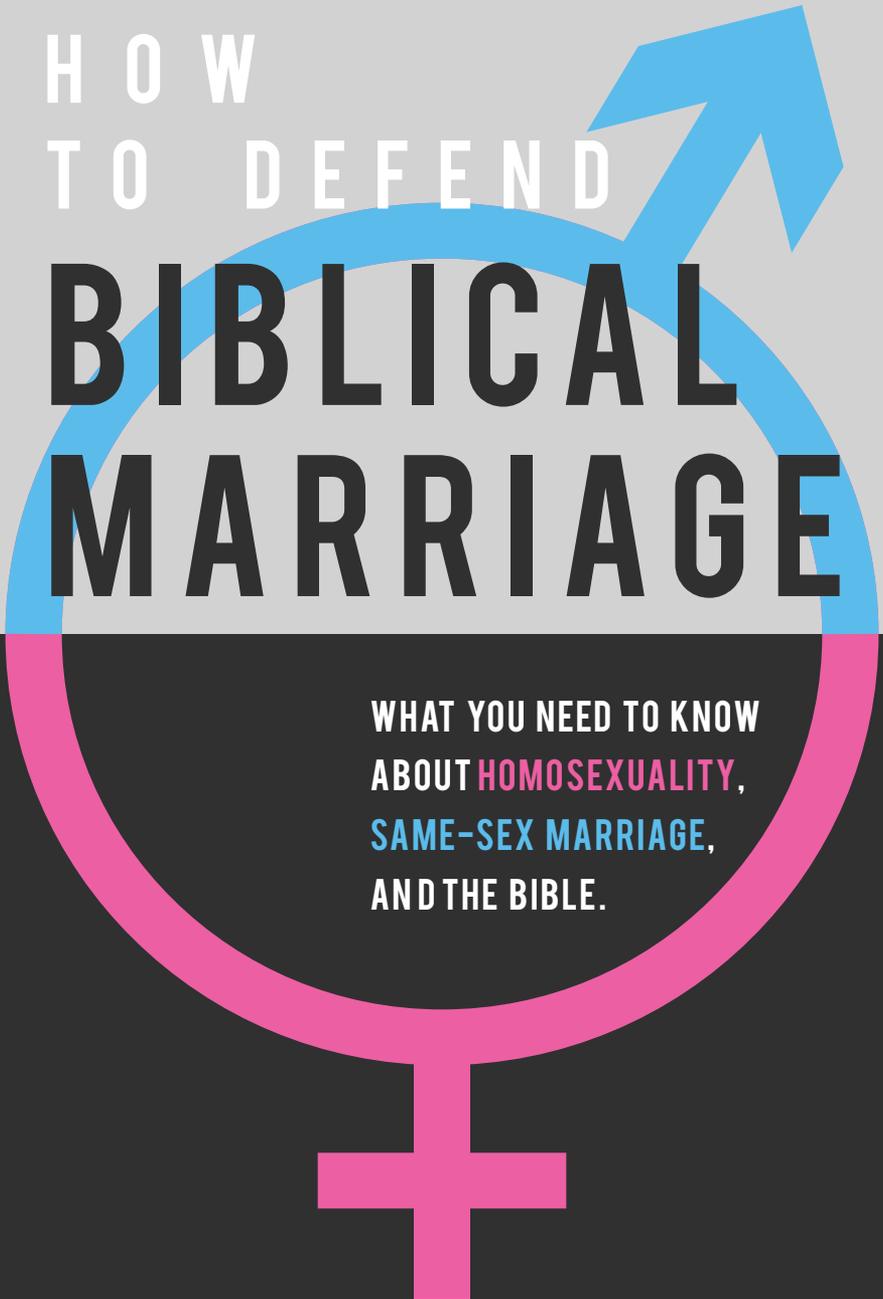


HOW
TO DEFEND



**BIBLICAL
MARRIAGE**

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW
ABOUT **HOMOSEXUALITY**,
SAME-SEX MARRIAGE,
AND THE BIBLE.

BY **JIM DENISON**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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**H O W
T O D E F E N D
B I B L I C A L
M A R R I A G E**

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JAMES C. DENISON, PH.D.

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HOW TO DEFEND BIBLICAL MARRIAGE

Actor George Clooney predicts, “At some point in our lifetime, gay marriage won’t be an issue, and everybody who stood against this civil right will look as outdated as George Wallace standing on the school steps keeping James Hood from entering the University of Alabama because he was black.”¹

According to the Institute of Medicine, 3.8% of the American population is homosexual.² However, relating to homosexuals has become an issue far larger than demographics would suggest.

This June, the Supreme Court is expected to legalize same-sex marriage (SSM) in all 50 states. If SSM becomes the “public policy” of our nation, how should Christians and churches respond? How can God redeem this divisive issue to strengthen our churches, ministries, and witness?

I

THEOLOGICAL RESPONSES

*1. What does the Bible says about homosexuality?*³

The sin of Sodom:

Before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house. And they called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them” (Genesis 19:4-5).⁴ (Note that Judges 19 narrates a similar story in the town of Gibeah.)

Interpretive options:

- Ostensibly heterosexual males seeking to humiliate strangers by treating them as women (Walter Wink).
- “Know” relates not to sexual activity but to hospitality (D. Sherwin Bailey).
- Attempted homosexual rape (Peter Gomes).

Responses:

- Jude 7 indicates that the sin of Sodom was “unnatural desire”: “Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.”
- However, it is plausible to view such “desire” as rape rather than homosexual attraction.

The Leviticus prohibitions:

You shall not lie with a man as with a woman; it is an abomination (Leviticus 18:22). 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 (Lev. 20:13).

Interpretive options:

- If we do not enforce Lev. 20:13, we should not enforce Lev. 18:22 (Walter Wink).
- The Levitical laws express worship codes intended for priests in ancient Israel, not binding precepts for all time (cf. kosher dietary laws).
- These prohibitions were intended to differentiate Israel from its neighbors during this formative period in its history.
- They prohibit “spilling of seed,” sexual acts that do not lead to procreation, rather than condemning same-sex relations per se.
- They have in view the denigration of the passive partner rather than consensual, covenant same-sex relations.

Responses:

- OT precepts are still relevant if renewed in the NT (see below).
- Lev. 18:1 applies the chapter to all of Israel, not just the priests.
- The fact that we do not enforce Lev. 20:13 makes the principle it expresses no less relevant. See prohibitions against child sacrifice (Lev. 20:2), adultery (v. 10), and bestiality (vs. 15-16), all of which carry the death penalty.
- While these prohibitions differentiated Israel from its neighbors, this observation makes them no less significant today. In fact, they continue to retain this force in our culture.
- There is no textual basis for limiting the prohibition to procreation.
- Both partners in same-sex behavior are punished, not just the aggressor. Thus the prohibition should not be viewed as relating only to subjugation of one partner. (This is an important point, since exploitation is a common interpretive approach to this text for those seeking to sanction SSM.)

