

Social Awareness. Living Truth.

Homosexuality: What Does the Bible REALLY say and why does it REALLY Matter?

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Introduction

Traditional biblical sexual ethic has understood homosexual¹ behaviour as one of a number of sexual sins. Increasingly, evangelical churches are under pressure to abandon this theological position and affirm homosexual behaviour and same sex relationships as part of God's design. This pressure upon the church is driven in part by trends in the society and government policy makers that see sexual orientation and gender identity as a protected minority class and to view same sex marriage as a fundamental issue of equal rights. This is compounded by the social perception that the traditional Christian understanding of homosexual behaviour runs the risk of causing psychological harm to individuals through castigating them to a life of loneliness (and even potential suicidal ideation) without hope for the deep relational fulfillment that is only found (it is believed) in the socially recognized validation of a legal marriage relationship. In giving the majority opinion for legalizing same-sex marriage in the United States, Justice Anthony Kennedy expressed this sentiment writing, "Their hope is not to be condemned to live in loneliness, excluded from one of civilization's oldest institutions."² In trying to make the case for same-sex marriage among evangelicals, Matthew Vines has argued that since the traditional biblical view on homosexuality has caused significant distress and pain for same-sex attracted persons, it is a view that has borne "bad fruit" and is therefore in need of revision.³

In understanding what is at stake, it is necessary to consider that the primary argument today is over the question of the legitimacy of same-sex marriage. So let us frame the central question this way: "Can two men or two women date, fall in love, remain sexually pure before their wedding day, and commit to a life-long, consensual, Christ-centred, self-giving monogamous union?"⁴ A secondary and related question follows: "Does the Bible really address and prohibit these types of relations?" There are generally two positions in response to these questions. The affirming position gives a positive response to the first and a negative response to the second; while the traditional position gives a negative response to the first and a positive response to the second.⁵

The challenge presented to evangelical churches today has two aspects. The first is to clarify whether or not we believe the

Bible definitively condemns same-sex marriage even in the case of a committed loving relationship. A second and more subtle challenge concerns whether or not the question of what the Bible says about homosexual behaviour is of such a nature that we believe unity on this issue is necessary to maintain a high view of biblical authority. In other words, is the evangelical "tent" large enough to accommodate opposing points of view on the question, and can we just agree to disagree? The nature of the question therefore involves three parts, a case for why the question is significant for biblical authority and the message of the gospel, an encapsulation of the biblical view, and a brief reflection on application and response.

Why the Question Matters

A major challenge for the modern church is the question of whether or not one's stance on the moral nature of same-sex marriage is a vital issue for maintaining a high view of the authority of Scripture. In other words, is it possible for those who claim a high view of Scripture simply to agree to disagree on the meaning of the issue of same sex marriage, in the same way that they might agree to disagree on the meaning of the Lord's Supper, the nature of predestination or the details of eschatology? Does this question matter for maintaining a high view of Biblical authority and our message of the gospel? The answer to this question involves reflecting on how it relates to our fundamental identity according to Scripture, the proclamation of the gospel itself, and our approach to biblical interpretation.

Malcolm Muggeridge has been frequently quoted in saying, "Sex is the mysticism of materialism and the only possible religion in a materialist society."⁶ In a society that has removed God from the centrality of meaning and existence as human beings, sex has become for many people a substitute religion. Perfume counters at shopping malls, movie advertisements, Facebook "relationship status" updates, online dating sites, and travel "deals" for couples all remind us of the importance of being in a relationship to be fully validated in our society. The movie, *The 40 Year-Old Virgin*, was depicted self-evidently as a hilarious comedy because in the eyes of Hollywood, the idea of anyone being over forty and never sexually active is unthinkable. The centrality of sex as being essential to our humanity has an extended history of intellectual contributors, from the biology of Charles Darwin, to

¹ We are using the term homosexual in reference to the practice of sexual relations with a member of the same sex in keeping with Scripture's use of the term. It is important to distinguish homosexual behaviour from same sex attraction. When speaking about or to a person, some people prefer to self-identify as gay as compared to homosexual.

² *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 U.S. 772 F. 3d. 388 (2015).

³ Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-sex Relationships* (New York: Convergent Books, 2014), 13-15.

⁴ I credit Preston Sprinkle, *People to be Loved: Why Homosexuality Is Not Just an Issue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 17 for this framing of the question.

