

**HOMOSEXUALITY  
AND  
THE CHRISTIAN**

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**Mark A. Yarhouse, PsyD**



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*Homosexuality and the Christian*

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Mark A. Yarhouse

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TO THE LOCAL CHURCH:

*May we be faithful witnesses who offer guidance  
and spiritual sustenance to those who are navigating  
sexual and religious identity concerns.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark A. Yarhouse is a professor of psychology and the Hughes Chair of Christian Thought in Mental Health Practice at Regent University, where he also directs the Institute for the Study of Sexual Identity ([www.sexualidentityinstitute.org](http://www.sexualidentityinstitute.org)). Mark received BAs in philosophy and art from Calvin College, and MAs in theological studies and clinical psychology, and a PsyD in clinical psychology, from Wheaton College. Mark is an award-winning educator and scholar who has spent several years promoting dialogue between people who view the topic of sexual identity differently. In 2000, he chaired a groundbreaking symposium at the American Psychological Association's annual convention that brought together both gay psychologists and Christian psychologists to discuss common ground in treatment options for persons sorting out sexual and religious identity conflicts. He chaired similar symposia at the APA on the many meanings of marriage among different religions and various groups within the gay community; services for adolescents experiencing sexual identity confusion; and a new approach to working with sexual identity issues in counseling. Mark has written over fifty articles and book chapters and is the coauthor of several books, including *Modern Psychopathologies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal*; *Family Therapies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal*; and *Sexual Identity: A Guide to Living in the Time Between the Times*.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

People ask professors all the time about the courses they teach, what they write about, and what they research. When I answer, the conversation often either changes abruptly or is taken to another level. What I mean by this is that people either do not want to touch the topic with a ten-foot pole, or they want to share their two cents because they have really strong opinions. I want to acknowledge a few people who were willing to share their opinions with me, help expand my perspective, or otherwise challenge me on this difficult topic.

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MARK A. YARHOUSE  
*VIRGINIA BEACH, VIRGINIA*

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## PREFACE

In a talk I gave recently at a Christian college campus, I asked the audience to “Raise your hand if you are nervous about listening to a conservative Christian speak on the topic of homosexuality.” Several hands went up. While I was able to use that question to break the ice, it points to a real concern that faces the church today: Sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular, are increasingly sensitive and divisive topics.

Some people are pushing hard for the church to change its teachings on homosexuality. Many mainline denominations are fracturing over the issue; people just don’t want to hear anything that sounds like a compromise on a topic that has become something of a watershed issue for Christ and our culture. But these hot-button conversations are not just occurring within and across denominations; as our culture changes and as young people are coming into their own, these discussions are also taking place across generations. Many young people in the church, while theologically conservative, want to find new and creative ways to engage the topic in light of the relationships they have in their social circles.

This book is intended to be part of that discussion, and in some ways it is meant to help the conversation become more constructive. I think it can be helpful to move away from the well-worn path of discussing and debating the causes of sexual orientation and whether

orientation can change. There is a place for an informed discussion about the causes of homosexuality and whether it can change; however, the overemphasis on those two points has left many people with far too few resources for navigating their sexual and religious identities. With apologies to Robert Frost, my focus is on the road less traveled: the intersection of sexual identity and religious identity. I encourage people to spend more time here, as I think sexual identity can be a neglected yet significant area for personal reflection, as well as a way to relate to others in a more constructive manner. It isn't so much about getting people into counseling so they can change; it's about equipping them to understand their attractions with reference to a larger sense of self and purpose. These things can be cultivated whether or not (or to whatever extent) orientation changes. Put differently, the cause of a homosexual orientation and the question of whether it can change, while meaningful topics in and of themselves, are secondary to the more pressing questions surrounding identity, sanctification, and stewardship.

I framed this book primarily around questions that people have asked me directly, as well as questions that point to what I believe to be important considerations. For example, a few years ago a young man asked me, "What does God think about homosexuality?" While it might not be the way I would phrase the question, it represents a concern facing many people who are sorting out this issue. Similar questions include "What causes homosexuality?" and "Can homosexuality change?" As I mentioned above, I am not convinced that these questions in particular are the most critical ones for the church today, but I understand they are important and that people want honest, informed answers.

Other questions get at what I think are important but often ignored issues, such as, "Why is sexual identity the heart of the matter?" The chapter that answers this question helps us take the discussion to another level. I want to demonstrate why I think shifting our focus away from orientation and toward identity can help us better

understand what it means to be stewards of all we are, including our sexuality.

As the church wrestles with the topic of sexual identity and how to meet the needs of those who experience same-sex attraction, there are other questions that I think we should be asking ourselves, such as, “Whose people are we talking about?” and “What is our community response to enduring conditions?” The answers to these questions form a framework for providing counsel and pastoral care. The answers will also help us with how to deal with sexual identities within our families, so part 2 of the book answers several questions asked by family members: “What if my child or teen says he or she is gay?” “My adult child announced a gay identity: What now?” and “What if my spouse announces a gay identity?”

