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Will You Lead the Church to a Better Stance on Homosexuality?

A Better Vision

RON SIDER

I believe that younger evangelicals have an opportunity today to lead the way in a better approach to the painfully difficult topic of homosexuality—an approach that rejects much of recent evangelical practice but affirms the core understanding that almost all Christians have embraced for two thousand years.¹

The widespread perception that evangelicals are hostile to homosexuals weakens our witness and even drives people away from Christ. Unfortunately, evangelicals are largely to blame for the widespread view that we are antihomosexual, homophobic, and hostile to gays. Too many of us have actually been homophobic. Too many of us have tolerated gay bashers. We were largely silent when bigots in the society battered or even killed gay people. We seldom dealt sensitively and lovingly with young people in our churches struggling with their sexual orientation. Some Christian parents rejected their children who announced that they were gay. Some Christian counselors caused great pain by conducting “conversion therapy” (it was largely unsuccessful) on young gay adults. Instead of taking the lead in ministering to people with AIDS, some of our leaders even opposed government funding for research to discover medicine to help them. Some even used the issue as an effective fund-raising tool. At times, we even had the gall to blame gay people for the tragic collapse of marriage in our society, ignoring the obvious fact that the main problem by far is that many of the 95 percent of the people who are heterosexual do not keep their marriage vows.² We have often failed to distinguish gay orientation from gay sexual activity. (There is nothing sinful in having a gay orientation where one is sexually attracted to a person of the same sex. Gay sexual practice, not gay orientation, is the important issue.³) If the devil had designed a strategy to discredit the historic Christian position on sexuality, he could not have done much better than what the evangelical community has actually done in the last several decades!

Some believe that the evangelical track record is so bad that we should just remain silent on this issue. But that would mean abandoning our submission to what finally, I believe, is clear biblical teaching. It would mean forgetting the nearly unanimous two-millennia-long teaching of Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians. And it would mean failing to listen to the vast majority of contemporary Christians (a majority of whom now live in the Global South).

I need to offer four preliminary notes.

First, when I use the word “gay” in this chapter, I am referring to same-sex orientation and relationships. I will sometimes (but not always) use the word “lesbian” to refer to female-female orientation or relationships. This chapter does not deal with other aspects of the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning) discussion.

Second, I want to acknowledge clearly that this topic is painful and complicated. Many people with a gay orientation have experienced rejection and hostility in the church in a way that has been very painful. Some of these persons are Christians who remain in our churches. Others have rejected Christian faith—a result we all must grieve. Furthermore, the fact that the topic raises a whole host of issues—scientific, cultural, biblical, theological, ecclesiological, political—makes it very complicated.

Third, all human beings (even the best Christians most fully dedicated to biblical authority) can only “see through a glass, darkly” (1 Cor. 13:12 KJV). Our best understanding is always finite, limited, and imperfect. Only when we see the Lord face-to-face in the coming kingdom will we understand the full indisputable truth that only God now possesses. That does not mean that we should not assert and act upon what we believe is biblically and theologically correct (based on our best study and reflection). Jesus and the apostles command us to do that (Matt. 18:15–17; 1 Cor. 5:1–5). But it does mean that we must state our positions with grace, humility, and respect, and listen carefully to those we believe are wrong.

Fourth, this chapter deals almost exclusively with what the church should teach and practice. I do not discuss related issues of public policy (the 2015 decision by the Supreme Court has settled the legal question of same-sex marriage).⁴

Biblical Teaching

The primary biblical case against homosexual practice is not the few texts that explicitly mention it. Rather, it is the fact that again and again the Bible affirms the goodness and beauty of sexual intercourse—and everywhere, without exception, it is sexual intercourse between a man and a woman committed to each other for life.⁵

According to the creation account in Genesis, “Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame” (Gen. 2:25).⁶ Their sexual attraction is good and beautiful. A whole book of the Bible—Song of Solomon—celebrates the sexual love of a man and woman. There are many, many Old Testament laws and proverbs that discuss the proper boundaries for sexual intercourse—and always it is between a man and a woman. Jesus celebrates marriage (John 2:1–11) and tightens the restriction on divorce—again always in the context of a man and a woman. Paul affirms the goodness of sexual intercourse by urging a husband and wife to satisfy each other’s sexual desires (1 Cor. 7:1–7).

Both testaments use the relationship of husband and wife to describe God's relationship with his people: Yahweh's relationship to Israel in the Old Testament and Christ's relationship to the church in the New Testament.⁷

Again and again and again, the Bible discusses and affirms sexual intercourse. And always without exception, it is talking about a man and a woman.⁸ It is within this context of widespread, unanimous affirmation of the goodness of sexual intercourse between a man and a woman committed for life that we must read the relatively few explicit biblical texts on same-sex practice.

Both Leviticus 18 and 20 contain a long list of prohibitions against certain kinds of sexual intercourse, including adultery, incest, bestiality, and lying "with a man as one does with a woman" (18:22; 20:13). The text says that God is driving out the inhabitants of Canaan (and giving the land to the people of Israel) because they practiced these "detestable" activities (18:24–28).

These prohibitions of same-sex practice in Leviticus say nothing about motives for or types of same-sex acts—e.g., gay rape or cult prostitution (common in Canaanite religion) or an older man with a boy. They simply—and unconditionally—prohibit all acts of sex between two males. The text says both are guilty and both must be punished.

Societies surrounding Israel were not nearly as universal in condemning same-sex activity. They often condemned it, but the punishment was less harsh than in Israel. And they also affirmed gay cult prostitution.⁹ The unambiguous prohibition in the Leviticus texts, as Duke Divinity School scholar Richard Hays says, is "the foundation for the subsequent universal rejection of male same-sex intercourse within Judaism."¹⁰

Christians today still condemn most of the sexual acts forbidden in Leviticus 18 and 20, but not all—for example, having sex with one's wife during her monthly menstrual period. Furthermore, virtually all Christians today reject the penalty (death) in Leviticus for gay intercourse. The early Christians clearly rejected some parts of the Old Testament law while retaining others. So we must turn to the New Testament to see what it teaches about our topic.

The Pauline understanding is stated in Romans 1:24–27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; and 1 Timothy 1:10. Romans 1 contains the longest statement. In this chapter, Paul argues that even gentiles, who do not have God's special revelation in the Old Testament, are rightly condemned by God because they have rejected the clear revelation of God in creation. They exchanged the truth about God revealed in nature for a lie (embracing idols). God's punishment was to give "them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity" (v. 24).

Paul then cites the following illustrations:

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error. (Rom. 1:26–27)

Thousands and thousands of pages have been written in recent decades to interpret this passage. Numerous authors in various ways argue that Paul does not mean (or at least contemporary Christians should not think) that all same-sex intercourse is wrong. Perhaps Paul only condemns pederasty (an older male with a boy was rather common in Greco-Roman culture), or

cult prostitution, or uncommitted, temporary same-sex activity. Or perhaps Paul was thinking of the rather common Greco-Roman view in his day that it was a disgrace for a man to play the part of a woman because women were inferior to men.¹¹ But the text does not say any of those things. It seems to state a sweeping prohibition of same-sex intercourse—whether female with female¹² or male with male.

Paul seems to allude to Genesis as the norm for what is natural—that is, a man and a woman in sexual intercourse.¹³ Romans 1:20 refers to the creation of the world. The words used in Romans 1:26–27 for male and female are the same ones used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) for male and female in Genesis 1.¹⁴ Since Paul had just argued that the created world reveals who God is (1:18–21), it is certainly plausible to think that part of Paul's argument is that the creation itself calls for male-female intercourse but not same-sex intercourse.¹⁵

Greco-Roman moral philosophers who condemned same-sex behavior often used the phrase “contrary to nature” to describe gay intercourse. This language was especially strong in the Hellenistic Jewish writers of Paul's time. They often vehemently denounced all same-sex practice as contrary to nature. Hays, a New Testament scholar, says Paul “speaks out of a Hellenistic-Jewish cultural context in which homosexuality is regarded as an abomination and he assumes that his readers will share his negative judgment of it.” Nature in Romans 1:26 and 27 means the created order.¹⁶

Paul's condemnation of same-sex intercourse appears to involve a comprehensive prohibition—thus both reflecting and reaffirming the teaching of Leviticus forbidding gay intercourse.¹⁷

Two other Pauline texts are relevant: 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. As is the case with everything else on our topic, there is much debate about the meaning of the key words: *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*.

In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul is responding to people in the Corinthian church who seem to think that traditional moral rules are no longer relevant. Paul rejects such thinking, declaring that “wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God” (v. 9). Then he lists a number of actions that fall in this category: “Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men [*malakoi*, *arsenokoitai*] nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (vv. 9–10).