⁵ Some have used other labels such as non-affirming or redemptive as labels for the traditional position. The label traditional refers to the view the Christian church has understood as biblical for nearly its entire history, not a viewpoint based on any particular church "tradition".

⁶ The exact source of this quotation is unclear.

the psychology of Sigmund Freud, to the identity politics of Michel Foucault, the shapers of the modern worldview without God have put sex at the centre of our existence as human beings. At the core of the sex-centric worldview is the presumption that our essence and ultimate fulfillment as human beings is to be found in being in a sexually intimate relationship with another human being. A person's identity as a man or woman is validated in how ever one sees oneself and how one finds pleasure in others.

The sex-centric world view stands in marked contrast to our Christian theocentric or God-centric worldview. As Christ-followers, we acknowledge that the Word of God provides the foundation for our worldview and shapes our identity as human beings. How do we respond to a world that espouses a sex-centric worldview where being in a sexual relationship is the essence of what it means to be human? If we want to respond with one word, it is the word Jesus! Hebrews 2:17 reminds us, "For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people." (ESV) Jesus was human in every way necessary in order to be the necessary sacrifice for our sins, yet he was a single man, never married and never sexually active. Jesus stands in denial of the sex-centric hypothesis that a sexual relationship is necessary to validate our humanity. Rather, there must be something else.

We don't have to read far into the Word of God to get a picture of what does give meaning and validation to who we are as human beings. Genesis 1 tells us that unlike the animals that were created "after their own kinds" (Gen 1:25), God created human beings "in his own image" (Genesis 1:26-27). This essence of our humanness is so profound that it is repeated twice with two types of parallelism. In Genesis 1:26, two parallel words are used, "image" and "likeness". Then in Genesis 1:27 it is again stated and then stated again in reversed word order. The implication of this for our identity human beings is two-fold. First, we as human beings reflect God. God is thus glorified in the creation of human beings reflecting his image throughout the created order. Second, because we are created in his image we are designed for a relationship with God in a way the animal world is not. Simply put, the essence of who we are as human beings at our core is to be in relationship with God. This very design of our humanity is to be fulfilled ultimately in being reconciled to God through Christ (Romans 5:10-11) and in being conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29). The message of the Gospel is that who we were intended to be in our design as human beings is completed in Christ. Paul writes to the Colossians, "We proclaim Him admonishing everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom that we may present every person complete in Christ (Colossians 1:28)."⁷ Neither sexual intimacy, nor conjugal relationships, nor marriage is all its fullness, will ever complete us as human beings. Rather it is Christ that completes our God-given identity that is grounded in its core in being created in God's image for an eternal relationship with him.

Unfortunately, the Christian church itself has sometimes been

misguided on our essence as human beings. As Scripture teaches that sexual relationships are only to be expressed within the context of marriage, the Christian church has sometimes substituted marriage as what is essential to completing who we are or the image of God in us. In arguing for same-sex marriage Mark Achtemeier writes, "God gives us these good gifts [i.e. love, marriage and sex relations] in order to help us realize our creation in the divine image."⁸ When sex and marriage become essential to realizing the image of God in us, it is hard to resist the implication that everyone needs to be married to fulfill our ultimate identity as human beings—and by implication, so too those who are same-sex attracted. However, if Christ alone is the means by which our humanity is completed, then not only is marriage unnecessary to validate those who are same-sex attracted, but it is not necessary to validate any one of us in our humanity. It is vital to the proper witness of the Christian gospel that we do not confuse being completed in Christ with being completed in marriage. Both the Christian witness as well as the storyline of Scripture consistently testify to the goodness of both marriage and singleness as equally valid vocations within the Christian life.

Though sex and marriage do not complete our humanity as individuals they do serve to point us to something beyond ourselves. Both sex and marriage are designed to point us to the reality of the divine mystery of God inviting human beings into an eternal covenantal relationship with him. The very core of this mystery is in its contrast of otherness, it is a mystery of how the creator eternal God of the universe might be in a personal covenantal relationship with his mortal created humanity and how this will be fully experienced by those who collectively share in it. In 1 Corinthians 6:17 Paul writes, "he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him (ESV)." The Greek word "joined" (kollaō) is the same root word used in Genesis 2:24 of man leaving his father and mother and "cleaving" or "holding fast" to his wife. The root of this Greek verb is the noun kolla which means "glue" and it serves as euphemism for the physical-spiritual bonding that occurs through sexual relations. The bonding that occurs in human sexual intimacy is thus a pointer to the mystery of the bonding that human beings will ultimately experience with the Lord in one spirit. We are "joined" with God in this cosmic mystery of becoming "one spirit with him."