This book has been in the works for many years. In some respects it traces back to an invited address I gave at Calvin College years ago on sexual identity development among Christians. I remember that when I gave the talk, the person who was invited to respond to me thought I was going to lecture on how religious people are either not as likely to be homosexual or that they are unable to change orientation. So he talked about how religious people do have homosexual orientations, and he called into question whether people can willingly change sexual orientation. Both are valid discussions, but what he did not understand was that I was not talking about sexual orientation. Rather, I was talking about sexual *identity*—the act of labeling oneself based upon one’s sexual attractions— and what influences it and how it develops over time. I was exploring the psychology involved in making meaning out of one’s sexual attractions, and how that meaning could lead to labeling (or not), as well as the role of religious beliefs and values in that process. It was as though the other speaker and I were speaking past one another, and I have found that speaking past one another happens more often than not in discussions about homosexuality and sexual identity. This is partly because people are caught up in the familiar debates (e.g., what causes homosexuality and whether it

can change) or are unable to step outside of the ways they normally think about this topic (discussing only orientation).

Please note that I open most of the chapters with a story out of my counseling practice or from consultations of which I have been a part. The people and their experiences are real, but the names and details have been changed to protect their identities.

This book is intended for a general Christian audience. I would like to see it help parents, pastors, and friends of fellow believers who experience same-sex attraction, and I anticipate that Christians sorting out these issues for themselves will find several of the chapters helpful too. It is a resource for the Christian community, some of whom experience same-sex attraction. We need new ways to think about this topic and the people who need support as they navigate a difficult path.

PART ONE  
**THE BIG PICTURE**



## CHAPTER ONE

# What Does God Think About Homosexuality?

At the time, Scott stood out in my mind as a fairly unique teenager. His father brought him in for counseling because Scott had recently told him that he was attracted to other guys. Scott's dad shared this with his mom, and the two of them wanted Scott to "get help." I asked about Mom, but Scott's dad said she was working and wanted him to bring Scott in without her.

Scott's parents were Christians. When I asked how their faith related to their concerns, Scott's dad offered very little other than to say they did not think homosexuality would be a good idea for Scott. I wondered if Scott's father really thought that homosexuality was an "idea" that Scott came up with one day. But that discussion would have to wait.

Both of Scott's parents approached counseling for teenagers with the same mind-set: drop him off for help and pick him up in an hour. Neither of Scott's parents wanted to be involved in counseling, although I was able to convince Scott's dad to come in for a couple

of consultations. This allowed me to get his perspective on Scott's concerns.

As it turned out, Scott's concerns were quite different from his parents'. Scott was not as interested in discussing his experiences of same-sex attraction. In fact, Scott wanted to talk more about theology than sexuality. He led off with the question, "What does God think about homosexuality?"

## SOURCES OF AUTHORITY

This is not the ideal way I would frame the question, but it is what some people ask, particularly when they are Christians struggling with same-sex attractions. For other Christians, the answer has already been comfortably settled in their minds: They believe God does not condone homosexuality, or, at least, that He doesn't condone homosexual behavior. But an increasing number of people, Christians included, are asking this question for the first time. This is undoubtedly related to the broad social shift that has happened in which popular culture, entertainment, and the media have embraced homosexuality.

We must walk humbly around the question of what God thinks about anything. Not that we can't ultimately come to conclusions, but we need to be very careful in our approach. For one thing, when we try to answer this question, we don't want to lose sight of the person behind the experience. We will try to keep this in mind throughout this book.

In any case, as we think about this question, the first thing we need to decide is where we should go for the answer. Christians like Scott look to a number of sources of authority for guidance today, including (1) Scripture, (2) Christian tradition, (3) reason, and (4) personal experience.<sup>1</sup> All four of these sources are important to some extent, so let's look at each in turn.

### Scripture

Christian doctrine affirms that the Bible is a reliable guide for the believer. Scripture is "fully truthful in all its teachings."<sup>2</sup> It is a "sure

source of guidance”<sup>3</sup> in matters of faith and life, and although it is not a detailed textbook on human sexuality, it is a trustworthy guide in matters of sexuality and sexual behavior.

Rather than looking at Bible verses related only to homosexuality,<sup>4</sup> it is important to take a broader look at how God’s Word deals with sexuality as a whole. A Christian understanding of sex is best understood through the four stages of redemptive history in the Bible: creation, the fall, redemption, and glorification. Each stage teaches us something unique about what God had in mind for our sexuality.

