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A Response to Questions on **Sexuality**

Chris Price



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**There are those who seek knowledge
for the sake of knowledge;
that is curiosity.**

**There are those who seek knowledge
to be known by others;
that is vanity.**

**There are those who seek knowledge
in order to serve;
that is love.**

— Bernard of Clairvaux

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Introduction

In 2020, we planted a new church in the city of Vancouver, BC.

Vancouver is a beautiful city. Diverse, eclectic, vibrant, hospitable, active and enamoured with the outdoors—water, boats, bikes, beaches and trails.

It is a brilliant place to live.

Despite being a world-class city, Vancouver has never had a large and flourishing Christian community. You might say that Vancouver is a never-Christian city in a post-Christian culture. Similar to other dynamic port cities on the West coast—Seattle, LA, San Francisco, etc.—we lean hard left; politically progressive and actively opposed to any moral or religious viewpoints that constrain or constrict individual self-expression and identification. This progressive bent is tempered by a large number of immigrants who bring to our shores deeply held traditional beliefs creating a unique confluence of cultures and perspectives.

Our intention was to start a life-giving church in hopes of serving the city in a way that causes wide-spread flourishing across all segments of society. Our dream is to be radically *for* the people of Vancouver while maintaining a deep, robust fidelity to the historic Christian faith.

Our church expression is deeply committed to holding scripture as authoritative, to thoughtful and nuanced Bible teaching,

to justice and mercy and to spiritual resiliency rooted in the ancient rhythms and practices of the Christian faith. These values are often met with intrigue and generous welcome by our city as we commit to serving the poor, building community and providing a space to explore spirituality.

At the same time, a commitment to historic, orthodox Christianity leads to a sexual ethic far more conservative than many of the thoughtful, sincere, progressive individuals in our city. In our experience, nothing garners more confusion and even outright hostility from otherwise wonderful, tolerant, broad-minded people than conversations around our view of sexuality, resulting from a traditional reading of scripture.

It is the preference of our pastoral team to spend very little time discussing sexual ethics, other than to apologize profusely for the mistreatment of the LGBTQA2+ community by people who had the name of Jesus on their lips without the love of Jesus in their hearts. Instead, we would much rather speak about justice, forgiveness, reconciliation, the inclusive embrace of the Gospel and a dozen other things before launching into controversial debates about sexual ethics—debates that have the potential to pour salt on still open wounds.

Nevertheless, our expressed desire doesn't change the fact that the first questions people often ask of us in the city are, "What is your view of sexuality? How about gay marriage?" "What is your posture towards the LGBTQA2+ community?" "Are you affirming of all life-styles?" Most interested inquirers hope to hear an answer that affirms the general ethos of our cultural moment. Any other type of response, however nuanced, is typically considered unacceptable and deeply controversial.

Which brings us to the need for this booklet. To refuse to give

a thoughtful, compassionate answer is unhelpful pastorally and doesn't serve our city well.¹

We wrote these pages to explain where we stand as a church and to address the plausibility problem many individuals intuitively sense must cling to a sexual ethic that is at least two thousand years old.

We have separated this work into four distinct parts and have included footnotes throughout that we really encourage you to read.

Part One addresses, in part, the plausibility problem that clings to the traditional sexual ethic and presents a positive picture of the Christian view.

Part Two is a primer as to why we hold the historic understanding of the Biblical teaching that, in short, sexual intimacy is reserved for marriage between a man and woman.

Part Three describes our commitment to providing a safe and loving place for sexual minorities. For those readers who are tired of theological and exegetical debates or are, perhaps, concerned that such debates may reopen old wounds, or be triggering, we would suggest reading part one and part three of this booklet with special attention given to part three. Perhaps, you've heard the refrain from sexual minorities: "nothing about us without us." This valid sentiment leads many readers to wonder if sexual minorities have been consulted in the writing of this booklet. We appreciate this pointed concern, which is why it is important to

¹To clarify, we will have little to say about those who identify as part of the trans community. We acknowledge how important the conversation around trans rights is for so many, as well as the very real questions that result when a follower of Jesus experiences a lack of congruency between the biological sex and their expression of gender. The question is so important to us that in Part Four we recommend several more thorough responses.

highlight the fact that everything written in this booklet has been both taught and better explained by gay and lesbian authors. In these pages, we have simply learned from their writings, summarised their insights and, more importantly, sought to centre their voices and experiences. Part three, in particular, highlights the contributions of many orthodox gay and lesbian authors.

Part Four answers some of the more specific questions or debates surrounding this topic. We interact with questions like, “Does Romans 1 apply to loving, monogamous same-sex relationships?” “Is ‘homosexual’ a bad translation of 1 Corinthians 6:9?” “Should the church’s mistaken approach to slavery in the past be considered analogous with the churches approach to same-sex relationships today?” “Does God make people gay?” “What about purity culture?” “How can we support singles, gay or straight, who are seeking to live celibately?” “Should this whole controversial conversation just be a disputable matter where Christians are free to disagree?”

We will start by addressing the plausibility problem that clings to the historic understanding of the Biblical teaching—that sexual activity is to be expressed in a marriage between a man and woman.

Part One: The Plausibility Problem

The sociologist Peter Berger coined the term “plausibility structures”, which describes the social processes by which we are primed to believe and receive ideas on the basis of authority. According to Berger, an idea’s plausibility is strengthened when it is played frequently in media, especially social media in our day, and when it is advanced by attractive individuals or role models—musicians, actors, athletes and university professors. The author and cultural commentator Glynn Harrison points out that, “the most powerful plausibility structure is the tone we adopt when ideas are exchanged in conversation: it is hard to resist a tone of voice that implies ‘everybody knows this’, particularly when it is accompanied by nodding heads around the table.”²

The traditional Christian teaching on sexuality is suffering from a plausibility problem. Many of us have grown up hearing some version of the script that: (1) traditional morality is

²Glynn, Harrison, *A Better Story: God, Sex & Human Flourishing* (London, England: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 71.

repressive, oppressive and restrictive in a way that is damaging to the freedom and individual expression of people. Therefore, external authority (tradition, religion etc.) must be rejected in favour of internal self-identification, and (2) traditional morality is bigoted and bankrupt—a new day of freedom and liberation has arrived. You are free to do what you want in the bedroom, with whoever you want, provided you don't hurt anybody. Anything less is inherently oppressive.

These truths have become almost self-evident. One can imagine the nodding heads, the knowing looks and the impassioned defences for all of the above statements.

The inevitable result of embracing this plausibility structure is that the Biblical teaching is then considered old and traditional and therefore regressive and backwards—like trying to turn the clock back to an unenlightened age before electricity. To be on the wrong side of history, to be labelled as regressive and backwards, to be the pariahs of popular culture—who wants that?

In other words, there are powerful forces at work, named and unnamed, that lead us to assume that a traditional reading of scripture is not just wrong, but deeply damaging to the human person. It is viewed as wrong in a way that makes people feel unsafe and emotionally disturbed and feeds into an us versus them narrative.

To be fair, it is not as though our culture is against all boundaries. Freedom from all restraints is not conducive to individual or societal flourishing. Boundaries keep us from over-working and burning out. Boundaries keep us from abusive situations and relationships that are unhealthy. Boundaries keep us safe and whole and contribute to our flourishing as humans. Even when it comes to our sexuality we are not devoid of all constraints. After

all, our culture believes in consent. Consent is about boundaries. Consent is good. Therefore, boundaries can be good. In other words, we all believe in drawing the line somewhere when it comes to our most intimate acts—for us, for others and for the flourishing of the community.

When it comes to sexuality the problem for us is not boundaries. Our culture's problem is where the Bible draws the line. In this regard, the impact of the sexual revolution, and its continued reverberations throughout the following decades, has been far-reaching.

And we need to acknowledge out of the gate that we are more influenced by culture than we think.

The Other Side of the Story

Despite our culture's widespread rejection of Christian sexual ethics, there is also a pervasive sense that the fruit of the sexual revolution has not been wholly good. It has not led to the liberation, freedom and joy that was prognosticated by enthusiastic advocates for sexual liberty. It hasn't necessarily led to all women being treated better, as the "me-too" movement recently highlighted. It hasn't resulted in healthier marriages or healthier homes. The problems surrounding consent in a hook-up culture fuelled by alcohol, especially on university campuses, are infamous. In fact, when we are confronted by the rate of sexual abuse in our day³; when we study the number of STDs prevalent

³ It is consistently reported that one out of three women experience abuse in their life-time. Much of this abuse is sexual in nature.

amongst young adults⁴; when we think about how many children have suffered from the sexual choices of adults and the collateral damage of infidelity; when we are saddened by the amount of unwanted and terminated pregnancies⁵; when we are appalled by the money spent on pornography⁶; when we think about the continual objectification of both sexes and sex trafficking globally (and its connection to porn and people being prostituted); when we reflect on where swiping right on Tinder actually gets you; when we are surprised about the lack of actual satisfaction people are reporting in their free and liberated sex lives; when we think about sex as more than a physical act—the mingling of souls, not just the joining of bodies; when we look into the faces of our children and consider what growing up in our sexualized culture

⁴Three million American teenagers get infected with a sexual transmitted disease per year. See. Meg Meeker, *Epidemic: How Teen Sex Is Killing Our Kids* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing Company, 2002), 12.

⁵Not only is abortion the ending of a vulnerable human life, our sanitized version of infant sacrifice on the altar of autonomy and choice, the mental, emotional and spiritual cost of abortion in the lives of women is rarely discussed. Yet the consequences can be severe. See. “The Long-Term Effects of Abortion,” Epigee Women’s Health, www.epigee.org/the-long-term-effects-of-abortion.html.

⁶The porn industry makes more money annually than major league baseball, football and basketball combined. See the secular organisation www.fightthenewdrug.com for all the damaging ways in which porn impacts us. Research suggests that as little as 33.9% and as much as 88.2% of popular porn scenes contain physical violence or aggression, and that women are the targets of the violence approx. 97% of the time (source @fightthenewdrug). And given the corrupting influence of pornography on the individual who indulges in it, as well as the dehumanizing impact on those who participate in the industry, to speak about ethical porn is the equivalent of ethical adultery—an attempt to say “evil be thou my good” and another symptom of our wide-spread moral confusion as a culture.

will mean for their sense of self worth⁷; when we factor in all of the above we are more than a little discouraged by our current state of affairs. John Mark Comer points out that,

The sexual liberation revolution of the 1960's set in motion a cascade effect: the reversal of the long-standing moral consensus around promiscuity (which separated sex from marriage) worked in tandem with the advent of birth control and abortion (which separated sex from procreation), which moved on to the legalization of no-fault divorce (which turns a covenant into a contract and separated sex from intimacy and fidelity), then to Tinder and hookup culture (which separated sex from romance and turned it into a way to 'get your needs met'). From there it's moved on to the LGBTQI+ revolution (which separated sex from the male-female binary), the current transgender wave (which is an attempt to separate gender from biological sex), and the recent polyamory movement (an attempt to move beyond two-person relationships). Amid the revolution, the questions nobody seems to even be asking are, Is this making us better people? More loving people? Or even happier people? Are we thriving in a way we weren't prior to our 'liberation'?⁸

Of course, the fruit of the sexual revolution has led to some positive outcomes. It allowed some women to escape abusive

⁷ Studies have shown that teenagers who are sexually active are more prone to depression and anxiety than their abstinent peers. See: <https://www.heritage.org/education/report/sexually-active-teenagers-are-more-likely-be-depressed-and-attempt-suicide#:~:text=The%20findings%20show%20that%3A,more%20likely%20to%20feel%20depressed>. (Accessed Oct 4, 2021)

⁸ John Mark Comer, *Live No Lies: Recognize and Resist the Three Enemies that Sabotage Your Peace* (New York, NY: Penguin Random House, 2021), 28.

situations more easily. It addressed some inequities between the sexes. It highlighted the ways in which sexual minorities have been misunderstood and mistreated by the broader culture and church, and advocated for greater compassion, kindness and understanding for those who were on the margins. For all of this we are very grateful. But what if, in spite of these achievements, the answers to Comer's questions above are still a resounding "no"?

In addition to the laundry list of ills we've already mentioned, happiness levels have been in decline since the 60s.⁹

Divorce, touted as a means of liberation from the patriarchy, is shown to disproportionately benefit men over women and children.¹⁰

Those who cohabit before marriage are both less likely to marry and significantly more likely to get divorced if they do marry.¹¹

⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁰ Corrie Lynn Rosen, "Men v. Women: Who Does Better in a Divorce?," LegalZoom, September 16, 2020, www.legalzoom.com/articles/men-v-women-who-does-better-in-a-divorce.

¹¹ I first heard about this data through an article in the Vancouver Sun more than a decade ago. Things have not changed, though the below links are U.S. based. See. Alicia Vanorman, "Cohabiting Couples in the United States Are Staying Together Long but Fewer Are Marrying," Population Reference Bureau, November 5, 2020, www.prb.org/cohabiting-couple-staying-together-longer. Also see. Scott Stanley, "premarital Cohabitation is Still Associated with Greater Odds of Divorce," Institute for Family Studies, October 17, 2018, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/premarital-cohabitation-is-still-associated-with-greater-odds-of-divorce>. Lastly, Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Nikki Graf, and Gretchen Livingston, "Marriage and Cohabitation in the U.S.," Pew Research Center, November 6, 2019, www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/11/06/marriage-and-cohabitation-in-the-u-s.

While most of us still deeply desire love that lasts a lifetime, our promiscuous ways have made it more difficult to attach meaningfully to another person for more than a few years.¹²

On and on we could go.

Given all of the above, and even when factoring in some positive gains, if there is a view of sexuality that should have a plausibility problem in our day, perhaps it should be the progressive one. As Comer writes, “the ‘liberation’ is starting to look more and more like an enslavement.”¹³

In drawing this section to a close, it is worthwhile to consider the words of C.S. Lewis afresh, “We all want progress. But progress means getting nearer to the place you want to be. And if you have taken a wrong turn then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road and in that case the [person] who turns back soonest is the most progressive.”¹⁴

¹² This is due to the way in which vasopressin and oxytocin are released in the brain. Both are meant to bond people to one another. When partners attach and detach to a variety of individuals over the course of years the bonds created by these chemicals are weakened. Less scientifically, you could say that our choices shape our character and our character determines the sustainability and health of our relationships. If you discipline yourself in sleeping with a wide-variety of partners, it weakens your ability to stay faithful and committed over the course of a lifetime. One can still do it, but you are starting your life-long commitment to fidelity with a self-imposed handicap. For many of us it is too late, but there is grace, mercy and new beginnings for us. The Spirit of God can restore and rewire our brains as we commit to the renewal of our minds by the word of God and the Spirit of God.

¹³ John Mark Comer, *Live No Lies: Recognize and Resist the Three Enemies that Sabotage Your Peace* (New York, NY: Penguin Random House, 2021), 31.

¹⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1952), 28.

A Positive View of Sexuality

Historically, an adherence to the Christian sexual ethic was responsible for introducing the concept of sexual consent in the West, underlying the value of sexual autonomy and drastically improving the lives of women, slaves and children in the ancient world—protecting them from sexual abuse and exploitation. In the present moment, a recommitment to the Christian sex ethic would address a significant number of the above problems that plague our society,¹⁵ leading us in the direction of wholeness and flourishing.

Even leaving to one side these obvious benefits, the Christian teaching also provides a profoundly positive view of sexuality. Christianity is not a body-denying religion. God made the material world and declares it to be good. Jesus is God who

¹⁵ When I say our society or culture—I mean our western culture. Whereas our culture's objections to the historic biblical teaching are very recent and very western, other cultures in the world might think the Christian teaching on sexuality is great, or not strict enough. To universalize our culture's objections is to give to our cultural moment some type of moral enlightenment or authority not possessed by other cultures, traditions or the billions of other non-white people who disagree with the permissive sexual ethic of the West. Our culture might be tempted to say, "well, those other people are all misguided and backwards." Let's cancel them. Or change them. Or evangelize them with our good news of sexual liberation. Let's impose our ideas of sexuality on their cultures and religions like Islam and Christianity. The problem, of course, is that all of the above sentiments sound like ethnocentrism. It smells of colonialism. It reeks of ideological imperialism and hegemony. It seems, in fact, like all the things the progressive West says it hates, especially about church history. Nevertheless, the gatekeepers of sexual mores give themselves a pass when it comes to our prevalent cultural ideas about sexual expression. We *can* impose our sexual ethic on others and, if they don't agree, they are morally backwards and regressive. This is the hypocrisy of our cultural moment when it comes to sexuality.

took on human flesh, making holy the entirety of our material, embodied existence. The imagined future state for humanity is not a disembodied existence after death but, rather, a resurrection body for all of eternity. To quote Sam Allberry, a pastor and theologian, who also happens to be gay, “The body is intrinsically good, not bad. So it doesn’t need to be abandoned or changed into some completely different form...It is a gift. In a sense, right now, a broken gift...But a gift nonetheless.”¹⁶ C.S. Lewis in his classic work, *Mere Christianity*, quipped, “There is no good trying to be more spiritual than God. God never meant [humankind] to be a purely spiritual creature...We may think this rather crude and unspiritual. God does not: He invented eating. He likes matter. He invented it.”¹⁷ One could just as easily write that God invented sex. We might view that as crude or unspiritual, but God does not. The philosopher Peter Kreeft, after noting that creation and incarnation were the two greatest events in history, goes on to write that, “God made matter, and God became matter. Therefore, matter is holy.” Again, one could just as easily point out that God made sex and God became a sexually embodied human being. Therefore, sex can be holy. This positive view of sexuality leads to an entire book of the Bible (*The Song of Songs*) devoted to passion, desire, eroticism and free-wheeling sexual expression within the boundaries of marriage; a celebration of sexuality so blatant and detailed that more squeamish Bible translators have shied away from fully drawing out the meaning of the Hebrew in our English translations. Perhaps not unsurprisingly, certain scholars have been far more prudish about sex than God.

¹⁶ Sam Allberry, *What God Has to Say About Our Bodies*, (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Publishing, 2021) 23.

¹⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1952), 64.

In what follows we will offer a brief primer on the purpose of sex in scripture. Simply stated, in the Biblical tradition sex is a gift given for: **oneness, procreation, pleasure** and to **symbolise** the relationship between God and His people. Let's look at each quickly.

Oneness

Sex is about oneness. In the creation story recorded in Genesis chapter two, the narrator describes the meeting of the first man and the first woman. "The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman for she was taken from man." The author goes on to write that, "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become *one flesh*. Adam and his wife were naked and they felt no shame."

In marriage God declares a man and a woman to be one flesh. This oneness is about more than sex, but it certainly includes marital intimacy. Scripture invites the husband and wife to symbolise with their bodies what is meant to be true in regard to the rest of our lives. We are one physically because we are one covenantally before God and people in marriage. And every time a couple comes together intimately they are renewing that covenantal oneness—they are allowing their bodies to make a promise that their vows commit them to keeping. Timothy and Kathy Keller say it well in their book, *The Meaning of Marriage*,

To call the marriage 'one flesh,' then, means that sex is understood as both a sign of the personal, legal union and a means to accomplish it. The Bible says don't unite with someone

physically unless you are also willing to unite with the person emotionally, personally, socially, economically, and legally. Don't become physically naked and vulnerable to the other person without becoming vulnerable in every other way, because you have given up your freedom and bound yourself in marriage. Then, once you have given yourself in marriage, sex is a way of maintaining and deepening that union as the years go by.¹⁸

Sex is not about recreation or physical activity as benign as jogging. It is not primarily about performance, an emphasis which creates anxiety and leads to an obsession with technique. Instead, the emphasis becomes the profound gift of reciprocal intimacy and closeness, and the strengthening of one's commitment to their marital vows.