This contrast of otherness that marriage represents appears at the very beginning in the language of Genesis 2. Just after it is acknowledged that it is not good that the "man" is alone, God says, "I will make him a helper fit for him (ESV)." The word "fit" (kenegdo) is translated various ways including "meet" (KJV), "suitable" (NIV/NASB), "just right" (NLT), and "comparable" (NJKV). The word is difficult to translate since it is made up of compounding two different words "like" (ke) and "opposite" (neged). The woman is in some respects "like" the man, but in other key respects different and "opposite" him. Had Adam needed a helper like him in every respect, then the just the "like" (ke) would have been sufficient.⁹ The woman is both similar and different to the man and she complements his differences.

⁷ Author's translation.

⁸ Mark Achtemeier, *The Bible's Yes to Same Sex Marriage: An Evangelical's Change of Heart* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), Kindle location 855.

⁹ Sprinkle, *People to Be Loved*, 32.

Perhaps the most theologically rich description of marriage is given in Ephesians 5:22-33. What begins as a discussion of wives and husbands as part of illustrating the call to mutual submission within the household becomes an elegant portrayal of how the relationship of husband and wife in marriage is intended to picture for the world the covenantal relationship of Christ and his people. Husbands are to love their wives sacrificially as Christ loved the church, while wives are to reciprocate that love by submitting to the husbands as the church submits to Christ. The marriage relationship itself is meant to portray a picture of the mystery of God in intimate communion with this people. Just as the “otherness” of Christ and the church is central to the mystery, so too, the model of marriage from its very creation is meant to embody the mystery of this “otherness” coming together in one covenantal union. If Christian marriage itself is meant to be a mini-picture for the world to see of this mysterious relationship of the core gospel message—that God has indeed invited us into an eternal covenantal relationship with him, then the “otherness” of husband and wife are core to communicating this gospel witness.

A final issue concerns whether holding a traditional position on the question of same-sex marriage is necessary in order to maintain a sense of personal and corporate integrity in how Scripture is interpreted. A historical distinctive of evangelical churches is in holding a high view of biblical authority—that is in affirming the Bible’s unique place as the inspired Word of God and representing the normative standard of truth for what we believe and how we should live. The historical Protestant commitment to sola scriptura or “Scripture alone” entails an expectation that the Bible’s teaching is sufficiently clear on critical subjects of doctrine and practice for the church.

Today there are some evangelical theologians and writers who assert that Scripture can be reasonably interpreted in a way compatible with an affirming position on same sex marriage.¹⁰ The question that remains to be convincingly answered is this: Do these interpretations pass the sniff test? In other words, would a reasonable person looking at these texts likely draw similar conclusions to those affirming interpretations, or are they a series of strained historical-grammatical maneuvers to effectively discount the more obvious reading of the text?

The theologian Dr. Christopher Yuan recounts his own story on this very question. As a same-sex attracted new believer in prison he confided in a chaplain his struggle to reconcile his gay identity with what he was reading in Scripture. To his surprise the chaplain asserted that the Bible doesn’t condemn homosexuality and gave him a book to read explaining an affirming perspective on various Scriptures. Christopher recounts that while he had every motivation in the world to be convinced by the book, he says, “God’s Holy Spirit convicted me that the assertions from that book were a distortion of God’s truth.”¹¹ If a new believer can detect a distortion of God’s truth in revisionist interpretations,

surely mature and discerning Christians can as well.

The Biblical Texts

The Bible has no notion of same-sex marriage and the biblical perspective on homosexual behavior is consistent in seeing it as one of a variety of expressions of sexual intimacy that are outside God’s design and intent for sexual intimacy, which is to be expressed strictly within the marriage relationship of husband and wife. There are eight texts in the Bible that make direct or indirect reference to homosexual behavior. These may be grouped as the Sodom texts (Genesis 19:1-9; Judges 19:22-23; and Jude 7), the Leviticus texts (Leviticus 18:22; Leviticus 20:13; 1 Corinthians 6:9; and 1 Timothy 1:10) and Paul’s discussion in Romans 1:26-27.