It is tragic that most Christians talk much more about the sexual sins in Paul's list than sins like greed and slander. We must recover Paul's balance.

But what do the words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* mean? Hays points out that the word *malakoi* “appears often in Hellenistic Greek as pejorative slang to describe the ‘passive’ partners—often young boys—in gay activity.”¹⁸

The other word, *arsenokoitai* (used again in 1 Tim. 1:10 in a similar list of sins), does not appear in any extant Greek text before Paul's use here in 1 Corinthians. This word combines two Greek words: *arsen* (the word for male) and *koitai* (the masculine plural noun of a word formed from the verb *koitē* [lying with]). Thus the meaning is a man lying with a man. It seems that only Jews and Christians used the compound word *arsenokoitai*.¹⁹ And the compound word very likely emerged as they read the prohibition against homosexual practice in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 because precisely the same Greek words appear in the translation of these verses in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible used in Paul's time). Pro-gay scholar Robin

Scroggs has shown that Jewish rabbis used a parallel Hebrew phrase drawn from Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 to refer to gay intercourse.²⁰ Therefore, as Hays says, “Paul’s use of the term presupposes and reaffirms the holiness code’s condemnation of homosexual acts.”²¹

It is important to remember that Paul does not end his discussion with his list of sinful actions that prevent people from entering the kingdom. Instead, after noting that some Corinthian Christians had been such persons, Paul rejoices that they are now forgiven and transformed: “You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified” (1 Cor. 6:11). Paul is not claiming complete sanctification. And he certainly is not commenting on our contemporary debate about whether persons with a long-standing same-sex orientation can exchange that for a heterosexual orientation (very few have, in spite of much effort). Rather, Paul is saying that the Holy Spirit works powerfully in the lives of Christians enabling them to turn away from former sins and resist ongoing temptation.

We can summarize the biblical material in this way. The most important fact is that in many places the Bible affirms the goodness of sexual intercourse—but only in the context of a marriage between a man and a woman. There are only a few texts that explicitly discuss same-sex intercourse. But they are unanimous in their prohibition of such action. Furthermore, the relative infrequency of discussion of such issues does not necessarily mean that they are unimportant. The fact that St. Paul mentioned incest only once does not mean he thought it was a minor or relatively harmless thing.

Hays is correct: “The early church did in fact consistently adopt the Old Testament teaching on matters of sexual morality, including homosexual acts.”²² Also, in both testaments, the texts clearly say (by the punishment prescribed or the result of the action) that the issue is very serious rather than something insignificant. The biblical teaching is unanimous.

Even writers who argue on hermeneutical grounds that the biblical teaching on same-sex practice is no longer normative for Christians today nevertheless acknowledge that the biblical teaching is universally negative. In his dialogue book with Robert Gagnon, pro-gay scholar Dan O. Via says, “Professor Gagnon and I are in substantial agreement that the biblical texts that deal specifically with homosexual practice condemn it unconditionally.”²³ Pro-gay scholar John McNeill similarly notes that “wherever the Bible clearly seems to refer to homosexual activity, we must recognize a judgment and condemnation.”²⁴ And Walter Wink, in an article in *Christian Century* advocating Christian acceptance of same-sex intercourse, bluntly acknowledges: “The Bible clearly considers homosexuality a sin. . . . I freely grant that. The issue is precisely whether that biblical judgment is correct.”²⁵

Hermeneutical Arguments

In spite of this biblical material, however, substantial numbers of Christians, including some evangelicals, offer hermeneutical arguments to say that the church should affirm same-sex intercourse between gay or lesbian couples in committed, monogamous, lifelong relationships. Not everything the New Testament teaches (e.g., head coverings for women) is still normative today. We must examine some of the most important arguments advanced to show either that Paul did not mean to condemn lifelong same-sex relationships or that persuasive hermeneutical arguments show that contemporary Christians rightly disagree with St. Paul.

Argument 1: Paul Was Unaware of Lifelong Same-Sex Relationships

One of the frequent, substantive arguments is that the kind of same-sex intercourse Paul knew and condemned is fundamentally different from the kind of same-sex relationships faithful Christians should accept today.²⁶ Typical gay intercourse in Greco-Roman society was pederastic (a dominant older male with a passive male youth). Not infrequently, it involved slavery and rape. And sometimes it involved lascivious heterosexuals who wanted sex with males in addition to sex with females. The Bible, it is argued, only means to condemn pederastic and exploitative gay intercourse. And in any case, the idea of a lifelong exclusively same-sex orientation or a permanent gay partnership (“marriage”) was simply unknown in Paul’s time.²⁷

It is certainly true that the most common gay relationships in Greco-Roman life were between men and boys (pederasty). Other, even more exploitative relationships were not uncommon. But Paul’s discussion in Romans 1 says nothing about pederasty or exploitation. There is nothing in the text that suggests that those are the reasons Paul prohibits same-sex intercourse. Rather, it is “against nature” and contrary to the entire Jewish understanding of God’s will for sexual intercourse. And Paul condemns both partners, not just a dominant or exploitative older male.

Nor is it convincing to say, as several do, that Romans 1:27 refers only to gay activity committed by males whose orientation is heterosexual but want the additional “thrill” of gay sex.²⁸ When Paul says, “Men also abandoned natural relations with women,” he is not thinking in terms of a specific (heterosexual) man making a choice to engage in gay intercourse. Rather he is talking about the whole pagan culture that has abandoned what the creation tells us about God and “exchanged” (v. 23) it for idol worship; and similarly the pagan culture has abandoned what nature teaches us about sexual intercourse and “exchanged” (v. 26) it for same-sex intercourse. As Hays says, “The ‘exchange’ is not a matter of individual life decisions; rather it is Paul’s characterization of the fallen condition of the pagan world.”²⁹

One of the major arguments of James Brownson’s recent book *Bible, Gender, Sexuality* is that Paul (and the Greco-Roman world generally) simply did not know of the idea of a lifelong gay orientation or a permanent male-male sexual partnership. “The ancient world had no notion of sexual orientation.”³⁰ Therefore contemporary Christians need not accept Paul’s sweeping prohibition of all same-sex intercourse. In fact, however, there are clear examples in Greco-Roman literature of both a lifelong same-sex orientation and a permanent male-male sexual partnership.

In Plato’s *Symposium* (which includes speeches at a banquet in 416 BC), Pausanias describes his love for Agathon, which had begun when Agathon (the younger man) was eighteen. But their gay relationship has continued for more than twelve years. Pausanias speaks strongly of the permanence of such a relationship: “For, I think, those who began from that moment [i.e., when the younger man begins to grow a beard] to fall in love with them are prepared to love in the expectation that they will be with them all their life and will share their lives in common; but not . . . go off and run away to another.”³¹

In another speech by Aristophanes at the same banquet, we are told of the myth that originally, persons were binary beings of three types: a male-male type, a female-female type, and a male-female type. But Zeus split each pair in half. The result is that now each person from each type desires to reunite with his (or her) other half. Persons from a male-female binary type desire heterosexual partnerships. Women who come from a female-female binary type now “are

inclined toward women.” Men who came from a male-male binary type now “regard with affection men and rejoice when they lie down with and are locked together with men.” Aristophanes says this same-sex orientation is permanent: “When they reach manhood, they become lovers of boys and are *not* inclined by nature toward marriage and the procreation of children.” And not just the gay orientation but the male-male partnership is to be lifelong: “These are they who continue with one another throughout life.”³²

There are also other examples of lifelong erotic orientation in the ancient world. Ptolemy (an astrologer of the second century AD) said the configuration of the stars determined one’s lifelong sexual orientation. Some astrological configurations produce an exclusively male-male orientation, others an exclusively lesbian one.³³ Ancient medical writers also sometimes spoke of people having a lifelong homoerotic identity.³⁴

We cannot know, of course, whether St. Paul knew of these philosophical, astrological, and medical texts, but as a well-educated Roman citizen capable of quoting Greek authors, it is entirely possible that he did. In any case, it is simply not accurate to say that the idea of a lifelong same-sex orientation or of a long-term same-sex partnership was unknown in Paul’s time. Thus one of Brownson’s central arguments depends on historical inaccuracy.

Argument 2: Paul Was Misguided about Women and Procreation

Another argument used to claim that contemporary Christians rightly reject the biblical prohibition of same-sex intercourse is that the reasons people in Paul’s day (and therefore presumably Paul himself) rejected same-sex intercourse are clearly misguided. Many ancients rejected gay intercourse because it belittled the supposed superior status of males versus females³⁵ and/or because it could not lead to procreation.

