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It will be published soon along with other papers from the event. For more information, please visit the BTI website at www.bostontheological.org or the ICPL website at www.interreligiouscenter.org.

Freedom for Community

Heterosexual Marriage, Celibate Vocation, and Same-Gender Unions in the Covenantal Order of the Church

by Andrew G. Lang

Karl Barth, some of you may know, was perhaps the greatest Reformed Christian theologian in the 20th century. Writing in the early 1950s, he had this to say about homosexuality in his magisterial *Church Dogmatics*:

[Homosexuality] is the physical, psychological and social sickness, the phenomenon of perversion, decadence and decay, which can emerge when man refuses to admit the validity of the divine command.... And since humanity as fellow-humanity is to be understood in its root as the togetherness of man and woman, as the root of this inhumanity there follows the ideal of a masculinity free from woman and a femininity free from man. And because nature or the Creator of nature will not be trifled with, because the despised fellow-man is still there, because the natural orientation of him is still in force, there follows the corrupt emotional and finally physical desire in which—in a sexual union which is not and cannot be genuine—man thinks that he must seek and can find in man, and woman in woman, a substitute for the despised partner.¹

But it is not widely known that this was not Barth's last word on the subject. In 1968, a few months before his death, Barth asked his secretary (Eberhard Busch) to reply on his behalf to a pastor seeking guidance. Barth said he was too old to reopen the question but that he "was no longer completely satisfied with [his] incidental remarks" in *Church Dogmatics*. Busch continued:

[O]ne is permitted to think that, in conversation with doctors and psychologists, [Dr. Barth] could come to a new judgment and description of the phenomenon [of homosexuality] precisely against the background of...[God's command, which is] also to be understood and followed as "freedom for community."²

Freedom for community! In 1968, these were bold words for any Reformed theologian to apply to homosexual relationships—especially one who was born in 1886! Barth knew that "freedom" and "community" could hardly be understood apart from each other, because human freedom exists only within the sovereign freedom of God who loves humanity and creates order where there is disorder, righteousness where there is unrighteousness, and community where there is chaos—in other words, freedom within an order of community established by God, and to which we are accountable.

This is not usually what "freedom" means in liberationist discourse on sexuality. Particularly in the radical school of "queer theology," freedom is grounded not in the freedom of God but in personal freedom—in the autonomous self that, liberated from external authority, is the locus of meaning, value, and purpose. In his liberationist reading of the *Song of Songs*, Christopher King writes that

[O]nly unconditional erotic autonomy makes true and complete self-offering possible in the first place. It is this liberty to love as one wills that queer people of faith must finally claim as a fundamental principle of human well-being and, truly, of salvation itself.³

King's ethic does connect with Jewish and Christian tradition at one critical point: that the goal of love is to be understood as "true and complete-self offering" to the other. But many of us will find a different starting point for the freedom to love than "unconditional erotic autonomy" or the "liberty to love as one wills." In the Reformed tradition, the self is constituted in orientation towards a divinely ordered community and therefore is in some sense heteronomous rather than autonomous. Put in another way, the self is not our private property. For Barth, "[h]uman freedom is the *gift* of God in the free outpouring of His grace."⁴ This is also the witness of Jewish tradition: "[E]xistence is not a property but a trust," Abraham Joshua Heschel writes in *Man is Not Alone*. "[T]he self is not an isolated entity, confined in itself, a kingdom ruled by our will."⁵

In Reformed tradition, freedom cannot be understood as my self-liberation but only as the sovereign gift of God who, despite my opposition, rushes to my side and creates the right order that I have abandoned. So God places me in the order of Christian community, with men and women who follow Christ as their Lord and whose lives are oriented towards this Lord as the source of their freedom and the measure of their behavior. It is in this community, and nowhere else, that God meets me through Word and Sacrament, and where I learn the boundaries and, paradoxically, the unlimited possibilities of the freedom that is mine only as gift, and never as self-determination.

