

The Williams—Asher Debate On Homosexuality



**A radio debate between
Robert Williams and Jeff Asher
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[On December 16, 1989, Robert Williams was ordained by John Shelby Spong, Bishop of the Diocese of Newark, New Jersey, into the priesthood of the Episcopal Church. This action immediately ignited heated controversy across the country. Feeling there would be general interest in a discussion of homosexuality from a biblical perspective, I sought and arranged this with Mr. Williams. The discussion took place January 20, 1990, via telephone on *BibleTalk* the weekly call-in radio program of the Dumas Drive Church of Christ in Amarillo, Texas. What follows is a transcript of the program taken from tape.]

Jeff Asher: A very pleasant good morning and welcome to *BibleTalk*. I am Jeff Asher, your host this morning and the evangelist for the Dumas Drive Church of Christ. Today we have a very special guest with us. For the last twenty years there has been in the United States an emergence of homosexuality as a prevalent behavior pattern. In certain quarters homosexuality is not only tolerated but approved. This change in attitude has occurred because some of our most prominent citizens—actors, politicians, athletes, and even clergymen—have openly declared their homosexual lifestyle and publicly defended it.

Many homosexuals are militantly atheistic as is proven by the existence of the Gay Atheist Association. Yet a large group of homosexuals profess to be Christians. Since 1968 the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches has ministered almost exclusively in the homosexual community,

advocating the compatibility of the homosexual lifestyle with Christianity. Since 1968 the question of whether or not homosexuality is a compatible and acceptable behavior has gradually moved to the top of the list of major religious issues to be debated in the coming decade. The mainline denominations are all troubled not only by homosexual memberships but by the ordination of practicing homosexuals into the various ministries. This fact is demonstrated by the ordination today in San Francisco of three gay Lutheran clergymen.

On December 16, 1989, Robert Williams became the first practicing homosexual ordained into the priesthood of the Episcopal Church since that denomination barred homosexuals from ordination in 1979 by resolution A-53. He is regarded as one of the most outspoken advocates of the position that a homosexual lifestyle is compatible with Christianity and acceptable unto God.

Mr. Williams is currently involved in a homosexual relationship with James Skelly, a divorced father of two teen-aged daughters. Robert Williams is our guest today on *BibleTalk*. He and I will discuss this issue from its biblical perspectives, examining, hopefully, all of the pertinent Bible passages and arguments made to support the position that Mr. Williams and numerous other homosexuals and non-homosexuals make regarding this practice. Mr. Williams understands that I am not sympathetic to his position and will be making observations and arguments intended to convince him and others of the falsity of their position. In order that we can focus on the issue and get the homosexual position clearly and accurately stated, we are going to give Mr. Williams an opportunity to make

some opening remarks. Mr. Williams, good morning and welcome to *BibleTalk*.

Robert Williams: Good morning, thank you, nice to be on your show. Let me start by responding to a couple of things you said in your introduction. Just sort of correcting them from my viewpoint.

The major one is, you described an emergence of homosexuality in the last 20 years. I don't believe that's true. I believe that the gay and lesbian people have been a part of the culture of every society and every time, including the biblical society, and the only thing that's different in the past twenty years is that we have been in the position politically to be more open and more visible. I don't believe that there are any more or less lesbian and gay people today than there were 100 years ago or 2,000 years ago. I think that we have always been approximately the same percentage of the general population, which is somewhere between 10 and 20 percent.

Secondly, just to correct the perception about a large number of gay people being militantly atheistic. In fact, the Gay Atheist League of America is a very small group, a very small minority, and my experience has been that the majority of lesbian and gay people, although they may have turned their backs on the established church because it has not been friendly to them, the vast majority of lesbian and gay people are deeply spiritual people who are searching for a place in which they can practice their deep-seated religious longings. And, in fact, those who have chosen to go in a militantly atheistic way are a tiny minority of the lesbian and gay community.

And this, just about my own ordination,

the press has somewhat misunderstood the significance of the ordination, I think. I'm certainly not the first openly gay Episcopal priest. There are in fact other Episcopal priests who have even written books about being gay priests. So, there are a large number of openly gay Episcopal priests. What was different and significant about my ordination was, first of all, that my being gay was a fact, a published fact, before the ordination occurred. In other words, I didn't come out publicly after I was ordained, but rather before it happened. Thus, my ordination itself was a more public and political event than any of the ordinations of gay people that have happened since 1979. But there have been dozens of gay and lesbian priests ordained in the Episcopal church since that 1979 resolution. I'm only one among many.

Another thing that is perhaps different is the ministry to which I feel called is a ministry specifically to and among the lesbian and gay community, and that sort of put it in a different category and got some attention. But there are plenty of lesbian and gay priests who are just working in regular parish ministries and in every diocese in the country.