Romans 1

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error (vs. 26-27).

Interpretive options:

- Paul is addressing heterosexuals whose homosexual behavior is “contrary to nature” for them.
- The “exploitative option” suggests that Paul has in view men who oppress men sexually (pederasty, prostitution, master-slave sex, etc.), rather than consensual, loving relations.
- Paul is rejecting behavior at the Roman imperial court, which was infamous for its gross sexual immoralities. By extension, he argues that God’s people are to be different from their culture.
- Paul is not aware of innate homosexual orientation, and thus addresses homosexual acts as “unnatural.”

Response:

- The text speaks of “natural relations” in general, not with regard to a specific person, showing that all homosexual relations are “contrary to nature” for all persons.
- Paul states that homosexuals “were consumed with passion for one another” (v. 27), proving that he forbade consensual relations, not just exploitative acts such as prostitution, pederasty and rape.
- Paul also includes lesbians; there are no examples in his day of women being exploited by other women.
- Paul nowhere limits his discussion to the imperial court, or even to Roman culture and context.
- Paul describes homosexual acts as “dishonorable passions” and “shameless acts,” apart from the motives that led to such behavior.

- The apostle considers heterosexual relations to be “natural,” so that homosexual relations are “contrary to nature.”
- Paul addresses “passions,” the expression of sexual orientation (often serving as a synonym in psychological literature). Thus he clearly was aware of orientation, and did not convey ignorant or misleading principles in this regard.
- Given that SS relations and SSM were common in first-century Rome, it is noteworthy that Paul nowhere endorsed them. In fact, every reference to SS relations in his writings is negative. (See more below.)

1 Corinthians 6

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God (vs. 9-10).

Interpretive option:

- “men who practice homosexuality” could refer to male prostitutes.

Response:

- The ESV phrase includes two Greek terms. The first (*malakoi*) is a technical term for the passive partner in homosexual activity. The second (*arsenokoitai*) is literally “men who lie in bed with men,” and refers more generally to homosexual behavior. (More on this term below.)

1 Timothy 1

Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted (vs. 8-11).

Interpretive option:

- “men who practice homosexuality” translates *arsenokoites*, which some claim refers to male prostitutes.

Response:

- it refers to a male engaging in same-gender sexual activity (Strong’s Concordance).

The argument from silence

As noted below (see question #4), David Gushee and Matthew Vines (and others like them) have tried to make the case that the Bible does not forbid SSM. While I believe that their arguments misinterpret the biblical text and misread non-biblical evidence, I also offer this observation: they can make no case that the Bible sanctions same sex (SS) relations or marriage. Not once does the Bible refer to SS relations in a positive way. Not once does it endorse SSM in any form.

SSM advocates might claim that such marriages were not possible in the biblical era. However, the historical record contradicts this assertion. Male-male sexual activity was widely reported and accepted by many Near-Eastern cultures in the time of Moses,⁵ yet Leviticus clearly forbids such relations.

Historians note that homosexual arrangements in Greece were “often the functional equivalents of legalized marriages,” complete with courtship rituals.⁶ First-century historians Tacitus and Suetonius both report that Emperor Nero married at least two males on different occasions. The first-century poet Martial reported instances in Rome of male-male marriages, as did Juvenal.

According to historian John Boswell, “by the time of the early Empire references to gay marriages are commonplace.”⁷ He also cites examples from Roman writers documenting marriages between two women. Same-sex unions were described in popular Roman culture and literature as well. According to Boswell, “Everywhere in the fiction of the Empire—from lyric poetry to popular novels—gay couples and their love appear on a completely equal footing with their heterosexual counterparts.”⁸

Such marriages continued in the Empire until they were outlawed on December 16, 342 A.D. by the Christian emperors Constantius II and Constans. The Theodosian Code, enacted by Christian emperors in the fifth century, ratified the illegality of same-sex marriages.

If SS relationships and marriage were part of God's plan, we would expect biblical writers to condone them. In fact, we find precisely the opposite. At best, SSM advocates argue that the Bible forbids homosexual lust, not homosexual relations per se. They have no evidence that Scripture ever views such relations favorably. If SS relations were part of his design for humanity, why has his word been so misleading on this issue?

2. Can a person be gay and be a Christian?

Paul lists people who engage in homosexual activity among those "who will not inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 6:9). However, such activity is not the "unpardonable sin." If homosexuality keeps a person from salvation, so does theft, greed, drunkenness, slander, and swindling. There is no sin God cannot forgive, for those who accept his pardon (Isaiah 43:25).

Nowhere does the Bible state that we must repent of specific sins before we can receive salvation. Once the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in us, he will lead us to repentance and consecration.

3. If God is love, why would he be against two people loving each other in a monogamous relationship?

It is clear that "God is love" (1 John 4:8), but it does not follow that he is the author of every relationship that claims to be loving. His word warns against adultery, for instance (Exodus 20:14). Incest and polygamy are wrong, even if those who engage in them claim to do so out of love. It is the same for same-sex partners, even if they remain monogamous.

Another point should be made here: Scripture forbids homosexual activity, not homosexual orientation. All sex outside marriage is wrong, whether heterosexual or homosexual. The sin is not in being attracted to a person of the same sex, or even loving that person. The sin is in expressing that attraction sexually.

4. What about those who say the Bible does not forbid loving homosexual relations?

In recent years, some high-profile Christians have tried to make the case that the Bible does not forbid same-sex relationships. In their view, the problem is

not that the Bible is wrong on this issue, but that Christians have misinterpreted biblical truth. Their approach has been appealing to some conservative Christians, since it claims that we can believe the Bible while embracing same-sex relationships and marriage.⁹

Matthew Vines

Matthew Vines is the author of *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships*. Vines was a philosophy student at Harvard before leaving school to pursue a full-time study of the biblical statements regarding homosexuality.

He says of himself, “Like most theologically conservative Christians, I hold what is often called a ‘high view’ of the Bible. That means I believe all of Scripture is inspired by God and authoritative for my life.”¹⁰ At the same time, Vines is convinced that homosexual orientation and behavior are not sinful. As a gay Christian, he seeks to reconcile his experience with God’s word.

A summary of his argument:

- We can tell truth by its “fruit” (Matthew 7:15-20). Forbidding homosexual behavior damages those with same-sex attraction, but celibacy is untenable for most gay people. Thus the “fruit” of rejecting same-sex behavior shows such prohibition to be wrong.
- The Bible forbids same-sex behavior in excess, not such behavior between monogamous, loving partners.
- The Scriptures know nothing of same-sex orientation, only behavior. They forbid same-sex behavior in excess, but do not address monogamous, loving same-sex relationships. Early Christians shared this ignorance of homosexual orientation.
- The “sin of Sodom” was not homosexuality, but attempted gang rape.
- Leviticus prohibits homosexual relations because the ancient world viewed them as denigrating or feminizing the passive partner. Since we no longer view such relations in this way, these prohibitions are no longer relevant to our culture.