It is certainly true that many Greeks and Romans viewed women as fundamentally inferior to men. They saw men as strong and rational, and women as weak and ruled by passion; in intercourse the male is to be active, the female passive. Frequently those Greco-Romans who condemned gay intercourse did so explicitly because it meant that a male (who is supposed to be strong and active, not passive) plays the passive role of a woman. The very act defies the proper gender roles of superior male and inferior female. Similarly, in female-female intercourse, a woman must (disgracefully) take on the active role of a man. Contemporary Christians like myself who affirm the full equality and dignity of women find such an argument against same-sex intercourse totally unconvincing.

But Paul never uses this rather widespread ancient reason for opposing same-sex intercourse. He simply declares that all same-sex intercourse is wrong. The fact that some of Paul’s contemporaries offered a misguided reason for rejecting same-sex intercourse says nothing about the reason for or validity of Paul’s prohibition.

It is also true that many Greco-Roman writers as well as prominent Jewish thinkers (e.g., Philo and Josephus) condemned same-sex intercourse because it could not lead to children. (They also often condemned intercourse between a married man and his wife if it were not intended for procreation.) But again, Paul never hints at these arguments. His stated reason for marriage is to avoid sexual temptation, not to enable procreation (1 Cor. 7:2–5). And he writes positively of the ways that husbands and wives satisfy each other’s sexual desires without any suggestion that the only valid reason for sexual intercourse in marriage is to bring children into the world.

In fact, in amazing contrast with the preponderant view in his culture that the married woman must be passive in intercourse, Paul speaks of a total mutuality as wife and husband reciprocally yield to each other (1 Cor. 7:4).

In his condemnation of same-sex intercourse, Paul simply does not use the misguided arguments (common in his day) that all contemporary Christians should rightly reject.

Argument 3: Jesus Was Silent

What about the argument that since Jesus said nothing about same-sex intercourse and a great deal about loving everyone, we should conclude that he was at least indifferent about the issue?

We must remember Jesus's historical setting. All extant relevant evidence about Judaism in the two centuries before and after Jesus indicate that the Jews were unanimously and unequivocally opposed to same-sex intercourse. If Jesus had said anything that contradicted this contemporary Jewish consensus, it would have been shocking—and would have been remembered.

Nor is it the case that Jesus loosened contemporary sexual standards. Not just adultery but lust in one's heart is sin (Matt. 5:27–28). Jesus dramatically narrowed the grounds for legitimate divorce, setting aside the easy divorce privileges (for men) granted in the Mosaic law (Matt. 5:31–32; 19:3–9; see also Deut. 24:1–4).

Silence or infrequent mention of a topic is never proof that an issue is irrelevant or unimportant. It may simply mean that the societal consensus is so strong that no one asks a question about it. That is very probably why we have nothing from Jesus about same-sex practice. Jesus did not say anything directly about incest or bestiality, but hardly anyone would argue that therefore he did not consider them immoral.

What we do have from Jesus about sinners of all types including sexual sinners, however, is very important. The Pharisees denounced him for associating with sinners (Matt. 11:19). He was involved with women of ill repute (John 4:4–42). He refused to implement the Mosaic punishment (stoning) for adultery, suggesting that those without sin should cast the first stone. But after all the other men had slunk away, Jesus gently told the woman not to sin anymore (John 8:2–11).

Jim Daly

President and CEO, Focus on the Family

My friend Ron Sider hits all the right notes—standing solidly on biblical truth, exuding grace and love, and calling the church to be both a firm and winsome witness. Homosexuality may be the defining moral issue of our time, and it is becoming increasingly unpopular and uncomfortable to stand up for God's design for human sexuality. For that reason, it is vital that we do so now more than ever.

There are three key ideas to guide us here. First, all people—regardless of sexual attractions, identity, or behavior—are created in God's image. As a result, they all have great worth and are deserving of love and respect. Second, God's blueprint for human sexuality can be summed up in six short words: "male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). Let's proclaim with our words and our lives the wonderful truths that men and women are created to be both

unique and complementary, that sex is a God-given gift intended to be shared exclusively within the bonds of marriage, and that marriage is for a lifetime.

Last, God's amazing grace enables us to live as he has called us. Christians who experience same-sex attractions do not have to act on those feelings, despite what the culture is telling them. Scores of men and women—through prayer, counseling, and the work of the Holy Spirit—have overcome unwanted desires. Many other equally faithful believers continue to struggle with those attractions, and yet remain committed to honoring God in this area of their lives.

Society today is experiencing confusion on these matters that would be unimaginable to previous generations. As our moral environment grows increasingly murky, Christians have a tremendous opportunity and responsibility to shine as beacons of grace and truth.

Jesus never condoned sin. But he modeled amazing love and concern for those ensnared by its destructive power. What a difference it would make if Christians today followed his example.

Argument 4: Same-Sex Attraction Is Biological

What if same-sex attraction is a genetic, inherited, unchangeable orientation? Does that mean it is morally right to engage in same-sex intercourse?

There is ongoing debate about the causes of same-sex orientation, but we can certainly agree that there are people who from their earliest experiences of sexual attraction are drawn only to those of the same sex. And the evidence clearly shows that most such people seem unable to change that attraction even after much effort, prayer, and anguish.

But the evidence is also quite compelling that some people inherit a predisposition to alcoholism that will likely overwhelm them if they start to drink. Some people (whether through their genes or socialization or both) are much more inclined to sex with children, incest, excessive overeating, and stealing. Surely Christians should not argue that every inborn trait is good and should be acted upon. The teaching of Romans is that there are many things that all of us are powerfully drawn to because of the fall that are sinful and must be resisted. Even if same-sex orientation is entirely due to genetic inheritance,³⁶ that in itself says nothing about whether same-sex intercourse is morally right.

Argument 5: Rejecting Same-Sex Relationships Is Similar to Condoning Slavery and the Oppression of Women

Another widely advanced hermeneutical argument for changing the historic Christian stance on same-sex intercourse builds on the way Christians today have moved beyond what the biblical text says about slavery and the role of women. The Old Testament explicitly allowed slavery, and neither Jesus nor any New Testament writer specifically condemned slavery (which was then a fundamental part of economic life in the Roman Empire) or called for its abolition. Christians today, nonetheless, agree that slavery is incompatible with biblical faith. Similarly, the inequality of women is clear in numerous Old Testament passages, and the New Testament does not offer any modern call for women's liberation. In fact, Paul says the husband is the head of the wife (Eph. 5:23) and women should "keep silent" in the church (1 Tim. 2:12 NRSV). And for many centuries, church practice relegated women to an inferior position—often citing a

couple specific New Testament texts. But today, many Christians (and I am one of them) embrace a “biblical feminism” that affirms the full equality of women and men in church and society. If ongoing careful biblical exegesis, experience, and hermeneutical reflection (plus, one hopes, the guidance of the Holy Spirit) have rightly led Christians to abandon earlier views about slavery and women that they had claimed were grounded in the Bible, why then should not the same change be embraced with regard to committed, lifelong same-sex partnerships?

I consider this a serious argument that should not be dismissed lightly. But I think it is wrong for one fundamental reason. In the cases of slavery and women, there is a clear progression within the Bible itself from earlier acceptance of slavery and female inequality to strong indications that both are wrong. In the case of same-sex intercourse, on the other hand, there is not even a hint of a change within the canon. The prohibition in the New Testament is as clear as in the Old Testament.

The Old Testament does condone slavery. But even there, the biblical text places substantial limits on its practice and seeks to mitigate its severity (Deut. 15:12–14). The New Testament commends masters to treat their slaves with respect (Eph. 6:9). And when Paul sends the (new Christian) runaway slave Onesimus back to his Christian master, Philemon, Paul commands Philemon to treat his returned slave “no longer as a slave, but . . . as a dear brother” (Philem. 16). When one understands the implications of that command, slavery becomes impossible!