The Sodom texts refer to the incident in Genesis 19:1-9 in which two angels come to stay with Lot. During the night the men of the city rise up and demand Lot to surrender the men to them that they might “know them”, a euphemism for having sexual relations. While everyone agrees that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by God because of excessive sin, what is sometimes disputed is the specific nature of the sin being condemned. The encounter portrayed is homosexual relations but in the context of a gang rape incident. Ezekiel 16:49-50 extends the sins of Sodom to include pride, excess, ease and lack of concern for the poor. Yet Ezekiel also condemns Sodom for committing an act of “abomination”, the same Hebrew word that used to describe same-sex relations in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. Jude 7 condemns Sodom similarly for the pursuit of sexual immorality and “unnatural desire”. While some have argued the real sin of Sodom described by Jude was the desire to have sex with angels,¹² this seems unlikely for two reasons. First, Jude suggests the same sin of Sodom was also being pursued in Gomorrah and “the surrounding cities”, yet the angels were only sent to Lot. The “Sodom-like” parallel account of the traveler in Judges 19:22-23 again cannot be referencing sex with angels, but does portray men desiring sex with men. In sum while the sins of Sodom were surely more than just the act of homosexual relations, the shadow passage in Judges together with the commentary of Ezekiel and Jude all seem to confirm homosexual relations as a sin attributed to the Sodomites that led to their judgment by God.

The Leviticus texts include two references to homosexual behavior in Leviticus as well as two references in the New Testament that appear to be borrowing the language of the Leviticus texts. The reference to homosexuality in Leviticus 18:22 (ESV) states, “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman, it is an abomination.” It is vital to note that this commandment is in the context of series of inappropriate categories of sexual relations and there is not apparent indication that homosexual relations is worse than any other category of sexual sin. These categories include prohibitions against incest (18:6-18), sex during menstruation

¹⁰ Two examples include: Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-sex Relationships* (New York: Convergent Books, 2014); and Mark Achtemeier, *The Bible’s Yes to Same Sex Marriage: An Evangelical’s Change of Heart* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014).

¹¹ Yuan, *Out of a Far Country*, 186.

¹² See Vines, *God and the Gay Christian*, 69; and Brownson, *Bible Gender Sexuality: Reframing the Church’s Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 269.

(18:19), adultery (18:20), and bestiality (18:23). The text then proceeds (18:24-30) to associate all of these “abominations” as being characteristic of the nations that preceded them and that they were to be distinct in not practicing them. Leviticus 20:13 (ESV) similarly states, “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them.” Again it occurs in the context of prohibitions against incest (20:10, 14, 17, 19-21), adultery (20:11-12), bestiality (20:15-16), and sex during menstruation (20:18). Here again the text that follows (20:22-23) associates all these behaviours with the customs of the nations God is driving out. God is calling the Israelite nation to a higher standard of holy sexuality.

While it is tempting to dismiss these Leviticus texts as vestiges of a purity code applicable only in the context of the ancient Israelites, the parallels with two New Testament texts would suggest that the Apostle Paul has specifically these texts in view as he recalls the New Testament church to purity in sexual conduct. The first of these instances in 1 Corinthians 6:9 arises in a context strikingly similar to the texts in Leviticus. Paul is calling the Corinthians to a new level of holiness in their personal behaviour and conduct with one another. As he admonishes them to treat each other with justice and love, he reminds them that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God. Then he proceeds to outline examples of unrighteous behaviour, four of which are of a sexual nature. The four types of sexual behaviour include: the sexually immoral (pornoi), adulterers (moichoi), the effeminate (malakoi), and a rare Greek term arsenokoitēs, that is a literal compounding of the words “male” and “bed” to yield, “male-bedders”. Scholars have noted that this last term appears nowhere in the previously known corpus of Greek literary sources, suggesting that Paul is coining his own term as he writes.

How do we determine what he is most likely referring to with this term? The first clue is in the words he is compounding “male” and “bed”. The word for “bed” (koitē) is used elsewhere in the New Testament as “marriage bed” (Hebrews 13:4), and “promiscuity” or “chambering” (Romans 13:13). So “male-bedders” are most likely males engaging other males for sexual intimate behaviour. But the case is strengthened even more convincingly when one notes the wording of Leviticus 20:13 in the Greek Old Testament that Paul frequently quotes known as the Septuagint. The literal word for word rendering of Leviticus 20:13 reads, “If anyone sleeps with a male (arsenos) a bed (koitēn) of a woman, both have committed an abomination.”¹³ Paul is simply coining a new word from these two adjacent words in the Greek Old Testament that bears the meaning not only of the joined root words but the contextual reference of how these words appear in the Old Testament. Paul is calling the Corinthians to the same standard of sexual purity that God calls the Israelites to in the Old Testament. Moreover, just as this behaviour in Leviticus is characteristic of those peoples whom the Israelites were driving out, Paul goes on to note that these behaviours were characteristic of the Corinthians’ former life. He concludes in reminding them: “such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified.” (1 Corinthians 6:11, ESV)

The other notable term in this passage is “effeminate” (malakoi).