Procreation

Another purpose for sex is procreation. Again we turn to the book of Genesis, the book of beginnings. In Genesis chapter one verses 27 and 28, we are told, "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.'"

Our culture has successfully divorced marriage from sex and sex from children. The biblical teaching, however, brings together what our culture has torn asunder. Children are viewed as a blessing in scripture and as one of the primary reasons

¹⁸ Timothy & Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (New York, NY: Penguin Random House Publishing, 2011), 256.

God has created men and women with complementary sexual organs. Why does scripture record that from the very beginning humanity was separated into the two distinct categories of male and female? Why is sexual difference so important? Why were we not created as androgynous humans, or asexual beings? Why do we have different reproductive organs? In the words of Genesis, God blessed us to be fruitful and multiply.

One need not believe that all sexual activity must produce children for it to be God-honouring. Rather, God has designed men and women in a complementary manner so that the sex act may participate with the Creator in making new life—bringing another vulnerable, dependant human being into the circle of our knowing and loving.

Pleasure

Another purpose for sex is mutual pleasure. Mutual means pleasure for *both* parties involved. God designed sex so that men and women would enjoy it together. Mutual pleasure requires serving one another and meeting the needs of one another. It involves communication and honesty. It involves foreplay—foreplay that begins outside of the bedroom with the kind word, the act of service, the gentle touches throughout the day.

Despite the ways in which humanity has mangled it, God did not create sex to be endured, He created sex to be enjoyed.

The God we meet in Jesus is the God who created the orgasm—the God who holds pleasures in his right hand forevermore—pleasures of which the orgasm is just a dim foreshadowing.

Whatever else the Bible teaches about sexuality, we shouldn't

diminish or neglect that fact that it is to be enjoyed within the bounds that God sets around it.

Sex as a Symbol

More than anything else, perhaps, our sexuality is a signifier. More than an act of covenantal commitment, connection and oneness between spouses, more than an act meant to produce the blessing of offspring, more than an act meant to bring mutual pleasure to a couple, our sexuality is meant to point beyond itself to the relationship we are meant to experience with God. As we will see, the same is ultimately true of marriage. In the words of gay Christian, Ed Shaw, “The chief reason we have God-given sexuality is to help us grasp the full passion of God’s love for us, his people, and the horrific pain he feels when we walk away from him. Our sexual feelings are a reference point for us in communicating the full power of God’s loving feelings towards us, and how awful it is when we are unfaithful to him.”¹⁹

As Shaw points out, throughout scripture we find God consistently using the metaphor of marriage or sexuality to speak about His relationship with His people. These images speak powerfully to us because of our own experiences as sexual and relational beings. Think about the Old Testament book of Hosea—a story about a man whose wife cheats on him, yet he continues to pursue her and plead with her to come home. This human relationship is used as a metaphor for the pain God feels about his own people cheating on him with other gods—worshipping idols and forsaking his ways. It also expresses God’s

¹⁹ Ed Shaw, *Purposeful Sexuality: A Short Christian Introduction* (London, England: Intervarsity Press, 2021), 18.

longing to be close with his people. The story connects with us so deeply, giving us profound insight into God's character and love, again, because of our own experience as relational, sexual beings. To quote Shaw again, "I don't think I understood the full offence of my own sin, my own rejection of God, until I saw it in these sexual terms—as spiritual adultery towards the God who has given me everything I enjoy...I don't think I grasped the full wonder of his persistent, gracious love for me until I saw him as a jilted husband, who, incredibly, loved me before I ever loved him, and who keeps on loving me even when I have stopped loving him. It turns out that the thing God has most used to help me appreciate his love for me is sexuality."²⁰ In other words, from a Biblical perspective, a large reason we are sexual is to make God more deeply knowable. Life is ultimately about knowing God and few things may help us know God more deeply than our sexuality.²¹ As a gay man, Shaw then draws out the personal

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 20, 21.

²¹ Moreover, though God is sexless and genderless, the sex act still carries with it important aspects of reflecting God's image and character to one another. God is a giver and we resemble God when we give ourselves as a gift to another. For the image bearer of God, sex is never meant to be about taking; rather, it is an act of giving oneself wholly to another person. Sex was not designed to have self at the centre. This may be one of the reasons why the Bible condemns (explicitly, or by application) sexual activities like pornography and lustful fantasizing. Indulging in these types of behaviours is all taking, no giving; it places self-gratification at the centre and it increasingly warps our character, including our view of humanity. Pornography, fantasy and even sporadic sexual encounters outside of loving, committed relationships tend to treat people like objects to be used instead of image bearers to be loved. The self-giving at the heart of fully satisfying sex is best sustained within a committed covenantal relationship where intimacy is a gift given to one another to reinforce the vows: "for better for worse, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow, I will love and cherish you and be faithful to you alone."

and pastoral implications of this perspective when he concludes, “Why do I have such powerfully passionate sexual feelings? To make my life miserable because I can’t express them in a marriage to someone of the opposite sex? No! They exist to make my life more joyful, as they help me begin to appreciate God’s love for me. Why has God made you as a sexual being? To torture you slowly as you struggle to express your sexuality in the right way? No! You have a sexuality so that he can best communicate to you the full intensity of his love for you.”

Much of what is written above sounds strange to our ears, especially the last point. If we don’t believe in a transcendent realm, then to think that bodily acts could be pointers to a deeper spiritual reality will sound farcical and far-fetched. This is why any honest discussion on sexual ethics will ultimately have metaphysical implications, touching deeply on what it means to be human, whether or not one has a soul, and whether or not there is a God who has designed us for a purpose. Despite its current legion of naysayers, the Christian perspective does provide a deep, rich, satisfying account of the explosive power of our sexual experience and our human tendency to either deify it, or be continually disappointed by it.

In conclusion, it must be said that the Biblical vision of sexuality does promote both that the proper context for sexual expression is marriage and that individuals would come into marriage sexually inexperienced. Ripping sex out of this context leads to all the devastating results we cataloged above. As we already noted, we all have boundaries when it comes to our sexuality.

Boundaries are good.

Christianity has stricter boundaries than our culture.

But for good reasons.

As a result, there is at times a noticeable purity in Christian circles that is mistaken for prudishness by a culture that has trampled sexual prohibitions. While pursuing purity before marriage certainly doesn't guarantee lights-out sex after marriage, the blessing (despite some potential awkwardness and missteps) is that the couple has the beautiful opportunity to learn to make love with a lighter load of relational baggage, free from a long, clingy trail of broken hearts and a catalogue of encounters from which to compare and evaluate their new lifelong partner. They have safeguarded the ability to say to another, "out of the wide variety of human beings populating our planet, I have chosen you, no one else will discover me like you, unwrap me like you, explore me like you. You are my sole definition of beauty."

And that is no small thing.

In the end, all true romance is fuelled through this type of exclusivity. No one dreams about a person saying to him or her, "I love you with some of my heart," or, "I can't stop thinking about you and your roommate." Such sentiments are not romantic because love is fuelled by exclusivity and so is true intimacy. This is what the Biblical teaching is trying to give to us, not just for a relationship that lasts for a season, but also for a lifetime.

We understand that some of the above sounds old-fashioned. But new doesn't equal true. We don't tell the truth by the calendar year. Instead, we are aligning our values and subsequent lifestyle with the two-thousand-year-old teachings of Jesus and the New Testament. For the followers of Christ, it is lamentable to see how far we have departed from the New Testament vision, especially considering the chaos it is causing in our culture. It is sad that we have actually started to lose the ability to pause and appreciate

the fresh winds of purity brushing against our cheeks, lighting on our souls, stirring up sadness over exposing too much of ourselves before we even understood what we are giving away.

We can't go back, but we can be forgiven and start again.

When we fail and miss God's mark (as all of us have in some manner or another), the Gospel of grace and God's generous welcome in Jesus is always waiting to forgive us, heal us and restore us.

There is almost always a gap between the ideal of God's commands and the reality of our lives. Never is this more true than when it comes to our sexuality. We may feel it acutely while reading through the above section. The question becomes, "What then do we do with the gap?"

Some try to change God's ideals. Such an attempt puts us in the place of God. We become the authority, we decide right from wrong, we are free to lower the bar of God's moral law making it easier for us to jump over.

Others attempt to mask the reality of their failures. This approach may turn us into hypocrites who hide away our failures behind self-righteous posturing in public, or sink us into silent and private despair over our inability to do what is right and good, as defined by God's commands.

We change the ideal, or we mask the real.

Both are attempts at closing the gap between the requirements of God and the reality of living in our own strength.

Both are not Gospel answers.

The Gospel fills the gap with the grace and forgiveness of God. Over time the sanctifying presence and power of the Holy Spirit, with whom we cooperate, closes the gap between the ideal of God's commands and the messiness of our lives.

The grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit are the answer to the gap, especially when it comes to matters of sexuality.

What about Sexual Minorities?

While reading the above pages the question that comes to mind again and again is, “Yes, but what about sexual minorities? How does the Christian vision of sexuality serve them? More than that, how can it ever be construed as good news?”

This is a crucial topic to explore and the primary reason we are writing this booklet.

In a groundbreaking study by Andrew Morin (the largest of its kind) he found that many LGBTQ+, especially in the U.S.A. grew up in the church. The results of his massive study indicated that, “86 percent of LGBT people were raised in a faith community from age 0 to 18...54 percent of LGBT people left their faith community after the age of 18.”²²

It is, of course, only one study. But it was massive in its scope and rigorous in its methodology. Because of his findings he titled his book *Us Versus Us*. The ‘other’ is actually ‘us’. Even more remarkable, he found in his study that, “three out of four respondents long to one day return to the religion of their youth, irrespective of that religion’s theology of homosexuality.”

It is a tragedy that this conversation around sexuality and the church has been forced into an us versus them framework. The truth of the matter is that the only way to appropriately frame this conversation is “us versus us.”

²² Andrew Marin, *Us versus Us: The Untold Story of Religion and the LGBT Community* (The Navigators, 2016).

We are not speaking about the “other” here. We are not discussing strangers. We are talking about our sons and daughters who we love more than life itself. We are conversing about our friends, our neighbours and our family members.

Who are you thinking about when you read these pages?

Yourself?

Friends?

Family members?

In my mind are young people who are vulnerable.

I met a young girl over a decade ago while serving as a youth pastor. She was smart and spunky and warm and full of life and fire. She tore through our youth group like a force of nature. Though not from a Christian home, she decided to follow Jesus in her teen years and experienced seasons of real intensity in her commitment to Christ. Not long after graduating from high school, she came to see me in my office.

In a halting speech she told me about her attraction to other girls. Her story is her story. But when she trusted me with this secret truth about herself, her story intersected with my own.

And there was a lot I celebrated in her coming out.

I admired her honesty and her courage. I hope every reader can appreciate how brave she was in that moment. If not, we will struggle to engage the conversation in a way that honours and humanizes our queer friends and neighbours. What she shared was so deep and personal for her and she opened up without knowing how I would respond.

I firmly believe that no part of us should be locked away forever in a closet.

A closet is too confining and darkness can feel damning. We never truly help anyone by hiding. Instead we are robbing people

of an opportunity to love the real us. Whatever our closet might be, if we never leave it behind we will never truly believe that we are completely loved.

But coming out to a friend or family member is a huge moment.

She trusted me with her story and I was honoured.

I still am.

Sadly, years later I found out that she was hurt very deeply by other Christians because of her sexual identity. I can't write about this topic without thinking about her.

I am also thinking of friends who helped bring me to Christ in my early twenties, one of whom later came out to me as gay.

Each story is unique and each story is precious because people matter.

The main purpose of the following pages is not to win an argument. Rather, the goal is to humanise people, honour their stories, engage the dialogue with humility and grace, listen in order to learn and love better, *and* to explain our church's interpretation of the Biblical teaching.

Of course, we might not all agree at the end of this booklet.

Nevertheless, we should all agree that we are called to love one another. We are challenged by Jesus to love one another enough that we would be willing to lay down our life for the other. "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:12,13).

Most people who pick up these pages really want to love others, regardless of morality, life-style or whatever else that tends to divide humans.

Here is some good news.

As far as we can tell, the Bible never tells us to love people less than we already are—instead, it pushes us beyond what feels natural so that we would tap into the supernatural love of God that extends beyond friends to include even enemies. It is this radical embrace that we encounter in Jesus and, regardless of your agreement with the pages that follow, this is how we are called to love one another.

In this conversation, may all people know we are Christians by our love.

Speaking Across the Divide

A loving posture doesn't mean the conversation will be easy. Justin Lee is a gay Christian and author of the book *Torn*, a moving memoir about growing up as a conservative Christian. In his second literary offering, *Talking Across The Divide*, he points out that,

An us-vs.-them mentality is taking over our public and private lives. Increasingly, we take our disagreements not to the people we disagree with but to our own echo chambers—spaces where we can talk about, rather than to, the other side—where like-minded people echo our own beliefs right back to us. Our opponents, too, are stuck in their own echo chambers, having their beliefs reinforced by people on their side rather than being encouraged to consider what we have to say. That's a problem, because our biggest challenges as human beings require working together.²³

²³ Justin Lee, *Talking Across the Divide* (New York, NY: Random House Publishing, 2018), 4.

Justin's point is well-taken. We may give lip-service to love, but we are steadily losing the ability to talk to one another about important and complex moral issues where there is genuine and honest disagreement, especially on social media.

Our discussions bring more heat than light and more angst than enlightenment.

Winning becomes more important than listening. Volume is more important than vulnerability.

Anger is more prevalent than empathy.

Battle-lines become more important than broken-hearts being bound-up and healed through long-suffering love.

For society in general, and for the Christian in particular, all of this is a problem.

This booklet is about viewing human sexuality through the lens of scripture—a traditional, conservative reading of scripture in the midst of a brilliant, progressive city like Vancouver. But, more than that, our hope is that these pages will function as an invitation out of our encrusted echo-chambers. It is an opportunity to step across deeply entrenched battle-lines, to take a fresh look at the historic Christian teaching on sexuality and investigate its plausibility in our cultural moment. It is part of an on-going exercise about learning to talk to one another in a way that is kind and winsome, empathic and understanding, gracious and filled with truth.

In other words, may the rest of this booklet be an invitation to a conversation that is marked and shaped by the love of God.

Part 2: Our Position

In this section we don't intend to write a Biblical defence of the traditional position or Side-B sexual ethics. Those treatments have been written by gay and straight theologians and pastors in a compelling fashion. What follows is just a primer as to why we hold to the traditional perspective on sexuality and marriage, as taught in the Bible and understood by the church throughout its history.

The “Clobber” Texts

The Bible is a long book. The New Testament alone has over 40,000 lines and 200,000 Greek words. In the entirety of scripture, only six verses explicitly mention sexual activity between two men. Even less mention is made of lesbianism. Of course, as Christians who hold to the authority of scripture, the Bible only has to mention an issue once for us to take it seriously. Nevertheless, as a matter of perspective, it is important to note that scripture cannot be construed as going out of its way to pick on, highlight, or single out gay and lesbian individuals. As one affirming author writes:

We need to put all this in perspective. These are six verses out of more than 31,000 verses or roughly 0.016 per cent of the text. The Bible contains more than 2,000 verses about money (and related issues of greed, wealth, loans, and property), and more than 100 specifically on one's obligation to care for widows. In other words, monitoring and proscribing human (homo)sexual activity is not a particular concern of the Bible when compared to the overarching demand for justice, economic equality, and the fair treatment of foreigners and strangers. For certain Christian groups to make this the decisive Christian issue is simply a misreading of biblical values.²⁴

The author makes a fair point.

The texts that specifically address same-sex relations are: Genesis 19, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, 1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:10 and Romans 1:24-27. Sadly, these scriptures have been labelled as “the clobber texts” by many in the gay community. Many of our gay and lesbian friends have experienced scripture wielded as a weapon—a club used to beat down and cripple their sense of self, all but snuffing out their significance as a beloved, image bearer of God treasured by Jesus. This continues to be a damnable tragedy and a dark smirch in the life of some churches—a continuing legacy of callousness towards sexual minorities that will be reckoned with on the day of Jesus' coming. As a community, we will stand against any bullying, hate or fear-mongering directed towards our gay friends and family

²⁴https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-08-23/same-sex-marriage-what-bible-has-to-say-robyn-whitaker/8831826?utm_source=abc_news_web&utm_medium=content_shared&utm_campaign=abc_news_web (Accessed February 7, 2021)

members in the name of Christ, while also holding to the traditional perspective on the Bible's teaching.

Sexual Immorality According to Jesus

Traditionally, Christians have taught that the act of sex is to be celebrated and explored within the context of marriage between a man and a woman. In fact, *this* is the catholic teaching of the church. We use the term catholic here to mean “throughout the whole”, indicating that the church has been essentially unified on this teaching throughout all times and places since its inception. In fact, the traditional perspective was not challenged until the last 50 years or so due to the changing sexual mores of our culture's post-sexual revolution.

The above position is based on the teachings of Jesus and the rest of the New Testament. In his teaching, Jesus condemns sexual immorality(s). “From within, out of people's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a person unclean” (Mark 7:21-23). The word translated as sexual immorality above is the Greek word *porneia*. The original meaning of the Greek word is “to prostitute” or “to sell”, in a sense, condemning the treatment of people as sexual commodities—as objects to be used instead of image bearers of God to be loved. By the time of the New Testament the word *porneia* had a much broader meaning. One commentator writes that the word *porneia* “is used of [deviant] sexual conduct normally thought of as extramarital relationships (Matt 5:32; 19:9; 15:19; Mark 7:21, John 8:41, Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25; Rev 2:21; 9:21), including incest (1 Cor. 5:1).” Or, again, “*Porneia* is

a broad word covering any sexual sin. It can refer to incest (1 Cor. 5:1), promiscuity (1 Thess. 4:3), sexual relations with a prostitute (1 Cor. 6:13)... It is also used figuratively of apostasy or idolatry because of the Old Testament image of Yahweh as the husband of his people (see Rev 2:20-21).” Strong’s Concordance also describes it as having a somewhat broader usage in Biblical times. When used literally, it includes three activities: prostitution, adultery and incest. Figuratively, it means idolatry, or sexual intercourse between unmarried persons.” To sum up by quoting Sam Allberry, “The term we translate as ‘sexual immorality’ is the Greek word *porneia*, an umbrella term for all sexual activity outside of marriage. Such behaviour Jesus describes as evil and defiling.”²⁵

A Jewish rabbi like Jesus, when speaking about sexual immorality, would also have in the back of His mind the Jewish Law, specifically Leviticus 18 and 20, which forbids all kinds of sexual activity, including consensual sex between two men. On matters of marriage, adultery and sexual sin Jesus did not overthrow the Old Testament law, rather he intensified it to address not just exterior actions but interior attitudes and thought patterns (see Matthew 5-7, or Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount”). In fact, in the Judaism of Jesus’ day there were two main schools of rabbinical thought: the school of Hillel and the school of Shammai. When it came to matters like marriage and divorce, Hillel was more progressive. Shammai was more strict. Jesus usually sides with Hillel on disputed matters within first century Judaism *except* when it comes to matters of marriage, divorce and sexual sin. In these instances Jesus sides with the more conservative school of Shammai, as we will see when we discuss marriage below.