The canonical progression in the case of women is even more striking. There is not a hint of inequality of women in the creation stories (Gen. 1; 2). But the fall led to enormous inequality as many Old Testament accounts illustrate—although even here, there are examples of women becoming powerful leaders (e.g., Deborah in Judg. 4:4–5:31). Jesus is dramatically different. He frequently ignored the rule that it was wrong for a man to appear in public with a woman. Even though a prominent rabbi said teaching the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) to a woman was like teaching her lechery, Jesus taught women theology (Luke 10:38–42).³⁷ Implementing the ancient prophecy that in the messianic time “your sons *and daughters* will prophesy” (Acts 2:17; cf. Joel 2:28), the early church had at least one female apostle (Rom. 16:7) and several prophets (Acts 21:9; 1 Cor. 11:5). Paul enunciated the amazing principle that in Christ “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).³⁸

When contemporary Christians totally reject slavery and embrace the full equality of women, they are extending a trajectory clearly begun in the biblical canon. In the case of same-sex intercourse, on the other hand, there is nothing in the biblical canon that hints at such a change.³⁹

Argument 6: Celibacy Is Impossible for Many and against God’s Desire for Human Flourishing

If same-sex intercourse is wrong, then celibacy is the only option for Christians with a same-sex orientation. But many people argue that celibacy is both impossible for many and contrary to God’s desire for human fulfillment. Many Christian proponents of same-sex practice argue, as does Dan Via, that a same-sex orientation is the “unifying center of consciousness” for a gay person.⁴⁰ Via also argues that God wants abundant life for everyone, “an aspect of which is bodily

(sexual) life.”⁴¹ Or again: “Abundant life is such an all-embracing idea that it can include the specific actualization of whatever bodily-sexual orientation one has been given by creation.”⁴²

Several things must be said about this argument.

First, it would undoubtedly surprise Jesus and Paul (both celibate) who certainly did not think bodily sexual activity was necessary for abundant life.

Second, it is profoundly unbiblical to argue that one’s sexual orientation is the defining aspect of one’s identity (the “unifying center of consciousness” as Via insists). For Christians, our relationships to God and to the new community of Christ’s church, not our sexual orientation, provide our fundamental identity. That is not to claim that our identity as men and women with particular sexual orientations is irrelevant or unimportant for who we are, but that sexual orientation dare never be as important to us as our commitment to Christ and his call to live according to kingdom ethics.⁴³

Brownson argues, from Paul’s teaching (1 Cor. 7:1–9) on marriage as a protection against sexual immorality (since many people cannot be celibate like Paul), that we ought to accept same-sex partners. Most people with a same-sex orientation, just like most people with a heterosexual orientation, lack the gift of celibacy. Therefore, Brownson argues, Paul’s advice to heterosexuals (“They should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion” [v. 9]) also applies to Christians with a same-sex orientation.⁴⁴ The church today should not expect them to be celibate.

But this argument that Christians with a same-sex orientation cannot be celibate ignores two facts. First, there are significant numbers of Christians with a same-sex orientation who do live celibate lives, and some speak movingly about how God’s grace enables them to do that.⁴⁵ Second, it also ignores the fact that Christians over the centuries and still today call on large numbers of heterosexually oriented Christians to be celibate—and believe that it is possible in the power of the Spirit. This list includes younger widows and widowers; unmarried singles (many of whom would gladly marry if they could find a partner); and older people who have lost a spouse. The numbers of heterosexually oriented, unmarried people whom the church calls to celibacy are vastly larger than that quite small number (5 percent of the population at the most) that have a gay orientation. Do Christians who use this argument to promote Christian acceptance of same-sex intercourse also want us to conclude that the tens of millions of Christians who would like to marry but cannot find a partner obviously cannot practice celibacy and therefore should find a sexual partner? Hays is right: “The Bible undercuts our cultural obsession with sexual fulfillment.”⁴⁶

Brownson also offers a slightly different argument against the view that Christians with a same-sex orientation should be celibate. He claims that Jesus’s teaching on lust means that the distinction between sexual orientation and sexual behavior is “ultimately untenable.”⁴⁷ The *impulse* to sin must also be sinful, Brownson argues, because Jesus teaches that lust is actually already sinful adultery (Matt. 5:28). Brownson argues that if same-sex practice is sin, then, by the adultery analogy, the *impulse* toward same-sex practice (that is, a same-sex orientation) is also sin. Therefore the claim (that I and many others make) that having and acknowledging a same-sex orientation is not a sin (and that one sins only when one acts on this attraction) is finally wrong.

I think this argument depends on a misguided understanding of what Jesus means by lust. Obviously, we do not have a lengthy footnote from Jesus to explain exactly what he meant by lust. But I very much doubt that he intended to teach that any instinctive attraction to the physical beauty of a woman is like committing adultery. It is probably the case that many male heterosexuals (including this one) have a polygamous orientation that regularly prompts them to notice the physical beauty of women other than their wives in a way that goes beyond the way that the pure Jesus noticed the bodies of women. And this action in some important sense is a result of the fall. But Jesus, I am certain, means something different by lust. Lust is dwelling on the thought of another woman's beauty and continuing to think about acting on the attraction even though one never intends to commit physical adultery. I think that is what Jesus means by lust, which he condemns.

One can think of an analogy with many other "inclinations" or "orientations." Some have an inclination to alcoholism or pederasty or materialism. That initial inclination surely results from the fall, but one sins only if one begins to nurture the inclination by dwelling on how one might act on the attraction. In a similar way, a same-sex (or polygamous or pederastic) orientation is a result of the fall, but one does not sin (in the form of lust) unless one begins to dwell on and nurture that attraction in one's mind. Jesus's teaching on lust does not in any way make the distinction between same-sex orientation and same-sex practice problematic.

Argument 7: It Is Time for a Paradigm Shift

David Gushee, a good friend and prominent evangelical social ethicist, believes a paradigm shift is warranted—a paradigm shift that would fully affirm same-sex activity on the part of a gay Christian couple committed to an exclusive, lifelong, covenantal relationship.⁴⁸ He argues that personal experience with gay Christians, modern knowledge about the apparently unchangeable gay orientation of some people, and new biblical and hermeneutical analysis taken together warrant his rejection of what he acknowledges is the two-millennia-long teaching of the Christian church.

How should we evaluate this call for a paradigm shift? It is certainly the case that significant paradigm shifts have occurred in the history of the church. The Copernican revolution provides one excellent example. When Copernicus argued that the scientific data showed that the earth revolved around the sun rather than the sun circling the earth, prominent Christians like Martin Luther rejected Copernicus's ideas, citing biblical texts that say the sun stands still. And the Catholic Church forced Galileo to recant when he supported Copernicus with additional scientific data. But over time, virtually all Christians have embraced Copernicus's scientifically accurate view of the solar system. We now agree that the Bible is not intending to teach astronomy when it includes an occasional text that reflects a prescientific view of the earth and sun. Modern science has prompted a reassessment of exegetical and hermeneutical conclusions, and the result has been a paradigm shift.

Is Gushee's paradigm shift on gay sexual partnerships analogous to the paradigm shift on the solar system? Or is it more like the widespread embrace of divorce in the Christian community after the sexual revolution of the 1960s? In the latter case, societal values shifted quickly and dramatically (as they have more recently on same-sex relations), rejecting millennia-long Christian teaching on divorce. The response of the Christian church was to fall largely silent about

Jesus's teaching against divorce and say little about the fact that Christians began to divorce at almost the same rate as everyone else. That paradigm shift, both Gushee and I agree, was a terrible ethical and theological mistake.

Finally, I simply do not find Gushee's arguments for his paradigm shift convincing. I respect the powerful personal experiences that he acknowledges played a role in his changed position. But personal experiences dare not override biblical teaching.

Gushee and others raise questions about the "traditional" interpretation of the relevant biblical texts. But I do not find the arguments compelling. And most advocates of a paradigm shift largely ignore the fact that the strongest biblical case for the view that God's design for sex is for a man and a woman committed to each other for life is the vast amount of biblical material that simply assumes that a male-female relationship is the proper place for sex. There is not a hint of any other situation being God's will. Even many pro-gay advocates acknowledge that the biblical material clearly supports the historic Christian position.

Nor do I find the hermeneutical arguments for this paradigm shift convincing. It is simply not true that the idea of a lifelong gay orientation is a totally modern idea unknown in the ancient Greco-Roman world. It is true that I would reject a number of the specific reasons given in Paul's time for opposing same-sex activity, but the Bible never cites these reasons in its general prohibition of gay sex. It is true that I embrace the paradigm shifts on both slavery and the role of women. But in both of those cases, there is a clear trajectory in the biblical canon that leads to that change. In the case of same-sex practice, there is not a hint of such a change in the Bible.

Obviously, we all are finite, limited persons. Our best ethical and theological judgments are filled with imperfection. We all see through a glass darkly. We cannot know now what the vast majority of Christians will think about this issue in one hundred years. All we can do is honestly and carefully affirm what we believe is the most faithful, biblical position. And I am convinced that the best biblical exegesis and hermeneutical reflection clearly points to the conclusion that the only right setting for sexual intercourse is between a man and a woman who are married and committed to an exclusive, lifelong relationship.

Thus far, I have argued that the biblical material unequivocally teaches that the only legitimate place for sexual intercourse is between a married man and woman in a lifelong committed relationship. Furthermore, none of the hermeneutical arguments claiming that Christians today should set aside the biblical teaching are convincing. Now—much more briefly!—I turn to church history and then the global church today.