The term literally means “soft-ones” and can refer to those who like soft clothes (Matt 11:8), but it is generally associated with male prostitutes or those who serve as the passive partner in homosexual relationships. For Paul to include this word as another category distinct from “male-bedders” (arsenokoitēs), is significant in showing that Paul is not merely condemning pedophiles or sexual predators, in which case those who were violated would surely be innocent, but rather Paul is encompassing here mutual relationships in which both parties are willing and therefore blameworthy participants.

What we must be very cautious of suggesting in either the 1 Corinthians 6:9 text or where “male-bedders” (arsenokoitēs) again appears in 1 Timothy 1:10, is the idea that homosexual behaviour is somehow more blameworthy or sinful than any of the other categories of sins that Paul lists in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. These include examples of heterosexual sexual sins (immorality and adultery) as well as list of other categories of sin including idolatry, stealing, drunkenness, greed and swindling. When we look in the mirror we are all guilty of sins worthy of death and being denied the kingdom of God. Paul’s point is this is what they were, and it is also what we were, but now we all have been justified once for all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. No one engaged in any form of sinful behaviour is beyond the reach of God’s transforming grace and justifying righteousness. The gospel message is good news for all.

The single most significant passage addressing homosexual behaviour in the New Testament is found in Romans 1:26-27. The key for interpreting this passage is to understand in context why Paul appears to give special emphasis to homosexual behaviour in illustrating his overall point. Paul’s overarching point in Romans 1:18-32 is that humankind as a whole has rejected God. In their unrighteousness they have suppressed the truth of God’s attributes, power and divine nature and they are without excuse worthy of God’s revealed wrath. The essence of human sin at its core is always ultimately directed toward God. God has given human beings clear evidence of himself—his attributes, his eternal power, and his divine nature in the things that he has made. As human beings we are made in his image and reflect his very attributes (Genesis 1:27). It is impossible for us not to see evidence of our creator in the personhood of our fellow human beings—their capacity for counsel, companionship, empathy, intimacy and love cannot but point us to the reality of a superintending being that is the supreme expression of such qualities in the universe.

The essence of our sin is that we human beings have rejected seeing God in the fingerprint of creation and yielding to him the worship and glory he is innately due and have instead, “exchanged” giving glory to the eternal God for giving tribute to images in creation whether they be images of creatures or ourselves (Romans 1:22). Paul then reiterates a second time that the whole of humankind has “exchanged” the truth about God for lie and has worshiped what is created rather than creator (Romans 1:25). We humans have rejected the fundamental relationship clearly visible to us in the very design of creation and instead have become fully self-absorbed in glorifying ourselves

¹³ Meaning “anyone who sleeps with a male in the conjugal bed”; in common day language “two men having sex”.

and the material world around us.

So what has God allowed in a form of poetic justice to the rebellion of humankind? Paul indicates that God “gave them up” to another type of exchange (Romans 1:26). Just as human beings exchanged the most fundamental vertical relationship in creation—that of humans with God, so in the same way, God has given over human beings to “exchange” the most basic of all human horizontal relationship in creation—that of a man with a woman in marriage. Once again rather than being other-focused human beings became self-focused, women exchanging natural relations for those with other women, and men giving up natural relations with women for relations with other men. Though humans were intended to see the innate design of creation for relations with the opposite sex, they were given over by God to pursue intimate relationships with those of their own sex.

Paul continues in the immediate discussion to make clear that same sex intimacy is only one example of the consequence of human beings’ denial of God. God gave human beings up to a debased mind filled with all manner of unrighteousness from envy and murder to gossip and pride. Why Paul singles out homosexual behaviour is not because it is more offensive than any other human sin. Rather he seems to use it a powerful illustration that when we reject God’s creation blueprint in the most fundamental area of our lives in acknowledging our vertical relationship with him, it will inevitably lead to us disordering his creation blueprint in other areas of our lives, starting with one of most basic horizontal human relationships of all—that of marriage between a man and a woman. The abandonment of God’s design for marriage is only one example of the ultimate disordering of God’s design in every aspect of our existence.