- In Greco-Roman context, Romans 1 warns against heterosexual men who oppress and denigrate other men through same-sex acts, not partners in a consensual, loving relationship.
- Paul's use of *arsenokoites* in 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 2 refers to economic exploitation, not sexual behavior.
- God's covenant expectation for marriage can be fulfilled by homosexuals living in a monogamous, faithful relationship.

The same week Vines published his book, the faculty of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary released an e-book, *God and the Gay Christian? A Response to Matthew Vines*. Edited by seminary president Albert Mohler, its authors deal with each of Vines's proposals in turn.

A summary of their response:

- The sin of Sodom is described in Ezekiel 16:50 as an "abomination," using the singular form of the Hebrew term *toevah*. This term is used in the singular only twice in Leviticus, when it calls same-sex intercourse an "abomination" (Lev. 18:22) and prescribes the death penalty for it (Lev. 20:13). Thus we should view the sin of Sodom as we do the sin referenced in Leviticus: same-sex relations.
- If Vines is right about Leviticus, only the stronger partner denigrating the weaker should be punished. But in the biblical text, both are to be punished equally.
- Romans was written to Jewish Christians, and should be interpreted in Jewish, not Roman, context.
- Romans 1 condemns "men committing shameless acts with men" (v. 27), which shows that both men were active in this relationship. Thus Vines is wrong to interpret the text as referring to a man denigrating an unwilling partner.
- Other words for homosexual behavior were available to Paul, but he coined *arsenokoites*, a term that derives from the Greek translation of Lev. 20:13, *arsenos koiten*. Clearly, he had the Levitical prohibition in mind.
- Contrary to Vines's claim, early Christians such as Tertullian, Chrysostom and Ambrosiaster clearly warned against homosexual passion.

- Vines claims that the Bible knows nothing of homosexual “orientation,” since it does not use this word. However, it uses the synonym “desire” (2 Peter 3:3; Jude 16; Romans 13:14; Galatians 5:16; James 1:14).
- If Scripture is ignorant about homosexual orientation, where else is God’s word ignorant about human nature? Why did God inspire a text that would mislead the world for 20 centuries? What does this supposed ignorance say about God’s remedy for sin through the atonement of Christ?

Mohler states:

Biblical Christianity can neither endorse same-sex marriage nor accept the claim that a believer can be obedient to Christ and remain or persist in same-sex behaviors. The church is the assembly of the redeemed, saved from our sins and learning obedience in the school of Christ. Every single one of us is a sexual sinner in need of redemption, but we are called to holiness, to obedience and to honoring marriage as one of God’s most precious gifts and as a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church.¹¹

He then concludes:

“The church has often failed people with same-sex attractions and failed them horribly. We must not fail them now by forfeiting the only message that leads to salvation, holiness and faithfulness.”¹²

David Gushee

Dr. David Gushee teaches ethics at Mercer University, a Baptist school in Georgia. Recognized as one of the leading Christian ethicists today, his announcement in 2014 that he now supports covenanted same-sex relationships shocked many.

His book, *Changing Our Mind*, tells the story of his decision. Gushee’s sister came out as a lesbian in 2008. In the following years, he developed an increasing number of personal relationships with gay Christians, and began to grieve for the rejection they had experienced from Christians and churches. In 2012 he co-hosted a conference on sexual ethics, during which he was moved by the stories of “deeply-hurt-by-the-church-but-still-committed-to-Jesus-gay Christians.”¹³ His own experiences as a bullied teenager caused him to resonate with their pain, as did his doctoral studies on the Holocaust.

Gushee's book invites those who affirm what he calls the "traditional" position on same-sex relations to reconsider their interpretation of Scripture. He describes the arguments proposed by those who affirm such reinterpretation, but offers no new insights on biblical texts himself.

His shift turns on three proposals:

- Old Testament creation narratives are theological accounts, not scientific descriptions. As we learn more about human nature (i.e., the existence of unchanging same-sex orientation), we are free to modify our application of these narratives. Just as we shifted from an earth-centric to a helio-centric understanding of our galaxy, so we can shift our understanding of sexual orientation without violating Scripture.
- Do not rely on arguments from God's purported design for humans, since such arguments have been "remarkably problematic" across Christian history.¹⁴ For instance, Christians have been wrong to cite human dominion in rejecting environmental concerns, or to cite Genesis 9's "curse of Ham" in supporting slavery. In the same way, we are wrong to discriminate against gay people on the basis of Genesis narratives.
- We live in a "Genesis 3" world where everyone is flawed and broken sexually, not just those of same-sex attraction. Thus we should offer grace with humility.

Responses:

- Gushee's first proposal opens us to the charge that the Bible is wrong or misinformed on the human condition. If this is true regarding same-sex attraction, where else is it true? Polyamory? Consensual relations of any kind?
- His second proposal commits the "genetic fallacy," rejecting an idea because of its source rather than its merit. The argument that humans were intended only for opposite-sex erotic relationships originates in Genesis narratives (which he claims have been widely misinterpreted). As a result, he believes it should be questioned.
- His third proposal is by far his strongest, in my view. Gushee is right: we are all broken and flawed sexually. However, this fact does not mean that we should affirm what the Bible forbids. To do so denies gay Christians the very truth that can most liberate them.

His larger argument commits the “bandwagon” fallacy, claiming that the growing popularity of his position is a reason to accept it. And he commits a logical “non sequitur” (“it does not follow”) when he states that Christians have been wrong on slavery, the Jews and women’s rights, so we must be wrong on homosexuality. In fact, the historical record shows that slavery was never accepted or defended by the majority of Christians. By contrast, until recently the Church unanimously viewed homosexual activity as forbidden by Scripture.

However, Gushee is very helpful when he insists that all sexual relationships should be covenantal in nature. Rejecting the “mutual consent ethic” and the “loving relationship ethic,” he affirms the “covenantal-marital sexual ethical standard—one person, for life, faithful and exclusive, in a loving, nonexploitative, noncoercive, reciprocal relationship, that is the highest expression of biblical sexual ethics.”¹⁵

Note that both Vines and Gushee came to their interpretation of Scripture regarding SSM out of personal biases in favor of SS relations. We should always beware of interpreting God’s word through the prism of personal experience. Rather, we should interpret experience by divine revelation.

5. What about the argument that the Bible was wrong on slavery, and thus on homosexuality?

My move to Atlanta in 1994 gave me my first exposure to the remarkable colonial history of the East Coast. We Texans think something is historical if it happened while Tom Landry was coach of the Cowboys. When people living in South Carolina speak of “the War,” they could mean the Civil War (though they’ll say “there was nothing civil about it”) or the Revolutionary War. It is a fascinating region.