Freedom, including my freedom to love, therefore begins with the sovereign freedom of God who elects humanity to be God's covenant partner, and who forms our lives so that we are *called* to relationships that correspond to the image of God's faithful love for humanity. We are, in other words, created for community. Heschel writes that:

[Humanity] in [its] being is derived from, attended by, and directed to the being of community. For [humanity], *to be* means *to be with* other human beings. [Our] existence is coexistence. [We] can never attain fulfillment, or sense meaning, unless it is shared, unless it pertains to other human beings.⁶

Humans are designed to be *with each other* and not alone; we are hard-wired for relationship. And this is God's plan. But we are also sinners, and sin threatens our relationships with death. In the self-assertion of the ego against God not only our relationship with God but also every human relationship is brought into disorder. There is, in fact, no human covenant that is not wounded by our collective and individual rebellion against God's sovereign claim on our lives. This is certainly so in all the greater and lesser injuries that we inflict on each other—in heterosexual marriage, in celibate life, and in the partnerships formed by gays and lesbians. Sin distorts our life together, so that no contentious issue in the church can possibly be discussed without anger and mutual recrimination—particularly an issue like sexual morality, which exposes our deepest fears of alienation, loneliness and chaos. Sin distorts all of our relationships. Left on our own, we cannot live together as God intended.

Covenant: God's bridge to humanity

But God does not leave us alone. Sin does not have the final word. This brings us to covenant, defined by the Westminster Confession as God's "voluntary condescension" which bridges "[t]he distance between God and the creature."⁷ "Covenant" is a critical concept in Reformed ethics, and I cannot possibly say much about it a few minutes. But I agree with Max Stackhouse that "it is likely that nothing less than an understanding of and a commitment to covenantal mutuality under God can bring moral and spiritual coherence to what is otherwise experienced as a seething, chaotic mass of dominations and arbitrariness."⁸

Moral and spiritual coherence! These are not empty words! We all sense that the scattered and broken pieces of our lives (and our relationships) belong together but we simply don't know how to re-build the structure we have demolished. But the Reformed tradition affirms that the coherence that eludes our best efforts has already been established definitively in Jesus Christ, a coherence—a belonging together—that we encounter in the covenant of Baptism, in which Christ's obedient "Yes" to God becomes our own "Yes"—and this is the starting point for our lifelong journey from chaos to coherence.

The self-disclosure of God in Baptism reveals that God's being itself is covenant. In the relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Christians believe that God's nature is not solitude, but communion. God's inherent nature is to be *with others*. God is "no *Deus solitarius* but *Deus triunus*, God in relationship," says Karl Barth.⁹ For Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, this means that God is always "God-With-Us."

God is not a sealed fortress, to be attacked and seized by our engines of war (ascetic practices, meditative techniques, and the like) but a house full of open doors, through which we are invited to walk. In the Castle of the Three-in-One, the plan has always been that we, those who are entirely "other," shall participate in the superabundant communion of life. Whatever we regard as the ultimate meaning of human life...all this is fulfilled in the original prototype: in the life of the eternal "With."¹⁰

Christians therefore look to the triune being of God as the primal form of all of our covenants. Here, God chooses not to be alone but with and for the humanity God created. Here, God elects humanity to be God's covenant partner. Here, God's love cannot be contained but pours itself out with incomprehensible majesty into the creation and reconciliation of humanity. Christian covenants must participate in this Trinitarian structure, so that the order broken by sin and restored by God's sovereign decision in Christ becomes an order of being "with" others.

The form of covenant

I can make only a poor attempt to describe the structure of covenantal relationships in the Christian community, but I want to emphasize four points:

First, God chooses each of us for covenant, calls us into covenantal life and uses covenant to complete God's work of conversion and sanctification in our lives. *Election, vocation, conversion and sanctification!* Nothing less is at stake in human covenants than the overcoming of our

opposition to God! So every covenant is a means of grace that draws us towards the Sovereign One who initiates and orders the covenantal life of the community and its members. God works through covenants to convert us to a life with God and with others.

Second, Christian covenants are accountable to the community, and therefore must be sealed by public vows. In contrast to the secular theory of “contract,” in which two independent persons with equal rights enter into an agreement, Christian covenants are accountable to the Lord who comes to us in Word and Sacrament, that is, in the realized life of the Body of Christ in the Christian community. Jesus Christ is the Lord of every covenant, but Christ’s sovereign care for human covenants is mediated through his Body, the church. Therefore, covenant promises cannot be a private contract between two solitary persons but always a public declaration of vows in the presence of the community.

