



# The Bible and Homosexuality

## SESSION 1

What role does the Bible play in the debate over same-gender sexual relationships and Christian discipleship?

### Introduction

The debate over how to regard same-gender sexual relationships is raging in the church, with shock waves rippling through society. Christians on all sides of the controversy often invoke Scripture. This situation raises questions: How can people of equally passionate faith disagree so strenuously on this subject? Is it possible to find a way forward without the church being torn asunder?

Peace, if it is to prevail, surely depends on people understanding both their own and others' positions. The chief aim of this study, therefore, is to explore how the Bible is used to support different beliefs about the (un)acceptability for Christians of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered (LGBT) identity and same-gender sexual practice. The closely related debates over same-sex marriage and the ordination of LGBT people will be discussed in passing, but they are not the study's primary focus.

We will look at two opposing stands, one identified here as *prohibitionist* because its adherents hold that the Bible prohibits all same-sex relations, and one identified as *affirming* because its adherents hold that LGBT identity is an aspect of some persons' overall, God-given selfhood and should therefore be affirmed. Some may object that treating the matter as a contest between these two opposing viewpoints is an oversimplification, since many people hold intermediate positions. For example, some concede that homosexual *orientation* may be innate and should not be condemned, as long as the person does not engage in same-gender sexual *practice* (just as one should not condemn those with a genetic predisposition to alcoholism, provided they do not drink to excess).



How can people of equally passionate faith disagree so strenuously on this subject? Is it possible to find a way forward without the church being torn asunder?

Some insist that same-gender sexual practice is sinful, yet out of awareness that *all* persons sin and depend on God's gracious forgiveness, they welcome individual LGBT persons or even couples into their churches, communities, and homes. Nevertheless, when the various viewpoints are arrayed on a continuum, there is a fundamental divide between those who think that the Bible rules out all same-gender sexual practice and those who think that a full and contextualized reading of the Bible demands that the church welcome and affirm LGBT persons, including those who are not celibate.

Looking at the debate over homosexuality and the Bible as if it were a high-stakes game may help us to understand why the controversy seems endless. As every elementary student knows, games have rules, and both sides have to agree on the rules or else the game breaks down. In the debate over LGBT identity and same-gender sexual practice, the prohibitionists and the affirmers agree that the Bible has much to say, but they disagree about how the Bible should be read. They follow different sets of rules or reading strategies for using biblical testimony. In this study we will try to understand the rules that each side follows.

Most of the church literature on LGBT people focuses on lesbian and gay issues and does not deal substantively with bisexuality or transgenderism. Nor does the literature discuss the issue of persons born intersex (having biological characteristics of both the male and female sexes; perhaps 1 in 2,000 persons is born intersex, though estimates vary).

The two-part study will begin by asking why so many people regard this debate as of paramount importance, and then move on to consider the pertinent biblical passages. This session will consider passages that explicitly mention same-gender sexual practice. Session 2 will address two other sets of passages: for the prohibitionists, texts interpreted to mean that God's will for marriage is that one man and one woman join in a lifelong bond; and for the affirmers, texts interpreted to mean that God does not want humans to live alone and that God regularly embraces outcasts and sets prisoners free. In session 2 we will also consider how each party handles nonbiblical evidence from science, tradition, and contemporary experience and conclude by reflecting on constructive responses to disagreement among Christian brothers and sisters.

## What Is at Stake?

For many prohibitionists, acceptance of same-gender sexual identity and practice is a step on the slippery slope to total loss of biblical morality and divine authority. From this perspective, the Bible's teachings against such identity and practice are clear: desire for same-gender sexual relations is a form of disordered and compulsive thinking that offends God. To affirm LGBT persons in their sexual preference is like supporting alcoholics in their desire to drink and is acquiescing in others' willful disobedience to God. LGBT people and those who support them undermine God's design for good order in the world—a design that has heterosexual married couples and their families at its heart. Same-gender sexual relationships threaten the social order by making a type of sexual liaison that is contrary to God's will seem "normal," thereby increasing its acceptability and spread in the society. Moreover, if same-gender couples choose to raise children, they are unable to provide a model of family as God intends it to be; thus they pass their own disordered thinking on to the next generation. Finally, in the view of some prohibitionists, full acceptance and