With one exception. While traveling in Charleston one day, my wife and I came upon the “slave trading warehouse.” This was the place where slaves were brought to America on ships and sold at market. I can still remember the building, and my revulsion upon seeing it. I believe that racism is the greatest sin in America, the failure which keeps us from addressing our other failures. Racism makes crime in south Dallas a “black” problem and drug abuse in north Dallas a “white” problem, when they’re all our problems.

Given our tragic history with racism, treating the subject of slavery in the Bible is a bit repugnant for us. However, a very common assertion regarding the topic of homosexuality and the word of God is that the biblical injunctions against this lifestyle are outdated, as is its acceptance of slavery. If we can prove that the Bible was wrong on the latter, we can believe that it is wrong on the former. The

issue of slavery in the Bible is a large and comprehensive subject, far more wide-ranging than we will consider here. I'll try to limit our study to the barest of essentials, so we can relate it to the larger question which brings it to our attention.

Slavery was an accepted part of life in Old Testament times. We know of no culture or ancient literature which questioned its existence or necessity. Persons became slaves in a variety of ways: they were born to enslaved parents (Genesis 17:23), purchased (Gen. 37:28), or sold themselves to pay a debt (Leviticus 25:39-55). Breaking into a home was punished by enslavement (Exodus 22:3); prisoners of war were commonly enslaved (Joel 3:6). The children of Israel enslaved the Canaanites they conquered in the Promised Land (Judges 1:28).

Slaves in Israel were considered to be property, and could be bought and sold (Ex. 21:32). They were granted protection against murder, permanent injury, or undue physical labor (cf. Ex. 21:20, 26; 23:12). Hebrew household slaves were circumcised (Gen. 17:12), and included at religious meals (Ex. 12:44). But why did the Old Testament not decry this practice in general, and move to free all those enslaved?

In many ways, it did. There were several ways a Hebrew slave could be freed (a process called "manumission"). An individual could be purchased and set free (Ex. 21:8). A slave permanently injured by his master was to be set free (Ex. 21:26). Hebrews were to be held as slaves for no longer than six years (Deuteronomy 15:12). And the Jubilee Year, which occurred every 49 years, was to free all Israelite slaves (Lev. 25:50).

But still we ask, why did the Old Testament sanction this practice at all? In fact, it simply recognized a fact of all ancient civilization. And its rules minimized this evil, protected its victims more fully than did any other society, and provided means for their eventual freedom. But the New Testament would bring God's word on the subject to much fuller expression.

In the Old Testament era, the primary way persons were enslaved was through capture in war. But in the first century AD, the breeding of slaves swelled their numbers enormously. And large numbers of people sold themselves into slavery as a means of improving their quality of life. Owning and using people as slaves was so commonplace in the Roman Empire that not a single ancient writer is known to have condemned the practice. But all that would begin to change with the advent of the Christian movement.

What was the New Testament attitude toward this institution? And how does this stance affect our study of the issue of homosexuality?

Slavery in the Roman era was dramatically different from the despicable practice as we know it in American history. If you had been walking through any first-century Roman city, you would not have been able to distinguish between slaves

and free. Patterns of work, relationships, or faith were no different between the two. Slaves served not only to do manual labor, but also as doctors, nurses, household managers, and intellectuals. They administered funds and cities. They were typically given an excellent education at the expense of their owners, so that philosophers and tutors were typically slaves.

Even more amazing to us, it was common for people to sell themselves into slavery to secure such privileges. A person who desired citizenship in the Empire could achieve it by enslaving himself to a citizen, then purchasing his freedom. Slavery was more a process than a condition.

While there is no doubt that many slaves were abused physically, sexually, and socially, it is also true that at least as many were part of the more privileged strata of society. And the total dependence of the Roman economy upon the labor of slaves made it impossible for the Empire to conceive of abolishing this institution. If an economist were to propose that we refuse all goods and services imported from outside America, we'd be equally surprised.

Does the New Testament then argue for slavery? Absolutely not.

In summary, what is the New Testament's view of slavery? No writer attempted to lead his readers to end the institution per se, as this was not possible in the Roman Empire. Those initiating such an uprising would have been quickly annihilated as rebels and threats to Caesar. Nor did they possess the legal or social leverage to bring about such a goal. But several other facts should be noted as well.

First, Paul abolished even the possibility of racial or social discrimination for followers of Jesus: "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26-28). Every believer is our sister or brother. The ground is level at the foot of the cross.

Second, wherever the apostolic church spoke to this issue, it did so with a view to freedom and equality. Paul appealed to Philemon to see his slave, Onesimus, "no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother" (v. 16). Clement, a friend of Paul, wrote in his letter to the Corinthians (ca. AD 90), "We know many among ourselves who have given themselves up to bonds, in order that they might ransom others. Many, too, have surrendered themselves to slavery, that with the price which they received for themselves, they might provide food for others" (ch. 55). And Ignatius (died AD 107) wrote to Polycarp: "Do not despise either male or female slaves, yet neither let them be puffed up with conceit, but rather let them submit themselves the more, for the glory of God, that they may obtain from God a better liberty."

Third, the New Testament church gave those who were enslaved a family and a home. This was one reason why so many of the earliest believers were slaves. Pastors and congregational leaders were drawn from the ranks both of slaves and free. Christians made no distinction between the two, for their Father welcomed all as his children.

Fourth, not a single New Testament leader owned slaves or condoned such, even though many had the means to purchase them (cf. Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, Barnabas). Their example inspired William Wilberforce and countless other Christians to do all they could to abolish slavery, and we thank God that they were successful.

It is therefore an extremely unfair accusation to claim that the Bible was “wrong” or “outdated” on the issue of slavery, and thus on the subject of homosexuality. And we should note that the Church never held a consensus endorsing slavery. Even in the pre-Civil War South, such a theological position was unpopular. It is therefore wrong to claim that the Bible and its interpreters were wrong on slavery. Or that their “error” somehow condones homosexual behavior.