Do you want to go ahead into the approach to the Bible or do you have a question?

Asher: Well, Robert, if you'd like to go on and give us your biblical perspective, then that will give me an opportunity to ask some questions and to direct our course this morning. I'd appreciate it.

Williams: OK, the first thing I want to say is that I grew up in West Texas, Abilene, Texas, and I'm quite familiar with the Church of Christ. Abilene,

Texas, as you probably know, is where there is a very large Church of Christ university, Abilene Christian. So I'm pretty familiar with your church, and the first thing I want to say about dealing with the Bible and this sort of program is that it is almost impossible for us to do anything along the lines of a debate, because, as you know, one of the first principles of debate is that you have to be arguing from the same premise, and I don't think we are. My approach to Scripture, as an Episcopalian, is fundamentally different from the approach to scripture that the Church of Christ takes. So, from the beginning we are sort of starting out on completely different footing. I just don't deal with the Bible in the same way that members of the Church of Christ would deal with the Bible.

Episcopalians, Anglicans, since the beginning of the Anglican Church at the time of the Reformation have always held up what we call the three legged stool. There are three factors that have to be taken under consideration in making any kind of decision in the church. All three of these are equally important. And those are Scripture, tradition, and reason. It's like a stool with three legs, and when you remove any one of those three legs, it will fall. So Scripture is part of the equation, but it is only one third of the equation, and reason is equally a third of the equation. Reason includes listening to the data from the sciences, both the natural sciences and the social sciences. And in the Anglican tradition, that is as important as the Scripture itself. And in fact the two inform each other and have to be held in tension.

So, if in fact a biologist or a psychologist tells us that homosexuality is in fact a

natural phenomenon that occurs among approximately 20% of the population, then as Episcopalians we have to take that very seriously. And say, "OK, here's some factual data. What do we do with it?" We factor it in as one third of that equation and we weigh it over against the Bible.

What we most certainly are not is biblical fundamentalists. We approach the Bible reverently and carefully. But carefully includes approaching it with a very careful scholarship and putting it through the rigorous process of biblical exegesis, which includes putting it in its historical and cultural context, doing linguistic studies, doing textual studies. We just don't take as given that, just because something is in the Bible, it necessarily has anything to do with our lives today.

In fact there are some biblical scholars, some of them Episcopalian, some of them not, but biblical scholars whose work I follow very closely, particularly among feminist scholars who are dealing with the whole question of canon. How do we in fact decide which books or which parts of books ought to be in the Bible? Just because a decision was made several centuries ago by the Catholic Church doesn't mean that they made the right decision. As you know, Martin Luther thought that the book of James should not be included in the canon of Scripture. There are scholars today who are questioning in a similar way, "Should this book even have been included, or should this passage be included?" How do we decide, what is our criterion for deciding, what in fact is the Scripture, the canon of Scripture, that the Christian Church should be using? And coming down on the side of saying if it brings

life to people, if it brings people into an encounter with the living Christ, then its Scripture. If it brings death to people, it is used in a way to label people, to harm people, if its used as a club with which to beat people over the head, which most of the passages about homosexuality are, then we can't in good conscience call it the word of God. We can't read it in a worship service and afterward say, "This is the word of the Lord." If it's a harmful and negative passage, it's not the word of the Lord of love.

Asher: Robert, let's stop right there. This is a good place for me to begin to respond in some way. First of all, I think that our audience needs to be made aware of the fact that Robert and I are certainly not adversaries in the sense that we are enemies of one another. I have a great deal of respect for him as a person, and, though I sincerely believe he is wrong, I would hope that today I could convince him of that.

Now, your opening statements, or your reply to the introductory material clarified some points, and really I have no desire to delve into that any further other than to suggest that we do recognize that they are substantially correct and that we are agreed that we have a climate in which homosexuality has become, if not more prevalent in the sense of numbers, at least more prevalent in the sense of being exposed or being held in regard by some in my lifetime. I know I'm not very old. I'm not much younger than you and the fact remains that I can remember the time when a subject like this wouldn't even be discussed in a pulpit, let alone on a religious radio program. So some prevalence does exist now that hasn't existed in the past.

The fact that you make the statement that we are not arguing from the same biblical perspective I believe is a good place to start. We are not coming from the same perspective because, as Robert indicated, we do not have the same attitude toward the Scriptures. He does not regard the word of God as the plenary, verbally inspired revelation of the mind of God. Therefore he says he is not fundamentalist. So we have a vast difference of perspectives with regard to that. But the fact of the matter is the Bible is inspired, and the Bible is the word of God. And, we would challenge, that if there are errors, if there are mistakes, that this be proven. To just simply disparage the Bible is not proof. A great many people have used it as a standard of morality and a code of faith for centuries. And the contention we make is that the Bible is the inspired word of God.