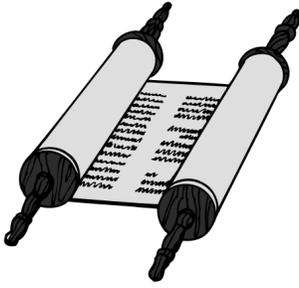
affirmation of LGBT identity and practice in society will eventually lead to the marginalization of prohibitionists, as it becomes politically incorrect or even illegal to oppose LGBT identity and practice.

Meanwhile, affirmers insist that same-gender sexual desire does not constitute disordered or compulsive thinking but is an innate, God-given aspect of some persons' identity, much like others' longing for heterosexual companionship (see Gen. 2:18). Those who condemn homosexuality and deny LGBT people rights and privileges that heterosexuals are granted by either church or state are committing a grave injustice, comparable to that done to black people during the era of slavery (an institution, affirmers point out, that was likewise defended with references to the Bible). LGBT people suffer because of harassment and restrictions placed on them and because they often internalize the culture's homophobia and judgmentalism toward them. Rates of depression, alcohol and drug addiction, and suicide are shockingly high among the LGBT population. LGBT youth are especially prone to extreme loneliness, self-loathing, and self-harm. Rejecting LGBT people constitutes injustice, but welcoming and affirming them continues Jesus' ministry to social outcasts and manifests God's inclusive love. Society's growing acceptance of LGBT people is a sign that the Spirit is moving across the land. For the church to resist this movement by trying to exclude noncelibate LGBT people or to force them to go straight would be as sinful as some first-century Christians' resistance to including the Gentiles unless they first converted to Judaism. It would be as sinful as some nineteenth-century Christians' refusal to support the emancipation of slaves.

## Biblical Passages That Mention Homosexual Practice

Four passages from the Old Testament and three from the New Testament make explicit reference to same-gender sexual relations; these are described below. Note that interpreters differ about how to translate some of the key terms. (Translations below are from the NRSV.)

*Genesis 19:4–8 and Judges 19.* In Genesis 19, Lot is entertaining angelic guests when all the men of Sodom surround his house and demand that he send out his visitors, "so that we may know them." Lot admonishes the men of Sodom not to act wickedly and volunteers to send out his two virgin daughters so that the men of Sodom may rape them instead of the visitors. Lot



Both those who would prohibit and those who would affirm same-gender sexual relationships appeal to the Bible to support their beliefs.

concludes, “Only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.” Judges 19 is a parallel tradition about a Levite who allows his concubine to be raped in place of him.

*Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13.* Both passages, which occur within the section of Leviticus known as the Holiness Code, state that it is “an abomination” for a man to “lie with a male as with a woman.”

*First Corinthians 6:9–10 and 1 Timothy 1:9–10.* Each passage includes a list of vices (a common rhetorical pattern in Paul’s day). In 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 Paul writes, “Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, *male prostitutes, sodomites*, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God” (emphasis added). The term translated by the NRSV as “sodomite” occurs also in 1 Tim. 1:10.

*Romans 1:26–27.* In an account of the divine consequences for Gentile idolatry, Paul writes, “For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.”

## Different Ways of Reading the Biblical Texts

### Prohibitionists

An underlying premise of the prohibitionists’ reading strategy is that the Bible is a kind of divinely given constitution or “owners’ manual,” which lays down timeless principles or rules for God-approved living. Properly regarded as the judge of human thoughts, the Bible is in no way to be judged by us.

