

**L. William Countryman (1987/2007), *Dirt, Greed, & Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today (Impureza, aidez y sexo: la ética sexual del Nuevo Testamento y sus implicaciones contemporáneas)*, Minneapolis: Fortress.**

Since its original publication 20 years ago, Professor Countryman's work has been the classic text for seminary courses and investigations of sexuality and sexual ethics in the New Testament. Now thoroughly revised, more than ever it merits the perceptive recommendation cited on the jacket of both editions:

One would like to make Countryman's book required reading for conservative church leaders who think they know 'what the Bible says' about sexual ethics. One would also like to make this required reading for liberal church leaders who have decided that the biblical perspectives have little helpful guidance for contemporary societies. No one will go away unchallenged by Countryman's rigorous exegesis, which first shows how different biblical ideas of sexual purity and property are from our own, and then how the basic principles of the New Testament can provide demanding guidance for human sexuality today (The Rt. Rev. Frederick H. Borsch, Ph.D).

Among the surprising insights of the first edition was Countryman's observation that in Romans 1:24-27, Paul does not refer to homoerotic relations as sinful, but as "unclean," a position he maintains and strengthens in the new edition. For elaboration of his interpretation of Romans 1:24-27 Countryman refers to his earlier work, *Interpreting the Truth* (Harrisburg: Trinity/Continuum, 2003:162-223). There he shows how Paul's general instruction on believers' praxis prepares the ground for the later deconstruction of uncleanness (2003:201): "What love commands is enough to satisfy the Law, even if it does not fulfill its letter [13:8-10]. The latter interpretation allows for the fact that Paul is about to *bracket the Torah's purity requirements.*" Concerning 14:14 ("nothing is unclean in itself") he then observes: "It would not be a mistake to call this *the central affirmation of Romans*. I do not say that it is the central affirmation of Paul's faith; chapters 7-8 may give us a closer view of that. But it is the principle that Paul sees as necessary to any resolution of the conflict over food purity in the church at Rome" (2003:205). Countryman concludes:

The Letter to Romans has a large and coherent structure....The larger part of it...is constructed in the form of *two extended, parallel entrapments*. In these, Paul hopes to neutralize potential opposition by showing those who assume an easy superiority to people of the opposite ethnicity that they have no real claim....The two 'entrapments' (1:18-32; chaps 9-11) came to be read as theological set pieces on the evils of homosexuality and Judaism, respectively, instead of playing their rhetorical function of entrapment for two distinct groups of Christians who prided themselves on their ethnicity and looked down on those who differed" (2003:211-12; see Boswell 1980 on anti-Semitism and homophobia)... "It is deeply distressing that Romans 1 and 9 have come to be read as affirmations of Christian cultural prejudices, whether against same-gender sexual partners or against Jews. **Passages that began as entrapments for the proud have now become bulwarks of our pride**....It is obscene that what began as an exercise in exposing the self-confidence of the proud has so long been an excuse for Christian arrogance and violence against gay-lesbian people and Jews." (2003:217).

I was, of course pleasantly surprised to discover in the new edition the following recommendation of my own works on oppression in Biblical theology (1983) and on the poor, women and sexual minorities in the New Testament (2000):

"Tom Hanks has brought these issues [of liberation and justice for sexual minorities] to the exegesis of the New Testament in a sustained and orderly fashion. He demonstrates beyond question that most of the New Testament authors were not interested in maintaining the household structures of the ancient Mediterranean and that, indeed, most of the individuals presented in the New Testament documents would not have seemed to be models of 'family values' whether in their time or

today.... A related approach appears in the writings of Theodore W. Jennings Jr.....The works of Hanks and Jennings, with their detailed and careful argumentation, show that excellent work is being done in this vein. However surprising their conclusions may be to casual readers (or offensive to readers protecting what they conceive as orthodoxy), they are, in fact, deeply grounded in attentive scholarly work” (251-252).

For its purpose as a textbook in mainline seminaries and reputable reference work, probably Countryman does well not to cite extensively such works as mine, Jennings’ and Marcela Althaus-Reid (also recommended, 2007:251). However, for maximizing support and encouragement to sexual minorities, I would recommend strengthening the subversive character of the argument in the following ways (for details and multiple examples, see my works 1983; 2000; 2006; 2007):

- 1 Avoid any reference to “**family/values**” in the Bible and stick to the Biblical terminology of “**house/hold**” (Acts 16:31, King James Version), since the Bible contains no reference to “family” or “family values” (as Countryman also recognizes; 2007:315, note1; but cf. 147, 164-65).
- 2 Instead of the continual references to the Greek philosophical categories of “**ethics**” and “**morals**” stick to the Biblical concept of **oppression/injustice and (liberating) justice** (cf. 2007:6-7). .
- 3 Since “**sex**” also is a term and category that does not occur in the Bible, a preferable title might be “**Dirt, Greed and Love**” (see Countryman’s recognition of the centrality of love in Song of Songs and the negligence of this book in the earlier edition; 2007:230-34). The *only* canonical book totally dedicated to the theme of sexual love might better form the starting point rather than the conclusion to the study! (cf. the most extensive treatment of sexuality in the New Testament, 1 Cor 5-7, where Paul also fails to mention the love that he later recognized as fundamental, 1 Cor13).
- 4 In a revealing footnote on polygamy, Countryman writes: “Recently in the West, the issue has been raised in another form under the term *polyamory*. The discussion of the topic has not developed far enough for me to attempt to include it here. As with any proposed change in the tradition, the first step is for its advocates to explain what they understand by it and why they feel it can contribute to or at least coexist with the ethics implied in the scriptures” (2007:328, note 20). However, this is precisely what Kathy Rudy has done in her article (T&S 4 1996:81-99) and book (*Sex and the Church*, Boston: Beacon, 1997) not mentioned by Countryman. In addition the Gay Men’s Theology group of the American Academy of Religion recently dedicated its sessions to the theme (as dutifully reported by a scandalized Robert Gagnon in his website; see also Robert Goss’ article, “Proleptic Sexual Love: God’s Promiscuity Reflected in Christian Polyamory,” *Theology & Sexuality* 11/1 (2004:52-63) and recent work, *Queering Christ*, Cleveland: Pilgrim (2002). Perhaps for the political-ecclesiastical context in which he writes (as a gay Episcopalian in a denomination dividing over such issues), Countryman does well do relegate the theme to a footnote (for a brasher approach see my 2007 SBL paper on Romans 1:16-2:16, especially the appendix on Robert Gagnon’s contribution).
- 5 Finally, I cannot resist objecting that where Fundamentalists claiming to be Christian continue to use the Bible to promote violence against sexual minorities, it’s like “giving away the store” to hand them Romans 1:26 free of charge. As many have pointed out, Romans 1:26 is best interpreted, not as describing lesbians or female homoeroticism, but as describing females resorting to “unnatural” anal sex with males (Hanks 2000; 2006; 2007), citing numerous authorities, including the unanimous patristic evidence until around 400 A.D.). If Romans 1:26 does not refer to lesbians, this means that there is not a single text in the entire Bible that condemns “homosexuality/homosexuals” (a term which by definition includes lesbians). Homophobic fundamentalists are thus left very much on the defensive, trying to explain why the Bible makes no reference to family or family values, ethics or morals, nor includes any condemnation of homosexuality. Explaining why the handful of texts commonly used to clobber are all explicitly limited to male-male anal sex and why translators betrayed readers when they began to introduce the term “homosexuals” in modern translations, starting with the RSV of 1946, becomes a very difficult and embarrassing task.