BIOLOGICAL / PSYCHOLOGICAL RESPONSES

6. Are homosexuals “born that way”?

According to the American Psychological Association (which affirms SSM),

There is no consensus among scientists about the exact reasons that an individual develops a heterosexual, bisexual, gay, or lesbian orientation. Although much research has examined the possible genetic, hormonal, developmental, social, and cultural influences on sexual orientation, no findings have emerged that permit scientists to conclude that sexual orientation is determined by any particular factor or factors. Many think that nature and nurture both play complex roles; most people experience little or no sense of choice about their sexual orientation.¹⁶

7. Are there physical factors to consider?

The Journal of Sex Research found that “the modal range for number of [homosexual] sexual partners ever was 101-500.” In other words, the number of participants in the study reporting 101-500 sexual partners was higher than any other group. The study also reported that 10.2 percent to 15.7 percent had between 501 and 1,000 partners. Another 10.2 percent to 15.7 percent reported more than 1,000 lifetime sexual partners.¹⁷ According to one study, 66 percent of gay couples reported sex outside the relationship within the first year, and nearly 90 percent if the relationship lasted five years.¹⁸

Why is such promiscuity a health issue?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that men who have sex with men constitute two percent of the U.S. population, but accounted for more than half of all estimated new HIV infections annually from 2008 to 2010.¹⁹

Dr. John Diggs, an internist with the University of Massachusetts Health Care system,²⁰ states that “the body was not designed to accommodate” anal intercourse. He describes in detail the potential for injury from such activity, and lists 12 diseases “found with extraordinary frequency among male homosexual practitioners.”²¹

According to a study published in the *International Journal of Epidemiology*: “In a major Canadian centre, life expectancy at age 20 years for gay and bisexual men is 8 to 20 years less than for all men. If the same pattern of mortality were to continue, we estimate that nearly half of gay and bisexual men currently aged 20 years will not reach their 65th birthday.”²²

8. Are there psychological factors to consider?

A study in the United Kingdom reported that homosexuals are about 50 percent more likely to suffer from depression and engage in substance abuse than the rest of the population, and are 200 percent more likely to be at risk for suicide.²³

According to the National Lesbian Health Care Survey, over half the sample had had thoughts about suicide at some time, and 18 percent had attempted suicide. About three-fourths had received counseling at some time, half for reasons of sadness and depression.²⁴

A recent study of women who had sex with women and men found that they report significant higher experiences with unsafe sex, smoking, alcohol consumption, and intravenous drug use. They also had an increased likelihood of induced abortion and sexually transmitted disease diagnoses. The study concludes: “For women, a history of sex with women may be a marker for increased risk of adverse sexual, reproductive, and general health outcomes compared with women who reported sex exclusively with men.”²⁵

A typical response to these studies is that gays and lesbians in the U.S. live in a homophobic culture, and that increasing acceptance of their lifestyles would mitigate these risks. However, homosexuals in Denmark (a culture which is highly tolerant of homosexuality) die as early as those in the U.S.—on average, in their early 50s (or in their early 40s if AIDS is the cause of death).²⁶ Since Denmark legalized gay marriage in 1989, they have found that the average age of death for homosexually married men and women was around 60; for conventionally married, it is about 80 years.²⁷

III

LEGAL RESPONSES

9. Is opposition to same-sex marriage (SSM) akin to racial discrimination?

“I resent the fact that homosexuals are trying to piggy back on the civil rights struggles of the ‘60s,” says Bishop Gilbert Thompson of Boston. Rev. Jesse Lee Peterson of Los Angeles calls this connection “offensive” and says that the civil rights movement “is not about sex.” Pastor Garland Hunt of Atlanta adds: “Same-sex marriage has nothing to do with civil rights, this is an issue of morality.”²⁸

What are the differences between gay rights and civil rights?

- Race is clearly inherited; the origins of homosexual orientation are still very much in dispute.
- The biological differences between people of different races are miniscule, varying by just two tenths of one percent. But the anatomical and biological differences between males and females are obviously very significant.
- Race cannot be chosen, while homosexual *activity* is a choice.
- While minorities continue to face economic discrimination, there are far less financial consequences for homosexuals. To the contrary, studies place the average income of homosexual households at either twice or 60 percent higher than the national average.²⁹

In opposing SSM, we should make very clear our support for civil rights. Racism in all its forms is wrong. God loves the entire world (John 3:16) and calls us to do the same (Matt. 22:39). And we should explain that our opposition to same-sex marriage is based on objective facts as well as biblical truth. (More below.)

10. Why are Christians threatened by SSM?

Other countries that have legalized SSM have provided few if any exemptions or protections for those who object on religious grounds. For example, a campaign in Canada seeks to remove tax-exempt status from churches that refuse to consecrate same-sex marriages. Denmark requires the Evangelical Lutheran Church to conduct gay marriages. A mayor in France faces up to three years in prison for refusing to conduct a SSM.

In America, 31 states have statutes criminalizing “bias-motivated intimidation.” If a homosexual claims that he or she faces intimidation by Christians with regard to SSM or sexual orientation, the person can sue on the basis of the statute. Catholic Charities has been forced to stop adoption and foster care ministries in many cities, because it insists that parents be heterosexual.

If the Supreme Court legalizes SSM this June, tax-exempt status for churches may come into question. In 1983, the IRS revoked the tax-exempt status of Bob Jones University as a result of the school’s racial policies. Their finding: “Racial discrimination in education is contrary to public policy. Racially discriminatory educational institutions cannot be viewed as conferring a public benefit within the above ‘charitable’ concept or within the congressional intent underlying 501(c)(3).”³⁰

Now imagine that the courts determine that same-sex marriage is “public policy” (change “racial” to “sexual” in the above finding, for instance). Will the tax-exempt status of churches and other religious institutions that support biblical marriage then be revoked?

In 2004, Harvard law professor Mary Ann Glendon warned:

Religious freedom . . . is at stake. As much as one may wish to live and let live, the experience in other countries reveals that once these arrangements become law, there will be no live-and-let-live policy for those who differ. Gay-marriage proponents use the language of openness, tolerance and diversity, yet one foreseeable effect of their success will be to usher in an era of intolerance and discrimination the likes of which we have rarely seen before. Every person and every religion that disagrees will be labeled as bigoted and openly

discriminated against. The ax will fall most heavily on religious persons and groups that don't go along. Religious institutions will be hit with lawsuits if they refuse to compromise their principles.³¹

11. Is the slippery slope argument about polygamy a realistic worry?

As many as 50,000 to 100,000 Muslims in the United States already live in polygamous families. A man marries one wife in a civil ceremony that is recognized by the state, then two or three others in religious ceremonies that are not recognized by the state.³² Will their numbers (and voting power) continue to grow?

According to a recent study, “young adults’ attitudes toward polygamous marriage were neutral.”³³ Will society’s shifting views on marriage soon include acceptance of polygamy? If so, why would legal definitions of marriage not follow suit?

“Polyamory” is “the practice, desire, or acceptance of having more than one intimate relationship at a time with the knowledge and consent of everyone involved.”³⁴ According to the “Polyamory Society,” it is “the nonpossessive, honest, responsible and ethical philosophy and practice of loving multiple people simultaneously.”³⁵

As many as five percent of Americans are currently living in relationships that involve “consensual nonmonogamy” or “permission to go outside the couple looking for love or sex.”³⁶ Polyamory advocate Lee Stranahan notes, “There’s no argument you can make against a poly marriage that wouldn’t work just as well as an argument against gay marriage.”³⁷

Here’s the point: Once we begin permitting anyone to marry, where do we end? If those in love are entitled to marriage, why not fathers and daughters (or sons)? Why not adults and children? Why not three or more marriage partners?