Prohibitionists tend to argue that the texts in question convey a plain meaning applicable to humans in all times and places. Indeed, to many prohibitionists, the passages speak so clearly against same-gender sexual relations that the affirmers’ denial of their continuing relevance seems deluded—even laughable. Extensive knowledge of the passages’ original historical and cultural contexts does not diminish the texts’ relevance for humans today. Typical prohibitionist inferences from the biblical texts cited above include the following:

- “*Homosexuality may not be mentioned often, but it is clearly condemned wherever it is mentioned*”
- The men of Sodom were judged by God for their wickedness.
- The passages from Leviticus identify same-gender sexual relations (between men) as an “abomination.”
- First Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 use a term (*arsenokoitai*) that is a compound of two words found in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, suggesting that the Leviticus texts were viewed as still relevant for Christians when those epistles were written.
- In Romans 1:26–27, Paul identifies same-gender sexual relations as expressions of “shameless” and “degrading” passions and as “against nature” (interpreted to mean a deviation from the “gender complementarity” that prohibitionists see as God’s plan for humanity, as per Gen. 2:24). Same-gender sexual desire is, according to prohibitionist reading of this passage, *distorted* desire.
- “*Even if the biblical authors made different assumptions about sex and gender than we do, we cannot simply set aside their worldview as inferior because we disagree with them.*” This argument is a defense against the affirmers’ contention that the stark disparities between ancient and modern views of sex and gender render the biblical prohibitions irrelevant for the present. Rather, prohibitionists argue, clear biblical statements and objective biblical truth ought to trump modern perspectives.

### Affirmers

An underlying premise of the affirmers’ reading strategy is that the Bible is a divine message expressed in

human forms of thought, and it was conditioned by the culture, linguistic patterns, and worldview of the times and places in which its various parts were written. The prohibitionists' case against same-gender sexual relationships seems clear only because they do not take account of passages' original historical and cultural contexts or ambiguities of language revealed by close study of the Hebrew and Greek.

Analysis of key terms in the biblical passages cited above uncovers nuances that would have been obvious to early readers but that are usually lost in modern translations. Biblical authors (like all ancient people) understood human sexuality, including homosexuality, very differently than it is understood today, making application of their beliefs to today's society problematic. For example, biblical authors had no concept of loving and enduring same-gender sexual unions. Their condemnations were premised on what they themselves knew about same-gender sexual practice, which in the ancient world was typically exploitative (as, for example, when young male prisoners of war were castrated and forced to become sex slaves). Arguments made to refute the prohibitionists and affirm LGBT people include the following:

- *"Comparing biblical and contemporary views of gender and sexuality is like comparing apples and oranges."* It is an error to try to derive answers to our questions about homosexuality—questions that biblical authors never imagined—from what they wrote. Ancient beliefs about gender and sexuality were part of larger worldviews that even prohibitionists do not accept:
- In Genesis 19 and Judges 19, the men of the city sought to harm the male visitors by gang-raping them, thus forcing them to take the passive or feminine role. The Sodomites' intention was not to seek sexual gratification but to inflict violent humiliation on the visitors. The stories are written in a context that accepted a strict gender hierarchy, in which any "feminine" behavior by a male is viewed as deeply shameful and a threat to the social order. Lot resists because failure to protect his guests from this terrible affront would be a failure of hospitality. Indeed, ancient commentators thought that the chief sin of the Sodomites was their violation of the rules of hospitality.

The radical discrepancy between the ancient storytellers' views of sexual morality and our own is underscored by the hosts' willingness to offer their own daughters/concubine to the attackers to be gang-raped.

- Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 presume that "men lying with men" is wrong, not because it violates a supposed rule of gender complementarity, but because it violates an assumed gender hierarchy, damaging the honor of the passive male partner by feminizing him. "Women lying with women" is not an issue for Leviticus because male honor is not at stake.<sup>1</sup>
- The word often translated as "relations" or "intercourse" in Romans 1:26, 27 is better translated "use" (as in the KJV); this word reflects Paul's utilitarian view of sex—a view popular among philosophers of his day but foreign to our own culture, with its ideal of sexual mutuality and relationality. Paul apparently assumed that *all* passion was destructive and dangerous; therefore intercourse (including heterosexual) was best carried on without it (see 1 Thess. 4:5; 1 Cor. 7:9).
- *"Prohibitions of same-gender sexual relations in the Holiness Code found in Leviticus cannot be deemed automatically binding on Christians today, since many other regulations from this part of Leviticus are not viewed as obligatory for Christians."*<sup>2</sup> To prohibitionists who insist that Paul preserves the relevance of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 by alluding to them in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 and 1 Timothy 1:9–10, affirmers argue that the supposed allusions are questionable and the key words ambiguous.<sup>3</sup>
- *"Romans 1:26–27 is not chiefly about same-gender sexuality but is part of a larger argument about the consequences of the Gentiles' primeval fall into idolatry."* Paul is arguing that when Gentiles first turned away from God to worship idols, God punished them by allowing them to persist in their willful suppression of the truth and to be carried away by their own passions. The punishment was retaliation in kind: their fall into passion dishonored them, just as they had dishonored God.<sup>4</sup>

Certainly Paul, like other Jews of his era, disapproved of same-gender sexual relations. It is misleading,

however, to cite Romans 1:26–27 as proof of a divine design for gender complementarity or as proof that same-gender sexual desire is a distinct malady or disorder. Paul’s focus was not on loving and enduring same-sex unions—a notion that would have been foreign to him—but on idolatry and how it leads to self-delusion and, in turn, to insatiable and shameful passion. So the relevance of the passage for LGBT persons in committed, enduring same-gender sexual relationships is dubious at best.

## Summary

Both those who would prohibit and those who would affirm same-gender sexual relationships appeal to the Bible to support their beliefs. Prohibitionists contend that wherever the Bible speaks of same-sex relationships the judgment is clear and harsh; therefore, the only possible conclusion is that such relationships are sinful and must be avoided. Affirmers contend that the Bible’s scattered references to same-gender sexuality carry all kinds of ancient cultural baggage that render the passages incompatible with modern worldviews—even for the prohibitionists, were they to be honest about it. Therefore the Bible cannot be made to answer our complex questions about homosexuality.

The biblical passages that explicitly discuss same-gender sexual relations are not the only relevant ones. In the next session we will consider additional biblical passages, along with other sorts of evidence that are regularly brought into this debate.

## About the Writer

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## Endnotes

1. See Phyllis A. Bird, “The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation concerning Homosexuality: Old Testament Contributions,” in *Homosexuality, Science, and the “Plain Sense” of Scripture*, ed. David L. Balch (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 142–76.

2. See, for example, Lev. 19:27. Affirmers do not generally contend that the entire Holiness Code be ignored but insist that the principles by which it is interpreted and appropriated be delineated with great care.

3. *Arsenokoitai* (NRSV: “sodomites”) may have referred specifically to the buying and selling of sex slaves, in which case Paul’s condemnation does not apply to LGBT persons involved in loving and committed same-gender relationships. *Malakoi* (NRSV: “male prostitutes”; KJV: “effeminate”) typically means “soft” or “effeminate” in other writings from the era. But definitions of effeminacy were very different back then, being part and parcel of a worldview in which femaleness was highly undesirable and indicated lack of control over the passions. (Thus, for example, persons who had too much heterosexual sex were *malakoi* because they could not control themselves.)

4. The Gentiles’ turning to same-sex relations was illustrative for Paul of *uncontrolled* (not twisted or distorted) passion. Other ancient authors drew parallels between gourmands who seek new sorts of food to satisfy their insatiable cravings and lustful persons who turn to same-gender sexual relations or even to bestiality when heterosexual sex no longer quells their desire. The clause translated by the NRSV as “their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural” would be more accurately translated “their women exchanged natural use for a use that is beyond what is natural.” The reference is not to a violation of so-called gender complementarity, but to a passion so inflamed that it cannot be satisfied through the usual channels or in the usual quantities. The same interpretation applies to Paul’s reference in v. 27 to men forsaking “the natural use of the female” and burning with passion for one another. See David E. Fredrickson, “Natural and Unnatural Use in Romans 1:24–27: Paul and the Philosophic Critique of Eros,” in Balch, *Homosexuality*, 197–222; also Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 51–64.