In contrast to the above conclusion, it is not uncommon to

²⁵ Sam Allberry, *Is God Anti-gay?* (The Good Book Company, 2015), 19.

find articles online where writers claim that sexual immorality refers to exploitive types of sexual behaviour, violent sexual acts or acts of prostitution—acts connected with temple worship and things like adultery.

All of this is true.

The best lies are 95 percent true.

Many of these same authors will then go on to claim that *porneia* doesn't refer to pre-marital sex. You can swipe right to the glory of God. Have sex with your boyfriend or girlfriend if you want. In other words, sexual immorality refers to all kinds of sexual activity except the kind we most often want to do.

Such an approach seems suspicious, self-servingly convenient and thoroughly unconvincing.

The only Jesus on board with such a licence for promiscuity is the Jesus we create in our own image. *Porneia* is sexual activity outside of marriage. The next question should be, "How does the New Testament define marriage?"

Marriage According to Jesus

The foundational text for marriage in scripture is Genesis 2:23-24: "Then the man said, 'This is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.' Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."

When the Pharisees pull Jesus into a debate about divorce in Matthew 19:5-6, he quotes this text saying, "Haven't you read that in the beginning the Creator made them male and female... Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no

longer two but one flesh.”

Jesus responds to the question about divorce by teaching about marriage and in this passage, Jesus is affirming several truths about God’s design or intention for marriage. First, God made them male and female. Sexual differentiation seems to be an inherent part of Biblical marriage. Maleness and femaleness are a biological reality and a divine creation.²⁶ Moreover, marriage between a man and woman is God’s design and God’s goal is faithfulness to one another within that union. A married couple is to be one emotionally, financially, legally, spiritually and physically and they are joined in such a way that no human being is meant to pull them apart.

John Stott, one of the best Bible commentators of the past generation, draws out the clear implications of Jesus’ affirmation of marriage described in Genesis one and two: “1. Heterosexual gender is a divine creation; 2. Heterosexual marriage is a divine institution; and 3. Heterosexual fidelity is the divine intention.”²⁷ This is the most natural, unforced reading of Jesus’ teaching. Jesus affirmed that marriage²⁸ is a life-long commit-

²⁶ With these statements we are not suggesting that intersexuality or Gender Dysphoria aren’t real. These experiences are very real and often painful and must be met with deep compassion. In addition, the gender binaries found in Genesis one and two do not mean that we must adopt rigid gender constructs. Men and women are different, but certain roles, jobs and attire traditionally attached to one sex or another may well be cultural constructs relative to time, place or social context. For more resources on this topic see Part Four.

²⁷ John Stott, *Same-Sex Partnerships?* (Revell, 2002).

²⁸ People sometimes criticised the idea of a Biblical view of marriage. “What do you mean by a biblical view of marriage?” They will then point out that there is a whole lot of polygamy and concubines and harems in the Bible. Some of the Biblical heroes had multiple wives. In other words, there are

ment between a man and woman.

To sum up, (1) sexual immorality is sexual activity outside of marriage, (2) marriage is between a man and a woman, (3) therefore, sexual immorality is any kind of sexual activity outside of a marriage between a man and a woman.

In addition, it is crucial to understand that marriage, like our sexuality, is meant to mirror, or image, the relationship God has with His people. The apostle Paul says as much in the book of Ephesians where he writes, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church” (Ephesians 5:31-32).

Rachel Gilson thoroughly and beautifully sums up this idea:

Christians rightly celebrate marriage. God created marriage as a symbol of how he loves the church. Human marriage is

all kinds of marriages in the Bible. Does the Bible promote or approve of polygamy? Though polygamy happens in scripture it leads to no end of trouble and is consistently painted in a negative light, sometimes being the very thing that draws people’s hearts away from God. As Old Testament scholar Richard Davidson explains, the biblical examples of polygamy are filled with “discord, rivalry, heartache, even rebellion, revealing the negative motivations and/or disastrous consequences that invariably accompanied such departures from God’s edenic standard.” Polygamy departs from God’s edenic standard. And it fails to understand that from Genesis three onward God is working with the people within their fallen culture and some of the temporary laws in scripture are concessions to the hardness of people’s hearts. Jesus claims this about Moses’ teaching on divorce when he reinforces God’s creation ideal for marriage recorded in Genesis two. To sum up, polygamy was the result of the fall, not God’s ideal. In this way, the Bible is true to the horrors of history. It is often descriptive, not prescriptive, it describes what happened, not what ought to happen. When we write about a Biblical theology of marriage I am talking about God’s intention for marriage, not some of the stuff the Bible records that people did.

supposed to be faithful for life, because God is always faithful to his people, as we should be to him. Human marriage is supposed to be the start of a new household, because God's relationship with his people begins a new family. Human marriage is the only place for sexual activity and pleasure, because God's relationship with his people is incredibly intimate....And, if we have ears to hear, human marriage is only to be a male-female union, because the gospel is the picture of two non-interchangeable and different parties, made one by the work of Jesus Christ. Husbands represent Christ, and wives represent his church²⁹.

This is the New Testament teaching on marriage that Jesus endorses. Though Jesus doesn't explicitly refer to same-sex sexual behaviour, Jesus does not stray from the common Jewish view informed by the Jewish scriptures. In no way does he represent a permissive sexual ethic that jives with our current cultural moment. His ethic forbids all kinds of sexual activity that many now view as morally permissible and no big deal. Jesus' ethic requires faithfulness in marriage and chastity outside of marriage. It is not about heterosexuality or homosexuality, it is about holy sexuality—sexuality that honours God and submits to the wisdom of his written word, no matter how constraining it is for passions that seem to come very natural to humans.

We can and should debate and discuss the six verses that explicitly mention same-sex behaviour with kindness and respect. Though these texts all seem to be uniformly negative in their stance towards sexual activity between individuals of the same-sex, the Bible is not always an easy book to interpret

²⁹ See Rachel Gilson, *Born Again This Way*, pages 85-99 for more of her thinking on marriage.

and faithfully apply to today's context. Admittedly, some of the scriptures in question have very little to say about a loving, monogamous, committed same-sex relationship.

The above isn't written to settle a debate but, instead, explain in brief why we hold our position as a church. Whatever conclusion one might reach on this debated matter, the reality is that much of the church, including many who self-identify as sexual minorities, will continue to hold to the traditional teaching described above. If this is the case, how can a church that embraces the traditional, historic view of the Bible's teaching on sexuality create a loving place for LGBTQA2+ individuals?

For the rest of this book we will explore some possible responses.

Part 3: How to Create a Loving Environment

There are only a few things I know for sure about showing love to gay people, and one of them is this: If you really want to love us, you have to respect us enough to let us make our own decisions. Even if you think we might get it wrong. Even if you're sure we have gotten it wrong. You can't just tell us what to believe and expect us to believe it. That's not how belief works—at least that's not how it worked for me. I needed to be given the space to read the Bible for myself, to listen to God's voice distinct from all the other voices claiming to speak on his behalf.³⁰

Many would respond to the traditional perspective by stating, “Well you can't love LGBTQA+ individuals! Your position

³⁰ Gregory Coles, *Single, Gay, Christian*, 107,108.

on marriage and sexuality makes it impossible. If your church won't marry gay people, or affirm sexual expression between queer individuals, those same individuals won't feel loved by the church." The popular sentiment is, "If you don't approve of my life choices or behaviours, how can you love me?" This objection highlights a tendency to equate approval with love. We see this play out in the church and the culture. Some Christians have struggled with the thought, "If I love 'them', they will think I approve of their behaviour!"

On the other end of the spectrum, in the culture we have a tendency to believe "If you don't approve of what I do, you must not love me!"

In other words, we equate love with approval and approval with love.

As compelling as this seems at first glance, it doesn't work theologically or relationally. Theologically, God loves us, but He doesn't love everything we do. God loves all people. But God doesn't love all lifestyles and neither do humans with any sort of moral grid for evaluating life choices.

Relationally, love and approval, even around important life decisions, cannot be the same thing.

It is far too simple. Let me give an example from my own life.

Like most of us, I have had a friend who lived with his girlfriend in an exclusive sexual relationship. I didn't think his life choices were blessed by God, or part of God's will for his life and relationship.

In other words, I didn't agree with his lifestyle. I didn't approve of a significant life decision he had made.

And, honestly, he didn't agree with my lifestyle either.

He couldn't wrap his mind around the idea of no sex before

marriage. It seemed dangerous and repressive to him—unnatural in his view.

Yet we love each other. I would jump in front of a car for him. I would fly across the country in a second if he needed me. I would show up in a crisis to provide support if called upon.

In light of this would he ever doubt my love for him?

I doubt it.

Instead he would say, “Chris and I had our moral disagreements, he didn’t approve of some of my big life decisions, and I thought his choices were often strange and oddly limiting, but he loved me and I loved him.”

Why?

Because love is not about approval across the board.

Let us switch the scenario for a moment.

The Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, has promised to bring thousands of immigrants from the Middle East to our shores. It is safe to assume that many of the immigrants will be Muslim. Interestingly, traditional Islamic theology believes that God created two genders and holy sexual expression belongs between a man and a woman in marriage.

Is this bigotry?

If our answer is yes (which given the current bent of society it is probably safe to assume) we have a significant problem on our hands. We are rightly against Islamophobia. Hatred and fear directed towards Muslim people is morally repugnant. We are also rightly against homophobia. Hatred and fear directed towards sexual minorities is not loving our neighbour as ourselves.

Here is the problem: If we view Islam’s theology of marriage, gender and sexuality as being inherently homophobic or

transphobic, how will that not naturally transition into Islamophobia? The human heart is a slippery slope. It is hard to hold together the thoughts, “We should respect and love our Muslim neighbours” with “their theology is oppressive, dehumanizing and hateful of sexual minorities.” Will the progressive mind not feel it necessary to engage in the ideological colonization of our new arrivals, imposing with the power of sanction and social shaming our good news of sexual liberation, which may (as seen above) actually be an enslavement? Certainly the educational system will attempt such an ideological takeover. We are concerned for the young Muslim girl who stands up in her classroom and politely expresses her belief, in accordance with her religious tradition shared by hundreds of millions of other humans, that there are only two genders and sex belongs in marriage. How will we hold back the inevitable tide of Islamophobia in that moment?

The only real solution to navigating these radically different moral beliefs is rediscovering a true definition of tolerance. This means respecting the right of people to hold opinions that we find offensive and misleading without massive societal censorship—or, better yet, refusing to demonise those we disagree with on profound moral issues.

Islamic theology might disagree with our lifestyle. But that doesn't mean Muslims hate us, or should be forced to celebrate us, and it doesn't mean we should hate Muslims, or be forced to celebrate their beliefs all the way through. Orthodox Muslim's from the Middle East are not progressive western liberals educated in our bastions of secularism, which many of our universities continue to be.

And that is okay.

To disagree does not mean to hate.

Now, all we are arguing for is the more positive, flip-side of the above sentiment. Love is not the same as agreement. You can love someone and disagree with their theology, or their lifestyle. For society to not disintegrate we have to rediscover these foundational truths.

Tolerance does not mean agreement.

It assumes disagreement.

And love does not always mean acceptance of everything the beloved says or does. Sometimes love shines through the brightest when we don't agree, but still embrace and desire the best for one another.

As Rick Warren famously said, "Our culture has accepted two huge lies. The first is that if you disagree with someone's lifestyle, you must fear or hate them. The second is that to love someone means you agree with everything they believe or do. Both are nonsense. You don't have to compromise convictions to be compassionate."³¹

Earlier in this article I mentioned the young girl who came out to me years ago. She wrote me this note days later: "I was just reminiscing to a friend about what my out process has looked like, and I was telling her about what it was like to tell you. I have such positive feelings associated with that day. I really felt like you treated me like a brother would. I felt no shame or judgement. Regardless of where you are at with homosexuality, you made me feel welcome. Welcome in your office, in your life and in the church. I will never forget that. Thank you, Chris."

She wrote, "Regardless of where you are at with homosexuality, whether we agree or not, I felt loved by you."

³¹This is a well known quote. I first heard him say it on Larry King live.

Because love doesn't require agreement.³²

In what follows we will investigate how to practically create an environment where all people, specifically sexual minorities, feel loved, cared for, accepted, treasured, blessed and given space

³²Doesn't an individual get to decide what love looks like to them? Don't we get to define what feels loving to us or not? Most would answer with an emphatic yes. It is true that in a friendship, or a marriage I can say to my partner, or my friend, "When you are always on your phone I don't feel loved or valued by you!" That is a legitimate expression of one's feelings. It is also appropriate to add to the above complaint, "For me, I *do* feel loved by you when you put away your phone, look me in the eye, and engage in active listening. That is how I feel loved." These are valid sentiments and genuine instances of "speaking our truth." Because we make similar statements in many of our relationships, it is easy to trick ourselves into believing that we get to define love for ourselves. We certainly get to in settings similar to the ones described above, but not across the board. Why? Simply because love is not subjectively defined by us in an ultimate sense. Rather, love is objectively defined by God. To say it another way, love is not God. God is love and, therefore, God ultimately defines what is and isn't loving. God shows us what love looks like most clearly through Jesus. And Jesus makes it clear that love does not mean accepting all kinds of attitudes and actions. Love is unconditional. But love is also transformative. God loves us in our brokenness, but he doesn't leave us in our brokenness. God's love transforms anything in our lives that is not in line with His word and, therefore, not conducive to our ultimate flourishing. In this way, love is more than a feeling—love is passion committed to our ultimate good. Therefore, whether or not we feel the rebuke of Jesus to be loving or not has no bearing on whether or not it was, in fact, loving. Jesus wills our ultimate good. If we define our ultimate good differently than Jesus, we may find his corrections unloving, but that doesn't make it so. This above reality is also why, while it is possible to create a loving environment, it is impossible to create an environment where everyone feels love. A loving environment creates space for gracious rebuke. If we have an immature view of love that requires that people never challenge us, agree with all our choices, never rebuke us, or make us feel bad about what we say or do, we will feel unloved in what is actually an objectively loving environment, as defined by the way of Jesus and the word of God.

to work through their sexual identity in the light of God's love and truth.

A Different Narrative

Imagine with us a real-life scenario. A young boy grows up in church. He accepts Jesus at the age of ten praying with his dad in his room. He reads the Bible and enjoys his faith community. When he hits puberty he starts to notice he is different from most of his guy friends. He doesn't feel drawn to girls the way they seem to be in their whispered huddles. Instead, he finds himself thinking about and drawn toward guys. This budding realisation introduces enormous conflict into his young heart. He hasn't heard a lot about homosexuality or sexual minorities at church—he has never even heard the acronym LGBTQA+—but what he has picked up on is entirely negative. Homosexuality is not God's will for his life. He makes the aching painful decision to keep his feelings to himself. Despite hormones raging, and a growing concern that he might be falling in love with his best friend, he pretends to like girls. He pretends to find the opposite sex attractive and alluring and mysterious, while praying desperately every night for God to make him straight.

We mean really wrestling in prayer.

Tears streaming down his face.

“God, make me like my friends.”

“God, I want to like girls.”

“God, I just want to be like my friends.”

“God, I just want to feel comfortable at church, comfortable in my own skin, please help me change.”

Nothing changes. He can't pray it away. His desire for boys

only intensifies. Eventually the secrecy is too much to bear. Nervously, he comes out to a few trusted friends who embrace him. Encouraged by the reception he receives, he slowly widens the circle. It actually goes better than he anticipated.

His parents are upset, but they express their love for him.

He eventually tells his youth pastor and that meeting is OK too. It is basically a best-case scenario in a conservative environment.

Nevertheless, as he approaches graduation and the prospect of moving away from school it becomes more and more clear to him that the church is not a safe place to explore his sexuality. People are polite, but also nervous. Polite, but prone to inappropriate prying on occasion. Plus, the prospect of perpetual chastity doesn't seem like an achievable goal to pursue as a young adult. He leaves home. He leaves church and he leaves his childhood faith behind.

For the next several years he gives himself to pursuing dating relationships with men. Not promiscuous by most standards, but he is out and meeting attractive individuals. He feels liberated, less stifled, like his soul is stretching and growing. He occasionally thinks about God, but not about church. He tells people he is spiritual, but not religious.

Until one day he has a radical encounter with Jesus and the Holy Spirit. It actually occurs at a gay bar when a girl he knows and admires prays for him.

As a result, he decides he needs to go back to church, so he finds one that is affirming of same-sex relationships. There are quite a few around. He attends for a while. His boyfriend even agrees to visit with him a few times. After a few years he starts to have doubts about his progressive church's interpretation of the

New Testament. Through conversation and prayer and research and wrestling he decides that the traditional reading of scripture regarding sexuality is correct.

He decides that he should pursue chastity in pursuit of Christ.

Curiously, as his change of mind becomes known in his circle of friends, he receives mixed reactions. Some friends are confused. Some are supportive. Others are deeply threatened. He starts to feel stifled and no longer comfortable at his progressive church. Some individuals, including church leaders, suggest that he has internalised an oppressive ideology and is now perpetrating it through his example. His presence starts to make some people feel uncomfortable, which makes him feel uncomfortable.

Where does he go to church?

At the conservative church of his upbringing, though he was initially treated kindly, he always felt like his sexuality was a threat or an embarrassment—almost like they would have preferred him to remain closeted. He also had to navigate the occasional well-intentioned Christian suggesting some type of reparative therapy, not knowing that he had prayed desperately for years that God would change his desires with no result. Not to mention, having to deal with a version of Christianity that asked questions like, “How can you even be a gay Christian?”³³ Isn’t that a contradiction in terms?

If both our culture and progressive Christianity view him with suspicion and confusion and strands of conservative Christianity

³³ We will address the debate around terminology in Part Four. Suffice it to say, some Christians don’t think believers should use the label “gay” and prefer the nomenclature of “same-sex attracted”. To use the word “gay”, in the thinking of some, is to identify with one’s sin. Many reject this critique (as do we). But, again, we will address this in Part Four.

view him as a threat, where does he go?

The above sketch is a story that is becoming increasingly more common. In fact, it was a true story.

As mentioned in the intro, people often ask us about our view on the Biblical teaching about sexuality. More than that, they are asking if it is oppressive and dehumanising for LGBTQA+ individuals. Many either suspect, or have already concluded, it is harmful towards sexual minorities and, therefore, morally repugnant. There are many queer individuals who would add their voices to this chorus of legitimate concern. The traditional perspective seems unnecessarily unfair or oppressive to people who are non-conforming or queer.

But what about the journey of the young man we describe above? Coming to fully embrace the traditional perspective on the Bible's teaching has actually felt liberating and healing for him.

There are many gay and lesbian Christians who don't find the position argued for in this booklet to be oppressive or dehumanizing or anything of the sort. We seldom hear their stories, but they deserve to be told. In fact, before we can confidently conclude that the traditional Christian perspective on sexuality is inherently oppressive and unliveable we have to listen to their voices. After all, it is an act of fear to silence anyone's story, especially when it is inconvenient for our narrative or framework.

For a simple thought experiment, imagine we claimed that the gay lifestyle is promiscuous and dangerously associated with all kinds of health risks. To support our view we quote statistics about the average amount of partners a gay man has in comparison to a straight man. You might rightly protest that there is no monolithic gay lifestyle. After all, there happen to be as many

gay lifestyles as straight lifestyles. Some gay people are promiscuous and some are not. The same is true of straight people. You proceed to present us with plenty of anecdotal evidence for the truth of your claim, but we refuse to listen. We've already decided what we believe and any information that doesn't confirm our considered bias is rejected out of hand. You would likely pity us for sticking our head in the sand. You certainly wouldn't respect us as nuanced, compassionate, informed individuals.

