sexual orientation’ as we have today, which makes it difficult to assess what ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ may mean in a time when we acknowledge the existence of people who are not solely attracted to a gender different from their own” (32–33). In Paul’s culture, “same-gender sexual activity existed, but long-term, monogamous, same-gender romantic relationships did not.... Since there was no cultural concept of long-term same-gender romantic relationships, his call for faithful monogamous marriage could not make space for same-gender sexual activity” (36–37).<sup>20</sup>

Of course, this much is true: Paul’s culture, and the Bible in particular, viewed same-gender sex as “unnatural” and therefore had no “cultural concept” of same-sex marriage. If we seek to reflect honestly in our own day on what “natural” would mean in reference to sexual ethics, we might consider the way in which marriage has been viewed by every culture in the history of the world until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is not just Paul’s culture that lacked the “cultural concept” of homosexual marriage, but every culture in human history. Might that give us pause before we re-define marriage, which is so fundamental to society and human welfare, and which the *RSL* authors affirm is deeply important to Jesus himself?

## E. Reading the Bible as Lutherans

The authors of *Reconciling Scripture for Lutherans* set out to offer a distinctively Lutheran reading of the Bible’s testimony on questions of sexuality and gender identity. They propose four “Scriptural lenses” drawn from the writings of Martin Luther to guide our interpretation. No Lutheran will disagree with the four principles that they enumerate, at least in broad strokes: Law and Gospel, plain reading of Scripture within its original context, Scripture interpreting Scripture, and the conviction that the OT (and the NT, too, for that matter!) ultimately testifies of Christ and should be read in light of Christ. In practice, however, their application of these Lutheran principles to the discussion of biblical texts is often *misapplication*.

### 1. *The Dialectic of Law and Gospel*

The introduction of *RSL* affirms that the Law gives us the knowledge of our sins and show our need for a Savior, while the Gospel is given to preach the forgiveness of sins to troubled consciences and to offer us eternal life in Christ (9–10). We can indeed rejoice in this distinction, and praise God that we are not acceptable in his sight because of our obedience to his good commandments (regarding sexuality or any other matter) but only because of our dear Savior, who died for us and for all. We have all sinned. And we have all sinned sexually. And not one of us can stand before God unless clothed in the purity, chastity, and righteousness of Jesus Christ.

God has in his wisdom given us *both* Law and Gospel, and his clear word of Law is vital in calling us to repentance, so that we might see our need for a Savior and rejoice in the Gospel. However, *RSL* never presents the Bible’s teaching on homosexuality (or any other prohibited behavior) as a summons to personal repentance. While *RSL* describes the Gospel as the good

---

<sup>20</sup> The authors make an unproven assumption that “same-gender romantic relationships” did not exist in the past. Moreover, the Bible’s emphatic rejection of homosexual acts is an unambiguous repudiation of same-sex marriage whether or not there was same-sex romance.

news of forgiveness in Christ for “troubled consciences,” they do not point Christians who are “troubled” by questions about same-sex attraction or gender identity *to repentance and forgiveness* in Christ, but instead to creative arguments *that the Scriptures should not “trouble” them* about these matters. The booklet softens Christ’s call to repentance over sexual immorality. While the *RSL* introduction claims that Christ’s forgiveness “gives us the love and encouragement we need to follow the Law more thoughtfully” (10), they do not speak of forgiveness *for the sin of homosexual lust and sex* (which Christ has won for us and freely gives!), nor do they admonish forgiven Christians to follow God’s commandments in this area “more thoughtfully,” unless by “thoughtfully” they mean creatively setting aside God’s Law and will and deciding for oneself what is pleasing or not pleasing in God’s sight.

## ***2. The Plain Reading of Scripture in Its Original Context***

*RSL* emphasizes that while reading the Bible, we should seek to determine what a passage would have meant “to its original hearers in its historical context” (10). This is a sound, and Lutheran, principle of interpretation. However, it is disturbing how willing the authors were to grasp hold of any speculative historical explanation which would serve to soften or remove a passage’s warning against homosexual behavior, no matter how unlikely or ill-fitted to other clear statements in the scriptural context. Some examples of this have been discussed above. This is not what Luther had in mind by his emphasis on the literal, contextual sense of Scripture.

## ***3. The Canon of Scripture Interpreting Scripture***

Luther did indeed emphasize that Scripture must be interpreted by Scripture. When reading an individual passage, it should be read in its immediate context, in the context of the rest of Scripture (especially directly-related passages), and in the context of the center of Scripture: God’s redeeming work in Christ. However, when discussing a single passage, simply bringing several other passages into the discussion does not guarantee an appropriate interpretation. Passages must be rightly related—logically and Christologically. When claiming to examine a passage through the lens of Scripture interprets Scripture, *RSL* too often fails to make logical arguments regarding the significance of the relationships. This is discussed above.

*RSL* also invokes the principle of Scripture interprets Scripture to set “inclusion in Christ” passages alongside passages which condemn same-sex intercourse, with the suggestion that these welcoming passages perhaps abrogate or supersede the Bible’s teaching regarding God’s will for his people’s sexual behavior. For example, Galatians 3:26ff rejoices that “in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith...no longer Jew or Greek...no longer slave or free...no longer male and female.” On this basis, *RSL* prompts the reader to consider: “What might this call for unity, and not uniformity, look like for Christians today? Might it mean an acceptance of differences in sexuality and gender identity? Might it look like a welcome for all?” (60). However, rich Gospel passages such as Gal 3:26ff should not be read to set aside and cancel the Bible’s teaching on sin, sexual purity, and repentance.