*Creation.* We begin with the creation story in Genesis 1 and 2. What are some things it teaches us about who we are as human beings, especially as it relates to our sexuality? First, we are completely dependent on God but also distinct from God.<sup>5</sup> Second, we are part of the creation. Third, human beings are placed in relationships; we are placed in families.

What is the nature of these family relationships? What we see in Genesis is that God created heterosexual marriage as the foundation of the family. This is affirmed later in the New Testament by Jesus, Paul, and others. God places the act of sex within the bounds of heterosexual marriage, and Christians should understand sex to be a good thing, something intended by God at creation.

Genesis affirms that God created two sexes, male and female, and that he wanted sexual intimacy to be kept within heterosexual unions. Creation is particularly important because it reveals what life was like before the effects of the fall. It was a state that God said was good, and therefore Christians should look at the creation story as having important implications for sexuality and sexual behavior. Through God’s design and His stated pronouncements, Christians have understood that He is blessing monogamous, heterosexual unions.

We may go on from there to wonder why God placed human sexual expression in heterosexual marriage. There may be more than one answer to this question. First, sex in marriage is a “life-uniting act”<sup>6</sup> that is tied to transcendent, spiritual purposes. In other words,

sex is more than just a physical activity, though it certainly involves the body. When Christians talk about how sex is tied to purposes that transcend it, they mean that it has a spiritual dimension to it that makes it bigger than the act itself. Sex is truly sacred. Therefore, sex outside of marriage violates what sex is meant to be—a life-union of man and woman.

Sex also has the potential to bring about new life. It's the natural way for a couple to "be fruitful and multiply," as we read about in Genesis. Of course not all sex in marriage brings about new life: some couples choose not to have children, and others are unable to have biological children because of infertility. But despite these exceptions, heterosexual sex is the means by which new life is formed, and the Bible places this way of forming new life in the specific relationship of heterosexual marriage.

There is also something that sex in heterosexual marriage can teach us if we look at it as a symbol of something bigger than the act itself. I mentioned above that sex is tied to transcendent purposes. In some ways our sexuality and the desire for completion in another reflects our yearning for transcendence, for something that is above or beyond the world we know. That alone is instructive. But we also learn in the Old Testament about the covenant, or promise, that God made with His people. God related to His people like a faithful husband to a wayward wife. He uses that image to convey something of how He feels when His people pursue other gods, when His people prefer idols. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ ushers in a new covenant. The husband-wife relationship is again used to illustrate the relationship between Jesus and the church, as the church is called the bride of Christ. For some reason God repeatedly uses marriage between a man and a woman as an object lesson; it tells us about God's love for His people—it tells us about Christ's love for the church.

However, sex is more than just life-uniting, or about procreation, or instructive, as important as each of those things are. It is also pleasurable, as we read about in other parts of Scripture.<sup>7</sup> It is something

that couples take delight in. But again, in the Bible this is all in the context of the life-union between man and woman.

Think about eating for a moment. Having sex outside of heterosexual marriage is like the experience of eating for the pleasure alone. Although it is an imperfect analogy to sex, eating has many purposes. The primary reason for eating is to provide our bodies with the nutrients we need to survive. But eating is also instructive. Eating reminds us of our need for God, since it is God who provides our every need. Fasting has long been an important spiritual discipline. It reminds us of our dependence on God as our sustenance.

In addition to these useful purposes, eating can also be fun. But we are not supposed to just focus on foods that are pleasurable to eat. It is one thing to “Eat dessert first!” as the popular saying goes; it is another thing to eat only desserts. (The analogy breaks down, however—we need to eat to live, but we do not need to engage in sex to live, despite the fact that our sexuality and its expression is an important and meaningful part of human experience.) The point is this: We do not want to eat in a way that deprives food of its true purpose. Nor should we approach genital sexual activity in a way that deprives sex of its true purpose.

*The fall.* The idea of losing the transcendent purpose of food or sex is directly related to the fall. Because of the fall, we engage in behaviors in a way that disconnects them from their true meaning. The Bible states that all of creation has been tarnished by the fall. Evangelical Christians often emphasize individual sins—either doing the wrong thing or failing to do the right thing. But sin is also a state or condition. We are fallen, and we live in a world that is fallen. One author reflecting on the fall wrote that the world is “not the way it’s supposed to be.”<sup>8</sup>

Another author talks about sin as the “white noise” in the background.<sup>9</sup> Maybe you’ve seen white noise machines in a counselor’s office, or perhaps you’ve used one to help you sleep at night. They emit a low noise that covers other noises, keeping people from hearing

conversations or from being wakened by other sounds. Sin is like that. In fact, it is much more pervasive and far-reaching than that. It is the background noise of human existence. It's always on—so much so that we can adapt to it and forget it's even there. Sin affects human relationships and human sexuality. Again, this is not just about what we do or fail to do, but also how we see and understand the world around us. So the question is, what is the impact of the fall on sexuality?