Third, the community is accountable to the covenants made by its members. Because we are sinners, our covenantal relationships are always threatened by moral disorder. Covenant partners will turn again and again to the church which, as the Body of Christ, will call us back into relationship.

Fourth, Christian covenants create new life. Just as the triune life of God is not enclosed within itself but creates life in all of its forms, human covenants must also be creative. This is seen most clearly in the covenant of heterosexual marriage, where (if it is God’s will) a woman and a man extend life through the birth and care of children. But this creative vocation must be seen in all of our covenants. In some way, every Christian covenant must extend the boundaries of life. Every Christian covenant must be generative and generous. Every Christian covenant must say “Yes” to life.

Marriage: the oldest of human covenants

Heterosexual marriage is the oldest of human covenants, and every other relationship descends

ultimately from this encounter of a man and woman in marriage. But the Christian tradition also says that in the marriage of a man and a woman we have a type, or an image, of the covenantal love of God for Israel and Christ for the church. Marriage, therefore, is the primordial witness to God's covenant with humanity. Barth writes:

Humanity as [humanity in community], here actualized in the encounter between male and female, and supremely in marriage, is the real witness...to the Alpha and Omega of the will and counsel of God, of His covenant with [humanity].¹¹

Is a covenant between same-gender partners also a “marriage?” That question is beyond the scope of this paper, but I think we are really faced with two questions. First, should same-gender unions be legally equivalent to heterosexual marriage in civil law? Here, the issue centers on human rights and especially the constitutional doctrine of equal protection. But the second question—which is, of course, the question we are asking at this conference—belongs to a different context: what is the role of same-gender unions in the ordered life of the Christian and Jewish faith communities? That question, of course, will be answered in different ways depending on the faith and order of each tradition.

Nevertheless, it seems clear to me that the Jewish and Christian traditions set heterosexual marriage apart from all other covenants. We have to ask whether the conflation of marriage with other relationships can obscure the priority of heterosexual marriage in God's creative design and the Bible's orientation towards the marriage of man and woman as an analogy of God's passionate and faithful love for creation. And although I intend to argue that the church must grant equal dignity to same-gender relationships lived under vows, I am not yet convinced that “equal dignity” is the same as “objective equality.” In other words, heterosexual marriage and same-gender relationships may not be objectively *the same thing* but each may have its own *inherent moral dignity*.

As the first human covenant revealed in scripture and the only human covenant present at the

origin of the human race, I believe marriage has a privileged claim on the ministry of the church. Through the tradition's use of marriage as an analogy of God's covenant with humanity, marriage is prior to all other covenants except—in Christian tradition—the primal covenant of Baptism.

But although heterosexual marriage is unique, it also participates in the Trinitarian structure that is common to all Christian covenants. Marriage, if I may borrow from St. Benedict's well-known image of the monastery as a "school for sinners," is the school where those called into this covenant learn how to be *with* another and not alone. It is a means of grace, through which God calls a man and a woman away from the terrible solitude of the alienated self into a life of self-giving love. Like other covenants, marriage is not closed in on itself but open to others, first, to the gift of children and family, second, to the church whose liberating boundaries encompass every Christian marriage. Like other covenants, marriage is accountable to Christ, who is the Lord of the married partners and of their family.

The covenant of celibate community

Marriage is also a *vocation*, which means that to be a Christian marriage, God must summon a man and a woman into this relationship. But throughout its history, the church has also held an honored place for women and men who were called into a different covenant, but one by which they nevertheless were liberated by God to live a life with and for others. That covenant is celibacy, and to this we will now turn.

For Protestants, any suggestion that celibacy is not a misfortune but a covenant is counter-cultural. We have had virtually no tradition of organized celibate community for more than 400 years—with a few exceptions, including one Augustinian monastery in Germany that transferred its allegiance to the Lutheran Reform in 1558 and somehow survived until 1675.¹²

Nevertheless, the disappearance of vocational celibacy, along with the organized structures without which any covenantal life is impossible, ought to be a serious concern for Protestant

churches. Luther's reaction to the abuse of monastic vows was so extreme that at one point he wrote that chastity is impossible outside of marriage. Calvin was equally contemptuous of the monastic way of life, writing that "the cloisters, the cells, the holes of the monkeries smell of nothing but excrement."¹³ So, in the end, there was no reform of celibate community in Protestant Europe, only a relentless attack on the monasteries that led to their dissolution.