12. What legal concerns should my church consider?

Legal counsel has suggested that Denison Forum on Truth and Culture should adopt a policy prohibiting our staff members from conducting SSM. Our policy:

Denison Ministries believes that the Bible mandates that sexual activity is to be enjoyed exclusively between a man and a woman that have been joined together in holy matrimony. All other sexual activity violates the biblical standard for Christians. As a result, the Corporation's ministers are prohibited from participating in any marriage ceremony where the participants do not fit within the biblical definition of holy matrimony.

Please note that this language is specific to our ministry. It is imperative that you not copy it for your governing documents, since it may not be appropriate for your church or ministry. Instead, you should seek legal counsel for assistance in considering this step. The Liberty Institute, the Rutherford Institute, and similar organizations can be of enormous help in this regard.

IV

PRACTICAL RESPONSES

13. How should churches relate to homosexuals?

Compassionate conviction should characterize our relationships with homosexuals. We should refuse to shun gays, or to embrace unbiblical behavior. We seek to glorify God in our personal lives and collectively as the church. As we focus on Jesus, we can follow his example of compassionate conviction, speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15).

In dealing with people who want to discuss homosexuality, I offer these recommendations:

- Remember that this issue is deeply personal for those who experience homosexual attractions, as well as those who have loved ones who identify as homosexual.
- Listen to the whole story before you seek to respond.
- Identify the real issue for this person, after listening and asking questions.
- Share your own brokenness and struggles with sin. This is especially important for pastors, since many perceive them as judgmental. Sharing brokenness establishes trust, which is essential to this relationship.
- Articulate your position on homosexuality, but with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15).
- Pray with the person.

On a congregational level, consider these steps:

- Address the issue through sermons, Bible studies, Sunday schools and small groups. Offer literature that equips members on these issues.
- Invest time in staff and lay leaders, equipping them to help members and others understand biblical principles and the church's position.
- Consider a town hall meeting to discuss these issues as a church body. (More on this will be discussed below.)

It is important for a church to decide its position with regard to homosexual issues. Dr. Bruce Corley describes four basic positions:³⁸

One, “unqualified openness.” According to Corley, these churches “are convinced that [the] way forward is to place homosexuality on equal footing with heterosexuality. Thus, they argue that homosexual persons should participate fully in all dimensions of church life. Gays and lesbians should serve in any role—including the ordained office—to which they sense the requisite calling and gifting of the Spirit. Further, the church should sanction significant times in the lives of gay and lesbian persons. Above all, clergy ought to bless same-sex unions in a manner similar to heterosexual marriages.”

Two: a more “qualified acceptance.” Such churches “gladly accept lesbians and gays as members of the church. But they cannot support the ordination of practicing homosexual persons. Nor do they believe that the church sanctions same-sex marriages.”

Three: “differentiated acceptance.” Such churches “differentiate between homosexual acts, which they deem sinful, and the same-sex preference, which they believe is not. On the basis of this distinction, proponents urge the church to focus on behavior and to treat homosexual practices as one type of sin among many. Further, not only ordination but even church membership (at least ongoing status in the church) ought to be limited to those homosexual persons who are sexually abstinent.”

Four: “undifferentiated rejection.” Such churches “find no warrant for distinguishing between sexual orientation and sexual behavior. As a result, they believe that no admittedly homosexual person can be a member in good standing in the church. Some proponents even suggest the church support civil laws against same-sex behaviors.”

14. What about homosexual church members?

More and more churches and pastors are facing the issue of gay members. At least four questions need to be considered.

(1) Should a church allow homosexuals to join?

The Bible does not offer specific teaching with regard to local church membership. As a result, thoughtful Christians have taken at least five positions on this issue.

One, some believe that people with same-sex orientation cannot be Christians (based on their reading of 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; see question #2 above). As a result, they would not permit such people to join their congregation until they have repented of their “sin” and changed their orientation.

Two, some distinguish between orientation and behavior. They permit homosexuals to join, so long as they remain celibate.

Three, some accept homosexuals, even those who are practicing a gay lifestyle, in the belief that we have no right to elevate or judge one sin over another. 1 Corinthians 6 warns that “neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (vs. 9-10). Accordingly, if we refuse membership to practicing homosexuals, to be fair we should exclude it from those who commit any sin on the list.

Four, some accept homosexuals, even those who are practicing a gay lifestyle, in the belief that inclusion in the church will help them come to repentance and transformation by the Spirit. In this view, excluding them from membership excludes them from such ministry and experience.

Five, some refuse membership to homosexuals (especially those who are non-celibate), believing that their “sin” is especially obvious to the culture and would be endorsed through church membership. In their view, the public nature of homosexual sin (especially in the context of marriage) makes it different from other vices listed in 1 Corinthians 6 and other biblical texts.

In my opinion, the first option is not tenable (as noted when we discussed this issue). The fifth position is also unwise, since we seldom (if ever) apply it to others whose sins are known to the public. If we refuse membership to gay Christians on this basis, we must do so as well to heterosexuals who are known publicly to be living together, sexually active, greedy in business, etc.

I believe that positions three and four are unwise, as they risk the implication that the church endorses homosexual behavior. In my mind, there is a significant distinction between church attendance and church membership. We should want practicing homosexuals to attend our worship services and other activities. As position four notes, we want them to experience the transforming work of the Spirit through our ministries and community.

But we should not allow unrepentant sinners to join our membership, whatever their moral issue. 1 Corinthians 5 instructs the church not to allow unrepentant immorality in its midst. The sinner in question was permitted to rejoin the fellowship only when he repented of his behavior (2 Corinthians 2:5-11). By extension, Paul's admonition applies to those seeking membership as well. We are not discriminating against practicing homosexuals—this position applies to all people and all sins.

The question is not whether sinners can join our churches—all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). The issue is one of unrepentant sin, persons who knowingly and intentionally live in a way that directly contradicts Scripture. We want them to worship, study Scripture, pray, and fellowship with us as a means to their repentance and transformation. But we do not want to endorse their sin, either to them or to the watching community.

How can a church redeem this issue? I have titled the following strategy, "How the homosexual issue can strengthen the church."

First, pastors should lead their churches to consider the issues related to homosexuality, and make decisions regarding membership, baptism and leadership. This step will give pastors the opportunity to educate their members on these issues, with particular application to personal, family, and spiritual concerns. The congregation should then determine its positions on these issues, and make them known.

As a result, pastors will be applying the church's positions, not making decisions in their own authority. Their ministry will be protected with regard to those who disagree, and strengthened as a result. Issues regarding homosexuality will be far less divisive for the church if its members have the opportunity to discuss them prayerfully and theologically. And gay persons will know the church's positions before applying for membership, lessening the likelihood of personal and public pain.

Second, churches should include in their membership process a way to discuss moral issues with prospective members. A membership class or individualized counseling sessions would be effective in this regard.