At the individual level, “being fallen” is probably best understood as a splitting of the will.<sup>10</sup> In Romans 7, Paul talks about his own internal struggle with obedience and disobedience to God. This reflects a divided will, and in the area of sexuality, this divide is very clear. Many people struggle with obeying God's revealed will for sexuality and sexual behavior.

The fall has affected sexuality in many ways that have little to do with homosexuality, and there are a large number of examples of this throughout Scripture. For instance, in the New Testament scene in which Jesus was asked about divorce, He noted that although divorce is allowed in the Old Testament, it is not God's best for people; it isn't God's heart. Also, according to the Bible, sexual behaviors and relationships that occur outside of marriage (such as sex prior to marriage or adultery) are sinful. Additionally, sex that is demeaning, whether within marriage or outside of marriage, is a result of the fall and is not considered God's intention for sexuality. Probably the most common effect of the fall that we struggle with today is our tendency to turn people into objects. As a society we have the sinful capacity to fragment others, to think about humans as interchangeable objects for personal sexual gratification.<sup>11</sup> This is a growing problem with our easy access to such images through the Internet and magazines.

And finally, as important and meaningful as relationships can be between two people of the same sex, sexual behavior between them is considered one of many things that fall outside of God's revealed will.

Christians tend to focus on the sins of others, including sexual sins, while overlooking or discounting their own struggle with sin.

But many Christians are beginning to realize that homosexuality is one of those areas that can get a disproportionate amount of attention while other areas of concern, such as greed, envy, or pride, remain largely unchecked.<sup>12</sup>

*Redemption.* Christians understand that God in His mercy did not leave us in our sin. He did not abandon us to our fallen state. Rather, God had a plan for the redemption of a chosen people and of the broader creation. Redemption was set in motion immediately after the fall, but it came to a culmination with the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. That said, the victory that believers experience in Christ is not yet complete. Indeed, Christians live in the “in between times,” as one theologian put it.<sup>13</sup> We are in the “now” and the “not yet” of the victory we have in Christ. In other words, we live a life that is redeemed and set apart for God’s purposes, but not all has been made perfect.

God uses certain relationships and institutions to protect us and to foster in us the qualities that are important to Him. For example, the church can be thought of as an institution that God established to provide for us and to protect us. A healthy church is a blessing that helps equip the believer. Similarly, there are ways in which marriage can be seen as providential. Marriage is the relationship God identifies as reflecting the many purposes of sexuality and full sexual expression. So it is a place for sex to be “life-uniting” (or at least to have that potential); it is a place that offers us the instructional aspect of what God says to us about His relationship with His people; and it is a place for us to enjoy and delight in the physical pleasure of sex.

Sex outside of marriage does not reflect God’s intention for sexual behavior, but a person’s experience of sex outside of marriage may not be different from that of sex within marriage. In other words, Christians cannot deny that there are meaningful relationships, including same-sex relationships, that are formed and maintained outside of heterosexual marriage. Sex outside of marriage may be pleasurable or

even produce children. But this does not mean that these are the kind of relationships God intended for full expression.

Christians affirm that we are in a place in history in which Jesus has secured the victory on the cross, but that victory is yet to be completed. This is the time of redemption, and God uses us to further the cause of redemption in our own lives each day.

*Glorification.* The story of creation, the fall, and redemption comes to a culmination with the return of Jesus. This is referred to as “glorification,” the last major act of redemptive history. So how does glorification affect how we view sexuality?

Glorification confirms that the church is our “first family”<sup>14</sup> and that biological ties should not be our top priority on this side of heaven. Our primary identity is a Christian, and we must look at everything else we are in light of this fact.

The church is God’s most important institution on earth. The church is the social agent that most significantly shapes and forms the character of Christians. And the church is the primary vehicle of God’s grace and salvation for a waiting, desperate world.<sup>15</sup>

Do you remember when Jesus was asked about what marriage would be like in heaven? It was a trick question—people were trying to get Him to comment on a theological debate that was going on at the time. But Jesus didn’t bite. He said that there would not be giving and taking of husbands and wives in heaven. Should we assume, then, that there will be no marriage in heaven? No, that’s not quite right. You see, although marriage will not exist between two human beings, marriage will exist between the church, the bride of Christ, and Jesus, the Bridegroom.

This should give us some insight into our sexuality today. Keeping glorification in mind helps us understand the place of our sexuality and its expression. Sexuality is important for a number of reasons, but it is not our first identity. Our primary identity is that we are part of

a body of believers who are wed to Christ. This is true whether we are single or married. Each of us is part of the bride.