And you would be right.

But, in a similar way, before anyone confidently concludes that the Christian perspective on sexuality is oppressive and unliveable we need to heed the voices quoted below. These individuals are working very hard to make the church a place that is faithful to the teachings of scripture, but also safe for sexual minorities.

That being said, here are a list of gay and lesbian Christians who hold to, and argue for, the historic position on sexuality and have written books defending the traditional teaching of scripture:

- Ed Shaw, *Same-Sex Attraction and The Church*
- Greg Johnson, *Still Time to Care*
- Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting*
- David Bennett, *A War of Loves*
- Christopher Yuan, *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel*
- Sam Allberry, *Is God Anti-gay? and 7 Myths about Singleness*
- Becket Cook, *A Change of Affection*
- Gregory Coles, *Single, Gay, Christian*
- Jackie Hill Perry, *Gay Girl, Good God*
- Rosaria Butterfield, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*

- Rebecca McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity*
- Nate Collins, *All But Invisible*
- Eve Tushnet, *Gay and Catholic*
- Debra Hirsch, *Redeeming Sex*

Not all of us are big readers so follow these instagram accounts (though keep in mind that people do change handles and go on social media fasts, etc.):

- @livingoutorg
- @samallberry
- @davidacbennett
- @jackiehillperry
- @revoiceus
- @bunonmyhead
- @rebecc_mclaugh
- @preston.sprinkle
- @christopheryuan

Every author and every book (or instagram account) represents a community of real people—a minority within a minority. Gay, often single, Christians submitting their identity and sexual expression to the person of Christ. No story is the same, but every story is worth being heard. As Wesley Hill writes, “It seems like an obvious point now, but it took me a while to feel its weight: not only did the world need one book about being single, gay and Christian, it needed dozens of books about it—because there is no one way of living that complicated, multifaceted story.”³⁴

³⁴ Gregory Coles, *Single, Gay, Christian: A Personal Journey of Faith and Sexual Identity* (Downers Grove, ILL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 2.

The above list is an offering of a dozen or so different voices to dig into at your leisure. In the modern church this conversation is becoming increasingly more heated, divisive and overwhelming. Why not give yourself a couple years to dig into the titles above and have your framework and thinking expanded by their deeply intelligent, profoundly compassionate pastoral voices. At the very least, you would come out the other side with a more nuanced viewpoint, less plagued by heated rhetoric and rigid binary thinking that leads to dismissively assigning people to good and bad camps.

As we listen to some of their voices in the following pages, it is worth keeping in mind that many of these individuals, and others in the same boat, don't feel comfortable in more affirming churches because of theological differences, or because of the underlying accusation or suspicion that they are internalising an oppressive ideology and perpetrating it by their example.

Different Voices

An Instagram post captioned, “Every conversation on morality in the modern world”:

Culture: We want to do ‘X’.

Christianity: You are free to do it.

Culture: But you think ‘X’ is wrong.

Christianity: Yes.

Culture: Because you want to control us.

Christianity: No. You are free to do what you want.

Culture: But you think ‘X’ is wrong.

Christianity: Yes, but only because we want your ultimate good,

which is the definition of love.

Culture: But we want to do 'X'.

Christianity: You are free to do it.

Culture: But we want you to say that 'X' is good.

Christianity: We cannot say that.

Culture: Why do you hate us?³⁵

The above post, though slightly tongue in cheek, highlights the difficulty we have listening to different perspectives on topics that matter deeply to us. Nevertheless, in what follows we want to highlight the voices of gay and lesbian Christians who hold to the traditional view defended throughout these pages. We won't often comment on their words. Instead we will let the power of their statements stand alone.

When most LGBTQ folks hear a story like mine, they consider it a tragedy. As they understand it, my misguided sense of sexual ethics has sentenced me to a life without love. If God is love, and yet my theology forces me into loneliness, surely something is amiss. I sympathise with this point of view, because I agree with much of it. God—the real God, the loving God—would never ask someone to live a life without love. If this is the call we receive, then we've known the wrong God, or we've misunderstood him. But there's a difference between love and sex. Which means there's also a difference between a life of singleness and a life without love. I've known love.³⁶

³⁵ Courtesy of Gabriel Finocchio

³⁶ Gregory Coles, *Single, Gay, Christian*, 88,89.

Eve Tushnet, author of *Gay and Catholic*, adds her voice:

We are often told, including by many Christians, that the church asks gay people to lead an empty life devoid of love, or forces us to choose between human love in this life and God's love in the afterlife. These false choices break hearts and spirits. Gay Catholics, even the celibate ones, can love and be loved, both by Christ who loves everyone and by the particular humans on whose shoulders we lean. Not only faith but hope and love are open to us, too. Is Christian marriage not in your future? Then your vocation includes the art, adventure, service, ministry or music or writing you are called to pursue. It includes the deep and fulfilling relationships that make real and prosaic demands on you, and any of a thousand other ways you can add to the world's sums of beauty and love.^{37, 38}

Far from being harmful and repressive, the Christian sexual ethic is life-giving and liberating. This can be seen on the broader scale of history. It was the Christian sexual ethic that transformed the situation of women, slaves, and children in the ancient world, safeguarding them from sexual abuse and exploitation, and the same Christian ethic underpins the values of sexual autonomy and consent that are rightly so important in our society today. Christianity was the catalyst for the first sexual revolution. But the Christian sexual ethic is also life-giving and liberating for me as an individual. It releases me from the pressure to make sure my sexual needs are being met and

³⁷ As quoted on [spiritualfriendship.org](http://spiritualfriendship.org/2015/02/11/three-cheers-for-eve-tushnet/), <http://spiritualfriendship.org/2015/02/11/three-cheers-for-eve-tushnet/>

³⁸ <http://ethikapolitika.org/2015/05/04/called-to-greatness-vocation-and-dignity/>

to find the one person who can meet all my relational needs so I'm never lonely again. (And the experience of many of my married friends suggests that a relationship doesn't guarantee the absence of loneliness anyways.) The Christian ethic also releases me from the pressure to look within to find who I really am and then to express that loudly and proudly to make sure that everyone knows, and it frees me from shame, giving me the confidence to be honest about all that is good and not good in me, in a way that a simplistic message of self-acceptance never could. It's very sweet when well-meaning people worry that the Christian sexual ethic will be harmful and repressive to me, but in reality, it is the unbiblical ideas that are lurking behind their concern which are more likely to cause problems.³⁹

I don't want an impoverished twenty-first-century Western concept of sex to dictate my life....My sexual orientation doesn't define me. It's not the most important thing about me...The Gospel gives us a better identity—a core, governing identity, an identity grounded not in our feelings, not in our accomplishments, not in what other people think about us, not in our individualism or expressiveness, but in our adoption into the family of God. Modern identities are very fragile. Jesus provides an identity that cannot fade as you age, an identity that provides forgiveness when you fail, an identity that places the lonely in families and cannot be taken away by death."⁴⁰

³⁹ Andrew Bunt, <https://www.livingout.org/resources/articles/41/isnt-the-christian-sexual-ethic-harmful-and-repressive> (Accessed September 29, 2021)

⁴⁰ Greg Johnson, *Still Time to Care*, 195.

David Bennett, in his book *A War of Loves*, complains that,

I often hear gay or progressive activists say that celibate gay Christians are the new ex-gay, referring to the harrowing history of conversion therapy. Or these activists call those who support us repressive. I need to name that for what it is: discrimination, and it is as deeply hurtful as any homophobia I experienced as a sexually active gay man. Being gay is not about having gay sex. That is a moral choice separate from gay identity. Of all communities in the world, gay communities are well poised to accept and understand that distinction. I pray that they will.^{41,42}

In her blog post entitled "Straight Allies: Please Listen to all LGBT Voices", Anne Witton writes:

I listened to my straight, married friend tell me about how painful it is to be gay. I know that she's spent a lot of time wrestling with this issue and I really value how much time and thinking she's invested in seeking to understand. But I also know I've

⁴¹ David Bennett, *A War of Loves*, 232.

⁴² Based on this quote you could imagine a dialogue with David proceeding in this fashion: **C:** Your theology holds that God-honouring sexual expression only belongs in a marriage between a man and a woman. It unfairly targets the queer community and justifies oppressive ideology around heteronormativity and cisgender privilege. **D:** I appreciate your concern, but I am part of the LGBTQ2A+ community. I love myself and the community and I don't find the above theology oppressive, or dehumanising, or any such thing. I just reject Queer theory as an ideology and revisionist theology as a solution that doesn't ring true to my experience or the experience of some of my Queer friends. In other words, if you proceed in your above view it is clear that you are only loving sexual minorities that agree with your ideology—you are an ally of sexual minorities who agree with you, but not an ally of *all* sexual minorities, specifically those who take my view.

done more thinking, crying, loving and losing, praying, agonising and reading than she ever will. That doesn't make my voice more important, but it does make it worth listening to.

And I'm not a lone voice. There are lots of us who know all the pain and suffering but have found in Jesus a grace and liberation in costly discipleship. We submit our sexualities to him and find a peace which passes all understanding; a joy which is deeper than romance; a way that is not the way of the world. A lot of the pain and suffering now comes from our friends who don't want to listen to that story because it doesn't fit their narrative. Our affirming friends who won't affirm our costly discipleship or support us on the way. Our friends who have the luxury of seeing this as an 'issue' rather than a daily personal walk. Our inclusive friends who don't include us in the conversation.

So here's my challenge to affirming friends and straight allies who want to have compassion for gay people—please listen to all of us.”⁴³

Two Last Testimonies

This an excerpt from the poet Jackie Hill Perry's "Love Letter to a Lesbian":

Dear _____,

I just want you to know that I understand.

I understand how it feels to be in love with a woman. To want nothing more than to be with her forever. Feeling as if the

⁴³<https://www.livingout.org/resources/posts/91/straight-allies-please-listen-to-all-lgbt-voices> (Accessed May 31, 2022)

universe has played a cruel joke on your heart by allowing it to fall into the hands of a creature that looks just like you.

I too was a lesbian. I had same-sex attractions as early as five-years old. As I grew up, those feelings never subsided. They only grew. I would find myself having crushes on my female best friends, but I was far too ashamed to admit it to them—let alone to myself.

At the age of 17, I finally made the decision to pursue these desires. I entered into a relationship with a young lady who became my “first.” The first time we kissed, it felt extremely natural, as if this feeling is what I had been missing all along. After her came another woman and then another woman. Both relationships were very serious, each lasting over a year. I enjoyed these relationships and loved these women a lot. And it came to the point that I was willing to forsake all, including my soul, to enjoy their love on earth.

In October 2008, at the age of 19, my superficial reality was shaken up by a deeper love—one from the outside, one that I’d heard of before but never experienced. For the first time, I was convicted of my sin in a way that made me consider everything I loved (idolised), and its consequences. I looked at my life, and saw that I had been in love with everything except God, and these decisions would ultimately be the death of me, eternally....

And amazingly, at the same time that the penalty of my sin became true to me, so did the preciousness of the cross. A vision of God’s Son crucified, bearing the wrath I deserved, and an empty tomb displaying his power over death — all things I had heard before without any interest had become the most glorious revelation of love imaginable....

Now why did I just tell you about this? I gave you a glimpse

of my story because I want you to understand that I understand. But I also want you to know that I also understand how it feels to be in love with the Creator of the universe. To want nothing more than to be with him forever. To feel his grace, the best news ever announced to mankind. To see his forgiveness, that he would take such a wicked heart into his hands of mercy....

There was a time in my walk with Christ where I experienced a lot of temptation about falling back into lesbianism. These temptations caused me to doubt God's word. My temptations and desires began to become more real to me than the truth of the Bible. As I was praying and meditating on these things, God put this impression on my heart: "Jackie, you have to believe that my word is true even if it contradicts how you feel." Wow! This is right. Either I trust in his word or I trust my own feelings. Either I look to him for the pleasure my soul craves or I search for it in lesser things. Either I walk in obedience to what he says or I reject his truth as if it were a lie....

The choice is yours, my friend. I pray you put your faith in Christ and flee from the lies of our society that coincide with the voices of your heart — a heart that Scripture says is wicked and deceitful (Jeremiah 17:9). Run to Jesus instead.

You were made for him (Romans 11:36). He is ultimately all that you need! He is good and wise (Psalm 145:9). He is the source of all comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3). He is kind and patient. He is righteous and faithful. He is holy and just. He is our true King (Psalm 47:7). He is our Saviour. And he is inviting you to be not just his servant, but also his friend. If lasting love is what you're looking for anywhere else, you are chasing the wind, seeking what you will never find, slowly being destroyed by your pursuit.

But in Jesus, there is fullness of joy. In Jesus, there is a relationship worth everything, because he is everything. Run to him.⁴⁴

This excerpt is from a blog post written by Becket Cook:

With a highly successful career as a production designer in the fashion world, I lived as a fully engaged gay man in Hollywood. I had many boyfriends over the years; attended Pride Parades in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York; and marched in innumerable rallies for gay-marriage equality. My identity as a gay man was immutable, or so I thought.

But in 2009 I experienced something extraordinary: I had a radical encounter with Jesus Christ while attending an evangelical church in Hollywood for the first time (I was invited by a stranger I met at a coffee shop the week before). I walked into the church a gay atheist and walked out two hours later a born-again Christian, in love with Jesus. I was stunned by this reversal. Since then, I no longer identify as gay but rather choose to be celibate because I believe God's plan and purpose—revealed in the Bible—is authoritative, true, and good.

Surrendering my sexuality hasn't been easy. I still struggle with vestiges of same-sex attraction, but denying myself, taking up my cross, and following Jesus is an honor. Any struggles I experience pale in comparison to the joy of a personal relationship with the one who created me and gives my life meaning. My identity is no longer in my sexuality; it's in Jesus.

When I came out as a Christian to my friends in L.A. and

⁴⁴ Jackie Hill Perry, "Love Letter to a Lesbian", *Desiring God*. (<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/love-letter-to-a-lesbian>)

New York, I was met with scepticism and, in some cases, outright hostility. But it wasn't until my memoir was published in 2019 that all hell broke loose. My closest, lifelong friends completely abandoned me, and my production-design agency in Hollywood dropped me like a hot potato under the most vague and frivolous of pretexts—even though I was one of their top artists, earning them loads of money over the years. Of course, if my memoir had been a celebration of my gay identity, I would've had advertising and editorial clients beating down my door with even more job offers.⁴⁵

When we listen to the above voices it becomes clear that culture won't genuinely accept these individuals because of their theology.

And, sadly, some conservative churches won't accept them because of their sexuality.

Where do they go?

Our church hopes to create a safe space for the growing number of people represented, in a small part, through the voices quoted above. In what follows I want to highlight what this means for our church practically.

⁴⁵ Becket Cook, "Why Hollywood Praises Elliot Page (and Blacklists Me)", *The Gospel Coalition*. (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/hollywood-elliott-page-me/>)

We will Reject Reparative Therapy and its Aims⁴⁶

Reparative therapy has often been associated with the ex-gay movement. The goal of reparative therapy was to make gay people straight—this goal was implied if not always explicitly stated. Though well intentioned in many cases, reparative therapy has been damaging to the gay community and is too simplistic both psychologically and theologically. In the searing words of gay Christian, Gregory Coles, “In the end, the ex-gay movement didn’t turn out straight Christians. It turned out people who were confused and disillusioned and still gay, people insured to promises that never seemed to come true. Were they failing God, not wanting to change enough, not believing enough? Or was God failing them? Was he just a sadist, a fairy tale, an opiate for the masses that began with euphoria and ended with a brutal let down?”

Strong, honest words.

He continues, “The diminished popularity—and, in some cases, the total collapse—of ex-gay ministries in recent years reflects more than just a changing cultural landscape. It speaks to decades of human casualties, people damaged by the broken promise of change. Many LGBTQ+ survivors of ex-gay theology have given up on their faith altogether, choosing to hate God rather than to hate themselves. Others cling to faith with tired, bloodied fingers, like castaways clinging to driftwood in a storm,

⁴⁶ This section was not written in response to Bill C4 being passed by the Canadian government. It was written more than a year before that bill was passed. For a detailed and charitable examination of the failure of reparative therapy see. Greg Johnson, *Still Time To Care* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2021).

able to believe in God only in spite of what the church has told them.”⁴⁷

The promise of change in these programs was often drastically over-blown and many gay people came out the other side very disillusioned.

To be fair, secular research *does* show that sexuality can be fluid, especially amongst women who self-identify as lesbians, or bi-sexual. Lisa Diamond’s book, *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women’s Love and Desire*, was based on a ten year study of 100 women and their reports on patterns of attraction and identity choices. She reported that a large swath of the women ended up changing the labels they used for themselves over the time period. Rachel Gilson, commenting on the study writes, “This happened least among those who could be called ‘very straight’ or ‘very lesbian,’ but many women who report some same-sex attraction do not actually fit into this latter pattern. In the words of Diamond, ‘when women undertook identity changes, they typically did so in a way that broadened rather than narrowed their potential range of attractions and relationships.’ (Sexual Fluidity, p. 67)”⁴⁸

Such results are less common amongst men, but they do exist, leading researchers to conclude that sexuality is more fluid than popular narratives have sometimes led us to believe. Two psychologists surveyed people with same-sex attraction who attempted to change or diminish their desires towards the same-sex. In this study, 15 percent of the participants reported

⁴⁷ Gregory Coles, *Single, Gay, Christian: A Personal Journey of Faith and Sexual Identity* (Downers Grove, ILL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 62,63.

⁴⁸ Rachel Gilson, *Born Again This Way: Coming out, Coming to Faith, and What Comes Next* (The Good Book Company, 2020), 131.

experiencing a significant degree of change, and 23 percent said they experienced some degree of change. The rest experienced little to no change.⁴⁹ All this means that sexual fluidity accounts for some change and shift in people's desires. This change in desires was often used to prop-up the legitimacy of ex-gay ministries but, again, the promise of change was often vastly overstated in these programs and was not experienced by the majority of individuals who participated. The overstated promises led to the widespread disillusionment and pain that Coles describes above.

Reparative therapy also traded in outmoded, man-made psychological constructs and, at times, seemed to deny that same-sex attraction can be deeply ingrained in the human personality, apart from sociological factors like upbringing and parental relationships. Overbearing mothers and distant fathers were blamed and made culpable for the direction of their child's sexual desires. Nature was sacrificed on the altar of nurture and countless hours were spent searching for deep-seated, pre-pubescent psychological wounds—the discovery and healing of which would magically straighten out the gay individual with unwanted desires.

It is unhelpful and overly simplistic to deny that both nature and nurture are at work in the development of human personality and sexuality. And, as far as some reparative therapy models denied this complex reality, their practitioners were misguided in their approach. For these reasons (and many others not mentioned), by 2014 the fifty-thousand-member American Association of Christian Counsellors (AACC) would rewrite their code of ethics, rejecting any remaining support for reparative therapy

⁴⁹ Mark A. Yarhouse, *Homosexuality: The Use of Scientific Research in the Church's Moral Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 88.

and, instead, moving toward the promotion of celibacy.⁵⁰

Theologically, the primary goal for the human person is not that they would be straight and attracted to the opposite sex.

We do not believe in salvation by straightness.

In our broken world, God's primary goal for us is not straightness, it is holiness.

God's primary goal for us is not marriage.

It is holiness.