Homosexuality should be only one such issue; the scope of biblical morality should be discussed as well (see Micah 6:8; Hosea 2:19-20; Romans 12:9-21;

13:8-14; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; 13:4-8, 13; Galatians 5:16-26; Ephesians 5:1-10; Colossians 3:1-17; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22; 1 Timothy 6:3-12; 2 Timothy 2:22-26; Titus 3:1-3; James 3:13-14; 1 Peter 3:8-9). All behavior that contradicts biblical standards should be discussed.

The point of this process is to help prospective members understand the kind of conduct the congregation strives to maintain, acknowledging that we are all sinners in need of the Spirit's sanctification. Through this step, gay membership candidates will understand the church's position regarding this issue. If the church has a ministry or resources for gay people, it can offer them at this time as well.

Third, if individuals are committed to living by biblical standards, they can be considered for membership. For homosexuals, this means a commitment to lifelong celibacy. For heterosexuals, it means a commitment to fidelity in marriage and celibacy outside it.

This strategy redeems the issue of gays and church membership. It strengthens the congregation regarding the biblical spectrum of moral issues, clarifies its position on gay membership, and applies this position in an honest and truthful manner. It helps gay Christians understand the church's position without embarrassing them publicly, and allows them to worship with the church and join if they are committed to biblical celibacy.

(2) What about baptism?

One's approach to this issue depends on the church's baptism theology and polity. For Baptist churches, the strategy outlined above would apply to baptism as well.

(3) What about leadership in the church?

As we have noted, the Bible offers no specific instruction on local church membership. However, it offers very clear teaching with regard to those who teach or otherwise lead the congregation:

- James 3:1 warns, "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." James makes clear the power of our words (vs. 2-12). It is vital that teachers speak truth to those they influence.
- Hebrews 13:7 adds, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith." Leaders in the church must live in such a way that others are drawn closer to Christ through their example.

- 1 Timothy 3:1-13 sets out clear standards for those who are to lead the church as elders or deacons.

Taking these instructions together, they show us that church leaders must teach and live in a way that honors Christ and strengthens the family of faith. Sinful words or actions undermine such leadership and bring dishonor and divisiveness to the body of Christ.

Gay Christians who do not believe their lifestyle is sinful will obviously not agree that they are therefore disqualified from church leadership. They may claim that the church is treating them unfairly. However, the church has the right to determine what standards it upholds for its leaders. To be non-discriminatory, it should require biblical morality in all its dimensions, not just regarding homosexuality.

This position redeems the issue of homosexuality and church leadership by defining a church's moral standards for all its leaders. Those who condemn a church for "discriminating" against gays will have less credibility if they cannot point to immorality in the church's leadership. And they will understand that the church extends both grace and moral expectation to all its members.

(4) What about members who "come out"?

When children grow up in a church, trust Christ as their Lord, join the congregation, then later "come out," how should the church respond? What about those who join as adults and later express homosexual orientation and/or behavior?

Once a church has determined its positions regarding prospective membership and leadership, it should apply these positions to existing members. For churches which choose to make immorality a membership issue, I suggest that a "restoration" task force or ministry group within the local church be developed. These members should be equipped with biblical, cultural and counseling resources. Among the team's members, the spiritual gifts of wisdom, discernment and mercy will be vital. They will work with members who struggle with immoral behavior, including homosexual activity, seeking the most redemptive response.

Once the church has decided its position regarding gay membership candidates, it will know how to address homosexuality with its existing members. If the church has chosen to exclude practicing gays from membership, it should respond to existing members by following Jesus' instructions in Matthew 18.

Initially it would send a member of the restoration team to the person in question (v. 15), seeking to initiate repentance and restoration. If the person refuses to listen, the team member brings two or three others (v. 16). If the person still

refuses to listen, the team brings the issue to the entire church (v. 17a). If the person still refuses to listen or repent, the church must remove him or her from membership (v. 17b). This process should be followed with regard to any immoral behavior, not just homosexual activity.

Such an approach redeems this issue by strengthening the church's moral character and public witness. And it allows the Spirit to bring God's people into closer intimacy with their Father.

15. What about “reparative therapy”?

In late December 2014, 17-year-old Leelah Alcorn wrote a suicide note, posted it on Tumblr and stepped in front of a truck, ending her life. Leelah explained how her parents had forced her to attend conversion therapy, pulled her out of school and isolated her in an attempt to change her gender identity. In response to her tragic death, a petition was started to ban reparative therapy. As of April 16, 2015, 120,958 individuals had signed their name to the cause.

“Reparative therapy” (often called “conversion therapy”) generally refers to any practices by mental health providers seeking to change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity. The Southern Poverty Law Center states that there are approximately 70 therapists currently practicing conversion-type therapy.

How should we view this practice?

Political issues

President Obama recently announced his support for efforts to ban “conversion therapy” for minors. Valerie Jarrett, senior advisor to the president, added: “Overwhelming scientific evidence demonstrates that conversion therapy, especially when it is practiced on young people, is neither medically nor ethically appropriate and can cause substantial harm. As part of our dedication to protecting America's youth, this administration supports efforts to ban the use of conversion therapy for minors.” U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy agreed that “conversion therapy is not sound medical practice.”

Bills banning conversion therapy have been adopted in California, New Jersey, and the District of Columbia. Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Ohio, New York, Washington and Illinois are considering similar legislation. However, a number of mental health organizations support the rights of youth to receive such therapy including the American Association of Christian Counselors, the Alliance for Scientific Integrity and Therapeutic Choice, the Catholic Medical

Association, the American College of Pediatricians, International Network of Orthodox (Jewish) Mental Health Professionals and the Christian Medical & Dental Association.³⁹

Bans on reparative therapy have raised significant religious liberty questions. When New Jersey passed its reparative therapy ban for minors in 2013, Russell Moore stated that the bill was “broadly and haphazardly written in a way that endangers, among other things, the teenager who seeks counsel for how to live a chaste life with same-sex attractions. His counselor, upon threat of losing a license, can only parrot the state-approved line rather than dealing with him or her as an individual.”⁴⁰

If the government can tell counselors what they cannot say to clients regarding sexual orientation change, where is the line against intrusion to be drawn? If Christian counselors tell non-Christian clients that they need faith in Jesus to avoid hell, will government officials censure this practice as harmful? What about counselors who encourage clients to end adulterous affairs?

Lt. Cmdr. Wesley Modder was given a “detachment for cause” by the Navy last February, claiming that he was intolerant toward those engaged in premarital sex and homosexual behavior.⁴¹ Will other Christians face similar censure if their counseling practices are viewed as harmful by government officials?

Alan Chambers

Alan Chambers is the former president of Exodus International (EI). His organization worked to help individuals reorient their same-sex attraction. It believed that reorientation of same-sex attraction is possible, but warned members not to go to counselors who claim they could eliminate all same-gender attraction.