This Protestant break with 1,400 years of vocational celibacy has led us to believe that marriage is normative for all men and women, that is, the only vocation of relationship to which Christians can aspire. We came to believe that Christians are not only free but are commanded to marry: In 1931, the Lutheran theologian Paul Althaus insisted that "marriage is the supreme task of personal fellowship—no one has the right to evade it."¹⁴ But it was not so in the apostolic church, as Karl Barth reminds us:

It is obvious that in the New Testament community marriage can no longer be an obligation.... This is the fact, too lightly ignored by Protestant ethics in its glad affirmation of marriage..., that Jesus Christ himself, of whose true humanity there can be no doubt, had no other beloved, bride or wife, no other family or domestic sphere but this community. Certainly, He expressed Himself very definitely about the divine basis, the indissolubility and the sanctity of marriage (Mk. 10:1-12, Mt. 5:27-31.) He did not command anyone to abstain from it in practice as He Himself did.... [But] there are those for whom entrance into the married state is not only not commanded but temporarily or even permanently forbidden. We certainly cannot say...that entrance into marriage is universally the higher way, the better possibility.... Our true point of departure is that for Paul marriage is always a way (beside which he knows another and better) by which the Christian, becoming one body with his wife, does not deny the truth that he is one spirit with the Lord, but in his own way maintains and expresses it just as much as he who chooses a different path.¹⁵

This "different path" is celibacy. So it is a mistake for us to see celibacy as either a compromise or

a curse for those who, because of their sexual orientation or their situation in life, are unable to enter into the covenant of heterosexual marriage. Celibacy is a *gift* in which the person called into this life becomes fully human. Those who hear God's call to this life are not half-human. We cannot say they are incomplete because they have not fulfilled themselves in a union between a woman and a man. Nor should we understand celibacy as "asexuality" or merely as "abstinence" from a sexual relationship. Instead, celibacy is a particular disciplining of sexuality that liberates sexual energy for communion with others. We only have to look at the ecstatic visions of Roman Catholic mystics like St. John of the Cross or St. Teresa of Ávila, or the extraordinary creative energy of the Shaker communities, to see how sexual identity was not negated by celibacy but channeled into an intensely unitive relationship with Jesus Christ.

Celibacy therefore conforms to the Trinitarian structure of covenant. It is a life *with* and *for*, not a life *apart from* others. Like the covenant of marriage, it should be sealed by vows. We have no time to examine the arguments of Luther and Calvin against monastic vows, but by definition there should be no Christian covenant—including baptism, marriage and ordination—in which public promises are not witnessed by the community. By abolishing the vow of celibacy, the Reformers also abolished the possibility of celibate life as a normative vocation alongside heterosexual marriage. The result impoverished the church and denied any structured expression for those Protestants who were not called into marriage. A church without a covenantal vocation to celibacy is a church that is not fully oriented towards Jesus Christ—who, as Karl Barth reminds us, lived his life for others but not in the covenant of heterosexual marriage! Barth cannot be ignored when he writes that in Jesus "[t]he great example of a powerfully exercised freedom for celibacy is before us all."¹⁶

On the other hand, the Protestant revolt against priestly and monastic celibacy was not groundless. Men and women like the monk Martin Luther and his future wife, the nun Katherine of Bora, were living under the burden of an enforced celibacy to which they were not truly called by God. We will take up this point again in a few minutes, because it will be a critical one in our discussion about same-sex relationships.

Are same-sex relationships a means of grace?

Do same-sex relationships conform to the Christian tradition of covenant? Can they become a means of grace through which God calls homosexual men and women to a life of conversion and holiness?