Why a discussion of these two areas? Because Christians over the ages have often rightly insisted that biblical interpretation and ethical and theological discussion should always occur in the whole body of Christ—both geographically and historically. One of the important protections against misguided biblical interpretation and theological reflection is to test one's conclusions with the full body of believers.

Church History

Does Christian history present a totally unanimous practice against same-sex sexual activity? Not quite. John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (1980) shows that gay and lesbian sexual intimacy sometimes occurred in the history of the church.⁴⁹ But his claim

that same-sex practice was not significantly condemned for the first one thousand years of church history is greatly overstated.⁵⁰

A number of Christian writers in the first four centuries condemned same-sex intercourse—as did a church synod in AD 305–306. The church’s teaching influenced Christian Roman emperors to increase the legal penalties for same-sex offenses. In the Middle Ages, church penitentials (which specified the penance required for various sins) and official church pronouncements (e.g., councils in 1179, 1212, and 1214) all condemned same-sex intimacy. And in the Reformation, the Protestant Reformers expressed the same position whenever they mentioned the topic. Stanley Grenz summarizes the historical record this way:

Whenever the church was confronted with sexual practices involving persons of the same sex, Christian teachers spoke out against such behaviors. Despite differences among them, the ecclesiastical sources Boswell and others cite never express moral approval of, or even indifference to, same-sex activity. On the contrary, explicit moral references to such behavior in the Christian tradition were consistently negative. This suggests that Christian ethicists from the second century to the twentieth forge an unbroken chain. . . . In each era, Christian moralists rejected the same-sex practices of their day. And they consistently found the basis for such condemnation in the several scriptural texts in which the biblical authors appear to pronounce divine judgment on the homosexual behavior with which they were confronted.⁵¹

The Global Church Today

One-half of today’s 2.2 billion Christians are Roman Catholics. And the Catholic Church’s teaching is unequivocal. Same-sex acts are contrary to Scripture and natural law. In the words of the Catechism: “Under no circumstances can they be approved.”⁵² The Catechism also strongly urges respect, compassion, and sensitivity to the men and women who have “deep-seated homosexual tendencies” but calls them to celibacy.⁵³

The various Orthodox bodies contain 260 million Christians (about 12 percent of all Christians today). Their teaching is similar to that of Roman Catholics. Orthodox writers, canons, and synods from the earliest centuries to the present unanimously teach that “homosexual behavior is a sin.”⁵⁴

The vast majority (about 600 million) of today’s Protestants (more than 800 million total) are evangelicals.⁵⁵ Not without exception but overwhelmingly, evangelicals today also embrace the historical teaching of the church on same-sex intercourse.

The explicit teaching of the churches that contain the vast majority of Christians today clearly declares that the only legitimate setting for sexual intercourse is within the marriage of a man and a woman. That is not to say that all these Christians embrace every argument advanced by the others for this conclusion.⁵⁶ Nor is it to ignore the fact that a significant minority of Christians in Western Europe and North America now affirm same-sex practice in lifelong covenanted partnerships.⁵⁷ But at the very least, the fact that the vast majority of Christians today embrace the historical teaching of the church as the proper interpretation of the Bible should give us pause before accepting same-sex intercourse.

It is also significant for Western evangelical Christians that the large majority of evangelicals today reside in the Global South—and they overwhelmingly believe that same-sex practice

is contrary to God's will. If we want to escape a Western colonial mind-set, we must listen carefully to them. Young Christians today are well ahead of my generation in overcoming the condescending, even racist, attitudes of many white European and North American Christians. But transcending that white prejudice requires careful listening and dialoguing with the vast majority of evangelicals in the Global South who believe same-sex practice is not God's will. (One of the more striking recent examples of white "Western" arrogance is the way the relatively small number of Anglican/Episcopal churches in the West have refused to submit to the views of the vast majority of Anglicans worldwide who live in the Global South.) It is also striking that the embrace of the church's historic prohibition against same-sex practice is strongest in those parts of the world where the church is rapidly growing (the Global South) and weakest in those places where the church is declining (Western Europe, Canada, etc.). And in the United States, it is precisely those mainline denominations that are embracing same-sex relationships that have declined dramatically in the last forty-plus years while evangelical churches have done much better.

Listening to and dialoguing with other Christians, of course, does not mean simply accepting their viewpoints. Respectful dialogue in the global body of Christ includes challenging one another. I disagree, for example, with the laws (often supported by African evangelicals) in many African countries that prescribe the death penalty or prison for same-sex activity—and I have added my name to a letter from American evangelicals urging a different public policy. Dialogue in the global body of Christ must be a two-way street. Small minorities are sometimes right over against the vast majority.

At the very least, however, the fact that the teaching of the churches containing the overwhelming majority of contemporary Christians prohibits same-sex practice should be a significant factor in our thinking about this topic. And for evangelical Protestants, the fact that the vast majority of our evangelical sisters and brothers in the world today do the same should discourage us from quickly reversing the millennia-long teaching of the church.

A Better Approach

Simply repeating biblical truth (no matter how strong our exegesis or how sound our theology), listening to two millennia of church history, and dialoguing carefully with Christians in the Global South, however, are not enough. We need a substantially new approach.

For starters, we must do whatever it takes to nurture a generation of Christian men and women who keep their marriage vows and model healthy family life. By far the primary reason marriage is in such disarray in the West is that (Christian!) *heterosexuals* have not kept their marriage vows. If we want to restore marriage as a crucial foundation of a good culture, then our most important concern must be to persuade Christian heterosexuals to follow biblical norms.

Second, we need to find ways to love and listen to gay people, especially gay Christians, in a way that most of us have not done. (Andrew Marin's *Love Is an Orientation* issues a passionate summons to do that.)

In addition to living faithful marriages and engaging in loving conversation, I believe evangelicals must take the lead in a cluster of other activities related to gay people.

We ought to take the lead in condemning and combating verbal or physical abuse of gay people.

We need much better teaching on how evangelical parents should respond if their children announce that they are gay. Christian families should *never* reject a child, throw her out of their home, or refuse to see him if a child announces that he is gay. One can and should disapprove of unbiblical behavior without refusing to love and cherish a child who does that. Christian families should be the most loving places for children—even when they disagree with and act contrary to what parents believe. Please God, may we never hear another story of evangelical parents rejecting children who “come out of the closet.”

We ought to develop model programs so that evangelical congregations are known as the best place in the world for gay and questioning youth (and adults) to seek God’s will in a context that embraces, loves, and listens rather than shames, denounces, and excludes. Evangelical youth groups in our churches and organizations ought to be the safest place in the world for those wrestling with their sexual identity to be open about their struggle. Surely we can ask the Holy Spirit to show us how to teach and nurture biblical sexual practice without ignoring, marginalizing, and driving away from Christ those who struggle with biblical norms.

Our churches should be widely known as places where people with a gay orientation can be open about their orientation and feel truly welcomed and embraced. Of course, Christians who engage in unbiblical sexual practices (whether heterosexual or gay Christians) should be disciplined (and disciplined) by the church and not allowed to be leaders or members in good standing if they persist in their sin. (The same should be said for those who engage in unbiblical practices of any kind, including greed and racism.) However, Christians who openly acknowledge a gay orientation but commit themselves to celibacy should be eligible for any role in the church that their spiritual gifts suggest. Imagine the impact if evangelical churches were widely known to be the best place in the world to find love, support, and full affirmation of gifts if one is an openly, unashamedly gay, celibate Christian.

That, very briefly, is what I believe our Lord calls biblical Christians to do on this fiercely debated, highly controversial topic.⁵⁸

I have no illusions that this approach will be easy.

The secular media and many in our great universities are overwhelmingly opposed to the teaching of historic Christianity on sexuality.⁵⁹ In light of the Supreme Court’s decision making same-sex marriage legal everywhere in the United States, there will be enormous legal and other public policy initiatives that will make it difficult for Christian nonprofits (universities, social service agencies, etc.) to maintain and live out the historic Christian teaching on same-sex activity.⁶⁰

Many conservative Christians want only to condemn. Many gay people consider anything short of affirming same-sex intercourse to be intolerant and hateful. For some, “welcoming but not affirming” is unacceptable. For many in our relativistic society (where relativism is confused with tolerance, and “love” trumps truth), any statement, no matter how gentle and loving, that says certain behavior is sinful is rejected as intolerant, uncivil, hateful, and violent. We must beg the Holy Spirit to teach us better ways to be gentle and loving. But we also must realize that any condemnation of sin will sometimes be rejected as unloving by those who embrace sin.⁶¹

We dare not be misled by the theologically confused argument that since we are all sinners (which is certainly true), the church cannot say same-sex practice is sin. Just because every Christian fails God in some ways does not mean we should abandon biblical norms and stop speaking about sin. Rather, we should reaffirm God's standards and gently, patiently walk with each other to help us all become more and more conformed to the image of Christ.