# The Bible and Homosexuality

## SESSION 2

| *How do wider biblical testimony and nonbiblical evidence figure in the debate over same-sex sexual relationships and Christian discipleship?*

### Introduction

In addition to the biblical texts examined in the previous session that explicitly mention same-sex sexual relationships, parties to the debate also marshal other sorts of evidence to make their cases. This evidence includes biblical passages understood as expressing God's intentions for humankind and nonbiblical evidence from tradition, science, and contemporary experience. In today's session we will survey this other evidence, in a continuing effort to understand the overall shape and gist of the prohibitionists' and affirmers' points of view. The study will conclude with brief reflections on how the church can be faithful to God in the face of sharp disagreement.



All parties to the debate over homosexuality and Christian discipleship draw on other sources of authority in addition to the Bible, although they interpret and weigh those sources differently. The other sources discussed here—tradition, science, and contemporary experience—are all, like Scripture, multifaceted and complex.

### The Biblical Witness

- *Divine design for the family.* Prohibitionists believe God has one design for the human family, best expressed in Genesis 2:24: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh." Jesus' quotation of this verse in his prohibition of divorce (see Mark 10:5–9) underscores its importance in testifying to traditional marriage (one man married to one woman for life) as God's plan for humankind. Moreover, Jesus prefaces the quotation with additional words from the creation story: "From the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female'" (Mark 10:6, quoting Gen. 1:27). The Genesis passages and Jesus' quotation of them point to the divine standard of *gender complementarity*. Some prohibitionists argue that the natural fittedness of male and female genitalia, which enables man and woman to become "one flesh," also points to gender complementarity. Prohibitionists see this divine design for the human family as under broad assault—not only by the forces advocat-

ing legalization of same-sex marriage, but also by the increasing social acceptance of divorce and of cohabitation by unmarried heterosexual couples.<sup>1</sup>

Affirmers offer both rebuttal and alternative interpretation of the creation story. They dismiss the notion of gender complementarity as a later imposition on the text. The reference to two becoming "one flesh" refers not to the joining of male and female genitalia but to the bonds of family. The male/female pairing of Adam and Eve establishes them as family and may even imply that such pairings have a central place in God's creation—but their joining together does not mean that every other kind of family relationship is sinful.<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere biblical writers use language borrowed from Genesis 2 to describe family relationships other than male/female coupling. For example, in the book of Ruth, Ruth will not leave Naomi but clings to her (Ruth 1:16, 14, echoing Gen. 2:24); moreover, Genesis has Laban say to his nephew Jacob at their first meeting, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh" (Gen. 29:14, quoting Gen 2:23).<sup>3</sup> Finally, the numerous biblical depictions of divinely approved polygamous marriages (multiple wives) or relationships

with concubines show that the Bible does not uniformly enshrine a one-man-one-woman model for human sexuality. Offering an alternative interpretation of the creation story, affirmers point to God's declaration in Genesis 2:18, "It is not good that the man should be alone," followed by God's creation of a helper, a companion for the man. The appropriate life companion for a homosexual person is a partner of the same gender, with whom he or she can live in lifelong, covenanted, exclusive relationship. God recognizes the need for intimate companionship, and "when gay and lesbian people desire to give and receive love from another person, they are expressing a deep feature of their God-given humanity—a feature that God understands."<sup>4</sup>