One of the key descriptions of homosexual behaviour arises in verse 26 where Paul writes, “their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature (ESV).” Some revisionist commentators have suggested that what Paul is condemning here is acting contrary to one’s “nature”, which in the case of same-sex attracted persons would be having opposite-sex relations.¹⁴ But as Paul and the ancients in general had little notion of sexual orientation, “nature” for them refers to the natural created order. This is further supported by the word translated “relations” (*chrēsis*) that connotes “use” or “function” and suggests one’s natural God-given physicality over and above one’s internal sense of desires. The phrase “contrary to nature” is one that has a long history in Greek literary sources as referring to same-sex intercourse and was popular among moral philosophers as well as Jewish writers who believed that same-sex intercourse was contrary to the will of God and the design of nature.¹⁵

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of Paul’s reference to homosexual behavior in these verses is that he begins with the women. This is the sole reference to lesbian relationships in Scripture. It is without doubt that homosexual behaviour in all its forms including the prevalence of pederasty was far more common among males than females in Paul’s day. Why would Paul begin with women? Most likely because it fits his overall

point. The pervasiveness of sin has affected all of us, such that even women are subject to abandoning God’s design for marriage in pursuing relationships with other women. That Paul begins with the women also clarifies that the issue being condemned is not simply the excessive lustiness of males. Nor is it merely condemning the practice of male pederasty. Rather Paul is acknowledging the reality that sin has so permeated all of us, that all our relationships have been affected. The implication of this text is that men having relations with men and women with women is part of the disordering of human relationships that has affected all of us as we human beings as a whole have rejected God. Same-sex relationships illustrate this disordering, regardless of how loving the individuals in the relationship may feel toward each other. Feelings cannot justify a relationship that is contrary to God’s design.

While Paul’s condemnation of same-sex intimacy is clear in Romans 1, we must return to the overall point of the passage that Paul’s condemnation of this specific behaviour is representative of how sin has disordered all our relationships, even those which are most basic and fundamental. As a result we are all guilty of falling short of God’s intent for us as human beings. To anyone tempted to cast dispersions upon others for their sin, Paul gives a stark warning in the first verse of Romans 2. Any of us who stand in judgment of others likewise condemn ourselves, because those who pass judgment are no less guilty before God of the same sins. The good news of the gospel reminds us that though all of us are sinners and guilty before God, God has given us his righteousness through the atoning work of his Son on the cross. Regardless of who we are, or what sins we have committed, the resounding message of the New Testament is the message of good news that Jesus Christ invites us to new life in him!

In all words of Jesus recorded for us in Scripture there is not any reference to homosexuality. Can we conclude from this absence that perhaps only the Apostle Paul had particular issues with homosexual relationships while Jesus might have willingly approved? This is unlikely for a number of reasons. First, mere absence of evidence alone does not constitute evidence of absence. Jesus doesn’t condemn incest, beating one’s wife or the abuse of children either, but we wouldn’t presume from his silence on these behaviours that he would approve of them! Jesus always spoke truth in the context of showing love. Second, while Jesus does not explicitly condemn same-sex marriage, he does explicitly affirm heterosexual marriage in Matthew 19:4-5. In responding to the question of divorce, Jesus reminds us that in the beginning God created human beings “male and female”. Because of this aspect of our divine image-bearing Jesus continues, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” (ESV) It is significant that Jesus here conjoins humans being created “male and female” from Genesis 1:27, with the sexual marital union of becoming “one flesh” described later in Genesis 2:24. The implication is that because God has created us male and female, he also joins us together as husband and wife in marriage (Matthew 19:6). Finally, while it is the Apostle Paul, the apostle to the gentiles, who explicitly addresses homosexual

¹⁴ See Joe Dallas, *The Gay Gospel?: How Pro-gay Advocates Misread the Bible* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1996), 203.

¹⁵ See Sprinkle, *People to Be Loved*, 96.

relationships in the New Testament, his words in Scripture are also inspired by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 7:40) and they are just as authoritative for us as any other Scripture (2 Peter 2:15-16). We do not pick and choose which parts of Scripture we are going to follow and obey, but we recognize that all Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, reproof and correction (2 Tim 3:16-17).