Some Christians who have rightly learned to listen to and love gay people say that all we should do is love gay people—and then let the Holy Spirit teach each gay person how they should act. That is far too individualistic. The church through the centuries has believed that interpreting the Bible and nurturing biblical behavior is a communal task. We are supposed to watch over one another in love, as John Wesley said. The Christian community must discern how to understand biblical sexual teaching and then nurture Christians who live it—but always with love and gentleness.

And also patience. We are sometimes in too big of a hurry to summon people to live biblical ethics. All of us, if we look inward with honest hearts, recognize that the Holy Spirit has been very patient, slowly reshaping our tangled character into the image of Christ. We should not be in too big of a hurry to talk about biblical norms. We should love, pray, and listen, waiting patiently for the Holy Spirit to prompt us about when to speak and act.

But that does not mean never talking about biblical sexual standards. It means waiting for the Spirit's timing.

I hope and pray that the Lord of the church and the world will somehow weave love, truth, and fidelity out of the tangled strands that we currently face today on this issue. And I dare to hope that young evangelicals (like my coauthor of this book) will be wise and faithful leaders in that huge task.



Response by Ben Lowe

Changing perspectives on human sexuality are causing upheaval in our churches and communities. They're among the most personal, painful, and polarizing moral questions stirring my generation today. And, regardless of what one believes, or how thoughtfully one approaches these issues, or how graciously one interacts with others, there's really no simple or safe way forward.

With a heavy heart, I mourn the hurt, fear, and anger that often plague these divisive issues and drive wedges between our families, friends, and fellow followers of Christ. At the same time, however, I'm glad things have become this challenging and unavoidable.

It's Good That It's Hard

For too long the church has largely been able to write off homosexuality as an outside problem. This contributed—through sins of commission as well as omission—to the tremendous insensitivity, misunderstanding, oppression, and even cruelty that persons identifying as, or suspected of being, LGBTQ have experienced. Today, however, just about everyone knows of loved ones who experience same-sex attraction and/or gender dysphoria.⁶²

Being in relationship with those struggling with their sexuality or identifying as LGBTQ changes things dramatically for the heterosexual majority. Media and entertainment play a significant role here as well. All of a sudden this isn't an abstract, us-versus-them issue. It has become very personal. It is now *our* issue. Regardless of where things go from here, this more personal connection and understanding is a very significant step forward. And it's progress that can be celebrated no matter what each of us personally believes about these issues. It puts us on the path toward overcoming the ignorance and bigotry that have too often reigned, and the tragic damage and oppression that have resulted.

At the same time, this growing awareness of and connection to homosexuality, which is leading to its growing acceptance and helping to fuel the cultural shifts we're witnessing, is also giving rise to a backlash against those who hold what are now increasingly countercultural views. More situations are coming to light where Christians in particular are being criticized or even maligned for not affirming same-sex relationships. At least some of these cases are misguided and troubling.

How I long for all of us, regardless of sexual orientation, to see and treat one another as God sees and treats us! Until then, however, I'd rather have it be this way—where Christians may risk being discriminated against for maintaining unpopular convictions—than the other way around where we're the aggressors. Too often it's been LGBTQ persons—both Christian and non-Christian—who have had to put up with injustice at the church's hands. And that is truly tragic.

Samuel's Testimony

I'm grateful for the robust biblical and historical analysis that my coauthor has offered in this chapter. In thinking through how to respond, I corresponded with Samuel (not his real name), a longtime friend of mine who is in his thirties, and who struggles with same-sex attraction and has chosen a path of celibacy as Ron advocates for here. This path has not been easy, so I'm grateful that he was willing to share some of his experiences and reflections for inclusion in this book.

I realize that some will be disappointed with aspects of Samuel's testimony or with my choice to feature it. I also recognize that there are many stories from varying perspectives that should be considered as we think through these issues. That said, Samuel's journey has greatly influenced me, and I hope that, by sharing part of his story here, others may benefit in some way too.

I've struggled with same-sex attraction since I was a young boy, though I didn't understand it until later during my teenage years. It was terrifying to finally connect my feelings with homosexuality. "Gay" was a slur that my friends used to make fun of or insult others. They referred to homosexuals as "disgusting perverts." And here I was experiencing these unwanted attractions that wouldn't go away no matter how hard I tried. And I tried hard.

I was terrified of somehow being found out, of not having close male friends because they would always be uneasy around me, of being judged and excluded from ministry by those at church, and of being alone later in life and unable to experience love or lifelong intimacy with another person. It hurt so much not to be "normal," but I learned to mask my struggle and vowed to keep this hidden. On multiple occasions I absurdly imagined myself one day lying dead in a grave, relieved and satisfied that I had made it through life without anyone knowing my "dirty little secret."

A lot has happened since then. The secret eventually became too much to bear alone, and one day I broke down and tearfully opened up to my Christian parents. They instantly responded with love and comfort, and have continued to do everything they can to support me. Over the years, I've also confided in a select handful of mentors and friends. For me this is a very private issue, however, and not how I want to be known. Sure, it's a big part of my identity. But it does not ultimately define me. Christ does. He is my creator, provider, and redeemer. I'm learning to trust him, even when there's much that I don't understand.

Following Jesus means giving up everything but gaining immeasurably more in return. As Jesus taught, to be his disciples means denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following him. For if we're all about saving our life then we will lose it, but if we lose our life for Christ and the gospel, then we will ultimately save it (see Mark 8:34b-35).

Sexuality is something that cuts to our core. Like everything else, however, it too has been affected by sin—in many ways, not just through same-sex attraction. And it too must be laid in love at the foot of the cross, to the one who sacrificed everything in order to save us. My broken sexuality is but one of the many effects of the fall, and neither it nor any other part of me falls beyond the redemptive love of God that is available in Christ Jesus. My best understanding of the Bible is that homosexual practice goes against God's will for us. As hard as this can be at times, I would rather surrender my homosexuality in worship to God and risk being mistaken than refuse to give it up and thus let it become an idol.

Celibacy is not always properly valued in parts of the church today, but it's certainly nothing new. Sure, unlike a heterosexual person who senses a call to celibacy, I'm sort of pushed into it without as much choice. But at the same time I *am* choosing to follow Jesus. That is my choice. And he's worth giving everything up for, like in the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl (Matt. 13:44-46). As Christian writer A. W. Tozer puts it: "The man who has God for his treasure has all things in One. Many ordinary treasures may be denied him, or if he is allowed to have them, the enjoyment of them will be so tempered that they will never be necessary to his happiness. Or if he must see them go, one after one, he will scarcely feel a sense of loss, for having the Source of all things he has in One all satisfaction, all pleasure, all delight."⁶³

Paths Forward

In figuring out the way forward, and regardless of our views, we need to take seriously both the thoughtful witness of Christians who affirm and embrace LGBTQ lifestyles as well as the witness of those who choose not to. At times it will take all the charity and patience God gives us in order to do this well. At other times we'll fall short, and then may God give us the humility and wisdom to seek help and forgiveness.

For those sincerely seeking clarity on these issues, it's one thing to conclude that homosexual practice is not biblically justified. It's another thing, however, to then live out this belief well in community. And this isn't just something for my generation to try to do better than previous ones. All generations need to work together to get this right. Two critical questions jump out here.

First, how do we tangibly and unreservedly love those who experience same-sex attraction? This includes figuring out what alternatives we can offer and how we can better support individuals struggling with their orientation or pursuing a life of celibacy. If someone chooses celibacy, there have to be more options available than a life of increasing loneliness and isolation (which is too often all that seems to be left).

There's often a strong and unbiblical bias in the church toward honoring marriage and families above singleness. Some churches will even only hire pastors and appoint elders who are married and have families. And when age cohorts reach the life stage where they pair off and get married, those who remain single are often left out, as couples tend to hang out with couples and families get together with other families that have kids around the same age. The church can and should be better than this. Couples can intentionally remember and value their single friends and relatives (regardless of sexual orientation). For instance, I know families that have made serious relational commitments to celibate individuals and have even welcomed them in as members of their household for the long term.

Along these lines, and in a society obsessed with sex, what does it look like to distinguish between sexual intimacy and other forms of healthy intimacy? Those committed to celibacy should not de facto be giving up on all forms of relational intimacy and devoted community. They should be empowered to cultivate loving, lifelong friendships and even be open to the possibility of nonromantic/nonsexual companionship as God provides. If two or more female friends or male friends end up single and choose to live celibate lives together over the longer term, that should be affirmed and not treated as odd or questionable.