- *Living righteously before God.* Who is God, and what does God require of us? Prohibitionists glorify God for God's steadfast love and graciousness, but see those qualities as inextricable from God's *righteousness*. The God who created and ordered the world also established clear standards for how human beings are to relate to God and to one another, and when God judges the world with righteousness, we will all be called to account for our sin. Nor should we suppose that we can escape God's judgment by presuming upon God's mercy, because God summons us to repentance and to righteous living (Rom. 2:4; 6:1–2). Just as adulterers cannot continue in the wanton commission of adultery and expect forgiveness, so those who experience same-sex desire cannot habitually act on that desire and expect to receive mercy. God is gracious, but God is also righteous, and as Christians we honor that righteousness by living within the boundaries and according to the principle of gender complementarity that God has established.<sup>5</sup> We, as the church, are "the bride of Christ" (Eph. 5:25–27), established to serve as a model of holy living and to transform the culture by offering the gospel of God's love and grace to "a world full of people who desperately need to know God loves them and they can be freed of the things of this world that so easily enslave us." But extending God's love does not mean remaining silent "as the carnage of sexual hedonism engulfs our culture"; rather, we are boldly to proclaim that God has a place for sex: "It is within marriage between a man and woman and that commitment is for life." For LGBT Christians, this means living celibate lives and, according to some prohibitionists, seeking to be

healed of same-sex desire. "We should see celibacy as a gift as Paul did and support and encourage single people. . . . We are to proclaim without exception the all-encompassing power of Jesus Christ to deliver us from any sin with which we struggle."<sup>6</sup>

Affirmers also stress God's righteousness but insist that, if the quantity of biblical testimony on each subject is any measure, God's righteous anger is directed not at the LGBT population, but at those who commit economic or military injustice or who exploit and oppress the weak. In his earthly work, Jesus spoke hardly at all about sexual morality, but he constantly ministered to social outcasts and practiced radical inclusion of marginalized people such as tax collectors, the sick, women, and Samaritans, proclaiming that through him God was liberating the captives and freeing the slaves. The Bible's copious demands for love, justice, and liberation trump its regulations against same-sex sexual relations. Affirmers see important analogies to earlier social movements for the establishment of more just laws, including especially the nineteenth-century struggle against slavery. Throughout both Testaments, biblical authors assumed the legitimacy of slavery, and these texts were constantly trumpeted by slaveholders—including many ministers, who were among the most zealous in defending slavery. But slavery was finally rejected by the church and society because it was judged to be inconsistent with the Bible's more central message of just or righteous love. So too, the Bible's requirement of love for God and neighbor (Matt. 22:36–39, quoting Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18) must be allowed to prevail over its few and ambiguous condemnations of same-sex sexual relations.<sup>7</sup> To take the "rule of love" as normative is not to reject biblical authority but to affirm it, by upholding the Bible's central measure of human righteousness.

## Extrabiblical Evidence

All parties to the debate over homosexuality and Christian discipleship draw on other sources of authority in addition to the Bible, although they interpret and weigh those sources differently. The other sources discussed here—tradition, science, and contemporary experience—are all, like Scripture, multifaceted and complex. The evidence that they present requires sifting and weighing, critical analysis, and interpretation.



It is unclear how this situation is going to resolve, but it may well resolve very badly unless all the parties to the debate show respect to one another by listening more attentively and generously than has often been the case.

## Tradition

Prohibitionists typically offer historical data to show that from the New Testament era onward, Christians evaluated same-sex sexual practice negatively and established measures to prevent it and inflict penalties for it.

Affirmers respond that tradition and history are more variegated with regard to homosexuality than prohibitionists allow. The affirmers point to times and places throughout the last two millennia where same-sex relationships have been tolerated or even celebrated and, more recently, explicitly validated by at least some denominations.

Christian theologians of eras past justified sex, first, as a means for procreation, and second (specifically referring to sex within heterosexual marriage), as a means to control a raging and disordered sexual drive.<sup>8</sup> But today both motifs have diminished in importance for many Christians—as far as heterosexual sex is concerned. There is greater willingness to honor heterosexual marriages that do not or cannot create children (though Augustine had already done so, praising the charity that united some elderly and childless couples).<sup>9</sup> Further, a more favorable view of sexual desire—as long as it is expressed within the bounds of heterosexual marriage—has taken hold in the church. On the other hand, the traditional norms of procreative intent and the need to curb distorted desire are still widely held to rule out same-sex sexual relations.<sup>10</sup> It is worth pondering why these aspects of the tradition have been loosened for heterosexuals but not for LGBT Christians.