The church is not only considered the “primary vehicle of God’s grace”; it also represents the believer’s main identity as a Christian, a follower of Christ. This can be discouraging when the church falls short of its potential in important areas, including how we as a community respond to fellow believers who are sorting out sexual identity questions. On the other hand, it can also be inspiring when we catch a vision for who we could be in relation to those who are struggling among us and in our communities.

Glorification, then, reminds us of what we, as individuals and as a body of believers, are moving toward. God’s concern is to help us grow into the fullness of our potential.

To summarize what we have covered so far, sex in heterosexual marriage is affirmed by the Bible for three primary reasons. First, it is a symbol of our relationship with the Lord. This was conveyed in metaphors throughout the Old Testament between God and Israel, and in the New Testament between Christ and the church. Second, sex in marriage is good because of the unity it creates between one man and one woman. Third, sex in marriage is good because it is the sole means of procreation, even when procreation is not chosen or not possible due to other issues such as infertility.

According to the Scriptures, sex outside of a heterosexual union falls outside of God’s will and intention for us. This is not limited to homosexual sex, but it does include it. Despite the reinterpretations some theologians have attempted, it seems clear that Scripture speaks with one voice on the topic of homosexual behavior. Let’s now turn our attention to Christian tradition.

## Christian Tradition

Scripture forms the basis for Christian tradition. Indeed, Christian tradition is not about believers discovering new truths about their faith; it is about passing on truths to the next generation and

addressing current issues in light of one's faith. It involves being faithful to what those who went before us understood to be true in terms of the person and work of Christ. How has Christian tradition understood homosexuality?

When considering homosexuality and Christian tradition, we need to acknowledge that there are a lot of different beliefs represented within the Christian faith. We can't cover the whole spectrum in a book of this size, but let me briefly review Roman Catholic and Protestant stances.

*Roman Catholic Christianity.*<sup>16</sup> Roman Catholicism has traditionally been shaped by the Church's interpretation of the Scriptures and historical traditions. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, a summary of the official teachings of Roman Catholicism, the purpose of marriage includes the good of the spouses as well as the procreation and education of children.<sup>17</sup> Historically, more emphasis has been placed on procreation; more recently, however, there has been an emphasis on the relationship of husband and wife as a covenant that symbolizes the love Christ has for the church.<sup>18</sup>

In the twelfth century, marriage was recognized as a sacrament by the Catholic Church; it was formally accepted at the Council of Florence (1439) and the Council of Trent (1545–1563).<sup>19</sup> Marriage as sacrament meant that the marriage ceremony was a “principal means by which God communicates the grace (favor) that heals human beings of sin and elevates them into the divine life.”<sup>20</sup> The Catholic Church holds that a “married life that begins in this context has the overtones of a shared commitment to journey ever more deeply into the mysteries of salvation.”<sup>21</sup>

What does this understanding of marriage have to do with a Catholic view of homosexuality? The Catholic Church does recognize homosexuality as a real sexual orientation, meaning that it is an enduring pattern of sexual and emotional attraction. (This is in contrast to some Christians who see heterosexuality as the only real sexual orientation, with homosexuality being more like an addiction

or other concern.) But in spite of this view, the Catholic Church holds that same-sex behavior is against natural law and that homosexuality itself goes against God's original design for sex.

A Roman Catholic view also takes seriously the fact that same-sex relationships do not allow for procreation. Same-sex relationships cannot reflect the various meanings of marriage found within Catholicism. Therefore, the person who experiences same-sex attraction is called upon to live a chaste life, accepting their same-sex attractions as a personal trial in their walk with God.<sup>22</sup>

*Protestant Christianity.* Despite the diversity of denominations represented within Protestantism, the majority express similar views on sexuality and marriage because they share a common history in the Continental and English Reformation movements.<sup>23</sup> The relationship between husband and wife is viewed as a “covenantal bond.” This covenant symbolizes the relationship between God and His people that is conveyed in the Old Testament (e.g., Jeremiah 3:14), or the relationship between Christ and the church as presented in the New Testament (e.g., Ephesians 5:22–33).<sup>24</sup>

One modern trend among Protestants has been to decrease the emphasis on procreation within marriage in order to take a more companionship-oriented stance;<sup>25</sup> therefore, one of the primary purposes of marriage in Protestant Christianity is the love and companionship between husband and wife. Having children has become secondary and an outflow of the marriage relationship.<sup>26</sup> Some view this companionship trend as a more secular, modern, and Western phenomenon, and believe that conservative Protestant Christians still emphasize the importance of procreation, or at least the potential to procreate, as it relates to marriage within a heterosexual union.

Protestant tradition sees sex within the context of marriage as a normal and positive product of humanity's creation as male and female.<sup>27</sup> In other words, sex is good and proper in the context of heterosexual marriage, but only in that context. Protestant Christianity values

celibacy but tends to show a preference for marriage.<sup>28</sup> This preference is not true in Catholicism.