Now with regard to the three legged stool. We are not opposed to reason. Certainly reason is a means by which we are to come to the Scriptures, or to interpret the Bible. You cannot handle the Bible contrary to reason. You cannot array Scripture against Scripture. You cannot make the Bible say one thing one time and make it say something else at another time. So reason is certainly a part of any hermeneutic that we bring to the Scriptures. But to suggest that tradition (which has no authority higher than man) is to be a part of this equation is faulty. We are talking about a divine book, and to suggest that these traditions are on equal standing with the Scripture certainly does not harmonize with what the Bible would reveal.

Now, to the point with regard to "reason" that Robert made. He uses a different concept of "reason" than I do. When I

talk about “reason” I mean taking the passages, studying them, drawing the proper conclusions, harmonizing, taking all the facts together. Some of these things he mentioned. But simply because some psychologist or psychiatrist tells us that there are significant numbers of people in the population that are homosexual does not negate what the Bible says about homosexuality.

There are a significant number of people in the population who are alcoholics. That does not negate what the Bible says about drunkenness. There are a significant number of people in our society who are given to incest, pederasty, and other things that are immoral. But that doesn't negate what the Bible says of those sins.

This idea that a passage of Scripture is to be rejected if it brings harm to people, or if it is a negative passage, or if it is a passage of Scripture which is used as a club to label someone, therefore, it ought to be rejected, could be used by any group that had some moral perversion that they wish to substantiate. The alcoholic would say, “Well, the Bible condemns drunkenness; therefore, all the passages in the Bible that relate to drunkenness are not Scripture.” The same thing could be said of the person who is involved in incest. “The Bible condemns incest; therefore, all the passages that talk about incest, that's negative to me. Lest someone label me as one guilty of incest, let's take those out of the Bible.”

Now we do not approve of nor are we guilty of using Scripture to label people in the sense that we want to pigeonhole them and make them into a minority and segregate them. If the Bible calls something a sin, then that is what it is. If it is

lying, do we label people because the Bible condemns lying? A man is a liar. Is that a label? Is that negative? Should we just disregard that passage of Scripture because someone is called a liar? Or, as far as the Bible is concerned, someone is called a thief. A thief might think that's rather negative terminology. How could I get up and preach from Ephesians chapter four that a man is to work, to give of his means, and to stop stealing without calling a man a thief in the process? We believe that we ought to preach the truth in love. So we have no animosity toward people who are guilty of sin. Homosexual sin is not any different than heterosexual sin or any other kind of sin. They are all sin before God. And if the Bible condemns it, then it is a practice which needs to be repented of. And it is a practice that a man must quit in order to be saved in eternity.

Robert, at this point I am interested (in that you have suggested this idea of “negative passages”) in considering some of these, and you give me either an explanation or just tell me whether or not they belong in the Bible. Would you be willing to do that?

Williams: Certainly.

Asher: All right, let's just begin in the beginning, and that is in the book of Genesis. The case of Sodom, which is Genesis chapter nineteen and verse four, where Moses tells us that the men of Sodom, from the understanding that I have, came out to commit the sin of homosexuality against these men who had come there, who we know by the Scriptures to have been angels. This is the basis of the term “sodomy,” which appears in some passages of Scripture in the Bible and has come into the English

language in our law statutes. But there in the nineteenth chapter and verse four, it says: “The men of the city, before they laid down, the men of the city, even the men of Sodom encompassed the house around both old and young, all the people of every quarter, and they called unto Lot and said unto him, ‘Where are the men which came into thee this night? Bring them out unto us that we may know them.’ And Lot went out at the door unto them and shut the door after them and said, ‘I pray thee brethren do not so wickedly, behold now I have two daughters which have not known man. Let me now I pray you bring them out unto you and do ye to them what is good in your eyes. Only unto these men do nothing, for therefore came they under the shadow of my roof.’”

We know here they then threatened Lot, and the angels smote the men of the city blind and then pronounced that they were going to destroy the city of Sodom. How do you deal with that passage?

Williams: Well, my first question is, why do you see this as a passage that has anything to do with homosexuality? Will you read to me the part that indicates, to you, that it has anything to do with homosexuality?

Asher: I would suggest that verse five is the verse that does that. “And they called unto Lot and they said unto him, where are the men which came unto thee this night? bring them out unto us that we may know them.”

Williams: And so you are taking that word “know” as being something about sex?

Asher: Yes.