## Science and Reason

Researchers in the human sciences have studied homosexuality from many angles and for many years. Research

has focused especially on (1) prevalence, (2) causal or developmental factors, (3) status as a mental disorder, and (4) efficacy of change methods.<sup>11</sup> While many of the studies are fascinating and important, the investigations have sometimes been weakened by research bias and other problems, such as inability of researchers to find representative populations of homosexuals to use as subjects and difficulty replicating earlier researchers' results.

Such problems at the research stage are compounded when findings are used by people in the church. Often those engaged in ecclesiastical debates over homosexuality have used scientific research results imprecisely and have selectively favored the findings that support their point of view. For example, with regard to the question of the cause(s) or development of homosexual identity and practice, affirmers have tended to lift up research suggesting that some persons are oriented toward same-gender preference by causes outside their control, such as genetic factors or prenatal hormonal variations. Prohibitionists have tended to favor research pointing to homosexual desire as a kind of addiction or compulsion—thus leaving open the possibility that individuals could choose differently and that they could be “healed” of the condition. Both sides are willing to claim that science has advanced their cause, suggesting that overall results have been inconclusive.

At the very least, research has served to demonstrate the great complexity of biological, psychosocial, and cultural factors contributing to some persons' emergence as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered. It has also dispelled some myths—for example, that homosexual men are prone to become pedophiles or that children of gay parents are more likely to become gay than are other children—and has led to the depathologizing of same-sex sexual orientation by the medical community.<sup>12</sup>

## Contemporary Experience

Contemporary experience has often been viewed as a suspect source of authority for theology and ethics because of the strong element of subjectivity involved. Experience has seemed like shifting sand compared to the firm word of Holy Scripture. Yet it is often through experience that the Holy Spirit speaks in people's minds and hearts. Experience does need to be interpreted with some care, yet it can offer powerful, often decisive evidence for God's working in our midst.

The type of experience most often cited by prohibitionists is of people who have “given up the gay lifestyle” as a result of conversion therapy programs such as Love Won Out and Exodus International, which teach that same-sex sexual desire is an affliction that can be cured through intense personal effort in reliance on God and with the aid of a trained therapist. Web sites for these and other such organizations include testimonies by persons who have come through the therapy successfully, meaning that they were able to control if not eliminate all homosexual urges and in some cases go on to fulfilled heterosexual marriage.<sup>13</sup>

Affirmers describe various kinds of contemporary experience relevant to their position: LGBT people’s experience of familial and social exclusion and resultant loneliness, self-hatred, sickness, and suicidal thoughts or actions; their experience of struggling to reconcile deep love of God and a call to a Christian life or even ordination with the church’s condemnation of them; their experience of finding love and joy in committed, long-term, same-sex relationships. Straight allies of LGBT people often report that the one factor that caused them to rethink and finally abandon a stance against homosexuality was a personal relationship with someone who happened to be lesbian or gay: perhaps a family member, a longtime friend who struggled to acknowledge his or her homosexual orientation, or someone who demonstrated through personal example that noncelibate LGBT people can live in authentic devotion to Christ.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, many LGBT people were themselves able to see the church as having a place for them only when they met an LGBT person who was a committed Christian.

## Conclusion: Generous Listening

Decades have passed since the issue of acceptance and rights of LGBT people came to the fore in church and society, and the debate has grown ever more polarized. Are our denominations and worldwide communions destined to split over this issue? For the prohibitionists, to endorse homosexuality would be to let our out-of-control, sexually hedonistic culture have its way—a flagrant breach of Christians’ fidelity to God, Bible, and tradition. The vision of living in holiness before God would be lost. For the affirmers, continuing to label noncelibate LGBT people as unrepentant sinners and

to exclude them from full participation in the church amounts to refusing the love of Christ to a suffering segment of humanity and putting a sign over the doors of the church saying “LGBT Folk Not Welcome Here.” The situation is painfully reminiscent of the era of slavery in the United States, when African Americans were confined to church balconies or excluded altogether, and told—on the basis of biblical texts—that their place before God was a lesser one.