Those within the Protestant Church who oppose this traditional stance on sexuality and marriage are primarily coming from mainline denominations rather than conservative or evangelical ones. Since the early 1970s, many mainline churches began debating the morality of same-sex behavior and whether to bless same-sex unions. There certainly has been a historical consensus—a Christian tradition—but that is being challenged in many Protestant denominations today. This challenge seems to reflect broader issues, with many of the challengers questioning the authority of Scripture and opposing a theology that recognizes the potential value in redemptive suffering. But in spite of these challenges, most Protestant denominations still do not bless same-sex unions or ordain practicing homosexuals.

Some Protestant groups have moved toward a stance similar to that of Roman Catholicism, holding that if people cannot change their sexual orientation, they are called to live a chaste life in keeping with traditional interpretations of Scripture and Christian tradition.<sup>29</sup> In other words, their stance is that there is no sin in individuals being same-sex attracted, as long as they abstain from homosexual acts.

So there is a traditional Christian sexual ethic seen in both Roman Catholic and Protestant Christianity. That ethic is grounded in Scripture and has been held throughout the history of the church. It would be a radical departure from church tradition for Christians to embrace same-sex behavior and relationships today. Those Christians who are making this shift seem to be doing so based on reason and personal experience rather than the teachings of Scripture or church tradition.

## Reason

When people cite “reason” as a source of authority, they are typically thinking of scientific advances that have furthered our understanding of homosexuality. In a different book, a coauthor and I discussed the

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relevance of science to the church's moral debate.<sup>30</sup> We identified several ways in which people have tried to move the debate about homosexuality away from the church's traditional sexual ethic.

The major areas we discussed were: (a) the commonness of homosexuality; (b) the causes of homosexuality; (c) whether it is a mental health issue; and (d) whether sexual orientation can change from homosexual to heterosexual. Here are a few quotes from people who have tried to use science to move the church away from the traditional sexual ethic in some of these areas:

- *Commonness of homosexuality*: "If the best scientific data . . . seems to put the figure of gay and lesbian people in the world at about 10 percent of the population . . . then you and I need to realize that 10 percent is such a large percentage that it could hardly be accidental."<sup>31</sup>
- *Mental health issue*: "If it could be shown that homosexuality is generally a symptom of unmet emotional needs or difficulties in social adjustment, then this might point to problems in relating to God and other persons. But if that cannot generally be shown, homosexuality may be compatible with life in grace. . . . The scientific evidence is sufficient to support the contention that homosexuality is not pathological or otherwise an inversion, developmental failure, or deviant form of life as such, but is rather a human variant, one that can be healthy and whole."<sup>32</sup>
- *Cause of sexual attractions*: "If organic or body-chemical explanations should, however, prevail, we are reminded . . . how this would make even more indefensible moral condemnation of same-sex preference or assertions of its unnaturalness."<sup>32</sup>

In chapters 3 and 4 I will review some of the research that is being used to support these bold claims. But for now I'll just say that the science is often poorly understood, it's overstated, and it is essentially misused by those who are attempting to change the church's historical teaching about sexuality and sexual ethics.

The best studies suggest that only 2 to 3 percent of the population is homosexually oriented, but to some extent those numbers

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shouldn't affect a Christian stance either way. At least as far as behavior is concerned, many patterns of sin are common, such as pride, while others are rare, like cannibalism. The point is, whether something is common or rare is a separate issue from whether it is wrong.

When we look at the causes of homosexuality, we simply do not know why some people experience same-sex attractions or have a homosexual orientation. There are probably many factors that contribute in one way or another, with these factors varying from person to person. In the final analysis, does the cause of same-sex attraction fundamentally change the Christian sexual ethic? No. We are all called to live the way that God reveals is good for us in terms of sexuality and sexual behavior.

There was a definite shift thirty to forty years ago in which mental health professional organizations declared that homosexuality was no longer a mental disorder, and we've seen more recent attempts to portray it as a healthy expression of sexual diversity. But there is mixed evidence for the truth of this claim, and the fact that our culture has shifted is not fundamentally central to the Christian sexual ethic. In other words, the question of whether something is defined as a mental disorder has very little to do with whether or not it is a sin. Many patterns are deemed "mental disorders" but are not sinful patterns of behavior, such as schizophrenia. On the other hand, many sinful patterns of behavior are not "mental disorders" but are sinful behaviors or attitudes, such as greed.

Finally, there has been an ongoing debate about whether people can change their attractions or orientations. When we look at this debate, we need to realize that this also is not directly relevant to the moral issue. The Christian should focus on being faithful to God's revealed will, and for most Christians the concern is with behavior rather than attractions or orientation. Changing sexual orientation is one thing. Changing behavior is another.