Application and Response

Any response we give to those who identify as gay or lesbian should encompass a balance of truth and love. Having a solid understanding of Scripture is critically important for the Christian who desires to uphold truth and thus live out the traditional biblical sexual ethic. Being haphazard in our understanding of what the Bible says puts us at risk of being easily swayed by popular opinion both through culture and by revisionist thinking within our church. We must become students of the Word so that we can speak knowledgeably and confidently on this topic. However, Paul also reminds us that if we understand all mysteries and have all knowledge and yet have not love, we are nothing (1 Corinthians 13:2). Jesus likewise instructed us that it is our love for each other that is the mark of being a true disciple (John 13:35). Having conviction is good and being convinced in our own understanding is good, but few individuals in the LGBTQ+ community will ever be won over through intellectual arguments.

So how should we respond to those who identify as gay or lesbian, whether they be a family member, a co-worker, a friend or an attendee in our churches? First, listen and do not judge. Whenever someone has courage enough to be honest with their same-sex struggle, they are taking a big risk. It is critical that if they are going to get to the next step of their journey that they have an advocate who can listen and help them. Allow them to share their struggle and their story as they feel comfortable doing so. We need to remember that same-sex attraction is not sin and needs to be differentiated from homosexual behaviour. If they are dealing just with the temptation of same-sex desire, we can encourage them that this temptation is no better or worse than any other temptation, and that God is faithful in helping us resist all temptations (1 Corinthians 10:13). Whenever someone is involved with sinful behaviour, we need to remember that it is the Holy Spirit's job to convict all of us of sin we need to address in our lives. We are all a work in progress—and the Holy Spirit has always yet more for us to do to be fully conformed to the image of Christ. Acceptance of someone as a person is not approval of their behaviour. Our job is to walk alongside them and disciple them, and to let the Holy Spirit work naturally in their growth and sanctification. Homosexual behaviour is not any better or worse than any other category of sexual sin the Bible mentions. It is unfortunate that Christians all too often want to call out same-sex sin, yet turn a blind eye toward fornication or other sin involving opposite attracted individuals.

After listening and getting to know them, a second responsibility we have is to be a welcoming community. Our faith in Jesus was never meant to be a solitary journey, but to be lived in the

context of the Body of Christ. Everyone needs to feel the mutual acceptance of the spiritual family. Singles that struggle with same-sex attraction have a vital need for supportive communities and discipling environments where they have healthy friendships with both those of their own sex as well as those of the opposite sex. How do we create a welcoming environment for same-sex attracted people? The starting point is having healthy communities for single adults. A healthy community is one that is intentionally inclusive of everyone without regard for their marital status, race, economic status, gender or sexual orientation. Resist the temptation to play match-maker for your single friends. The implicit message is that they are incomplete without a spouse. If such badgering is difficult for heterosexual singles it is even more difficult for same-sex attracted singles that feel they are being forced to explain why they are not dating someone of the opposite sex.

After welcoming them and inviting them into community, a third responsibility we have is to lead them to Jesus. It is significant that in Acts 8, the Holy Spirit leads Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch. Eunuchs in Philip's day would have been as stigmatized to faithful Jewish believers as a same-sex attracted, trans-gender or gender-fluid individual would be to us today. Yet the Holy Spirit moved Philip to go and seek him out. Upon meeting the eunuch Philip proceeds to share Christ with him and he is baptized on the spot. Whatever the eunuch's "lifestyle" happened to have been at the time was of no consequence. He was at that moment born-again in Christ! In a similar fashion our responsibility is not to help people address same-sex attraction, but to lead them to Jesus!

Finally, how ought we respond when someone comes into our church, who is quite public about their gay identity—perhaps they come with their partner or "spouse" or even as a family with children? The answer is no different. We listen and learn about their journeys without judgment, we welcome them into community, and we invite them to Jesus. Jesus routinely ate and drank with "sinners" despite the indignation among the religious elites around him. Remember that acceptance of others into community does not constitute approving of their life choices. There is a difference between inviting people to participate with us, whether it is in worship or in community, and having them represent us and what we stand for as a church. When someone wishes to become a member or serve in a ministry of the church, then it is appropriate to have a conversation about submitting to the Lordship of Christ and living in accordance with biblical lifestyle standards. That conversation is one that we need to have with everyone, whether they are same-sex attracted or not. All of us who represent the church in membership or ministry are called to submit ourselves to the Lordship of Jesus in all areas of our lives. But until that point, the church is a hospital for sinners and we want all persons to receive the welcoming love of Jesus as they encounter his community regardless of the nature of the relationships they have. We invite everyone to join us in being faithful disciples of Jesus, submit to his Lordship, and allow the Holy Spirit to convict us of all sin (John 16:8).