God's primary goal for us is not happiness as we define it, but holiness as He defines it! Holiness leads to ultimate happiness, but holiness is the priority. So we are not after heterosexuality or homosexuality—which are modern categories made popular by Freud—but, instead, holy sexuality, which looks like chastity in singleness and faithfulness in marriage. In other words, we are not looking for straightness as the ideal. We are looking for submission—sexuality submitted to the Lordship of Christ, which looks different for all of us depending on our stage of life, orientation or personal struggles. As Rachel Gilson writes,

Our same-sex attractions may linger until we die or Christ returns. But until that day we have his power, his word, and his vision for a new way forward, because it is our birthright. We obey him, not our sinful desires. They are strong, but He is stronger. They make deceitful promises, but his promises are as firm as they are beautiful.... As we move forward, we will see that the battle is never easy. Stewarding our sexuality is about faithfulness to Jesus, which is so much more than exchanging one set of attractions for another—in many ways this is much

⁵⁰ Greg Johnson, *Still Time to Care* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2021), 101.

harder, but ultimately it is much more beautiful...we same sex-attracted Christians have a unique and powerful ministry today when we fight for faithfulness in our lives. But we will also see that the fight is worth it—because Jesus is worth it, and we are worth it to him.⁵¹

This is a description of holy sexuality.

More poignant and powerful than simple straightness.

A far more worthy, God-honouring goal too.

A testimony and witness that the church needs to experience more and more.

We Will Welcome Gay People to Attend our Church

Gay couples will attend our church. Queer individuals will populate our pews. We will never assume that everyone is straight. There will be gay, lesbian and Trans* people at our church exploring Christianity, some with a deep commitment to scripture and a growing relationship with Jesus, others who are not sure what they think about scripture, Jesus or even their own sexuality.

It is odd how much space the modern church has made for straight individuals to wrestle through their sexuality in the midst of slip ups, mistakes, and wrestling with the Lordship of Jesus whilst sleeping with their boyfriend, reacting to purity culture while tithing their money, masturbating and watching porn while playing drums on Sunday morning etc. I don't write any of the above to make light of sin and would encourage repentance whenever we miss the mark that God sets for our lives. We *are* called to be holy. Yet all of these situations and dynamics are

⁵¹ Rachel Gilson, *Born Again This Way* (The Good Book Company, 2020), 55.

at play every Sunday morning in the messiness of church life.

Think about greed for a moment.

A simple definition of greed is to keep all we are given. The apostle Paul writes that the “greedy” will not inherit the kingdom of God. Habitual greed in our lives is indicative of the fact that we are not a citizen of God’s kingdom. Yet every Sunday there are people coming to our services and participating in the life of our community that aren’t giving anything to the church, or to non-profits outside of the church and, yet, they don’t feel picked on, marginalised or ostracised in our community. Again, we are not advocating minimising sin or creating a culture devoid of real conviction and genuine repentance. But it seems clear we have not created the same type of space for queer individuals to wrestle with scripture and grow in sanctification—a glaring omission that is problematic and damaging, especially for adolescents who are in the process of real and genuine identity formation, detached from the inherited beliefs of their parents. In the words of Bridget Eileen Rivera,

At the end of the day, LGBTQ Christians are largely asking to be treated with the same grace and good faith that cisgender, heterosexual Christians typically reserve for each other. The question is whether cisgender, heterosexual Christians are willing to share that grace with LGBTQ people. It’s possible to create a community defined by the gospel instead of by condemnation. But it takes everyone together. All of us must be willing to give each other the space to grow in tandem with the Holy Spirit.⁵²

⁵² Bridget Eileen Rivera, *Heavy Burdens: Seven Ways LGBTQ Christians Experience Harm in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2021), 175.

David Bennett wrote a book called *A War of Loves* in which he describes his personal journey with a high degree of transparency and openness. It is a raw and beautiful story worth reading. As a young gay man, who also happened to be an activist for the LGBTQ+ community, he had a dramatic encounter with the Holy Spirit at a bar. He came to faith in Christ and spent the next three years in a conservative, charismatic Bible-teaching church. He studied the Bible, participated in worship and thoroughly enjoyed participating in his new community.

He enjoyed it so much that sometimes he would bring his boyfriend.

David knew what the church believed about marriage and sexuality. His church held the same position as our church. But David wasn't sure what he believed, and we should have deep sympathy for that fact. A quick Google search will show you all the different perspectives on the debate texts. Our friends like David need time to wrestle through the questions and issues in a safe and loving environment—an environment that doesn't have to sacrifice what it believes is the correct understanding of God's word. Because he received a beautiful welcome from the church, eventually, as a result of his own study, he came to believe the traditional position and now he is faithfully walking that out as a single, celibate, gay man who is witnessing prophetically to the fact that Jesus is worth our wholehearted pursuit regardless of the sacrifice. His life is a radical witness to the abundant goodness and sufficiency of Jesus.

We need to create space for stories like David's. This is a responsibility, not just for the pastors, but for every follower of Jesus who makes up our church.

Leadership in the Church

There are volunteer roles in our church that are open to people from all different walks of life—different worldviews, perspectives and opinions—who have a heart to serve and be involved. Not teaching roles or certain leadership roles, but many other volunteer opportunities. We might have atheists playing drums and Buddhists running media and Bahai friends helping run Alpha groups and Muslim neighbours taking part in our mercy ministries. These are not token roles, they are vital to the life of the church.

How about our gay friends? Can a queer individual serve in the church or rise to any level of leadership?

The short answer is yes.

The longer answer is it depends.

It depends on their character, their calling, their commitment to the church, their level of competency and vision alignment and a bunch of other things, including how they are submitting their sexuality to Christ and the struggles that might involve.

How about our straight friends? Can a heteronormative person serve in the church, or rise to any level of leadership?

The short answer is yes.

The longer answer is it depends.

It depends on their character, their calling, their commitment to the church, their level of competency and vision alignment and a bunch of other things, including how they are submitting their sexuality to Christ and the struggles that might involve.

Unrepentant sin in any area of our lives, gay or straight, will sooner or later disqualify us from leadership in the church.

God takes holiness seriously and so do we. God takes sin

seriously and so do we. A gay or straight person can qualify or disqualify themselves from leadership in the church.

Many of the gay and lesbian and bi-sexual authors I mentioned earlier could be pastors at our church. I would love to have Wesley Hill, Sam Allberry or Debrah Hirsch as pastors at our church. Gregory Coles could lead worship. I would love to have Rebecca McLaughlin as a scholar in residence for our community. On and on I could go.

Whereas some wonderful straight Christians that are part of our church wouldn't qualify for leadership positions for a number of reasons, ranging from maturity, character and theology, all of which might require a tough conversation—a discussion that may be had in a loving, gracious, kind manner and still leave the individual feeling unloved and denied an opportunity.

These types of boundary markers in organisations are unavoidable and occur across the board.

The same is true about the movement Jesus started. The Pharisees, for example, were emphatically not “in”.

There are churches in our city led by our friends where a senior leader at our church (us included) wouldn't be allowed to lead a small group because of our theological differences on certain secondary matters.

There are Catholic churches where we, as Protestants, would be barred from taking communion, a significant Christian tradition and sacrament that goes back to Jesus. Nevertheless, we are friends with priests and we champion their ministries.

The same is true in politics. If you are a member, or better yet a leader of the conservative party, and after research and deep soul-searching decide to adopt the platform of the communist party, you will not hold your leadership position or party

membership as a conservative for long.

Again, it makes sense.

The same is true with many progressive churches. There are many affirming churches where a gay individual who held to and taught the traditional perspective on marriage and sexuality couldn't be a pastor or leader because, gay or not, they don't subscribe to the church's stance on marriage and sexuality.

Pieter Valk is a gay Christian man who holds to the traditional Christian sex ethic explained in these pages. He started a ministry called *Equip* with a vision to “help churches become places where LGBT+ Christians could belong and thrive according to a traditional sexual ethic.”⁵³ Pieter also happens to be a trained counsellor who works with young people to help avoid and repair some of the wounds inflicted by living in the “closet”. At the time of this writing, his organisation applied to be part of the Franklin Pride Parade. To be a part of the Franklin Parade they took a host of precautions. As Pieter writes,

We consulted a same-sex married man who runs a gay-affirming ministry about how to respectfully contribute to the diversity of pride. He was confident Equip could offer a space at Franklin Pride where more conservative gay people and allies could uniquely learn. We planned to familiarise our volunteers with the history of hate crimes against LGBTQ+ people (often perpetrated by Christians). We were going to bring a graffiti wall where Pride-goers could share about painful and beautiful faith experiences. We were going to hand out cards with apologies from Christians to gay people and offer follow-up

⁵³<https://equipyourcommunity.org/about/#anchor-mission> (Accessed May 31, 2022)

resources from a variety of perspectives. A volunteer was going to make artisan cotton candy while we offered hugs. Moreover, we offered for Franklin Pride to review all of our materials. To our delight, our application was accepted!⁵⁴

Sadly, the story doesn't end there. They later received a call banning them from participating in the gay pride parade. This story is not a singular event. Pieter concludes his op-ed by writing,

Gay celibate Christians like me were told that our community—our kind of gay person—was not welcome at Franklin Pride. June 4 at Harlinsdale Park was going to be my first Pride and a first Pride experience for many of my gay celibate Christian friends. We were eager to participate and contribute our unique colour of the rainbow. Instead, we've been painfully excluded. Ultimately, this unwelcome and exclusion is inconsistent with the spirit of Pride. A central principle of the gay rights movement has been that gay people deserve the right to choose for themselves how they identify, who they love and what they believe. If this right is not honored for gay celibate Christians at Franklin Pride, then the rights of all gay people are being undermined at Franklin Pride.⁵⁵

Pieter would also be banned from many pulpits in progressive churches for the same reason cited by the Franklin Pride parade. We are sad at the way this excludes or rejects gay Christians with

⁵⁴https://www.williamsonherald.com/opinion/letters_to_editor/letter-to-the-editor-some-gays-unwelcome-at-franklin-pride/article_310a3114-dcff-11ec-bac5-d7da53c09d5c.html (Accessed May 31, 2022).

⁵⁵Ibid.

a traditional sex-ethic, but we understand. Again, we all have our boundaries.

At our church we intend to create space for Pieter's "unique colour of the rainbow." We are inviting our church to trust God enough to create space where gay and lesbian individuals, in relationships or not, can ask questions, hear the Gospel, fall in love with Jesus and submit their lives to His good care. We invite them, along with the rest of us, to hold the nature of their sexuality and relationships in open hands before our loving and gracious Father who never asks us to leave anything behind without offering us something ultimately better in its place.

It will be messy.

We will make mistakes.

We will get criticised from all sides

But we are committed to the journey.

Conclusion

In the introduction I mentioned the work of Justin Lee. In his theologically informed memoir, *Torn*, he talks about meeting the evangelical speaker Tony Compolo. Compolo has been, at different times in his own journey, both non-affirming and affirming. Lee heard Compolo speak and, afterwards, Justin pulled him aside and told him his entire story as a young, conservative gay man growing up in the church. As Justin tells the story, Compolo just listened attentively to the entirety of his journey. "He didn't know if I was a Christian, if I was having sex, or anything else about my life. He didn't ask. He simply made me feel welcome

and unconditionally loved.”⁵⁶ When Justin was finished spilling his secrets to this well-known stranger and Christian speaker, Tony wrapped him up in a giant bear hug and thanked him for sharing. Justin ends his book with these words, “In that moment, I knew one thing for certain. No matter what theological views Christians might ultimately hold on gay marriage, sex, or relationships, if all Christians loved as Dr. Campolo loved me in that moment, this world would be a completely different place. May it be so, and may we be the ones to make it happen.”⁵⁷

May it be so.

And may we be the ones to make it happen.

Not tomorrow.

Not in ten years.

Not when the political climate settles down.

Not when we finally emerge from our independently chosen echo-chambers and finally learn to listen to one another again.

But now.

If we loved like Christ, the world would be a completely different place—still a broken place, but a better place nonetheless.

Not tomorrow when things are easier.

Not tomorrow when everyone toes the party line of whatever intellectual fad is currently in vogue.

Not tomorrow when an out-of-reach utopia arrives on the tired misbehaving shores of our planet.

But today.

Starting right now.

Starting with us.

⁵⁶ Justin Lee, *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays vs. Christians Debate* (Jericho Books, 2013).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

May we love like Christ has loved us.

If you have been reading this book as a sexual minority, allow me to remind you of a story I told at the beginning of this book about the young girl who came out to me in my office.

There was one part of the story that I held back.

During that meeting she told me about an encounter she had with God in a church service. It is widely perceived that churches force people to stay in the closet, despising the person they are inside.

Sadly, that can be true.

But her experience at a church service pushed her out of the closet.

She was in a worship service singing songs to God, she told me, when God started to speak back. Our theology allows for this type of interaction between Creator and creature, so I listened with rapt attention as the story began to spill out. God whispered to her heart, His voice seeking out all the deep places of brokenness and insecurity in her soul. And it was like God began to pronounce over each area of secret shame,

“I love you like that.”

“I love you, like that.”

In other words, I love you as you are.

One by one, God kindly began tugging on the loose threads which sprouted from the unforgiving fabric that had clothed her in condemnation for years until, mercifully, it all unravelled in a pool of tears.

God is persistent too and His gaze finally rested on her sexual desire for other women—her same-sex attraction that she had hoped for years would melt away.

God spoke, one last time.

“I love you like that.”

“No, that cannot be true,” she thought.

God insisted,

“I love you like that.”

Finally, she gave up and gave in. She surrendered to God’s still small voice, and believed.

God truly does love her like that. In the brokenness. In the mess. In the beauty. In the longing. In the aching and loneliness. In the hope and yearning. God loves her. God sees her. God is for her.

And to our LGBTQ friends, we hope you realise that, first, we admire your courage and strength and, second...

God truly does love you like that.

God loves you.

Like that.

And so do we.

Part Four: Objection and Response

OBJECTION:

Purity culture has been deeply damaging to some people who grew up in conservative churches. It seems as though you are reinstating it with your section on sexuality.

RESPONSE:

What scripture is describing and what we are defending is different from the purity culture in the western church, as made popular in books like Joshua Harris' *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. Purity culture in the church has gone wrong in numerous ways. Here are some examples: **(1)** People picked up on the idea that sex is nasty and vile and should be avoided until you find the one you really love and marry, which is a hard switch to suddenly flip during the honeymoon. **(2)** It has caused some people to hate their sexuality instead of receiving it as a gift of God to be

stewarded well—a gift that is bigger than just the sexual act. **(3)** It made promises that weren't biblical. It implied that purity when you are single would necessarily lead to a certain type of sex life or marriage in the future; e.g. "I was told that if we wait to have sex, sex in marriage would be awesome, but instead it really hurt for the first several years and was pretty awkward and frustrating. It's hard not to feel lied to." Or to quote one Instagram thread, "That's the lie of purity culture: a promise of romance and marriage and sex if we're pure enough.... Singleness isn't a punishment for sexual impurity." This leads to our fourth complaint. **(4)** Purity culture tended to idolize both sex, marriage and virginity at times. The key to human flourishing became sexual and marital intimacy, rather than intimacy with Christ. **(5)** Purity culture was sometimes fear based in its communication and it underemphasized the beauty of God's grace in the messiness of our lives. I remember meeting with a young woman who had become a new Christian. She had slept with a lot of men earlier in her life and she wondered out loud to me if she could wear white with integrity on her wedding day. I said "Yes! Of course you can wear white!" Jesus died to cleanse us from all unrighteousness, to give us a new beginning and a fresh start—though our sins are like scarlet they will be white as snow."

What we argue for in this book is Biblical purity as distinct from the ways in which purity culture twisted or missed the grace-filled message of Jesus.

The reason why some readers might confuse the two is because the New Testament teaching is also very different from the permissive attitude of culture, which seems to ascribe to the moral maxim, "Do what you want, as long as you don't harm anybody!" People should do what they want, live how they want,

say what they want—provided they don't harm anybody. It is a very appealing dictum.

The problem is we don't have an agreed definition about harm.

We might define harm as damage inflicted on the dignity of human beings. Or, perhaps, harm is what diminishes human flourishing. All of that is true.

But even on the above secular definitions of harm, pornography is objectively harmful, but we don't agree about that as a culture.

Not only that, we ignore the fact that our definitions of harm are influenced by our views about the nature of reality and the human person. For example, if one believes in God and the soul then factoring in God's perspective and insight would be crucial to a proper definition of harm and human flourishing. There is nothing more ultimately harmful than hardening our hearts towards God and what he desires for our lives, missing out on the reason for which we were created. Yet our culture often applies the harm principle assuming there is no God, or God hasn't revealed Himself to humanity, or no human soul exists. The end result is a cultural definition of harm that is always incomplete. After all, if we get God wrong, we will get the meaning of life wrong, or only partially right, which means we will get our ethics wrong, or only partially right—the end result is futility in thinking regarding sexuality or anything else.

Fundamental to the Christian worldview is the belief that God exists. God has revealed himself most clearly in Jesus. And Jesus has put boundaries around our sexuality because he loves us. As Sam Allberry writes,

God cares who we sleep with because he cares deeply about the people who are doing the sleeping. He cares because sex was his idea, not ours. He cares because misusing sex can cause profound hurt and damage. He cares because he regards us as worthy of his care. And, in fact, that care is not only seen in telling us how we should use sex, but also in how he makes forgiveness and healing available when we mess this up.⁵⁸

That is not a purity culture.
It is Biblical wisdom.

OBJECTION:

Does Romans 1 specifically address loving, monogamous same-sex relationships?

RESPONSE:

Many of the six scriptures that explicitly mention same-sex sexual activity have little to do with a loving, monogamous same-sex relationship. For example, Genesis 19 is about gang rape and a profound failure of hospitality on the part of the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah. To apply this text to loving, gay relationships today is a tragic failure of exegesis and application. To refer to sexual minorities as “Sodomites” is offensive, horrible and unwarranted as a result.

How about Romans chapter one verse 24 to 27, though? Not only is this the only place in scripture where lesbianism is specifically mentioned, it is the text that seems most unambiguous

⁵⁸ Sam Allberry, *Why Does God Care Who I Sleep With?* (The Good Book Company, 2020), 9-10.

in its denouncement of same-sex sexual activity. Here is the passage in question:

They exchange the truth about God for a lie, and worship and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen. 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 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 (Romans 1:26, 27).

How should we understand the thrust of the apostle Paul's teaching in the above passage? Is it a blanket, universal ban on same-sex relations?

Throughout Church history the answer has been an unambiguous "yes".

In the last fifty years or so the tides have started to shift. Commentators have started to claim that Paul is actually writing against abusive sexual practices between men and boys, or sexual practices connected with pagan idolatry. Others think he is talking about excessive and inappropriate lust, not committed love. Whatever approach is taken, the conclusion is that Paul is emphatically not imagining a caring, monogamous gay relationship though, popular misconceptions aside, those type of relationships did exist in his day. If the above is true, gay author Matthew Vines helpfully points out the implications of the conclusion. "If there's a substantial difference between the type of behaviour Paul condemned and the intimate, committed

relationships of gay Christians, then he has not relegated our gay friends and loved ones to the proverbial dustbin.”⁵⁹

The stakes are clearly high. So what situation was the apostle Paul addressing in this passage? What are the reasons for his prohibition of same-sex sexual activity?

Natural Vs. Unnatural

In the text the apostle Paul calls the type of behaviour he is prohibiting “unnatural”. He writes, “Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another.” Therefore, part of Paul’s reason for highlighting this activity is because it is, in his view, “unnatural.” So what does natural and unnatural mean in this passage?