It is important to begin by acknowledging that homosexuality is most often experienced as inherent, as a “given,” not a “choice.” I know that some of us do not believe that the “givenness” of homosexuality is at all self-evident. But there is broad ecumenical consensus that sexual orientation is for most people not a malleable or “curable” condition. Speaking for the Roman Catholic Church, for example, the U.S. Bishops’ Committee on Marriage and the Family came to this conclusion in 1997:

[I]t seems appropriate to understand sexual orientation (heterosexual or homosexual) as a fundamental dimension of one’s personality and to recognize its relative stability in a person.... Generally, homosexual orientation is experienced as a given, not as something freely chosen. By itself, therefore, a homosexual orientation cannot be considered sinful, for morality presumes the freedom to choose.¹⁷

But basing its argument on natural law, the Roman Catholic Church prohibits the expression of love in a homosexual relationship because “only within (heterosexual) marriage does sexual intercourse fully symbolize the Creator’s dual design as an act of covenant love with the potential of co-creating new human life.” In the Roman Catholic view, a homosexual relationship is therefore “disordered” because it does not express the sexual encounter of a man and a woman and because it cannot be open to the procreation of children. For these two reasons, the church requires that gays and lesbians remain celibate.

The Roman Catholic teaching, in my opinion, is a reasonable attempt to struggle with a difficult

problem in a way that does not dishonor or condemn the gay and lesbian members of the church. We can certainly be grateful that Catholics have broken decisively with the now widely-discredited model of homosexuality as a “disease.” Instead, the church affirms that homosexual orientation is, at least generally, an inherent dimension of the human personality of gays and lesbians. The Roman *magisterium* therefore implicitly calls into question the ethics of so-called “transformation ministries” or “restorative therapies” that promise to convert or “cure” homosexuals into heterosexuals.

If the only moral option for homosexuals is a life of consecrated celibacy, the Roman Catholic Church can offer this alternative with some credibility. The church continues to maintain an entire infrastructure of organized celibate communities, although it is difficult to see how this structure—which now supports less than one million men and women in celibate vocations—could expand to include an estimated thirty to fifty million lesbian and gay Roman Catholics. But Protestants have less credibility when we impose celibacy on our gay and lesbian members. Our churches support virtually no institutional forms of celibate life and seem to have returned to the idea of permanent celibacy merely as a backdoor solution to the troubling presence of openly homosexual Christians in the ordained ministry. Confronted with the ecumenical consensus that homosexuality is not chosen, some Protestant churches have rediscovered the vocation of celibacy several centuries after it was abandoned by Luther and Calvin. But the rediscovery lacks moral conviction, and the spectacle of married bishops and ministers—who have no personal experience of vocational celibacy and have never considered this vocation valid for themselves—imposing permanent celibacy on others is problematic, at least.

But enforced celibacy for homosexuals is equally problematic in the Roman Catholic tradition. Fundamentally, it violates the dignity of celibate life as *vocation*. There is no evidence in either scripture or tradition that God created an entire class of human beings who *sui generis* must enter into covenants of celibate community. Celibacy in the Catholic tradition is always seen as a *gift*, a *way of life* to which God elects and calls some, but not most, men and women. As almost any Roman Catholic vocation director will tell you, to live a life of enforced celibacy when that

man or woman does not clearly hear the divine calling to this covenant is almost always destructive. Celibacy in the absence of God's call to celibate community is not necessarily a moral choice.

Protestants should know this well enough from our own history! One of the forces that drove thousands of Catholic priests, monks and nuns into the arms of the Reformation was the legal requirement of celibacy in the absence of a real vocation to this way of life. Eberlin von Günzburg, a Franciscan friar who converted to Lutheranism in 1522, was speaking for the generation of Luther and Calvin when he described the moral agony of a celibate life divorced from vocation. Celibacy, he wrote, was

...a daily nagging of conscience and unrest of mind, by which all joy becomes suffering, all consolation saddening, all sweetness bitter.... [It] dulls and deadens the human senses, hardens the heart, and restrains natural honesty, leaving one in the end in so uncivil and inhumane a state, and so guilt-ridden and remorseful, that one hates salvation and the good in one's life and longs for misfortune.¹⁸

Protestants should remember the spiritual and mental anguish of our own celibate ancestors before legislating permanent celibacy for lesbians and gays who may not be called to this exceptional (and demanding) way of life. Nevertheless, some homosexuals *are* called to the covenant of celibate community, and so are some heterosexuals. But we should recognize with Karl Barth that celibacy, like marriage, is a vocation and it would be a serious error to prescribe it when the vocation is absent. When celibacy is imposed not by God's call but by ecclesiastical discipline on gays and lesbians, the result is precisely what Günzburg described: the senses are dulled, the heart is hardened, honesty is restrained so that, in the end, one is left in "so incivil and inhumane a state, and so guilt-ridden and remorseful, that one hates salvation...and longs for misfortune." Today, we would describe this condition as a state of deep melancholy, depression or despair—and why should we be surprised? What else could be the result when a man or a woman who is capable of giving himself or herself to another in love is sentenced by the church to a life of

solitude? This was obvious enough to the Reformers nearly 500 years ago, and it should be equally obvious to the church today.