Similarly, *RSL* takes up Jesus’ teaching in Matt 22:34–40 that the greatest commandments involve love (for God and for neighbor), and uses this principle to re-examine the Leviticus 18 prohibitions against bestiality, male-with-male sex, and sex during a woman’s menstrual cycle.



The real question, for each of these practices, *RSL* suggests, should be whether it shows “love.” Here, the *RSL* authors do not mention the fourth prohibited practice in that section of Leviticus 18—adultery. But following their line of reasoning from Jesus’ words in Matt 22, what would prevent the parallel conclusion that, if one participates in an adulterous affair as an expression of “love for God and neighbor,” then that, too, “might align with the whole of Scripture” (51)?<sup>21</sup>

A better approach to allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture would be to associate true love for God and neighbor with God’s commandments regarding our behavior toward him and toward our neighbor. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments,” Jesus taught (John 14:15).

#### 4. *The Metaphor of the Hebrew Scriptures as the Manger which Holds Christ*

I have reviewed *RSL*’s use of this interpretive lens at some length above.<sup>22</sup> In discussing God’s prohibitions of same-sex intercourse in Leviticus, the authors query: “How do these laws compare with what we know of Christ? Do they correspond with the God we know in Jesus, or are they instead like the straw that held the baby?” (24) Here, the *RSL* authors claim to be employing Martin Luther’s interpretive principle. But it is instructive to hear Luther’s complete quote about the OT as a “manger”:

These are the Scriptures which make fools of all the wise and understanding, and are open only to the small and simple, as Christ says in Matthew 11:25.

**Therefore dismiss your own opinions and feelings,** and think of the scriptures as the loftiest and noblest of holy things, as the richest of mines which can never be sufficiently explored, in order that you may find divine wisdom which God here lays before you in such simple guise as to quench all pride. Here you will find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies.<sup>23</sup>

In light of the *RSL* authors’ clear effort to align the Bible with contemporary sexual tolerance, Luther’s words here stand as an important warning and corrective. We should come to the Scriptures as those desiring to be taught. “Dismiss your own opinions and feelings,” Luther counsels, and find in the Bible “divine wisdom which God here lays before you in such simple guise as to quench all pride.” It is indeed the ultimate purpose of the Scriptures to drive us to Christ and to root us in him, but it is not a “Lutheran” interpretation, ostensibly for this reason, to simply dispense with passages with which we disagree.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> For those who have attempted to minister to a Christian brother or sister ensnared in the sin of an adulterous affair, it will be recognized that this sin is often defended by those involved on the basis of their intense, genuine love for one another and sometimes even on the basis of the intense, genuine spirituality fostered by the relationship (“love for God”).

<sup>22</sup> See especially Sections C.4. and D. 1.

<sup>23</sup> LW AE 35:236 (my emphasis).

<sup>24</sup> The saving (or “soteriological”) purpose of Scripture, however, is not to be relegated to certain passages of explicit “Gospel,” but—just as all of Scripture relates to Christ, whether we perceive this or not—so also Lutherans confess that all of Scripture is significant to God’s purpose of salvation in Christ. Robert Preus, *Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism: A Study in Theological Prolegomena* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1950), 1:188–89, summarizes the theology of Lutheran dogmatician Abraham Calov on this point: “All of God’s revelation, every aspect of it, is binding, however remotely or indirectly it may appear to touch on the ultimate soteriological purpose of Scripture. It is, in fact, the soteriological purpose of revelation and of Scripture that demands that every aspect of God’s revelation be taken seriously.”

## F. Concluding Assessment

Christians are sinners gathered by the voice of their Shepherd, sinners forgiven by the saving work and Gospel word of Jesus. We are called to love as Christ has loved us, to forgive as Christ has forgiven us. We are called to remove the log from our own eye before we seek to remove the speck from our neighbor's eye. We are called to share the message of repentance and forgiveness of sins in Christ to those near and far. Christians are called to walk as disciples taught by Christ, seeking to conform our lives to his good and gracious will, yet still knowing that we are in desperate need of his forgiveness every day and every hour. And he grants it, so great is his mercy! We are called to rejoice in God's good gift of marriage, the mysterious icon of the love between Christ and his Bride. Christians are called, in the words of Luther's Small Catechism, to "lead a sexually pure and decent life, in what we say and do, and husband and wife love and honor each other." Apart from the marriage bed of husband and wife, Christians are called to sexual chastity and celibacy. All this is the clear testimony of the Holy Scriptures.

As stated earlier, *Reconciling Scripture for Lutherans* does not carefully listen to and apply the Bible as God's authoritative Word to the matter of human sexuality and gender identity, but rather ***offers creative ways to employ Biblical language and theological categories to confirm a set of convictions that have been arrived at on other grounds.*** While the booklet claims to approach the Bible on this topic through a Lutheran lens, its approach does not embody the convictions of Martin Luther. Luther urged a different approach: "We must let the prophets and apostles sit on the lectern, and we here below at their feet must hear what they say, and not say what they must hear."<sup>25</sup> Perhaps *our own* assumptions, morals, convictions and desires need correction. Perhaps our Lord, through his word, is calling *us* to repentance. Luther writes: "Let us be and remain pupils, and let us not change the word of God; we ourselves should be changed through the word."<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Luther's Works, AE 34:284.

<sup>26</sup> Luther's Works AE 3:297.