

**Analytic Exercise**  
Romans 1:16-32  
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*Editor's Note: Due to copyrights, the Hays and Placher articles referenced in this exercise are not available on the resource CD or the task force's Web site. Publishing information about them is included below for those who would like to locate them for use with this exercise. The process outlined here could also be applied to analysis of other articles that address the same biblical texts but arrive at different interpretations.*

The handful of biblical texts that refer to homosexual activity have figured prominently in the debates over sexuality that have polarized our denomination. An intriguing and troubling aspect of this debate is that there are committed, intelligent Christian people on both sides of it, who look at the same biblical texts and draw different interpretive conclusions from them.

The Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church engaged in an analytic exercise designed to help us understand why people who honor the Bible's authority disagree about its meaning. We hoped to discern principles of interpretation at play and the manner in which they are engaged in a reading of a biblical text. The exercise proved helpful to us, and we recommend it for other groups.

First, we found it helpful to review tried and true Reformed principles of interpretation—interpretive guidelines that Presbyterians, historically, have held to be important, including:

*The Centrality of Jesus Christ*

All of Scripture should be understood with reference to the central revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

*The Priority of the Plain Sense of the Text*

*Interpretation of Scripture by Scripture*

The entire biblical canon is the context for understanding the fullness of Christian faith and life.

*The Rule of Love*

Any interpretation needs to offer and support the two-fold commandment to love God and neighbor.

*The Rule of Faith*

We interpret Scripture in light of the doctrinal consensus of the church, past and present.

And, Presbyterians have always affirmed that: *interpretation of the Bible requires earnest study, and that we rely upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit in interpreting and applying God's word.*<sup>1</sup>

The biblical text we chose as the focus of our analytic exercise was Romans 1:16-32, which includes the most extensive New Testament reference to homosexual activity. We examined contrasting readings of it by two highly respected Christian scholars, Richard B. Hays and William C. Placher. It is important to note that their essays represent two very different genres of scholarly writing. Richard Hays' essay is part of a full-scale, 500-page examination of New Testament ethics entitled *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996; pp. 379-406), a highly acclaimed scholarly work. William Placher's essay is a transcript of an hour-long address presented at a church conference, and thus represents a very different popular genre. It is published in a short volume entitled *Struggling with Scripture*, by Walter Brueggemann, William C. Placher, and Brian K. Blount (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002; pp. 32-50).<sup>2</sup> However, despite the different genres the essays represent, they provide important food for thought and helpful illustration of the application of interpretive principles.

As you approach this exercise, remember that the Bible is not self-interpreting. It was written in a different time, a different place, a different culture, in different languages, and thus requires interpretation. Moreover, interpretation is not simply reiteration, but the work of bringing the text into our own time and place so that it is a living word through which God continues to meet us and speak to us.<sup>3</sup>

It will also be important for participants to keep in mind the *analytical* purpose of the exercise. Refrain from debating your own understandings of this much-discussed text in Romans or rendering judgments as to which reading is "right" and which reading is "wrong" (you can schedule that conversation for another occasion!). Examine the contrasting readings in an effort to understand why people who honor the Bible's authority disagree about its meaning. Try to discern principles of interpretation at play and the manner in which they are engaged in a reading of this text.

### **Recommended Procedure Guidelines for Leader**

**Read to the group the introductory paragraph of this document and introduce the *analytical* nature of the exercise**, noting that participants are to refrain from debating their own understandings of Romans 1 or rendering judgments as to which reading is "right" and which is "wrong." Throughout the exercise, the leader can refocus participants on the analytical nature of the exercise if the discussion deviates from it.

**Review together Reformed principles of biblical interpretation** (noted above).

**Read Rom. 1:16-32.** It may be helpful to note that this passage is part of a very complex argument with which Paul begins his letter to the church at Rome, the central theme of which is: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). All are in need of God's gracious gift of justification, God's saving righteousness. Here in Romans 1, Paul speaks of Gentiles; later he will turn his attention to Jews. But in each case, *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

**Discuss the following questions:**

- **As you review the reflections of Hays and Placher on Romans 1, where do you find points of commonality?**
- **Where do you find points of difference in their practice of biblical interpretation?**

As the group discusses points of commonality and difference, it may be helpful to list these on a blackboard or flipchart. It will also be helpful to include Reformed principles of interpretation as reference points in the discussion. Which principles are reflected in their readings? How is their practice of these principles similar or different? Moreover, in what ways do matters of context (literary and historical, ancient and modern, that of the text and that of the interpreter) figure in their readings?

- **What did you learn from this analytic exercise that you might not have learned if the focus of the discussion had been “which reading is right and which is wrong?”**
- **What did you learn from this exercise that illumines your understanding of conflict over biblical interpretation in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)? What implications do these learnings have for our denominational life together?**

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ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> These guidelines are elaborated upon in both a position statement and a resource document adopted by the General Assembly of the PC(USA): *Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture* (PCUS, 1983) and *Biblical Authority and Interpretation* (UPCUSA, 1982). Both can be found in one document on the task force’s Web site. The guidelines are also reviewed in segment two (“Biblical Authority and Interpretation”) of the task force’s video resource *Seeking Peace, Unity, and Purity*, along with three different models of biblical authority and interpretation practiced within the PC(USA): the scholastic model (the Bible as a book of inerrant facts), neo-orthodoxy (the Bible as a witness to Christ, the Word of God), and contextual biblical interpretation (a divine message in human forms of thought). These models are discussed in more detail in the resource document *Biblical Authority and Interpretation* (1982), and in Jack Rogers, *Reading the Bible and the Confessions: The Presbyterian Way* (Louisville: Geneva, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> A transcript of Placher’s address, delivered at the 2000 Covenant Conference of The Covenant Network of Presbyterians in Pittsburgh, PA, is also available on the Covenant Network Web site.

<sup>3</sup> On these points, see Walter Brueggemann, “Biblical Authority: A Personal Reflection,” in Walter Brueggemann, William C. Placher, and Brian K. Blount, *Struggling with Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), pp. 13, 17.