Revisionist theologians have provided several options. John Boswell, a significant affirming author, argues that the apostle Paul is only condemning same-sex relations when it is a heterosexual person engaging in a same-sex act.⁶⁰ It was, therefore, unnatural because it went against the sexual orientation of the individual involved in the act. This, however, remains a minority view, even amongst affirming theologians.

Matthew Vines in his book, *God and the Gay Christian* takes a different approach. He argues that, in the ancient world, when a man took the active role in sex, his behaviour was looked on as appropriate, masculine and “natural”. But if he willingly,

⁵⁹ Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian*, 99.

⁶⁰ See John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, for the entirety of his argument.

or unwillingly, took on the passive role in intercourse, he was viewed as acting “unnaturally”. On the other hand, women who took the passive role in sex were viewed as “natural” and women who were aggressive sexually and took on the dominant role were viewed as “unnatural”.

To place a male in a passive role or a female in an active role confused gender roles in the ancient world and, as a result, was condemned roundly by first century moralists, whether it be Plato or the Jewish Historian, Josephus. Perhaps Paul was arguing along a similar vein.⁶¹ The excessive lust highlighted by Paul and the violation of gender roles was shameful and degrading (or unnatural) to the individuals involved in the first century. But, as Vines points out, “none of these reasons extend to the loving

⁶¹ It is important to note that elsewhere in Paul’s writings he uses the word natural to refer to a local custom, not a binding command from God equally applicable across all cultures or time-periods. In his letter to the Corinthian church he writes, “Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not the very *nature* of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory?” (1 Corinthians 11:13-15). The word nature in this passage is the exact same Greek word that Paul uses in Romans chapter one. In 1 Corinthians Paul is responding to the cultural situation of his day and the fact that long, uncovered hair amongst women had sexual connotations suggestive of loose morals. In light of this, Paul urges the women to cover their heads when praying or prophesying in order to avoid bringing societal shame on themselves or the early Christian community. Shame is a key word here. Paul was planting churches and writing to churches in an honour and shame society. And it is within this ancient honour and shame culture that Paul’s instructions about hair length being natural or unnatural should be understood. Paul’s use of natural here is highly contextualised to the situation he is addressing and doesn’t apply outside of the specific context in which he was writing. Some might suggest the same might be true with Romans chapter 1. However, that is unlikely given the most unforced, coherent interpretation of the passage we argue for below.

committed relationships of gay Christians today.”⁶²

Whereas other affirming authors have attempted to have Paul condemn only abusive, non-consensual same-sex acts like men sleeping with boys—a practice known as pederasty—Vines doesn’t go this route. Partly because it is clear from Paul’s language that “they burned with sexual desire for one another” which communicates a mutual relationship of desire, not a predatory one. In addition, any attempt to link Paul’s teaching here to abusive relationships between men and boys fails to account for Paul’s similar words about lesbianism, which did not carry with it the same power dynamic, or propensity towards abuse in the ancient world. Vines’ approach avoids these pitfalls, but is his interpretation of “natural” and “unnatural” correct? Does Paul’s teaching not apply to “the loving committed relationships of gay Christians today?”

In some ways, Vines is right.

Paul’s negative language would not discount the very real love, commitment and sacrifice that are experienced in many committed same-sex relationships. Though relationships like this existed in Paul’s day, we don’t think that is his main concern in this passage, given the language he uses. He is not addressing sexual orientation either. Rather, contra Vines, Paul’s main concern seems to be sexual activity between men and men and women and women. He calls this behaviour unnatural and we doubt it has anything to do with gender roles in that day, at least in this specific passage.

Let us explain why.

⁶² Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian*, 11.

Paul is writing as a Jewish theologian saturated in the moral vision of the Jewish scriptures when he uses the words natural and unnatural. As a theologian well-versed in the Torah, it is clear from the context of Romans one that Paul is referencing the origin story of Genesis one and two consistently in his argument. Echoing Genesis one, two and three, Paul refers to the creation of the world (20), creatures in their classes of birds, animals and reptiles (23), as well as uses the language of “glory”, “image” and “likeness”—all Genesis one and two language. In fact, throughout this passage Paul is using the same words found in the Greek translation of Genesis one and two. John Stott mentions other similar themes like, “they resolve to become wise (22), the refusal to remain a dependent creature (18,21), the exchange of God’s truth for Satan’s lie (25) and the understanding that rebellion is death (32; cf. 5:21ff)” —all echoes of Adam and Eve.”⁶³

Therefore, Paul is *not* appealing to cultural practices that bring either honour or shame. He, like Jesus in the passage on divorce and marriage we examined earlier, is appealing to the creation story when constructing his argument. Paul, like other Jewish writers in the first century, was referring back to the natural order of things as ordained by God in the beginning. The conclusion then drawn is that same-sex sexual activity misses God’s mark and intention in creation and is, therefore, unnatural. As Preston Sprinkle writes, “Paul’s whole point is focused on people going against God’s design in creation. God designed males to have marital sex with females. Even if some males or

⁶³ See John Stott’s Commentary on Romans. John R. W. Scott, *The Message of Romans* (Downers Grove, Ill: Intervarsity Press, Revised Ed. 2020) See also, John R. W. Stott, *Same-Sex Partnerships: A Christian Perspective*.

females desire to have sex with people of the same gender, this doesn't mean that it's okay. It goes against nature—the way God designed us.”⁶⁴

A Suppression of Truth

More than that, a key part of Paul's argument is that humanity in rebellion against God suppresses the truth about God revealed in the created order. He writes,

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of humanity, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be made known to God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason god gave them up to dishonourable passions. (Romans 1:17-21)

⁶⁴ Preston Sprinkle, *People to Be Loved*, 51.

Paul then continues to speak about same-sex sexual relations in the passage we read at the start of this section. His argument is that God has revealed himself in nature, but humanity in rebellion against God suppresses the truth of that revelation and worships created things instead. Because of this willful rebellion, God gives people over to their depravity. This depravity manifests itself in all types of behaviours, whether it is by lying, slander, lust or violence. This passage in no way picks on gay and lesbian individuals, or elevates sexual expression between two men or two women as the epitome of sin and evil. Rather, Paul highlights sexually activity between two members of the same sex as his first example because it is a clear instance of suppressing a truth, not just about God, but about humanity. These acts fall short of God's plan because they involve a denial of God's intention that sexual intercourse be between sexual others. Such intention is revealed in the design of the human body and the anatomical complementarity of male and female body parts, or sex organs; an obvious complementarity that same-sex sex clearly rejects, suppresses or denies, which is why the apostle Paul singles it out in his argument.

To us, the above seems like the most natural, unforced reading of the text. It also represents the universal Jewish teaching on the topic during this time period based on their reading of the Torah. Same-sex sexual relationships were viewed negatively by Jewish writers and theologians across the board in the first century. There are no exceptions. It is hard to argue, given the actual words that the Apostle Paul writes in Romans one, that he is somehow reversing the trend. Instead, it seems clear that Paul falls in line with this consensus view based on his understanding of the Jewish scriptures and God's purpose in creation.

This conclusion results from the proper rules of biblical exegesis involving intent and context, and it lines up with how the church has interpreted Paul's teaching across different time periods, cultures and continents. Moreover, it continues to represent the dominant view in the church today amongst those who hold to the authority and trustworthiness of scripture.

As tempting as it seems, we can't appeal to Jesus to rescue us from the words of Paul in this matter. It is true, of course, that Jesus didn't explicitly mention same-sex sexual behaviour, but any type of argument from silence is tenuous. Jesus also didn't explicitly mention rape, or other forms of sexual abuse, but we would never conclude on that basis that Jesus had a positive view of sexual violence. Most of the people Jesus talked to were Jewish, and religious Jews in the first century had no debate about the morality of same-sex relationships. The consensus was uniform. Jesus didn't address same-sex relations because, unlike divorce or diet laws, this wasn't a contested issue in Judaism. And for Jesus, as for his first century contemporaries, sexual immorality would have referred to any type of sexual activity outside of the Biblical definition of marriage between a man and a woman. Jesus does not stray from the common Jewish view informed by the Jewish scriptures. In no way does he represent a permissive sexual ethic that jives with our current cultural moment. As mentioned earlier in this booklet, his sexual ethic forbids all kinds of sexual activity that we view as morally permissible and no big deal. It requires faithfulness in marriage and chastity outside of marriage. It is not about heterosexuality or homosexuality—it is about holy sexuality—sexuality that honours God and submits to the wisdom of his word, no matter how constraining it is for passions that seem to come very natural to humans.

I know we fear the accusation of “being on the wrong side of history” when it comes to moral issues. It is a powerful sentiment when wrapped up in the language of justice and inclusivity. To be labelled as being on the wrong side of justice and inclusivity creates anxiety in the heart of every sensitive Christian. Nevertheless, Jesus is the Lord of history, and the only way to be on the wrong side of history is to be on the wrong side of him. So fear not.

OBJECTION:

Should the disagreement in the church about the moral legitimacy of same-sex relations and gay marriage just be a disputable matter like first century examples of sabbath and food laws (see, for example, Romans 14)?

RESPONSE:

Well, it *is* a disputable matter in the church. Christians dispute whether or not scripture prohibits or permits/blesses same-sex marriages and sexual activity therein. To accuse someone of not being a Christian because they disagree with you on this matter is overstepping one’s bounds and making a judgement that requires a God-like knowledge. What we are talking about here is a potential brother or sister who is in err. In addition, I think it is helpful to note all of the ways in which the non-affirming and affirming perspective agree when it comes to sexual ethics. Ken Wilson in his book, *A Letter to My Congregation*, outlines a list of agreement:

- Temple Prostitution
- Homosexual orgiastic practices associated with pagan worship
- Homosexual services for hire
- Adults engaging in pederasty
- Homosexual gang rape
- Pornography
- Casual or recreation sex
- Promiscuity
- Acts exerting dominance over others⁶⁵

If the above list is accurate, adopting an affirming perspective doesn't represent an all-out concession to our culture's view of sexuality. One would still affirm that sex is good, but it is not God; sex is physical, but not just physical, and sexual expression is gift, but not a right; an activity, but not necessarily an identity, etc. Moreover, one would reject pornography, casual or recreational sex, promiscuity, orgies, swinging, most forms of sexual expression between members of the same-sex and any and all acts of sexual exploitation. This is a far more restrictive view than our culture's. As Wilson writes, "For someone who wants to love people and the Bible, seeing this is such a relief."⁶⁶

Perhaps, it is.

After all, as friends and fellow sojourners trying to figure all of this complicated stuff out, it is beautiful to celebrate what we have in common in the midst of disagreement.

Nevertheless, our hesitancy around naming this as a disputable matter akin to the food laws or sacred days mentioned in

⁶⁵ Ken Wilson, *A Letter to My Congregation*, 79.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

Romans 14 is the uniform witness of scripture against same-sex sexual expression. If same-sex sexual relations misses God's mark for human sexuality, as we argue in this booklet, it cannot be loving to move anyone in the direction of approving, or celebrating, such behaviour. Not only that, if Paul's reference to sex between men in 1 Corinthians 6:9 refers to those engaging in consensual sex with members of the same gender habitually and unrepentantly (which we consider to be the most faithful reading of the text) it gives us reason for serious concern (concern equally directed toward habitual greed, slander and other behaviours mentioned by Paul). Paul ends his list of vices by claiming that these individuals who habitually engage in these sins "will not inherit the kingdom of God." The implication is that our approach to this topic could be a salvation matter for someone. As such, it cannot be classified as a disputable issue where we should adopt a *laissez-faire* approach to resolving the debate. Thankfully, in the passage quoted above Paul doesn't end on a bleak note. Instead he writes, "And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:10).

OBJECTION:

The word “homosexual” is a bad translation of 1 Corinthians 6:9. It was introduced by the RSV translation in 1946. This mistaken translation ignited an anti-LGBTQ movement within the church. It is a horrible translation of the Greek words *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi*.

RESPONSE:

The word “homosexual” is a bad translation and shouldn’t occur in our English translations. The label homosexual generally refers to someone’s sexual orientation. Sexual orientation is a concept introduced by sexologists in the nineteenth century and popularized by Freud. The concept did not exist in the ancient world, though (popular misconceptions aside) men and women exclusively attracted to the same-sex were known of in the first century and before (just read Plato’s *Symposium*).

Orientation can be defined as a persistent pattern of attraction to a person of the same-sex, or opposite sex. Orientation does not imply anything about an individual’s sexual activity. It simply describes their consistent pattern of sexual attraction. This passage is not singling out an individual who is attracted to the same sex or who has what moderns would call a homosexual orientation.

The word Paul uses (*arsenokoitai*) is a word that he has coined. It is made up of two compound words that translate as “men” and “bed”. Both words have their origin in Leviticus chapter 18 where it refers to men having sex with men in a manner similar to having sex with a women. It is not referring

to idolatry, or abusive practices between men and boys. It is simply referring to sexual activity between men. That is why more recent translations, such as the NIV, have translated it as “men who have sex with men.” It is likely that *arsenokoitai* is the active member in the sexual union, whereas *malakoi* is the passive member in the sexual encounter. Because Paul is describing an active, sexual relationship between two men and not all LGBTQ+ individuals are sexually active—some are celibate and some are in mixed-orientation marriages—to translate these two words as homosexuality is misleading and has caused damage to the gay community. Thankfully, most newer translations have rectified this error.

OBJECTION:

You use the term “gay Christian” throughout this booklet. Isn’t this an illegitimate way for a Christian to self-identify? Are they not just identifying with their sin by doing so?

RESPONSE:

I will let Greg Johnson, himself a gay Christian, answer on our behalf. In his book, *Still Time to Care*, he writes:

There are perfectly good and valid reasons why many followers of Jesus choose to describe themselves as same-sex attracted. They may not want to be associated with baggage that comes with the term gay. They may have built their identity on their gayness in the past and are trying to break free of that. I have a friend who says, “Homosexuality was my identity until I met

Jesus.” He wants nothing to do with the label gay. He wants to get as far away from it as he can. Others may prefer the phrase because it seems more descriptive and less tied up in issues of personal identity. Some others use the phrase because their spouse could never live with the alternative. Still others may choose to identify as same-sex attracted because they inhabit conservative religious spaces in which calling themselves gay will be misunderstood and misrepresented...There are a lot of good reasons believers have for describing themselves as same-sex attracted.

There are also very good and valid reasons why many followers of Jesus choose to describe themselves as gay and celibate. They may be speaking phenomenologically, using the term gay in its descriptive sense, not in a prescriptive or ontological sense. They may not be saying, “This is who I am at core” but be merely saying, “This describes my experience.” They may find the association between the language of same-sex attraction and the ex-gay movement disturbing. They may have gone through reparative therapy and feel retraumatized by a label they were told to adopt under false pretense. If someone had been closeted and hiding behind a mask her entire life, her saying she is gay might be a healing step toward personal integration. Someone else may be thinking missiologically and therefore prefer to use the language of the culture they are trying to reach. They may be wanting to emphasize their commonality with secular LGBTQ people in order to build bridges for the Gospel. They may prefer gay because it maps onto a sexual orientation and not just attraction.... There are lots of good reasons believers describe themselves as gay and celibate.... There are good reasons why some believers don't like either label, and that too is

a perfectly good and valid option. There are personal decisions about how one describes one's experience. Terminology is an area of Christian freedom.

“Terminology is an area of Christian freedom.”

Let's move on.

OBJECTION:

This book just represents your interpretation of scripture. There are other interpretations.

RESPONSE:

That is true. In this O and R we interact with a few alternate interpretations. Writing this booklet is a challenging and audacious task for a number of reasons. One of those challenges being that readers may immediately assume there is “no biblical view of marriage and sexuality”—only differing interpretations of the Bible's view on marriage and sexuality.

We have tried to sympathise with this objection throughout this booklet because some of the scriptures addressing sexuality in the Bible are hotly debated. We also acknowledge some very limited validity to post-modern, reader response criticism as a hermeneutic principle, which locates meaning in the reader, not the text. At the very least, it explains how two different people can come to the same text and pull out two very different readings.

Nevertheless, this approach, if embraced fully, leads to an interpretative relativism which dismisses authorial intent and context and shifts authority from the text and church tradition to the individual interpreter.

The result is an incoherent and unliveable relativism.

Locating the meaning in the reader and not in the text makes the idea of labelling certain readings of a text a “bad reading” or a “good reading” nonsensical because those value judgments must be replaced with the language of “difference”. Interpretations aren’t “good” or “bad”—they are just different

and utterly dependent on the reader. Think about where this approach actually leads.

When thought all the way through, this hermeneutic results in an untenable situation because it requires that readings of scripture that justify slavery or that unfairly marginalize and oppress gay people are not inaccurate, false and wrong-headed but, instead, represent just one out of many different, equally valid interpretative conclusions with no objective criteria by which we differentiate between our options.

In our view, this approach also puts the locus of authority in the wrong place. Instead of authority residing in the proper interpretation and application of the Biblical text, it dumps all authority on the individual interpreter.

If an individual has authority over the text to pick and choose what they will believe or receive as authoritative, the only God we will find in the pages of scripture is a god made in the image of our own wants and desires. Bible reading becomes an exegetical hall of mirrors where our likeness appears everywhere we look. Moreover, a canon of our own individualistic creation leads to a God impotent to intervene in our lives because intervention requires outside existence and initiation and this version of God lives only in our heads. Again, in this scenario the interpreter becomes the ultimate authority, not the text.

Throughout this booklet our approach has been different. Though there are many sources of knowledge—including tradition, experience, the scientific method, reason, etc.—scripture is our highest authority when it comes to matters of faith and life. You can think of the Bible as our Supreme Court, capable of overturning and challenging legitimate, but lesser, authorities. We receive scripture as our ultimate authority, not through a blind, unthinking leap of faith, but because of both its transformative power and the affirmation of Jesus.

Transformative Power

The Bible is powerfully transformative in the lives of people. Scripture has spoken to and changed the hearts of billions of people from every ethnicity, in every demographic and socio-economic status and throughout every century. It has spoken to the poor and the rich, the powerful and the powerless. It has humbled kings and uplifted peasants. Specifically, the teachings of Jesus continue to be a key that unlocks something deep in every human heart because his teaching flows straight from the one who fashioned every human heart. Intellectual fads and fashions have come and gone and today's "truth" will likely be tomorrow's heresy. Yet the word of God continues to speak within every culture and challenge every culture at some point or another, including our own, because it is not *solely* the product of any one culture—it is ultimately the product of the God who is over all cultures. As such, scripture is undeniably powerful and its authority is authenticated by the person of Jesus.

The Person of Jesus

Jesus is unique amongst all religious teachers and gurus. Jesus' teachings, miracles and bodily resurrection from the dead—for which there exists plenty of compelling historical evidence—set him apart, leading us to accept the historic Christian claim that Jesus, unlike other prophets and sages, is the incarnation of the one true God. As such, Jesus has unparalleled, unmatched authority when it comes to the nature of God, the nature of life and the deepest truths about reality—authority not shared with other religious teachers and leaders. Once one accepts the authority of Jesus, we need only ask how Jesus received scripture. Though He fulfilled much of the Jewish scriptures, making them no longer binding on the Christian, it is clear Jesus viewed the Bible as trustworthy and authoritative. All of his ministry and teaching has as its backdrop the story of God as told in the Jewish scriptures.