The vocation of gays and lesbians in the church

So, if not celibacy, then what? Is there a vocation for those gays and lesbians God has not called to heterosexual marriage or celibate community?

Like all other women and men, lesbians and gays are called by God to live a life not for ourselves, but for others. We are called to covenantal relationships in which our lives correspond to the inner life of God who is self-in-community, who in God's own being is self-for-others.

The unions of gay and lesbian Christians are covenantal relationships if they conform to this Trinitarian structure. Like heterosexual marriage and celibate community, these relationships are "schools for sinners" in which two partners learn how to live in the paradox of freedom that is *unlimited* precisely because it is *limited* by the other. The partner in a same-sex relationship is truly "other"—not through the complementarity of a man and woman, of course, but in the mutuality of two persons who in freedom choose each other and delight in being chosen. God creates these relationships because within the limits of our given sexuality we are always called out of isolation into community. *Always!* Through these relationships we learn what it means to be truly human, to care for another as much as we care for ourselves, to learn that a life enclosed on itself is death, but a life opened to other lives is God's gift and command to those who believe.

It may be true that same-sex relationships, like celibate community, are not objectively identical to heterosexual marriage, that the marriage between a man and a woman has its own distinctive and privileged character. Nevertheless, they are moral relationships and they have a specific claim on the ministry of the church.

Same-sex relationships are broken by the same powers of evil that threaten heterosexual marriage. All relationships are wounded by sin. That is why God gave us covenants and why Christ is the Lord of each covenant. When the church offers its ministry to same-gender partners it is affirming the reality of sin and therefore saying “no” to the false doctrine that there was no fall from grace and no need for the Cross. We often speak about “affirming” or “celebrating” same-gender unions but I am convinced that the real pastoral need in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community is the ministry of the church when our relationships are broken by sin. Like heterosexual couples, we are adrift in the ethical chaos of a society that exalts freedom over commitment, selfishness over self-sacrifice, and the fulfillment of personal “needs” over mutual responsibility. The church needs to be a safe harbor for these relationships—encompassed by ethical boundaries, discipline, accountability and tradition. In other words, gay and lesbian couples need *structure*, and we need just as much structure as heterosexual couples.

Same-gender couples therefore have a claim on the pastoral care of the church. The church must not abandon us to the moral disorder of a fallen world that is in rebellion against God. But the church’s pastoral concern for these couples necessarily requires the public, liturgical expression of the vows that bind them together. Pastoral care without the public recognition of their vows would undermine the moral accountability of same-gender couples to each other and to the church. The congregation cannot legitimately expect conformity to ethical norms for homosexual partners if it is unwilling to witness the vows in which those partners commit themselves—in the presence of the community—to fidelity and mutual obedience. If a congregation permits pastoral care but denies the public rite of union it is saying, in effect, “we expect you to honor your covenant but we don’t want to hear about it outside the pastor’s office.” “Don’t ask, don’t tell” is a cruel way of life for same-gender couples and if that constraint were imposed on heterosexual partners, I doubt many marriages could survive. “Private” promises of fidelity apart from the community are like New Year’s resolutions, easy to break. Moreover, the alienation of same-gender unions from the liturgical life of the community plays into the hands of the secular ideology that covenants are only private contracts between individuals who are accountable to no one but each other.