The second critical question is, how do we tangibly and unreservedly love those who pursue sexual same-sex relationships if it runs counter to our values? This has challenging implications for Christian community, and I bring up some of these questions in my chapter on unity and reconciling our divisions. Beyond that, however, one step we can and should take is to distinguish between the expectations that we hold one another to within the bonds of Christian fellowship and the expectations that we hold others to in the broader society. For instance, I believe it is possible to support LGBTQ civil rights and same-sex civil marriage in society while also advocating for the right of churches to define sexual ethics and Christian marriage based on our religious beliefs. We should be wary about imposing distinctly Chris-

tian values or standards on others who don't share our faith, just as we don't want Islamic Sharia law imposed on non-Muslims like ourselves.

Living in the Tension

Recently I had a hard conversation with a good friend who is openly gay. He used to be a Christian but, after years of fighting his sexual orientation and asking God to change him, he decided to leave the faith to embrace homosexual relationships. While others may disagree with his assessment, he just couldn't see a biblical way to do both at the same time.

We remained in contact through all this, and one day he asked to talk about something that had been weighing on him for some time. He knows my thoughts on sexual ethics and wanted to know whether I would be disappointed if his behavior never changed. I responded that I would be overjoyed if he returned to faith and rejoined me as a brother in Christ. Regardless of his faith commitment or sexual behavior, however, I still cared about him and wanted to remain friends. In the end, we agreed that, while each of us experiences tensions at times because of our differences, our friendship is more important and worth the tension. It wasn't an easy conversation, but I'm grateful for his graciousness toward me, and glad that our friendship continues.

I don't have all the answers here. I don't think any of us do. And the stakes sure are high. But I hope and pray that as we live into the tensions of the present, God will help us find ways—without minimizing our beliefs and values—to love one another well here, and that Christians will more and more become known as a just, peaceful, and caring people toward the LGBTQ community and all those who experience same-sex attraction.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Ron says: "Jesus never condoned sin. But he modeled amazing love and concern for those ensnared by its destructive power." To what extent does your church follow Jesus's example with regard to sinners in general and sexual sinners in particular?
2. "By far the primary reason marriage is in such disarray in the West is that (Christian!) *heterosexuals* have not kept their marriage vows," writes Ron. If it's true that the primary threat to marriage in the West is coming from Christian heterosexuals, what should be your church's agenda going forward from here?
3. How has your church taken "the lead in condemning and combating verbal or physical abuse of gay people"? How could it do more?
4. What do you think about Ron's statement that "Christians who openly acknowledge a gay orientation but commit themselves to celibacy should be eligible for any role in the church that their spiritual gifts suggest"?

5. Ben calls for the church to figure out “what alternatives we can offer and how we can better support individuals struggling with their orientation or pursuing a life of celibacy. If someone chooses celibacy, there have to be more options available than a life of increasing loneliness and isolation.” What are some of the alternatives your church currently provides or could potentially provide?

¹². Wright, Zozula, and Wilcox, “Bad News about the Good News,” 9. Numerous other studies show the same results (p. 10).

¹³. I also do not mean to suggest that one should continue to live with a physically abusive spouse. Separation for a time (one hopes with the strong, loving support of one’s local congregation) is sometimes the right thing to do.

¹⁴. They provide excellent biblical and theological work. See especially Ronald W. Pierce, Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, and Gordon D. Fee, eds., *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004); and the website of Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE) International, cbeinternational.org.

¹⁵. Les and Leslie Parrott, *Becoming Soul Mates: 52 Meditations to Bring Joy to Your Marriage* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 88.

¹⁶. In the following paragraphs, I have adapted a section from my *Living like Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 48–56.

¹⁷. The “divorce surge” across society appears to be getting better. *The New York Times* recently reported that the divorce rate peaked in the 1970s and 1980s and has been dropping ever since. Claire C. Miller, “The Divorce Surge Is Over but the Myth Lives On,” *New York Times*, December 2, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/02/upshot/the-divorce-surge-is-over-but-the-myth-lives-on.html>. Of course, there’s a lot of nuance to these statistics: the divorce rate is still high among those who have not been to college, and more people are getting married later these days. Overall, however, the trend is positive. It’s also encouraging to note that while some studies have suggested that the divorce rate among Christians is even greater than the societal average, these numbers drop off considerably when focused on those who attend church more regularly. Ed Stetzer, “Marriage, Divorce, and the Church: What Do the Stats Say, and Can Marriage Be Happy?,” *The Exchange: A Blog by Ed Stetzer, Christianity Today*, February 14, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2014/february/marriage-divorce-and-body-of-christ-what-do-stats-say-and-c.html>. Active faith seems to have a strong positive influence on marriages, and that’s good news. For more on Christian divorce rates, see sociologist Bradley Wright, “Statistics about Christian Divorce Rate,” *Bradley Wright’s Blog*, December 19, 2006, <http://brewright.blogspot.com/2006/12/christian-divorce-rates.html>.

Chapter 5: Will You Lead the Church to a Better Stance on Homosexuality?

¹. This chapter is longer than my other chapters, not because the topic is more important, but both because I have not written much previously on the topic and because the issue is a matter of intense debate.

². See chap. 5, “Sins against the LGBTQ Community,” in *Forgive Us: Confessions of a Compromised Faith*, by Mae Elise Cannon, Lisa Sharon Harper, Troy Jackson, and Soong-Chan Rah (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

³. Richard Hays is right in saying that since the fall, all persons have a sinful nature that inclines us to all kinds of sinful acts. But I think it is confusing for Hays to deny that “a homosexual orientation is morally neutral because it is involuntary.” *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 390.

As Christians who are only partly sanctified, we all experience temptations that arise, because of the fall, from our still partly twisted hearts—whether the inclination is to pride, materialism, or adulterous or homosexual acts. But there is a huge ethical distinction between feeling a temptation to a sinful action and acting on that temptation. Jesus’s condemnation of lust as well as actual adultery (Matt. 5:28) does not mean that a man’s initial physical attraction to a woman who is not his wife is sin even though it happens because of the fall. One lusts in one’s heart only when one dwells on the attraction and the possibility of acting upon it. The same is true of the attraction of a person with a gay orientation. Simply experiencing same-sex attraction and being aware of that but choosing not to act on that is no more sinful than experiencing an inclination to adultery, drunkenness, lying, or greed but choosing not to act on that.

⁴. I have written on this elsewhere—e.g., “Bearing Better Witness,” *First Things*, December 2010, 47–50.

⁵. There are, of course, a number of texts that describe and condemn sexual intercourse outside of marriage.

⁶. James V. Brownson is probably correct that the phrase in Gen. 2:24 about the man and woman becoming “one flesh” refers first of all to the formation of a new social unit or “kinship group,” i.e., a new family. And he

is almost certainly correct in rejecting Robert Gagnon's argument that Gen. 1:27–28 and Gen. 2:20–25 speak of an initially undifferentiated human being (Gen. 1) that then gets divided in Gen. 2 into two halves (male and female) that therefore need to be reunited in sexual intercourse (Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013], 26–37) and elsewhere. But that does not mean that Gen. 1 and 2 do not refer at all to sexual intercourse between man and woman. Nor does Brownson's discussion undermine the view that Gen. 1 and 2 suggest that the Creator's design for intercourse is that between a man and a woman.

⁷. Isa. 5:1–7; 54:5–7; 61:10; 62:4–5; Jer. 2:20–3:3; 31:32; Ezek. 16:32; Hosea 1–3; Matt. 22:1–14; 25:1–13; Mark 2:19–20; John 3:29; Eph. 5:30–32; Rev. 19:7–9; Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 439n156.

⁸. Brownson argues that the Bible does not exclude committed same-sex intercourse, but even he acknowledges that “whenever the Bible uses the language of ‘one flesh,’ it is referring, usually explicitly, to unions between a male and a female” (*Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, 104).

⁹. Gagnon, *Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 44–56.

¹⁰. Hays, *Moral Vision*, 381.

¹¹. For a thoughtful advocacy of these and similar views (and citations of a great deal of the literature), see Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*. For a critique of these views, see Hays, *Moral Vision*, 388–99; Stanley J. Grenz, *Welcoming but Not Affirming* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 81–130; Gagnon, *Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 254–302, 341–486, and elsewhere.

¹². For refutation of the idea that Rom. 1:26 condemns male-female intercourse during a woman's menstruation rather than female-female sex, see Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Eroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 247–53.