For these two reasons (and many others unmentioned) we receive the Bible as our ultimate authority. Once that decision has been made, we need to determine a method for best understanding its teachings. For us that involves a number of practices:

(1) As far as it may be discernible to us we will take authorial intent seriously. Attempting to discern authorial intent—through the investigation of both original languages (Greek in the case of the NT), the original context of each text, its genre (is it poetry, wisdom literature, an epistle or theological history, etc.), its location in the story of God as unfolded in scripture, and whatever other information we can glean about the socio-cultural context from secondary historical sources—is an important part of our hermeneutic for determining the meaning of each text. We

would find ourselves frustrated if people imported meaning into our writing that we never intended. As much as possible, we should extend the Biblical authors the same courtesy.

(2) Though church tradition must always be reforming itself in light of clearer or better interpretations of scripture, we still take seriously the historic consensus of the church when it stretches across ethnicities, languages, customs, cultures and time-periods. In areas of theology where the church has recognized legitimate disagreement amongst Christians (mode of baptism, meaning of the Eucharist, how to read Genesis one, etc.) it has been due to the ambiguity of the relevant Biblical passages that may be interpreted in numerous ways. If no such disagreement exists and the church has been uniform in its approach to a certain ethical matter or theological topic throughout the centuries, it may testify to a lack of ambiguity regarding the Bible's teaching. Such uniform witness must be given significant weight and such a consensus should not be overturned without compelling evidence.

To call to the reader's attention every instance where we were operating from within this interpretive grid would have been tedious, but the above commitments provide the lens through which we view scripture and draw conclusions. And it should be clear at this point that the teaching of this booklet lines up with how the church has historically interpreted the Biblical teaching on sexuality across time, geography, gender and ethnicity. Not only that, we believe our conclusions in these pages result from a fair and open-minded reading of scripture that employs the tools of reasonable Biblical interpretation outlined above.

OBJECTION:

Christians misread scripture in support of slavery. Now Christians are misreading the New Testament in a way that damages sexual minorities. Just as we changed our mind on slavery, we should change our minds on the traditional perspective surrounding sexual minorities.

RESPONSE:

Matthew Vines in his book, *God and the Gay Christian*, writes that, “In the nineteenth century, experience played a key role in compelling Christians to rethink another traditional—and supposedly biblical—belief. This time, the issue was slavery. Much as you and I might be repelled by the notion, most Christians throughout history understood passages such as Ephesians 6:5-9 and Colossians 3:22-25 to sanction at least some forms of slavery. But in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Christian abolitionists persuaded believers to take another look.”⁶⁷

For Vines, this statement functions as part of his rationale for being willing to revise the church’s traditional teaching on homosexuality, a revision motivated by both exegesis and the experience of same-sex attracted Christians. Tony Compolo, who we mentioned at the conclusion of Part Three of this booklet, changed his mind and became affirming of same-sex

⁶⁷ Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships* (Convergent Books, 2015). See Vines’ introduction and his discussion on good and bad fruit and how he changed his mind on this matter.

relationships. In his official statement he wrote, “Not long before...some Christians even made biblical cases supporting slavery. Many of those people were sincere believers, but most of us now agree that they were wrong. I am afraid we are making the same kind of mistake again, which is why I am speaking out.”⁶⁸

Equating, in some fashion, slavery with homosexuality is becoming more and more common. This rhetorical move involves an argument from analogy. An argument from analogy attempts to use relevant similarities between two different things to infer or draw attention to similarities that have not yet been observed or accepted. Reasoning by way of analogy is common, but not the strongest form of argumentation. They can be critiqued and their conclusion overthrown by the use of disanalogy. Disanalogy involves highlighting the significant differences between the two things compared, which may weaken the analogy, sometimes rendering it useless for all persuasive purposes. So, when it comes to the analogy drawn between slavery and homosexuality, do the dissimilarities outweigh the similarities?

Similarities

Ethnicity and same-sex attraction are the same in that: 1) Ethnicity is not chosen and, in many cases, orientation is not chosen either. 2) Ethnic minorities and sexual minorities have been subjected to hate, abuse and discrimination, which is repulsive and terrible. 3) The church has changed its mind about slavery

⁶⁸ See. <https://www.premierchristianity.com/home/tony-campolo-calls-for-full-acceptance-of-gay-couples/468.article>

and some segments of the church are changing their position on the legitimacy of same-sex relationships. In these three instances there is common ground. There are, however, some significant historical, theological and practical differences. Any similarities we draw are quickly overwhelmed by the enormous differences.

Differences

(1) Up until the sexual revolution the church has, on the basis of scripture, uniformly spoken against same-sex sexual expression. The issue of slavery is far different. Many voices within the church have spoken against the issue of slavery throughout history, including such luminaries as Thomas Aquinas and John Wesley. Not to mention, repeated Papal Bulls condemning the capturing of human beings. Allow me to quote Timothy Keller in length,

The analogy between the church's view of slavery and its view of homosexuality breaks down. Up until very recently, all Christian churches and theologians unanimously read the Bible as condemning homosexuality. By contrast, there was never any consensus or even a majority of churches that thought slavery and segregation were supported by the Bible. Chappell shows that even within the segregationist South, efforts to support racial separation from the Bible collapsed within a few years. Does anyone really think that within a few years from now there will be no one willing to defend the traditional view of sexuality from biblical texts? The answer is surely no. This negates the claim that the number, strength, and clarity of

those biblical texts supposedly supporting slavery and those texts condemning homosexuality are equal, and equally open to changed interpretations.⁶⁹

(2) The Bible contains the framework for rooting out and abolishing all slavery, grounded in the creation account, which establishes that all people bear the image of God. It is, however, the same biblical teaching found in the creation account which not only overthrows any basis for ethnic superiority, but also establishes the definition of marriage as between a man and a woman—a definition reaffirmed by Jesus (Mark 10:6-8). Marriage, like ethnicity, is not a human creation. Marriage is a divinely established institution in which sexual fidelity is normative and blessed by God only within those bounds. It is for this reason that the New Testament is uniformly negative towards same-sex sexual activity (as well as any other sexual activity outside of marriage as defined by Christ). Whereas the same New Testament contains statements that would blow up the institution of slavery, particularly as it was practiced in the Americas. This includes clear condemnations of capturing and selling another human being, and Paul’s approach to slavery in the letter to Philemon. To quote same-sex attracted Christian, Sean Doherty,

Slavery is not analogous to same sex sexual relationships, for two reasons. First, because there are theological reasons given by Scripture as to why sex should only be within marriage

⁶⁹ <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-bible-and-same-sex-relationships-a-review-article>

and second, because the Bible specifically prohibits same sex relationships, whereas it does not support slavery.⁷⁰

(3) Ethnicity remains static throughout the course of our lives and this immutability is normative for all people. Sexuality is far more fluid. For example, Jean Lloyd, a woman who, for over forty years, journeyed from being a closeted same-sex attracted teenager seeking to reconcile her sexual desires with her Christian faith, to an openly lesbian woman, to practicing celibacy, to eventually being happily married to a man, wrote an article entitled, *10 things I wish my pastor knew about my homosexuality*. In the article she expresses this desire to her pastor,

I wish you knew that you aren't helping me follow Jesus either by demanding that my attractions change or by not allowing them to change. No one can promise me that my attractions will change. Jesus certainly didn't. But don't deny me that possibility either. (Especially If I'm an adolescent!) Both secular science and human experience attest to sexual fluidity and the potential for change.⁷¹

Jean encourages us to navigate between two different extremes. The church's extreme of demanding that same-sex attractions change and the culture's extreme of denying the possibility of any change or choice at all. She also testifies to sexual fluidity, especially amongst adolescents. As mentioned earlier, Lisa Diamond from Cornell University, herself a lesbian

⁷⁰ See www.livingout.org

⁷¹ <https://www.lifesitenews.com/opinion/seven-things-i-wish-my-pastor-knew-about-my-homosexuality>

and strong advocate for gay rights, has done significant research on the fluidity of homosexuality and heterosexuality for males and females.⁷² Does it even make sense to refer to our ethnicity as being fluid and open to change in the same way as our sexual desires? Obviously not!

In conclusion, because of the historical, theological and practical reasons listed above, slavery and homosexuality cannot be made analogous for the sake of winning a point in this important conversation surrounding the legitimacy of same-sex sexual expression within the church. Comparing slavery to same-sex sexual activity is a disingenuous comparison. The fact that established, learned theologians are drawing these parallels shows just how much this debate surrounding the legitimacy of same-sex relationships in the church is being driven by emotional and cultural pressures.

OBJECTION:

You've basically ignored the Trans* conversation in this booklet.

RESPONSE:

This is true and we are sorry. The experience of Trans people is very important to us and your voice needs to be heard. You are seen and loved by God. This book, for the sake of length, has largely addressed the experience of gay, lesbian and bisexual friends. May we recommend reading Preston Sprinkle's book *Embodied* for a book-length response. We would be happy to buy you a copy if you reach out to us.

⁷² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m2rTHDOuUBw>

OBJECTION:

The Christian teaching on sexuality is causing LGBTQ+ to commit suicide and it should, therefore, be rejected.

RESPONSE:

Authors like Matthew Vines have argued that the church's teaching on sexuality is pushing gay young people to the verge of suicide. This is a very serious charge.

In general, weekly church attendance is associated with better mental health and lower rates of suicide. In May 2020 Tyler Vander Weele, a professor at the Harvard School of Public Health, published a large-scale study of U.S. women found that those who attended religious services at least once a week were five times less likely to kill themselves than those who never attended! After controlling for relevant factors, the study concluded that women who attended church regularly were 68 percent less likely to die “deaths of despair” due to suicide or substance abuse. Moreover, men who attended weekly were 33 percent less likely to die such deaths.⁷³ It is clear from the data that regular church attendance is, in general, beneficial for mental health. How does this data impact the claims of writers like Matthew Vine?

⁷³ See. Tyler J. VanderWeele et al., “Association Between Religious Service Attendance and Lower Suicide Rates Among US Women,” *JAMA Psychiatry*, August 2016, <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapsychiatry/article-abstract/2529152>. Also see. Ying Chen, et al., “Religious Service Attendance and Deaths Related to Drugs, Alcohol, and Suicide Among US Health Care Professionals,” *JAMA Psychiatry* 77, no. 7 (May 6, 2020): 737-44, <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapsychiatry/article-abstract/2765488>.

Some studies have shown that parental rejection can lead to higher rates of suicide amongst teenagers who identify as LGBTQ+. Some Christian authors have likewise claimed the church's traditional position against same-sex relationships is to blame for the suicide of gay teens. Sadly, such a claim may not be without warrant. A 2015 study showed that "LGBT young adults who mature in religious contexts have higher odds of suicidal thoughts, and more specifically chronic suicidal thoughts, as well as suicide attempt compared to other LGBT young adults."⁷⁴

The water is further muddied by the fact that a study done in the Netherlands by secular researchers concluded that, "even in a country with a comparatively tolerant climate regarding homosexuality, homosexual men were at much higher risk for suicide than heterosexual men."⁷⁵

Christopher Yuan, who is same-sex attracted, points out that in 2015 a European Union Survey done in the Netherlands showed that 91 percent of the respondents believed that same-sex marriage should be legalized across Europe. The Netherlands legalized same-sex marriage in 2001 and has been considered the most gay-affirming country in the world. Yuan goes on to point out that, "If the church's rejection of same-sex relationships causes suicides, then the Netherlands—where the evangelical church has a minimal presence—should have considerably fewer suicides. This unambiguously is not the case."⁷⁶

What are we to conclude on the basis of this data? Is the problem Christian theology or is it Christian behaviour? Why do some

⁷⁴ Rebecca McClaughlin, *The Secular Creed*, (Gospel Coalition, 1st ed. 2021).

⁷⁵ Christopher Yuan, *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel*, (Multnomah Books, 2018).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

gay children grow up in conservative theological environments and end up healthy and well-adjusted, whereas others tragically end their lives? It is the same theology in both instances, but tragically different outcomes.

Regardless of how one answers that question, any suicide, young or old, is tragic and the above studies should make us pause and engage in some very sober reflection.

When attempting to assess causation in this conversation, the truth remains ambiguous. The studies that show a correlation between parental rejection and teen suicide don't delve into whether or not these parents were *behaving* as Christians. If they were rejecting their child, neglecting their child, failing to affirm their love for their child, they were emphatically not behaving like a follower of Jesus, whether they went to church or not. In these instances, it would be unchristian behaviour in the lives of professing Christians that creates problems for young people—demeaning messaging and treatment, mixed in with religious guilt and brow-beating is a potent and poisoned chalice to have to drink as a young person.

In the end, here is what we know for sure: acting hateful towards anyone, rejecting anyone or abusing anyone with our speech or actions is going to be detrimental to emotional health, especially if this type of behaviour comes from primary care-givers or one's peer group. We also know that such actions are emphatically not in line with the way of Jesus and should be renounced and repented of whenever they rear their ugly heads in the lives of professing Christians. Our posture towards sexual minorities must be one of generous welcome and kindness because it is not "Us vs. Them" it is "Us vs. Us" and we are meant to be a loving

family where the value and worth of people, as image bearers of God, is constantly affirmed, regardless of one's sexual orientation.

OBJECTION:

Christian leaders might ask, “What about church discipline? How does it apply to the LGBTQ+ individual in the community?”

RESPONSE:

In 1 Corinthians 5:11, the apostle Paul writes to the church that they “must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people.”

The context in which the apostle Paul utters this Spirit-inspired prohibition is significant to understand. The church in Corinth is not only permitting, but celebrating, sexual immorality that the surrounding culture doesn't even approve of. Specifically, a man is having sexual relations with his mother-in-law. The church in Corinth is unwilling to label this activity as a serious breach of biblical ethics, so the apostle Paul writes to correct the situation by advocating for the immediate expulsion of this man and woman from the fellowship. The purpose for this seemingly harsh admonition is that the sinning couple would come to their senses, realise the depravity of their situation, repent and be restored to God and the church. Paul then goes on to give the command to disassociate from the immoral brother or sister that I quoted above.

How should this text and the overriding issue of church discipline apply to the LGBTQ+ conversation in the church?

(1) It is important to note that this scripture is not speaking to nuclear family relationships. Applying this passage in an unqualified manner to marriages or parent/child relationships would be disastrous. For example, a wife would be forced to completely dissociate from her husband if she caught him viewing pornography or refusing to give generously to the church or other social causes, indicating a heart that is bound up by greed. This is important to note because some LGBTQ+ youth growing up in Christian homes have had this verse misapplied to them once they came out to their parents. We heard of one tragic situation where the parents no longer allowed their child to eat with the rest of the family. This is a terrible misapplication of the apostle Paul's teaching that should be avoided at all costs because of the untold harm it does to the child and the emotional regret that will likely plague the parents in later years.

(2) This passage in 1 Corinthians needs to be tempered by Matthew 18:15-18 where Jesus himself outlines the process for church discipline:

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

It is tempting to comment on each step that Jesus outlines, but we want to focus on the end result: that Jesus advocates for the unrepentant believer. They are to be treated like a "gentile or

tax collector”. For Jesus’ audience, which likely consisted primarily of Jewish people at this moment in his ministry, a tax collector and a gentile would be considered individuals who are outside of a covenantal relationship with God, thereby, forsaking the blessings associated with that relationship. In our language we might say that the person should not be considered a Christian. Or, perhaps more charitably, given our limited access to the person’s heart, we might say that a refusal to repent when confronted lovingly by fellow believers forces us to place a question mark over the legitimacy of the individual’s salvation. But we must ask the follow-up question, “How did Jesus treat tax collectors and gentiles?” The answer is clear: Jesus lovingly pursued them and invited them into, or back into, fellowship with Him. Jesus treated gentiles and tax collectors as valuable people made in the image of God who are created for a relationship with their maker. Jesus did not disassociate with gentiles or tax collectors, but he also didn’t consider them part of God’s covenant people, apart from their repentance and faith.

So, how does this connect with Paul’s admonishment in 1 Corinthians 5?

We believe when Paul admonishes the church to not associate with the immoral, drunken, and greedy person, he is talking about a special kind of association. Paul is referring to not associating with the person as a brother or sister in Christ when the church gathers. Similar to the end result of Matthew 18, a question mark has now been placed over the legitimacy of their salvation. Therefore, positions and activities in the gathered body that are only appropriate for believers should not be accessible for these individuals as long as they persist in their season of rebellion. These straying individuals should, however, still be

pursued and loved by other Christians and invited to submit, or resubmit, their lives to the lordship of Christ.

Moreover, when Paul admonishes the church to not even eat with such a person, we think that, given the context of the letter, he is referring to a special type of meal. When the churches gathered back then they would have communion together as a meal. Later on in chapter 12 Paul will give further instruction to the Corinthian church on the proper manner in which communion should be celebrated when believers gather for worship. Here Paul is advocating that the church should not participate in communion with a rebellious brother or sister. This interpretation allows us to avoid over-applying this text in such a way that it requires a blanket ban on all meals with straying Christians, which would force us to refuse to meet a rebellious brother over a meal, even when the purpose is to urge them to repent of their sin and pursue holiness again.

To conclude, we believe that the understanding of church discipline argued for above is both faithful to 1 Corinthians 5 and Matthew 18, as well as being congruent with the general tenor of the New Testament and, more specifically, the ministry of Jesus Christ. It also has the benefit of being easily reconcilable to the generous posture we have advocated for towards the LGBTQA2+ community.

OBJECTION:**Doesn't God make people gay? If so, how can it be wrong?****RESPONSE:**

The author Donald Miller once wrote that one of the saddest parts of our lives is how little we remember of them.

We are not sure.

Perhaps the sorriest part of our brief time on earth may be how much of our lives we spend wishing we were someone else. How much of our mental space is taken up wishing we were stronger, smarter, better-looking, more popular, more desirable, more of whatever else we are not? It doesn't help that our culture so often forces us to think about what we lack. After all, how many advertisements seem focused on creating a sense of inadequacy, exploiting the chink in our armour of projected self-confidence that a given product is guaranteed to address? The amount of annual dollars being spent by marketers to make us feel discontent is mind boggling because content people aren't nearly as vulnerable to the next best thing on the market.

The journey towards emotional wholeness is, in part, a journey towards accepting oneself the way that God made us and learning to find our affirmation and worth in Him. As long as we are perennially at odds with who we are we will be out of step with our creator. It is probably fair to conclude that we will never achieve peace with God (emotionally speaking) until we are at peace with who He has created us to be. As James Hufstetler writes, "you will never really enjoy other people, you will never have stable emotions, you will never lead a life of godly

contentment, you will never conquer jealousy and love others as you should until you thank God for making you the way he did.”⁷⁷ Or, to quote Soren Kierkegaard, “the most common form of despair is not being who you are.”

The above insights into human personality seem to make it an imperative that the same-sex attracted person should accept their orientation as the way that God made them, resolving themselves to live faithfully within their unique calling as an LGBTQA2+ individual. As Psalm 139:13-14 says, “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.”

Is an individual’s same-sex attraction part of their inmost being that God wonderfully knit together in the womb?

Many gay affirming Christians believe so and there may be some truth in this way of thinking.

Psalm 139, however, must also be held in tension with the truth proclaimed by the same author in Psalm 51:5, which reads, “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”

We are born beautiful.

And we are born broken.

One is left wondering, which is it?

Are we fearfully and wonderfully made, or are we sinful from the womb?

The answer is “yes”.

⁷⁷ James Hufstetler, “On Knowing Oneself”, *The Banner of Truth*, Issue 280, 14.

We need to locate both Psalm 51 and Psalm 139, and the seemingly conflicting truths they proclaim, within the entire narrative of scripture.

The Biblical Story

The Biblical storyline includes a creation and a fall. God didn't create humanity sick only to command us to become well. Instead, scripture tells a different story. As the writer of Ecclesiastes says, "God created humankind upright, but they have gone in search of many schemes" (Ecclesiastes 7:29).