Williams: Well, in fact the use of that word in the Scripture in most places has absolutely no sexual context. It means simply “know.” One possible interpretation is that the men of Sodom had an almost Ku Klux Klan type distrust of foreigners, and here are foreigners in their midst who are being housed and protected by Lot. And they come to him to say we do not want these people here, at least until we know who they are. Send them out to us. Also, the indication of whether it includes a sexual component or not is not there. Clearly the intention of the men is violent, to do violence to these men, to those angels whom they think are men.

I have no problem in saying that the Scriptures certainly condemn violence against anyone, whether or not a sexual component is included as part of that violence. And in fact that would be the sin of Sodom. It is the sin of “sodomy” to do violence against people who were strangers in their midst. And elsewhere in Scripture, including in the New Testament, when Jesus refers back to Sodom, or in other places in the Old Testament when Sodom is referred to, this is the sin of Sodom.

Not one of those instances mentions anything sexual about Sodom. It says the sin of Sodom is the sin of essentially what we might call “inhospitality,” the sin of not responding kindly to the stranger in the midst, which in the desert society is a matter of life and death. If you did not put up strangers, they could die in the desert over night, so part of the code of the Hebrew people was to take care of the stranger and sojourner.

Rather than taking care of them, the

men of Sodom were wanting to do violence to them. Well, certainly that is condemned, but it is only since about the eighteenth century that Christians have read anything sexual into the Sodom story. Up until that point they saw it simply as being about doing violence to strangers.

Asher: Let me reply to this in some way. I would encourage all of our listeners to get their Bibles and turn to Genesis nineteen, and I will show you the truth of this passage by what we can show from the context. In verse five they do demand, “Bring them out that we may know them.”

Now, Mr. Williams is correct in suggesting that in the majority of the passages the word “Yadah” does simply indicate “become acquainted with.” But there are 12 passages in the Old Testament that have this sexual connotation. Four of those uses are associated with this sin of homosexuality. In Genesis 19 you have the word “know” and its derivative “known” used twice. Likewise the book of Judges chapter 19 where you have the men of Gibeah. You have the same thing again. Now, in verse five they ask the question or make the demand, “Bring them out that we may know them.” Lot went out at the door unto them and shut the door after them. We would first observe that if it just simply means bring them out that we may get acquainted with them, Lot in refusing to bring them out, is the one who is guilty of inhospitality. That doesn’t make any sense. Secondly, we would point out that in verse seven he says, “I pray ye brethren, do not so wickedly.” If all they wanted to do was to get acquainted with these men in order to overcome their distrust of foreigners, why would Lot suggest that

what they wanted to do was wicked? Then in verse eight the statement is made, “Behold now I have two daughters which have not known man. Let me I pray bring them out unto you.” This is the use that would govern our understanding that this has a sexual connotation. And he uses the same word to refer to his daughters: don’t know these men, don’t have sexual relations with these men; but rather; (and Lot had really slipped here, and I’m not justifying what Lot did) but he simply uses the word to suggest that he offers these men an opportunity to have sexual relations with his daughters instead. So it is obvious that the context is talking about sexual relations. Furthermore, you made the statement that there were no sexual overtones in the sin of Sodom. But Jude seven says, “Even as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication and going after strange flesh are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.”

All right, here Jude says the sin that Sodom was guilty of was fornication, sexual immorality. They went after strange flesh. We can develop this more, I hope, in the course of the discussion. But, “strange flesh” will include the sin of homosexuality. The only flesh that God authorized that any man know was the flesh of his wife and that from Genesis two, where Adam said, “Now this is bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh.” So “strange flesh” would be flesh other than my flesh, and the only flesh that is my flesh or a man’s flesh is the flesh of his wife. And so here we have a definite New Testament passage that condemns the sin of Sodom as having a sexual nature. Now when we go back to the context of Genesis 19 we see that it is

obviously a homosexual act.

Williams: The notion of “strange flesh” in the Jude passage, I think, is really stretching it to say that it refers to homosexuality. In fact, I think, for the writer of Jude, it refers to the notion of human beings having sex with angels, which is what, if there is a sexual connotation in the Genesis passage, seems to be indicated. The idea of the whole term, “strange flesh,” there is a reference to the fact that the adults, human beings with angelic beings, and that to have any sort of sexual activities there is off limits. Again there is no reason to assume that the passage refers to homosexuality. It is only to take a prejudice that the interpreter already has in her or his mind and read it back into a passage that, in fact, doesn’t deal with that at all.

Asher: But we made it very clear that in Genesis 19:5 the question is asked, “Where are the men which came in to thee this night?” They had no knowledge that these were angels. They came seeking men. The same thing is true in Judges nineteen. The same word “know” is used in Judges 19 with regard to the sin of Gibeah. And there are no angels involved. What they desired was to have sexual relations with a man.