So these are the common arguments from reason or science. They are often cited as grounds for moving the church down a certain path—away from the conclusions drawn from reading Scripture and from Christian tradition.

## Personal Experience

One final source of authority that is brought into the debate about homosexuality is personal experience. It is important to listen to fellow believers who experience same-sex attraction. Gay Christians have an important perspective to offer, but we should also listen to the voices of sexual minorities who do not form a gay identity, by which I mean those Christians who are attracted to the same sex but decide not to act on these attractions or form a gay identity based upon these attractions. These people seem to be disparaged by people on both sides of the debate.

Perhaps the reason many conservative Christians won't listen to them is because certain segments of the church have made very strong claims that people who are attracted to the same sex can be healed or completely changed. They think that if a person has enough faith they can change their sexual orientation to the point that they are attracted to people of the opposite sex. This could lead some same-sex attracted Christians to feel the pressure to claim that they've been "cured" and are completely changed, even if they aren't. This added pressure should be lifted, and the experience of those who attempt change and who have benefited from it, even if they haven't changed completely, should be explored and better understood.

On the other side of the spectrum, many Christian communities have emerging groups supporting a gay identity. We see this in the Roman Catholic Church: The group Dignity, although not an official Roman Catholic group,<sup>33</sup> was developed with this purpose in mind. Similar groups have emerged in nearly every Protestant mainline denomination today.

Gay Christians tend to emphasize that their homosexuality is "who they are." They can no more remove that from their overall sense of identity than can African-American Christians remove being black from their identity. In our studies of gay Christians, a common theme was that of authenticity—gay Christians told us that it would be inauthentic to deny their own homosexuality. One woman we interviewed talked about her experiences that confirmed her sense of identity as a gay Christian: "Confirmation came for me when . . . I

found happiness or contentment . . . being with a woman. . . . Every time I chose to do what was natural, it felt like confirmation.”

It is important to recognize that sexuality should be experienced as central to a person’s overall sense of identity. I think this was intended by God. We are inherently physical beings, and we are inherently sexual beings. So we don’t want to communicate that our sexuality is somehow removed from who we are.

On the other hand, it is also important to recognize that when we ask what God thinks about homosexuality, we are likely to confuse the pattern of behavior with the person. In other words, while we can acknowledge that some gay Christians say behavior and identity cannot be separated, other Christians who experience same-sex attraction do precisely that. They separate behavior and identity, seeing it as a necessary step in navigating their sexuality in light of their faith. When we instead ask what God thinks about homosexually oriented people, or what he thinks of people who experience same-sex attraction, we can answer without hesitation that God loves them. And as Christians we should take the lead in demonstrating the love of God in real, sustained relationships.

When we are asked as a church to listen to the voices of sexual minorities, I think it is important that we do just that. We want to avoid, however, listening only to those who have chosen to embrace a gay identity. As I mentioned above, we do well to also listen to those who have chosen not to integrate their sexual attractions into their behavior. Their personal experiences contrast with those who embrace a gay identity. It isn’t that those who do not identify as gay deny their attraction to the same sex; rather, they choose not to form an identity around their attractions. In the studies we have conducted, they tend to form an identity around other aspects of who they are. For example, one person shared the following:

My faith in Jesus has allowed Him into my life to heal wounded areas. With healing comes strength and maturity—which enabled me to grow up and out of the [same-sex attraction].

And if I do have fleeting moments of [same-sex attraction]—I

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remember why it happened, and I think of God and who I am in Him. I can let go of the attraction and move on and be at peace.<sup>34</sup>

As we discussed in seeing sexuality in light of glorification, some Christians foster a primary identity as part of a larger body of believers who share with one another an identity in Christ.

Their experiences, taken together with the proper role of science and an understanding of Christian tradition and biblical revelation, speak an important message to sexual minorities today. That message is a message of meaning and purpose that is found in God's provision and in stewarding one's sexuality and sexual identity. There are those who are attempting to live out the Christian sexual ethic as understood from Scripture and Christian tradition, and their voices, their personal experiences, must also be heard by the church today.

## WHAT SOURCES OF AUTHORITY DO YOU EMPHASIZE?

I've been reviewing the four major sources of authority that people in the church turn to for direction on the difficult topic of homosexuality. But, of course, most people don't treat these four sources as equally authoritative. Each of us places greater relative weight on some than others. It is important to reflect on what weight you give to each of them, as well as the weight others are giving to these various sources of important information.

Some Christians claim to give greater weight to personal experience and reason. But what I think they are actually doing is giving greater weight to the experiences of those Christians who have embraced a gay identity. Meanwhile, they don't seem to be as open to the personal experiences of those Christian sexual minorities who have chosen not to embrace a gay identity. These same Christians also appear to favor a certain reading of science. They apply that understanding of science to the moral debate in the church, and by doing so they believe the findings make Scripture and Christian tradition less relevant.