Regardless of how one understands the genre, or overall intention, of Genesis one and two, the Biblical narrative begins with Adam and Eve being created in the image and likeness of God, enjoying perfect peace with the Creator and with one another. It is not long, however, before Adam and Eve rebel against God and fall from His grace, forsaking all of His goodness. They make a choice that centres on a tree. The tree may be symbolic, but the choice is historical, literal and devastating.

Adam and Eve weren't made sinners alienated from God. They became sinners alienated from God. A harmful, spiritual mutation occurred in our race's infancy, which has spread throughout the entire human genome. Tragically, Adam and Eve could only reproduce what they had become, and they had become sinners alienated from God. As the *Jesus StoryBook Bible* puts it, in this moment, "A terrible lie came into the world. It would never leave. It would live on in every human heart, whispering to every one of God's children: God doesn't love me."

We are now born with a God-denying bent; a lie which doubts God's love and goodness lives on in the hearts of humanity and it

takes a miracle of grace to renounce its hold on our souls. Considering where we find ourselves in God's story today we should conclude that we are not created sick, but we have inherited the 'dis-ease' of sin from the progenitors of the human species.

We are born both loved and lost in lies, beautiful yet bent and broken.

We are birthed into iniquity as the author of Psalm 51 claims. How we are is not how we ought to be. The way things are is not the way God intends them to be. Our condition, thrust upon us at birth, would seem unfair and unjust *if* it weren't for the grace of God in Jesus. Jesus deals with our sin problem on the cross. Jesus became sin so that we could be clothed in His righteousness.

Jesus became sick so that we could be made well.

Psalm 139 is a poetic restatement of Genesis chapters one and two.

Psalm 51 is a poetic treatment of Genesis three.

Jesus reaffirms Genesis one and two and His cross deals with the problem of Genesis three.

How does all of this relate to our original question?

Genesis one tells us we are made in the image of God. Genesis three tells us that image has been distorted by sin. We are born with all kinds of proclivities that are contrary to God's will expressed in God's word. We are tempted to lust after women or men who are not our spouses. We are tempted to lie to make ourselves look better. We have a stubborn bent towards jealousy, pride and covetousness. We experience persistent attraction to members of the same sex. Selfishness is natural—as easy as breathing—and, yet, selfishness is a sin.

We didn't learn these behaviours, we found them in our heart from a young age. But, again, what "is" is not necessarily what

“ought” to be. Therefore, the argument, “I was born this way,” regarding *any* attitude, action or pattern of consistent desire should have no bearing on whether one endorses that attitude or action.

All of the above may sound like bad news, but it is bad news that prepares us for the really great news. The Gospel news for all of us is that our starting point doesn’t determine our ending point. God graciously interrupts the downward spiral of our depravity; He injects His life to overcome our love affair with death. The end result is not a doubling down on the old creation, but a celebration of new creation. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation. The old is gone. The new is coming and one day it will be finally here in its fullness.

OBJECTION:

It is not uncommon to hear some version of this sentiment:

“My sexuality is who I am. To claim that you love me but don’t bless my sexual relationship with my partner is a profound rejection of my deepest sense of self. I cannot accept this as loving no matter how kindly you put it, or how nicely you treat me or my partner.”

RESPONSE:

As soon as our sexual expression moves from a verb (something we do), to a noun (someone I am), it does complicate matters. (Note: we want to emphatically deny that all LGBTQ people make

such a reductionistic move when it comes to their personhood. Moreover, we reject the idea that to call yourself gay or lesbian is to define yourself by your sin, making the term gay Christian seem like a contradiction in terms, etc.) To feel like you are being rejected for who you are while being asked to accept the rejection as loving is often too much to reconcile in one's head and heart.

How is one to respond?

The beginnings of a response might involve pointing out that defining oneself solely by one's pattern of sexual attraction is extremely reductionistic.

Identity is bigger than sexual attraction and action, as many gay and lesbian believers have pointed out.

In a body positive, body affirming religion like Christianity, we are not less than our sexual desires, but we certainly are more.

We are artists.

We are engineers.

We are teachers and nurses and stay-at-home parents.

We are activists and adventurers.

We are hopeless dreamers and surly realists.

We are sons, daughters, mothers and fathers.

Most significantly, we are made in the image of God. The royal dignity of bearing the likeness of our Creator belongs to each of us, not as a human right, but as a heavenly gift and earthly vocation.

We are loved deeply by our Creator.

For the followers of Jesus, our deepest identity flows from being united to Christ through faith. Wherever we live, our fundamental location is "in Christ". Whatever we do, our fundamental identity is "in Christ". Through Him, our orphan hearts are given a name. We are adopted into the family of God. Though

our father and mother might forsake us, God will embrace us, bless us, lavish His love and affection on us. Our identity is secure in Him—it can't be taken by people, and we will not be forsaken by God.

For every believer, *this* is fundamentally who we are—all other identities are subordinated to, and relativized by, our inheritance as a son or daughter of God, through Christ.

If we define our core, or primary, identity in any other manner, such identity markers are unbiblical, or sub-biblical. The end result is we will struggle with a Biblical definition of love that will always confront all other false identities that we cling to and derive worth from, including when we move our sexual proclivities from a verb (something we do) to a noun (something we are).

To say our consistent pattern of sexual attraction is who we are (whether heterosexual or homosexual), or the defining feature of our humanity, may unwittingly confine us to living in a cramped, shrunken-down view of both reality and of our own selves.

Even sexuality itself cannot be reduced to the sex act.

In her book, *Sexual Character: Beyond Technique to Intimacy*, Marva Dawn makes a distinction between *social* sexuality and *genital* sexuality. Social sexuality is how we experience the world as an embodied, gendered, human being in community. It involves the desire to know others and be known, to experience intimacy, love and connection to the humans we rub shoulders with at work, at church and in our neighbourhood. Genital sexuality refers to the sex act. In certain situations genital sexuality may be an appropriate expression of social sexuality (e.g. a loving committed relationship), but the two cannot be collapsed into

one another, or made synonymous. Such a move would deny the reality of a celibate individual still being a deeply sexual person.

When considering the layered nature of our sexual experience, it seems clear that our sexuality is bigger than *just* our sexual activity, just like our sexual activity is bigger than *just* achieving orgasm and mastering technique.

How might the above reflections relate specifically to our LGBTQ+ friends?

Positively, it may mean a number of things:

(1) We are invited to embrace our gay brothers and sisters for who they are in all of their wonderful complexity, acknowledging both that their humanity is bigger than their pattern of attraction to the same-sex, as well as celebrating the fact that their orientation provides them with a unique perspective and human experience that everyone can learn from. In this regard, queerness may be an avenue for experiencing unique grace.

(2) It is vital that Christians repent of any inherent prejudice that would lead us to be surprised or shocked by the genuine commitment, long-suffering kindness, and a whole-hearted devotion that exists in many same-sex relationships. Of course such virtues exist. We *all* bear the image of a relational God, giving us capacity from which to experience joy, peace, long-suffering patience and self-sacrificial love. Our consistent pattern of sexual attraction, whether directed to the opposite sex or same-sex, does not negate this fact.

(3) Nevertheless, all of the above does not mean we need to baptize or bless all expressions of genital sexuality, including many forms of heterosexual expression, as well as sexual activity between two members of the same sex. After all, genital sex is an act that: (a) Is not necessary for a flourishing human life, as

countless celibate individuals have affirmed; including those who have wanted to get married but could not, did get married but experienced long-term illness or were widowed, and those who willingly chose a celibate life-style. (b) Was not experienced by Jesus, the true human and new human or, in other words, the epitome of human perfection. (c) Makes up so little of our human experience—at least from the perspective of time spent doing it. (d) Cannot be equated with love and intimacy. After all, humans cannot thrive without love and intimacy, but we can live fully and joyfully without sexual expression, as a chorus of witnesses, both today and throughout history, testify to. (e) Will find no home in God's new heaven and new earth. The happiest, most satisfied, and most whole we will be is in a world without genital sex. The sex act has always been a pointer to some type of deeper, fuller reality that is fulfilled in the presence of God.

Such a conclusion is embraced, believed and promoted by many gay and lesbian Christians who find their identity ultimately in the person of Jesus and in belonging to the family of God.

Any Biblical definition of love would invite all of us to find our identity in the exact same place.

OBJECTION:

How do we better serve single people in our church?

RESPONSE:

Comedian Chris Rock once remarked, “You have a choice: either be single and lonely, or married and bored.” Those are your options according to Rock. You will be lonely, or you will be

bored. Make your choice and live with it.

Thankfully, the Bible teaches that both marriage and singleness can be better than Rock's humorous quip leads us to believe.

In the evangelical church we have little trouble believing that marriage can be enjoyable and fulfilling. Some single Christians we know, however, have a hard time trusting that this can also be true about singleness, and the modern, evangelical church in the West hasn't always helped matters.

Whereas our culture may have idolized sex, the church has, at times, turned marriage into an idol. Sadly, single people get crushed between the two competing idolatries of marriage and sex. Singleness becomes a regrettable lot in life that other married Christians feel duty bound to rectify for their relationally challenged brothers and sisters.

In our desire to "sort-out" the singles, we can resort to trite truisms or silly clichés, the merit of which we rarely stop to seriously question.

You know the line, "When you are satisfied with singleness God will give you a spouse."

Satisfaction plus singleness equals a spouse.

It is simple spiritual math.

Be satisfied.

The only problem with this equation is that it doesn't always add up. The advice boils down to "stop desiring marriage," as if there were something inherently wrong about a single person longing to be married. Moreover, our personal satisfaction with our singleness doesn't somehow force God's hand to deliver us a spouse.

At other times, we may be tempted to inform our single friends that they are just too picky, which seems like an odd

piece of criticism. Hopefully, they are going to be married to this person until they are dead so a fairly high standard seems warranted. We know some married people who now wish they were a little more picky when choosing a spouse.

Here is the bottom line.

Usually the advice we give single people in the church turns singleness into a state of deprivation—singleness is treated as a season of incompleteness that may evidence character weakness. As one single woman writes,

For so many, singleness is the visible sting (stigma) of being ‘not chosen.’ It carries the pain of feeling unloved and unlovable, undesired and undesirable, lonely and alone. For many, it means a life lived in limbo, postponing or despairing of living a full life ‘until’ marriage. I believe those are lies from the pit of hell, because they steal, kill, and destroy, and Jesus came to give us abundant life marked by righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.⁷⁸

Think about how crippling these damnable lies must be for our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters who feel called to a celibate, single life, or who see no other option for living faithfully as a queer Christian. As gay, celibate Christian, Sam Allberry, writes, “Those for whom marriage is not a realistic prospect need to be affirmed in their calling to singleness. Our fellowships need to uphold and honour singleness as a gift and take care not unwittingly to denigrate it. Singles should not be thought or spoken

⁷⁸ Rich Villodas, *The Deeply Formed Life* (Downers Grove, Ill: Crossway Publishing, 2020), 158.

of as loose ends that need tying up.”⁷⁹

We need to learn to celebrate singleness in the church, so let us suggest a few ways we can do this:

(1) We should publicly express appreciation for single people in our congregation, especially those who are living celibately in obedience to Christ. Chances are the single people in our churches are giving a lot of time and energy to ministry. If all the single people picked up and left, the impact of the local church would be severely hindered. Make sure the singles know they are appreciated. This is not just the pastor’s job from the pulpit, it is the responsibility of every Christian to honour and thank God for the ways single Christians serve the church. When it comes to church planting during a pandemic, we are keenly aware of the gift that single people with time, talent and energy have given to our church. We couldn’t do this without them and we are so grateful.

(2) For those who preach and teach in the church, make sure our preaching includes illustrations and analogies that are easily relatable to single people. It is very tempting for pastors to only pull personal illustrations from their marriage, or their relationship with their children. These personal illustrations may represent situations and stories that single people find humorous, but also difficult to relate to their situation, reinforcing a sense of alienation that may already be present in their experience of church community.

(3) Don’t gloss over the struggles of married life. We inadvertently feed into the idolization of marriage when we only speak glowingly about married life and neglect to share the painful sanctification that often takes place when you put two sinners in

⁷⁹ See Sam Alberry, *Is God Anti-gay?* (The Good Book Company, 2013).

close proximity, inviting them to live together until death severs their covenantal bond. There are many painful, mini-deaths that take place in a marriage before that final day. We don't do anyone a favour, married or single, when we whitewash what feels, at times, like the overwhelming struggles or tensions of married life.

We also must not minimise the struggles of single people. We shouldn't downplay their desire to get married, or peddle in pious platitudes that over simplify the complexity of their situation and the very real difficulties that they run up against when trying to find a suitable life partner, or deciding to commit to celibacy for the foreseeable future in honour of Jesus.

(4) Loneliness is real and the church is meant to be a family. Jesus, in fact, turned all of his followers into one big family. Let me quote Greg Johnson at length,

This means we have an obligation to make sure that every believer has a seat at the dinner table. No one eats alone unless they want to. God sets lonely people in families. Surely, John Stott nailed it on the head when he said, 'At the heart of the human condition is a deep and natural hunger for mutual love, a search for identity and a longing for completeness. If gay people cannot find these things in the local 'church family,' we have no business to go on using that expression.' For a church to care for its non-straight siblings, the church has to become family, with all the mutual responsibilities that family entailed in a first-century, clan-based family network...it means making sure people are known. Making sure someone knows when they're out of town. Someone notices when they don't show up. Someone knows when their plane is landing. Someone knows

to check in on their pets. It means they have refrigerator rights in someone's house—they don't have to ask permission to open refrigerator doors.”⁸⁰

The onus is on the straight church.

The nuclear families.

Those who open the door to warm greetings night after night.

We need to bring others into our circles.

Open our homes and hearts and hands.

To be reminded, in the words of Rosaria Butterfield, that “The Gospel comes with a house key.”⁸¹

More than that, we need to embrace the art of intentional communities again. Homes where people can live in a real community and do life together. One such initiative was created by the celibate, gay Christian, Pieter Valk in Nashville. The ministry is called the *Nashville Family of Brothers*. Their stated purpose is “Building family in Nashville for men called to kingdom singleness,” and you can follow them on Instagram @nashvillefamilyofbrothers .

More initiatives like this need to be started by local congregations—creating space for real family, connection, and intimate and loving friendships that go the distance and honour Jesus. See also the blog <https://spiritualfriendship.org/> for more insight into these matters, or check out Wesley Hill's book, *Spiritual Friendship*.

(5) As a church we also need to understand and support mixed-orientation marriages as a potential solution to loneliness

⁸⁰ Greg Johnson, *Still Time to Care* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2021), 225.

⁸¹ This is the title of Rosaria's book.

for a minority of individuals. Some single gay and lesbian individuals may find themselves open to pursuing such a relationship, but there should be no pressure from the church to chase it. These types of marriages come with their own unique challenges. Some of the queer individuals quoted throughout this work are in these types of partnerships and have been open and honest about the joys and very real struggles that have resulted.

As Greg Johnson writes, “Plenty of men and women who are sexually attracted to members of the same sex have been able to develop a healthy marriage with a person of the opposite sex. They have gone on to have children and grandchildren and lead a fulfilling life with their spouse.” Johnson then cautions, “Mixed-orientation marriage is probably not something everyone would consider. It brings real challenges on top of the normal challenges of Christian marriage. And people should never enter into marriage in the hope that it will make them straight. It won’t.”⁸²

Nevertheless, the church must create safe spaces for these types of marriages as well and be willing to provide the unique support that may be required for couples navigating the challenges created.

We included this point because of the reality that mixed-orientation marriages may be an option for a minority of single gay and lesbian Christians (especially for those who find themselves middling in Kinsey’s scale—or, in other words, bi-sexual or queer). But, again, it should never be presented as the only, or even main, option for gay and lesbian singles, especially by straight Christians, or church leadership. Such pressure can

⁸² See. Greg Johnson, *Still Time to Care* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2021).

not only lead to brutal marital situations that blow up a few years down the road, but it also feeds into the idolatry that surrounds heterosexual marriage and sex in the church—a prevalent idolatry that already makes the lives of single Christians more difficult.

(6) In the end, and in all things, we must uphold the value of Jesus.

Jesus is worth being single for.

Jesus is worth suffering for.

Jesus is worth remaining pure for.

Jesus is worth being celibate for.

God is the greatest good, and the greatest gift He can give us is relationship with Himself. God unreservedly gives us Himself in and through Jesus. To become a Christian is to embrace Christ as our ultimate treasure. The purpose of life becomes about knowing him more, loving Him more, and loving others more. With that increasing knowledge comes an ever-growing delight in His person and presence that spills over into all aspects of our lives. This means that, regardless of our marital status, we can still fulfill the fundamental purpose of our lives—to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Timothy Keller writes these words of encouragement:

If single Christians don't develop a deeply fulfilling relationship with Jesus, they will put too much pressure on their dream of marriage, and that will create pathology in their lives... However, if singles learn to rest in and rejoice in their marriage to Christ, that means they will be able to handle single life without a devastating sense of being unfulfilled and unformed. And they might as well tackle this spiritual project right away. Why?

Because the same idolatry of marriage that is distorting their single lives will eventually distort their married lives if they find a partner. So there's no reason to wait. Demote marriage and family in your heart, put God first, and begin to enjoy the goodness of single life.⁸³

Marriage is good, but it is not God. Marriage is wonderful, but it is not worthy of worship. Marriage needs a demotion when it competes with God for ultimate devotion in our lives. Single or married, gay or straight, people in the church need to live as though this were true.

Because it *is* true.

In the words of gay Christian, Wesley Hill, “A great company of saints witnesses to the fact that we can indeed flourish without romance, marriage, or children; I don’t know of one who witnesses to the possibility of our flourishing without love altogether.”⁸⁴

Single or married, gay or straight, live a life of love, just as Christ Jesus loved us and gave Himself up for us. For that is where life that is truly life is found.

⁸³ Timothy & Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage* (New York; NY: Penguin Books, 2013).

⁸⁴ Wesley Hill, *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate, Gay Christian* (Brazos Press, 2015), 41.

Resources

For the Christian who wrestles with same-sex attraction:

- *Is God Anti-gay* by Sam Allberry
- *A War of Loves* by David Bennett
- *Washed and Waiting* by Wesley Hill
- *Gay Girl, Good God* by Jackie Hill Perry
- *Born Again This Way* by Rachel Gilson
- Any of the other works mentioned in Part Three of this booklet.

For students of the Bible:

- *Welcoming but not Affirming* by Stanley Grenz
- *Same-Sex Partnerships* by John Stott
- *People to be Loved* by Preston Sprinkle
- *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* by Richard Hays

For testimonies:

- www.livingout.org
- www.spiritualfriendship.org
- The Re-voice Conference
- <http://www.themarinfoundation.org/>

A few influential books on the affirming side:

- *The God and the Gay Christian* by Matthew Vines
- *Torn* by Justin Lee
- *A Letter to My Congregation* by Ken Wilson

Our culture may give lip-service to love, but we are steadily losing the ability to talk to one another about important and complex moral issues where there is genuine and honest disagreement.

Our hope is that these pages will function as an invitation out of our encrusted echo-chambers. It is an opportunity to step across deeply entrenched battle-lines, to take a fresh look at the historic Christian teaching on sexuality, and investigate its plausibility in our cultural moment.

The Way Church is a community of people committed to following Jesus in the city of Vancouver, BC, joining with Him in the restoration of all things.

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