To strengthen the point on “strange flesh,” I call everyone’s attention to Genesis chapter two, because in Genesis two Adam clearly says, in verse 23: “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called woman because she was taken out of man. Therefore, shall a man leave his father and his mother and shall cleave unto his wife and they shall be one flesh.” The Bible clearly teaches from the beginning that this was a one flesh union, and that this

was the only flesh that man has a right to, whether it is heterosexual fornication or homosexual fornication doesn’t make any difference. We are not going to elevate homosexual fornication above heterosexual fornication and say, “All you heterosexual fornicators can go home; God approves of that.” The Bible does not teach that. It is one man and one woman for one lifetime and that in the union of marriage.

Williams: When did Adam and Eve marry?

Asher: Right there in Genesis two, that is when they married, when God brought them together.

Williams: I just wondered. There is nothing in the entire book of Genesis that indicates that there is a marriage there.

Asher: Well, Robert, I’m not going to ask you to define marriage, because we know that your relationship hasn’t been sanctioned by the Episcopal Church as yet, even though there seems to be plans for that. But Ephesians chapter five, when talking about the relationship between a husband and his wife being parallel to that of Christ and the church, obviously indicates the marriage relationship.

Williams: I understand that.

Asher: And this very passage, Genesis two, is quoted in connection with that. This idea of the one flesh union has always, and your own church recognized that, that the one flesh union described in Genesis two is the marriage relationship. I’m not talking about a certificate given by a judge or a justice of the peace. I’m talking about a God ordained, God recognized marriage.

Williams: Well, in fact, that is what a lot of unmarried heterosexual couples would say they have, because they have not had a ceremony or certificate but they consider themselves to be married. I was just reacting to your speaking of Adam and Eve and their being married.

Asher: Well, it is definitely a marriage. There is no disputing that point. Jesus in the nineteenth chapter of the book of Matthew quotes the very words of Moses there and applies that to the marriage relationship. Let's be turning there to read that. "The Pharisees also came unto him tempting him and saying unto him. Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?" That's the context of marriage.

"And he answered and said unto them, have you not read that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female and said for this cause shall a man leave father and mother and shall cleave to his wife and they twain shall be one flesh, what therefore God hath joined together let not man put asunder." There is no denying that. And from the beginning we have the God ordained pattern: one man, one woman, for one lifetime, and this being the only flesh union that God recognizes.

Williams: Who performed their marriage do you think?

Asher: Well, you have a sacramental concept. There is nothing in the Bible that teaches a preacher has to unite two people. I'm satisfied with the fact that God brought her to him and gave her to him.

Williams: In the case of my marriage I'm satisfied with the fact that God brought

us together. It's being sanctioned by a particular body (church) is beside the point. We are kind of off the subject, but I think it's sort of fascinating because I would say that this Genesis passage gives precedent for that.

Asher: The point of the Genesis passage, and you haven't addressed this point, the only flesh union sanctioned in the Bible is the union between a man and a woman. You made the statement earlier that the passages in the New Testament where Jesus spoke with regard to Sodom and Gomorrah didn't say anything about their being guilty of homosexuality. In each of those passages though, he used Sodom and Gomorrah as an example of a nation that was guilty of sin and was condemned of God. Those were the applications that he made. Let's look at what Jesus said.

Williams: I said that I accept that, but the sin was about violence against strangers. It was not, as you were saying a few minutes ago, the intention was not simply wanting to get to know these strangers. The intention was to essentially lynch these strangers, which, in fact, may have included a sexual element. They may have intended to rape them also. But obviously we could say that the burden of Scripture condemns rape, heterosexual or homosexual. And obviously the burden of Scripture condemns violence against anyone. In that point we are in agreement. We're saying Sodom is condemned throughout the entire canon of Scripture, Old and New Testament. I'm just saying it's not about homosexuality, it's about violence.

Asher: Well, you can't have it both ways, Robert. It can't mean get acquainted with, then have a sexual overtone. So

you've got to admit that the Genesis passage has the sexual overtone.

Williams: I don't have to admit that. I'm saying I'm not even talking about sex. I'm talking about violence. That obviously these men of Sodom intended to do harm to the strangers who were Lot's house guests.

Asher: Well, does it condemn fornication then? Does the passage condemn fornication?

Williams: I don't think the passage has any connection to fornication.

Asher: All right, so you're just going to say there are no sexual overtones at all in the passage. It may or may not be talking about rape.

Williams: I'm saying that's one possible interpretation of it. The bottom line, back to my introductory remark, is I just don't really care as much as you do about what this passage says.