It is unclear how this situation is going to resolve, but it may well resolve very badly unless all the parties to the debate show respect to one another by listening more attentively and generously than has often been the case. “Listening generously” does not require that we adopt the alternate point of view, but it does demand that we acknowledge the integrity of those who think differently than we do, strive to discern the coherence and logic of their position, and pay attention to the ways that they use Scripture, tradition, science, and contemporary experience in constructing their interpretation. “Listening generously” means recognizing that all who are in this debate are striving to live lives committed to Christ, in reliance on Holy Scripture—even though we disagree with one another about *how to read* Scripture.

We are called to show Christian love and forbearance by listening to one another’s point of view and trying to understand it. In this way we will also come to understand our own positions more fully. Moreover, we will give the Holy Spirit room to work in our midst. We cannot at the moment see how the Spirit can possibly work out this disagreement. But the Spirit has surprised us before, and may well surprise us again.

## About the Writer

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## Endnotes

1. Some of the arguments described here can be found in Alan F. H. Wisdom, “Is Marriage Worth Defending?” in *Mount Nebo Papers* 2 (Summer 2009). This multipart paper is available at <http://www.theird.org/Document.Doc?id=111> (accessed July 10, 2010).
2. This point is argued by Patrick D. Miller, drawing on the work of Paul Lehmann, in “What Does Gen 1–3 Teach about Sexuality, and How Should We Live in Response?” in

*Frequently Asked Questions about Sexuality, the Bible, and the Church: Plain Talk about Tough Issues*, ed. Ted A. Smith (San Francisco: Covenant Network of Presbyterians, 2006), 14.

3. These cross-references are offered by William Stacy Johnson, *A Time to Embrace: Same-Gender Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 145, 146.

4. *Ibid.*, 117.

5. Some prohibitionists argue that the principle of gender complementary ought to shape *all* aspects of male and female roles and behavior, not just sexual practice. Women, according to this traditionalist view, ought not exercise significant leadership positions in the church. See John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991).

6. Source of quotations: "Minority Report of the Special Committee to Study Issues of Civil Union and Christian Marriage to the 219th General Assembly (2010) Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)," <http://www.pc-biz.org/IOBView.aspx?m=ro&id=3335&promoid=169> (accessed July 10, 2010).

7. Affirmers point also to other church teachings and practices that have been overturned despite explicit biblical teachings supporting them, notably the prohibitions against divorce and (in some denominations) the ordination of women.

8. Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (London: Continuum, 2006), 278.

9. Augustine, "The Good of Marriage," excerpted in *Marriage in the Early Church*, trans. and ed. David G. Hunter (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 104.

10. Farley, *Just Love*, 277–80.

11. Stanton L. Jones and Mark A. Yarhouse, "The Use, Misuse, and Abuse of Science in the Ecclesiastical Homosexuality Debates," in *Homosexuality, Science, and the "Plain Sense" of Scripture*, ed. David L. Balch (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 84.

12. Farley, *Just Love*, 280.

13. Conversion therapy has not been well received in the medical community and is proclaimed "dangerous" by some because failure to convert can lead to depression or suicide. Even proponents of conversion therapy concede that success rates are low.

14. Consider the testimony of Dr. Mark Achtemeier, an evangelical Presbyterian and professor of systematic theology, who changed from a prohibitionist stance to a strongly affirming one based on his deepening friendship with several gay Christians. The testimony is online at "And Grace Will Lead Me Home: Inclusion and Evangelical Conscience," Covenant Network of Presbyterians, <http://www.covnetpres.org/2009/11/and-grace-will-lead-me-home> (accessed July 10, 2010).