This then makes them question Scripture and Christian tradition, which can lead to some interesting efforts to reinterpret Scripture to fit a shift in beliefs and values that they have brought to the Word. This is understandable; it can be difficult to grapple with Scripture when someone you are close to, someone you know and love, such as a daughter or son, is struggling through these issues. Or perhaps they are not struggling but rather feel greater expressed happiness or contentment as a gay person in a same-sex relationship.

Other Christians appear to give greater weight to Scripture and Christian tradition. This is good, although I hope that all four sources of authority are given consideration. For them, Scripture is “trump,” and the weight of Christian tradition is substantial too. They can pay attention to the findings from science without believing that science is able to settle the moral debate for the church. After all, science describes what occurs and can be measured; it doesn’t tell us how we ought to live or why we should choose one behavior over another. In other words, this group of Christians recognizes the limits of science on ethical decision-making. If they do listen to Christian sexual minorities, they tend to listen to those Christians who do not form a gay identity. They may value that aspect of personal experience but are suspicious of those who identify as gay and Christian, seeing them as championing a cause—a change in sexual ethics that goes against Scripture and Christian tradition.

## CONCLUSION

“What does God think about homosexuality?” Scott asked. It’s an important question to a sixteen-year-old who takes his faith seriously. It’s also an important question to those who love Scott and others like him.

At the time Scott’s question seemed unique, particularly for a teenager, but I see more and more young people asking it these days. Unfortunately, the question blurs the distinction between the person and their actions. People who experience same-sex attraction or have a homosexual orientation may or may not engage in same-sex behavior.

Such behavior is a concern to the Christian because of what we believe God intends for sexuality and its expression.

So what, then, should be our answer to this question? Although we could look at the specific passages of Scripture that address homosexuality directly, many Christians find it more helpful to look at the Scriptures in their entirety. In the end, the Bible speaks with one voice on the matter. When we add the weight of Scripture to the weight of Christian tradition; when we look carefully at the relevance of scientific research on matters of sexual ethics (science is able to describe what *occurs in nature* but not *how we ought to live*); and finally, when we reflect on the personal experiences of sexual minorities who integrate their attractions into a gay identity *and* those who choose not to because of their effort to live in conformity to God's revealed will, the evidence points to a traditional understanding of how God sees homosexuality. In other words, our conclusion is that homosexual behavior is not appropriate for the Christ-follower.

As for the person, the sexual minority, God loves them. And, just as with any other person, God desires a relationship with them.

So Christians will want to be careful and humble in their attempt to answer the question of what God thinks about homosexuality. At the same time, there is a tremendous cultural push to change Christian ethics and church teaching on the morality of same-sex behavior. In that sense, the question is being asked more frequently than ever, and there is a need to answer with doctrinal clarity in the context of pastoral care and respect. In all matters, including our sexuality, it may be helpful to talk about being good stewards of what we have been given. We will discuss this further in subsequent chapters.

But there is also a pastoral piece to this discussion. I don't think God is sitting at a distance seeing what people will do with the circumstances they are in. I think God is very active in our lives, identifying with us in our longings and struggles, including attraction to the same sex and the desire to experience full sexual intimacy. And I think the Christian can invite God into that experience of longing—the Christian can invite God to speak to him or her in that desire. The

French writer Paul Claudel once said, “Jesus Christ did not come to take away suffering from the world. He did not even come to explain it. He came to fill suffering with his nearness.”

This language will sound foreign to our ears. Our culture today emphasizes personal fulfillment and individual attainment—not what it means to conform our lives to the Word of God. Although it contrasts sharply with a Western culture that focuses on felt needs and “self-actualization,” Christians are called to say no to some experiences so that we can say yes to a life that is obedient to God’s revealed will. Our understanding of that revealed will is found in Scripture, witnessed to in Christian tradition, illuminated by science properly conducted and interpreted, and confirmed by the lives of those who are living faithfully before God. Indeed, from Christian sexual minorities we learn that the Christian life is one in which we become more Christlike rather than just fulfilling our potential. Or, to put it more accurately, our potential can only be truly fulfilled in obedience to God and His claim on our lives, including our sexuality and its expression.

## TAKE-HOME POINTS

- Avoid proof-texting from Scripture.
- A biblical understanding of sexuality and sexual behavior should reflect the four acts of the biblical drama: creation, the fall, redemption, and glorification.
- There are four general sources of authority: Scripture, Christian tradition, reason (science), and personal experience.
- Personal experience should include both those who want to change the church’s teachings on homosexuality and those who live in conformity to God’s revealed will for sexuality and sexual behavior.
- Everyone favors one or two sources of authority over others—it can be helpful to reflect on which sources of authority you favor and why.