Asher: All right, let's go back to what Jesus did say then. That seems to be something that you do care about.

Williams: Let me make one more comment about the Genesis passage because you had asked about the types of things I would say do not belong in the canon of Scripture. I'm not sure I would say that about the Sodom story in general, but the part, the unspeakable act of domestic violence that is implied by Lot's wanting to throw out his two virgin daughters to a mob of men, that's clearly not a passage that I can read in a church service and say this is the word of the Lord. That's a passage that's wrong. Just plain wrong. It is evil and twisted and

contributes to the treating of women as property. It contributes to the high incidence of domestic violence in our society, which is almost always done to women by adult male relatives. This sort of passage, holding this up as the word of God, helps create that situation. So that's an example of a passage I would say by that test does not belong in the canon of Scripture.

Asher: All right, let me make this final note and then we'll go back to Matthew nineteen. Certainly everyone in the audience can see that there is nothing in Genesis nineteen that would suggest that God approved of what Sodom did or what Lot did. The fact that it is in the word of God and is an example of gross immorality is by implication a disapproval of what Lot did. To suggest that it needs to be removed because it speaks of something that is unspeakable is ridiculous. It is simply a passage of Scripture that shows that that is not how anyone should treat a woman. And that passage is no basis at all for condoning that kind of behavior.

Williams: There is no indication in the passage that Lot's suggestion is condemned by God or by anyone. It was sort of a matter of course. And there is no reaction to it at all.

Asher: It is an historical narrative, Robert, and it just simply states what happened. So you can't take the passage and say that it approves of anything. Now, I want to get back to Matthew nineteen, because you had made the statement earlier that Jesus did not condemn the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah as being homosexuality. Then we made some remarks about marriage. Does Matthew nineteen not clearly teach

what God authorizes with regard to sexual relationships between a man and anyone? Jesus said in Matthew nineteen, going all the way back to the beginning, “For this cause shall a man leave father and mother and cleave to his wife and they twain shall be one flesh.” Now, that is going to exclude incest, polyandry, polygamy, and bestiality. And that’s going to exclude homosexuality. Jesus said a man shall cleave unto his wife. On what basis do you find any scriptural approval of a man/man sexual relationship, in light of that passage?

Williams: Well, would you like me to suggest a passage in which I think I do see that?

Asher: Yes, if you would.

Williams: Luke chapter seven, beginning around verse two. This is the story of Jesus’ healing the centurion’s “pais.” In this particular place the word “pais,” which is transliterated from the Greek “pais,” is translated in English as “slave.” Elsewhere, when the same story is told in other gospels, it is obviously the same story but the word “slave” is not used. It is rather the word “boy.” So there seems to be some confusion about what the identity of this young man is. Is he a servant in the centurion’s household, or is he a son of the centurion? I would suggest that the confusion is because he is in fact neither, but is romantically linked; he is the lover, we might say, of the centurion. Which in fact would not be at all uncommon in the Roman culture, in particular in the Roman army, for a somewhat older man, particularly in the army, to take a somewhat younger man as a lover. This was a fairly common thing. The word “pais” by the way, is almost never translated “slave,” either in

Scripture or contemporary writings of the same time. It almost always means “boy,” the same word that a parent might call their son. It’s always a word of affection and endearment. It never just means “servant.” So, if in fact this was a servant in this centurion’s household, he was a servant with a highly unusual relationship, a relationship of affection to the centurion. At any rate, he’s fallen ill, and the centurion had heard of Jesus. This man has had a relationship with the Jews in the area, and in fact he was probably sort of over them as magistrate. So he sent some of the elders whom he knew to send word to Jesus and say, “Please come and heal my ‘pais.’” And they came to him and said, “This man deserves this, because he is a good man and has done good things for us.” And Jesus goes with them, and He’s on his way to the house. The centurion seems to be troubled, which is instructive here. He runs out and says: “Lord you don’t have to come under my roof. I’m not worthy of you, to have you under my roof, and I know that it is not even necessary. You can just say the word and the ‘pais’ will be healed.”

Now, if in fact this man is a Roman soldier living in a homosexual relationship, and yet, he is very informed about the religion of the Jews, then he would have suspected that Jesus might have condemned this relationship. So he seems to be a little troubled here and says, “You don’t have to come into the house.” It is kind of odd that he would say that, so at any point, Jesus turns to the crowd, to his disciples, who are Jews behind him, and says, “Not even in Israel have I found such great faith; you know, this man’s faith is better than yours.” Then, in fact, the boy is healed.