Conversion and sanctification

Ultimately, the purpose of same-gender covenants, like the covenants of heterosexual marriage and celibate community, is conversion and sanctification. Through these relationships we cooperate with God's design for human life. They are a means of grace, and we could not be fully human without them. The second-century Church Father, St. Irenaeus, says this about God's work of sanctification in our lives:

If you are the handiwork of God, await the [Artisan's] hand patiently. [God] does everything at a favorable time, favorable, that is, to you, whom He made. Offer [God] your heart, pliant and unresisting. Preserve the form in which the Artisan fashioned you. Keep within you the Water which comes from [God]; without it, you become rigid and lose the imprint of [God's] fingers. By preserving the structure, you will ascend to perfection; God's artistry will conceal the clay within you. [God's] hand formed your substance; He will coat you, within and without, in pure gold and silver; He will adorn you so well that "the Lord will delight in your beauty" (Ps. 44:12). But if you become rigid and reject [God's] artistry, if you show [God] your displeasure at being made a human being, your ingratitude to God will lose you both His artistry and His life. Making is the property of God's generosity; being made is a property of human nature.¹⁹

What a glorious vision, for all of us! God is an artisan who will adorn our lives "in pure gold and silver." God created and continues to form our lives into the image of God, into the image of the "eternal With." But you and I cannot "ascend to perfection" alone. Not alone. *Not alone*. God takes us by the hand and leads us through the terrors of life, giving us companionship so we can learn how to live not for ourselves, but for others. Through these relationships of community and family, of heterosexual marriage, celibate love and homosexual partnership, God converts us towards the "life for others" that corresponds to God's primal nature as the triune Creator, towards the majestic generosity and creative power of the One who binds himself to us in

covenant, and we know this is true because Jesus Christ has been revealed to us as the first of many chosen, justified, called, and sanctified by God.

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- ² Letter to Rolf Italiaander (June 21, 1968), in Karl Barth, *Offene Briefe 1945-1968*, ed. Diether Koch (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1984), 543, cited in Paul Capetz, “The Gospel According to Matthew Shepard,” *Witherspoon on the Web* (Feb. 18, 2002), http://www.witherspoonsociety.org/paul_capetz.htm (accessed 1 June 2008).
- ³ Christopher King, “A Love as Fierce as Death,” in *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*, ed. Robert E. Goss and Mona West (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 136.
- ⁴ Barth, “The Gift of Freedom: Foundation of Evangelical Ethics,” in *The Humanity of God* (Atlanta, Georgia: John Knox Press, 1960), 75.
- ⁵ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1976), 47.
- ⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Who Is Man?* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1965), 45.
- ⁷ “The Westminster Confession,” in *Reformation Roots*, vol. 2 of *The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1997), 562.
- ⁸ Max Stackhouse, *Covenant and Commitments: Faith, Family, and Economic Life* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 155.
- ⁹ Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation*, vol. III.4 of *Church Dogmatics*, 117.
- ¹⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Trinity: God Is ‘Being With’,” in *You Crown the Year with Your Goodness* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 144.
- ¹¹ Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation*, vol. III.4 of *Church Dogmatics*, 117.
- ¹² François Biot, *The Rise of Protestant Monasticism* (Baltimore and Dublin: Helicon Press, 1963), 65-67. At this point the vocation of celibacy-in-community disappears from Protestant history until the first deaconess community was founded in 1836. Crossing the Atlantic with German Reformed and Lutheran immigrants, the deaconess movement spread to the United States, and its memory is preserved in the many “Deaconess Hospitals” affiliated with the United Church of Christ and the Lutheran churches. But today the deaconess movement in North America is only a memory. In Europe, there has been a modest revival of Protestant monasticism—most notably the ecumenical Taizé community in France. Unlike the deaconess movement, Protestant monks have met a cool reception in the United States, at best. The only alternative for North American Protestants called to this vocation are the small Anglican communities that are closer in spirit to Rome than to Wittenberg or Geneva.

¹³ John Calvin, “Traité des scandales,” quoted in Biot, *The Rise of Protestant Monasticism*, 37.

¹⁴ Paul Althaus, *Grundriss der Ethik* (1931), quoted in Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation*, vol. III.4 of *Church Dogmatic*, 141. Althaus, who in 1931 was already a supporter of the National Socialist movement, was writing against the background of an ideology that viewed celibacy and homosexuality as racial treason because both states of life denied children to the nation.

¹⁵ Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation*, vol. III.4 of *Church Dogmatics*, 144, 146.

¹⁶ Barth, *Final Testimonies* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1977), 49.

¹⁷ Committee on Marriage and Family, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers” (Washington, D.C.: National Catholic News Service, Oct. 1, 1997).

¹⁸ Eberlin von Günzburg, quoted in Steven Ozment, *Protestants: The Birth of a Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 79-80.

¹⁹ Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” quoted in *The Scandal of the Incarnation* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 72-73.