¹³. David Gushee suggests that “because arguments from God's purported design in creation have proven remarkably problematic in Christian history, do not rely on them for sexual ethics” (*Changing Our Mind* [Canton, MI: Read the Spirit Books, 2014], 94). But Jesus did precisely that. His teaching on divorce returns explicitly to God's design in creation (Matt. 19:3–6).

¹⁴. Gagnon, *Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 290.

¹⁵. We cannot know whether or not part of Paul's argument is a reference to the obvious physical anatomical fit of male and female sexual organs. But I have never understood why this obvious anatomical fit is not one valid argument in favor of the traditional understanding of the proper place for sexual intercourse.

¹⁶. Hays, *Moral Vision*, 387. Brownson has a long discussion on the meaning of “nature” in his text (*Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, 223–55), but nothing in his argument excludes the possibility that an important part of Paul's argument is that same-sex acts are contrary to what God wills for the created order.

¹⁷. Brooten says that Paul was probably thinking of Leviticus (*Love between Women*, 284).

¹⁸. Hays, *Moral Vision*, 382. See also Gagnon, *Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 306–12, for a discussion of various interpretations of the word.

¹⁹. For numerous citations, see Gagnon, *Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 316–32.

²⁰. Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 83, 106–8.

²¹. Hays, *Moral Vision*, 382.

²². Ibid.

²³. Dan O. Via and Robert A. J. Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 93.

²⁴. John J. McNeill, *Church and the Homosexual*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 59–60.

²⁵. Quoted in Grenz, *Welcoming but Not Affirming*, 87.

²⁶. E.g., Scroggs, *New Testament and Homosexuality*, 123–29; Victor P. Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul: Selected Issues*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 52–82; Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 124–25 and elsewhere.

²⁷. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, 155–56 and elsewhere.

²⁸. Furnish, *Moral Teaching of Paul*, 60–65. See other examples in Gagnon, *Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 380–81n47. There were some ancient moralists who thought this way and condemned this activity.

²⁹. Hays, *Moral Vision*, 388. Brooten (*Love between Women*, 242–45) agrees with Hays that Paul means to condemn all same-sex intercourse.

³⁰. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, 155. See also 156. Brownson does briefly refer to Plato's *Symposium* (229–30) but then argues that since there is no evidence of Jews and Christians of Paul's time speaking of a same-sex orientation, we can assume that Paul knew nothing of the idea of a homosexual orientation.

³¹. Plato, *Symposium* 181B–D; quoted in Gagnon, *Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 351–52.

³². Plato, *Symposium* 191E–192C, 192E, 193C, emphasis added; quoted in Gagnon, *Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 354–55; see also 356–58.

³³. Brooten, *Love between Women*, 3. In this book, Brooten provides considerable evidence from antiquity for persons viewed as having “a long-term or even life-long homoerotic orientation” (9). For the evidence from astrologers, see 115–41.

³⁴. Ibid., 143ff. For additional ancient sources that knew of a lifelong homoerotic identity, see also Robert Gagnon, “Does the Bible Regard Same-Sex Intercourse Intrinsically Sinful?,” in *Christian Sexuality: Normative and Pastoral Principles*, ed. Russell E. Saltzman (Minneapolis: Kirk House, 2003), 141–46.

³⁵. See Brooten, *Love between Women*, 275–80, 302; and Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, 105, 107, 129, etc.

³⁶. Some people argue this view, but the scientific data do not support this argument. See the detailed discussion of the literature in Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, “Neurohormonal Wars: Old Questions and Dubious Debates in the Psychology of Gender,” *Books and Culture*, September/October 2012, 11–15; and part 2, November/December 2012, 11–15. The best current scientific research rejects a one-sided biological determinism. Both genetic and cultural factors are significant in shaping our sexual identity.

³⁷. See my *Good News and Good Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 65–66, for more examples.

³⁸. For careful analysis of all texts and issues, see Ronald W. Pierce, Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, and Gordon D. Fee, eds., *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004).

³⁹. See, further, William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001); and Webb's two chapters in Pierce et al., *Discovering Biblical Equality*, 382–413.

⁴⁰. Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible*, 95.

⁴¹. Ibid., 35.

⁴². Ibid., 96.

⁴³. See Jenell Williams Paris, *The End of Sexual Identity: Why Sex Is Too Important to Define Who We Are* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011).

⁴⁴. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, 142–43.

⁴⁵. Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010); Hill, *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015); Eve Tushnet, *Gay and Catholic: Accepting My Sexuality, Finding Community, Living My Faith* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2014).

⁴⁶. Hays, *Moral Vision*, 390.

⁴⁷. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, 175. See also 170–77.

⁴⁸. Gushee, *Changing Our Mind*.

⁴⁹. John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

⁵⁰. See the careful review with a great deal of citations of relevant literature in Grenz, *Welcoming but Not Affirming*, 63–80.

⁵¹. Ibid., 80. Gushee, who argues for accepting covenantal gay sexual practice, agrees that “until very recently the Christian church in all of its major branches included as part of its 2000-year-old sexual morality a rejection of the moral legitimacy of sexual acts of persons of the same sex” (*Changing Our Mind*, 9).

⁵². *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 625; section 2357.

⁵³. Ibid., 625–26; sections 2358, 2359.

⁵⁴. Stanley S. Harakas, “The Stand of the Orthodox Church on Controversial Issues,” Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (website), <http://www.goarch.org/ourfaith/controversialissues>.

⁵⁵. The World Evangelical Alliance represents about 600 million Christians worldwide.

⁵⁶. Protestants, for example, do not agree with the Catholic view that contraceptives are wrong because the chief end of marriage is procreation. See the discussion in Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, 110ff.

⁵⁷. For example, a 2013 poll by the Barna Group found that 37 percent of “practicing Catholics” in the United States approved of same-sex sexual relationships. But only 15 percent of “practicing Protestants” approved—and that figure had moved very little from 13 percent ten years earlier (Barna Group, “America’s Change of Mind on Same-Sex Marriage and LGBTQ Rights,” Barna Group [website], July 3, 2013, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/618-america-s-change-of-mind-on-same-sex-marriage-and-lgbtq-rights#.VEaiFa5wSJa>).

⁵⁸. In *Changing Our Mind*, Gushee unfortunately does not give any serious consideration to the option I embrace here, dismissing it quickly as “5b” of the “exclusionist” option.

⁵⁹. See Tish Harrison Warren, “The Wrong Kind of Christian,” *Christianity Today*, September 2014, 54–58.

⁶⁰. In this chapter, I have not discussed the public policy aspects of this topic. For a careful discussion of the coming legal challenges, see a book written by lawyers (some of them for same-sex marriage): Douglas Laycock, Anthony R. Picarello, and Robin Fretwell Wilson, eds., *Same-Sex Marriage and Religious Liberty: Emerging Conflicts* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008). See also Stephen Monsma, *Pluralism and Freedom: Faith-Based Organizations in a Democratic Society* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013); and the materials of the organization Institutional Religious Freedom Alliance, www.irfalliance.org.

⁶¹. However, the slogan, “hate the sin, love the sinner” is not helpful. Emphasizing hate is dangerous. It is better to grieve over sin. In addition, the slogan too easily nurtures a “sinful them” and “good us” dichotomy. Temptation stalks us all. Galatians 6:1–3 recommends the right combination of gentleness and ethical clarity.

⁶². Though often lumped in with same-sex attraction, gender dysphoria is a somewhat distinct and equally important issue to consider. While the question of gender identity and dysphoria lies beyond the scope of this chapter, a book I’ve found helpful here is Mark Yarhouse’s *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015).

⁶³. A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Amazon Digital Services, 2011), 20.

Chapter 6: Will We Live More Like Jesus?

¹. D. Joseph and T. McKeenan, “What If I Stumble?” recorded by DC Talk, *Jesus Freak* (Forefront/Virgin Records, 1995).

². Rev. Peter Harris, speech about creation care, Wheaton College Chapel, Wheaton, IL, March 9, 2008.

³. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 44–45.

⁴. Ibid., 45.

⁵. Ron Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just like the Rest of the World?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005).

⁶. For a much longer discussion, see my *Good News and Good Works: A Theology for the Whole Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), chaps. 3 and 4.

⁷. See *ibid.*, chap. 5.

⁸. See my *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, 6th ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2015), chap. 6.

⁹. Ron Sider, *For They Shall Be Fed* (Dallas: Word, 1997).

¹⁰. See Sider, *Rich Christians*, chap. 3.

¹¹. See my *Just Politics: A Guide for Christian Engagement*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2012), chap. 5.

¹². Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990). The book has been reprinted several times.

Chapter 7: Will We Renew Our Political Witness?

¹. “Congress Less Popular than Cockroaches, Traffic Jams,” Public Policy Polling, January 8, 2013, http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/pdf/2011/PPP_Release_Natl_010813_.pdf.