Now, it seems to me that Jesus is encountering here a homosexual relationship, a relationship between an army officer and his male lover. There is some indication in the passage that the man is a little nervous about how Jesus would react. So, he does not want Him to come into his house. Yet, what he gets from Jesus is no condemnation, but in fact praise, by His saying, “You know this man has more faith than you, my followers,” to whom he is speaking. So I see this as a passage in which Jesus encounters a committed homosexual relationship, not batting an eye and not offering any condemnation.

Asher: I think you have made your point on that. Now let me reply. First of all, while you were talking I did a little checking here in my concordances and lexicons. The word “slave” in this passage is not translated anywhere else in the Scripture by the word “boy.” Now that’s just not so. It’s not in the New Testament.

Williams: I’m not talking about just Scripture. I’m talking about in contemporary writing.

Asher: You made the statement in the beginning that we take things in their context; we look at the words, we do the hermeneutical and linguistic studies. Lexicography by itself does not prove anything. I can go to the lexicons and find many different meanings for different words and then come back and impose that on something. I’m telling you, and I’m sticking with it, that the word that you’ve cited in Luke 7:2 is not translated anywhere in the Scripture by the word “boy.” Now there is nothing, then, to suggest by that lexical argument that has any merit here in this context.

Secondly, the point of this passage is that this centurion is used as an example of faith. He is held up in contrast to the faith of the Israelites or the Jews. His faith is great because he believes Christ can do what he came and asked Him to do. There is not a thing in the context anywhere other than the one word, “servant,” which you picked out, and have assigned a meaning of “boy,” based upon Roman behavior. You don’t know if this man was a homosexual. You don’t know if this man had a slave or servant that he used in a homosexual fashion and engaged in that kind of practice. You have nothing at all from the context to argue that. And so that is completely unfounded. The point of the whole illustration is that it is a comparison of the faith of Israel with that of the centurion, and Jesus calls it great faith. Now that’s all there is to that. Your argument on “pais” is incorrect and is not in the Scripture.

Williams: When you use the word “context,” you are meaning a very different thing than when I use the word “context.” When you use the word “context,” you seem to be limiting it to the printed word on the pages themselves, and that is your concept. When I say the word “context,” I’m talking about the entire setting. I mean let’s look at the story, when it happened, look at what we know about the Roman culture, from history, from anthropology. Asher: Fine, Robert, but you began your remarks by saying you didn’t think there were any more homosexuals now than there were then as a part of society. Then I’ll give you the big number, 20%. Are you going to take here an example where 8 out of 10 centurions that might have come to Jesus were not homosexuals and then argue that he was? You have nothing from the

passage.

Williams: But what I am saying is that what we know about the Roman military is that, in fact, the percentages would have been probably higher there, because homosexuality was not only not condemned but encouraged in the Roman army.

Asher: Let me read something to you here. This comes from the book *Counseling Homosexuals*, by Bill Flatt, Dowell Flatt, and Jack Lewis, and Bill Flatt is quoting Plutarch. And, he says, Plutarch in the “Dialogue On Love” illustrates, and he quotes: “There is only one genuine love, the love of boys. You will see it in the schools of philosophy or perhaps in the gymnasiums and the palaestrae. Making love to a slave boy, however, is not gentlemanly or urbane; such is mere copulation, like the love of women.” To many Greeks, Flatt says, the ideal sexual experience for a man was to love a lad in the flower of his youth. Here you have said he was a servant or slave, and this is a quotation of Plutarch, which says that wasn’t even regarded among the Romans as being gentlemanly.

Williams: Well, it wasn’t regarded by Plutarch.

Asher: Well, you’re trying to make an argument on Roman culture and I’m showing you that Roman culture ...

Williams: Yeah, but you’re talking about one particular Roman writer.

Asher: Well, I’m talking about one particular Roman writer that extols what you would call the homosexual condition. I’m talking about one particular Roman writer who would say that the

love of boys was a good thing, and yet, the very thing that you use as your proof in the New Testament is the very thing that he condemns. You are inconsistent.

Williams: No, I’m not inconsistent. I’m just saying I can point to other Roman writers, particularly Aristotle, who go into long passages of tracing such relationships. I also think its interesting that you’re quoting Plutarch from a secondary source, instead of reading Plutarch. You’re reading what somebody says Plutarch said, taking his word for it, which is very shoddy scholarship.

Asher: Well, I think that I can have pretty good confidence in Jack Lewis, Dowell Flatt, and Bill Flatt, who are recognized scholars. Jack Lewis is recognized as one of the leading Hebrew scholars in the United States.

Williams: I don’t know who any of those people are.

Asher: You said you were from Abilene, and you’re supposed to be familiar with my brethren. You ought to know these things if you make that kind of statement. Jack Lewis is a leading Hebrew scholar in the United States; he served on the translating committee for the New International Version.