Recommended Resources for Digging Deeper

Theology and Biblical Perspectives

Danylak, Barry. *Redeeming Singleness: How the Storyline of Scripture Affirms the Single Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010). A biblical theology of singleness showing through Scripture the validity of the single life.

Deyoung, Kevin. *What Does the Bible Really Teach about Homosexuality* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015). A pastor making the case for the historic position on marriage and sexuality.

Gagnon, Robert A. J., *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009). Among the most thorough treatments in examining and analyzing the relevant biblical passages.

Mohler, R. Albert Jr. ed. *God and the Gay Christian? A Response to Matthew Vines* (Louisville, KY: SBTS Press, 2014). A direct theological response to Matthew Vines' book by eminent Southern Baptist theologians.

Sprinkle, Preston. *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality Is Not Just an Issue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015). One of the finest efforts to balance compassion and biblical truth on the question of what the Bible says about homosexuality.

Sprinkle, Preston, ed. *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016). A debate by four theologians on the question of homosexuality with arguments and rebuttals.

Yuan, Christopher. *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel: Sex Desire and Relationships Shaped by God's Grand Story* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2018). A biblical-theological examination of issues of identity, sexuality, marriage, singleness and same-sex attraction.

Personal Journeys & Biographies

Butterfield, Rosaria Champagne. *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor's Journey into Christian Faith* (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown & Covenant, 2014). A leftist lesbian professor's journey to Christian faith.

Coles, Gregory. *Single Gay Christian: A Personal Journey of Faith and Sexual Identity* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2017). Account of a young Christian man's struggle with same-sex attraction and identity.

Hill, Wesley. *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2016). A personal journey of wrestling with loneliness as experienced by a gay evangelical Christian.

Shaw, Ed. *Same-Sex Attraction and the Church: The Surprising Plausibility of the Celibate Life* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2015). A same-sex attracted pastor shares his vision of how the church should support same-sex attracted persons and the plausibility of the celibate life.

Yuan, Christopher & Angela Yuan. *Out of a Far Country: A Gay Son's Journey to God. A Broken Mother's Search for Hope* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2011). Parallel accounts of a prodigal gay son's journey to faith and a faithful mother's journey of prayer.

Responding to Culture

Dallas, Joe. *The Gay Gospel: How Pro-Gay Advocates Misread the Bible* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1996/2007). Arguments to equip Christians to respond to claims of pro-gay theologians and advocates.

McDowell, Sean & John Stonestreet. *Same-Sex Marriage: A Thoughtful Approach to God's Design for Marriage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014). Addresses what defines marriage as well as the current cultural climate on same-sex marriage and how Christians should respond.

Clinical Issues

Yarhouse, Mark. *Homosexuality and the Christian: A Guide for Parents, Pastors, and Friends* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 2010). One of the best books addressing the clinical dimensions of homosexuality by a Christian psychologist.

Support and Understanding

Allberry, Sam. *Is God Anti-Gay? And Other Questions about Homosexuality, the Bible and Same-Sex Attraction* (Surrey, U.K.: The Good Book Company, 2014). Accessible book addressing common questions Christians have about homosexuality.

Sprinkle, Preston. *Grace // Truth 1.0: Five Conversations Every Thoughtful Christian Should Have about Faith, Sexuality & Gender* (Center for Faith, Sexuality and Gender, 2017). Navigating questions of faith, sexuality and gender through a series of five honest conversations—useful for small group study.

About the Author

Dr. Barry Danylak (PhD, Cambridge) currently serves within the EMCC as Community Pastor for Single Adults at Centre Street Church in Calgary, Alberta. As a pastor-theologian Barry is also an international speaker and author on topics related to singleness and the church. He can be reached for comments or questions at barry.danylak@cschurch.ca.

Editorial Comment

The SALT Commission is grateful to the author for providing us with their academic and personal exploration of this topic. We encourage all readers to prayerfully consider how to integrate this culturally relevant information into their Biblical worldview and ministry context.

The SALT Commission (Social Awareness Living Truth) is a commission of the Evangelical Missionary Church of Canada.