Williams: I’m not questioning the ...

Asher: You questioned the source. I’m giving you the facts, and we’re not going to let you impugn the integrity of the source.

Williams: No, I’m questioning the method. If you are going to quote Plutarch, you read from Plutarch; you don’t read from a contemporary writer

who quotes from Plutarch.

Asher: The best you can do is Luke chapter seven, and you have made a statement yourself ambiguously referring to Greek and Roman sources which you haven't produced. If we're going to talk about "shoddy scholarship," you haven't produced any of those, and you haven't made your case on the word. This is the only argument you have made from Scripture, Luke 7 verse 2, where you have one word which is never, I've already shown, never translated "boy," as you suggested, in the standard versions. And you have made your whole argument based on an assumption about a Roman centurion for which there is nothing in the Scriptures whatsoever to make any contention. Now, is there another passage of Scripture that you would like to suggest here?

Williams: So, what you are charging that I am doing with the Luke passage is what I am charging you are doing with the Genesis passage. And in both cases we are taking our own experience and finding the Scripture to support that experience. And I would be willing to grant that is what I am doing, and that is what you are doing with the Genesis passage. You are taking a passage that has nothing do with homosexuality and finding it. And your charging that I am taking a passage that has nothing to do with ...

Asher: We have just a few minutes left Robert, and we have got to get back to Matthew nineteen, because you have not dealt with that passage, which is how we came to this any way. And I want you to explain how you are going to harmonize the statement of Jesus that a man shall leave father and mother and cleave only

unto his wife. How are you going to harmonize that statement with your practice of homosexuality?

Williams: First of all, I would say that according to the traditional interpretation that Jesus himself did not obey that. You know there is no evidence that Jesus married.

Asher: Well, Jesus did not say all men had to marry. That is not the point of Matthew nineteen. There are only two options in Matthew nineteen, either marriage or celibacy. Now that is what you have.

Williams: I have chosen the option of marriage.

Asher: But the marriage that Jesus authorized in Matthew nineteen is one man and one woman. "A man shall leave father and mother and cleave unto his wife." And that cannot mean anything but a woman.

Williams: You are making a big assumption, that, because he quoted from Genesis, he is therefore saying this is the only model in which you can have a marriage. In fact, I am saying that here he is looking at a same sex marriage, saying this is a good thing.

Asher: But you have not produced Scripture for anything else.

Williams: I do not use scripture like you do.

Asher: So your whole point, I want to make this clear because I do not want to misrepresent you, is that you believe you can engage in your homosexual activity simply because you want to, whether or

not Jesus said you could, or Paul said you could, or anybody said you could.

Williams: No, I believe that what Jesus said is terribly important, but it is not what is printed in that book. That book is not the Word of God. The living Christ is the Word of God, and it is my encounter with the risen Christ in worship, in prayer, in meditation, in community with other Christians that is my source of authority. Not words printed on a page.

Asher: You cannot encounter Christ apart from the Scripture. That is the only place we know about Christ. If it were not for the Scriptures we would have no knowledge of Christ whatsoever.

Williams: I disagree absolutely. I would say you would not encounter Christ apart from the worship community. And that, in fact, the worship community is prior to the Scripture. The whole question of canon is that the worshipping community chose which books were to be canon. So that suggests that the community is prior to the book.

Asher: Let me suggest to you that the living Christ, as you refer to Him, is encountered in the living Word. Hebrews four verse twelve: “For the word of the Lord...

Williams: I don’t agree with that ...

Asher: ... is quick and powerful,” or living and active, “and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit and joints and marrows and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”

Williams: I am just saying I do not agree with that. I see it as the Bible is the

church’s book rather than the church being the people of the Bible. The Bible is the property of the church to interpret and to deal with, and the primary place of encounter with Christ for me is within a community of other Christians, specifically within the eucharist.

Asher: So you’re telling me that you do not encounter Christ, or have any authority for your man to man relationship in the Scripture, but you find your authority for that in the church.

Williams: I think that is fairly accurate. I do not think there is any authority for anything in a person reading Scripture alone.

Asher: So, the church, then, is your source of authority. Whatever your church recognizes is authority.

Williams: Whatever my worship community recognizes.

Asher: Well, I guess so, because your church certainly does not recognize your relationship.

Williams: My worship community recognizes my relationship.

Asher: Yes, your “Oasis” in Hoboken, New Jersey.

Williams: No, I’m talking about my parish in Hoboken, New Jersey.

Asher: Well, we’re at the top of the hour and out of time. Ladies and gentlemen we thank you for listening this morning.