In 2013, the board of directors announced that EI would be closing. Chambers stated: “I am sorry for the pain and hurt many of you have experienced. I am sorry that some of you spent years working through shame and guilt you felt when your attractions didn’t change. I am sorry we promoted sexual orientation change efforts and reparative theories about sexual orientation that stigmatized patients.”⁴² Many of the member organizations under EI’s umbrella continue to function, independently or in new networks.

In September, his latest book will be published: *My Exodus: Leaving the Slavery of Religion, Loving the Image of God in Everyone*. He has voiced his support for President Obama’s desire to ban reparative therapy.

Russell Moore

Russell Moore is president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. Speaking at a conference last year, he stated that treatments attempting to change a person's sexual orientation have been "severely counterproductive."

He told journalists, "The utopian idea if you come to Christ and you go through our program, you're going to be immediately set free from attraction and anything you're struggling with, I don't think that's a Christian idea." He added, "Faithfulness to Christ means obedience to Christ. It does not necessarily mean that someone's attractions are going to change."⁴³

Stanton Jones and Mark Yarhouse

Stanton L. Jones and Mark A. Yarhouse jointly published "A Longitudinal Study of Attempted Religiously Mediated Sexual Orientation Change." Their conclusion: "Evidence from the study suggested that change of homosexual orientation appears possible for some and that psychological distress did not increase on average as a result of the involvement in the change process."⁴⁴

Their specific findings:

About one third of the final participants abandoned their attempt to change, with many embracing a homosexual identity. About one third embraced sexual abstinence rather than a homosexual identity. About one fourth had moved away from a predominantly homosexual orientation and reported having satisfactory heterosexual relationships. One participant claimed at first to be a "success" story but later repudiated his report and embraced a homosexual identity, while another had given up on change but later claimed to have successfully changed his orientation to heterosexuality.⁴⁵

What about harm to participants? They noted:

Distress did not increase with continued commitment to the process, and few subjects reported extreme levels of distress, suggesting that distress and harm are not inherent in the attempt to change sexual orientation. To be sure, harm may indeed occur when incompetent or inhumane methods are utilized, or when vulnerable minors are treated unprofessionally. On the whole, however, our evidence suggests that some people experience meaningful shifts in sexual orientation and that the attempt to change is not intrinsically or necessarily harmful.⁴⁶

Joseph Nicolosi

Dr. Joseph Nicolosi is one of the founders of reparative therapy.⁴⁷ He believes that it is impossible to “cause” sexual-orientation change. But he also believes that individuals who are questioning their sexual identity deserve the chance to investigate all their options, in contrast to counselors who simply encourage them to adopt a gay identity and live a gay lifestyle. The client sets the goal for counseling, which seeks to deal with underlying factors that may affect sexual orientation.

For instance, Nicolosi cites a study which reports that 46 percent of homosexual men (compared to seven percent of heterosexual males) reported homosexual molestation. The same study found that 22 percent of lesbians reported homosexual molestation, compared with one percent of heterosexual women. Persuasive adults can influence teenagers, as can developmental crises.

Nicolosi also notes a study of 34,707 Minnesota youth which reported that 25.9 percent of 12-year-olds were uncertain if they were heterosexual or homosexual. However, only two to three percent of adults eventually labeled themselves homosexual. He concludes that 90 percent of “sexually questioning” teens could erroneously be identified as homosexual if affirmed as gay by a therapist, counselor or club. Nicolosi seeks to help clients understand their sexual feelings and orientation, resolve past trauma and understand the health consequences associated with homosexual activity.

Alan Chambers has been critical of Nicolosi’s work, accusing him of using pornography to make people “100% straight.” Nicolosi responded: “I have never said I could cure someone completely from homosexuality. All my books make it quite clear that homosexual attractions will persist to some degree throughout a person’s lifetime.” He also states, “I do not use heterosexual pornography with my clients.”⁴⁸

My view

After listing “men who practice homosexuality” among sinful behaviors, Paul stated, “And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (v. 11). I believe that God can change any heart. At the same time, I do not believe that therapies promising to change sexual orientation through human effort are likely to succeed. Nor do I believe that coercive approaches are appropriate.

While I understand the government’s need to protect its citizens from harmful medical/therapeutic practices, I am concerned about intrusions on religious liberty. This issue merits close monitoring in coming years.

16. What about transgender people?

Nearly 17 million people watched Olympic champion Bruce Jenner tell ABC's Diane Sawyer, "for all intents and purposes, I'm a woman." Time magazine has called the transgender movement he represents, "America's next civil-rights frontier."

What should the church say to Bruce (now known as Caitlyn) Jenner? Let's consider medical perspective on gender confusion (called "gender dysphoria"), then seek theological wisdom.

Paul McHugh is the former psychiatrist in chief at Johns Hopkins Hospital, where sex-reassignment surgery was first performed in the 1960s. He writes in *The Wall Street Journal*: "policy makers and the media are doing no favors either to the public or the transgendered by treating their confusions as a right in need of defending rather than as a mental disorder that deserves understanding, treatment and prevention."⁴⁹

When Johns Hopkins studied its sex-reassignment patients, it discovered that they were no better adjusted after their surgery than before, so the university ceased such operations. The physician who headed the study later told *The New York Times*: "My personal feeling is that surgery is not a proper treatment for a psychiatric disorder, and it's clear to me these patients have severe psychological problems that don't go away following surgery."⁵⁰

Dr. McHugh reports a recent study of sex-reassignment patients which found that their suicide mortality rose almost 20-fold above the comparable nontransgender population. He concludes: "'Sex change' is biologically impossible. People who undergo sex-reassignment surgery do not change from men to women or vice versa. Rather, they become feminized men or masculinized women. Claiming that this is a civil-rights matter and encouraging surgical intervention is in reality to collaborate with and promote a mental disorder."⁵¹

Now to some theological facts.

One, God's word calls us to affirm our created gender. Deuteronomy 22:5 states, "A woman shall not wear a man's garment, nor shall a man put on a woman's cloak, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God." Deuteronomy 23:1 adds, "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the Lord." Jesus affirmed that God made us "male and female" (Matthew 19:4).

Two, none of us fulfills God’s perfect intention for us. “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). As fallen people, we have each distorted the image in which we were made, and feel a deep longing to fulfill our God-given identity and purpose.

Three, suffering people are desperate for hope. When we are in pain, we will try whatever promises to help. Sex-reassignment surgery and hormone treatments are drastic measures. People considering such options need compassion and community, not ridicule and rejection.

Four, separating the body from the soul heals neither. According to Dr. McHugh, changing the physical gender does not heal the psyche. That’s because God made us in his image, as unified in diversity as our Three-In-One Lord. Where we are wounded most deeply, we most need the transforming power of the Spirit.

So, here’s what the church should say to Bruce/Caitlyn Jenner: God loves you. His hope for you is not in becoming a woman, but in being the man you were created to be. His Spirit longs to heal you and transform you into the image of Christ (Romans 8:29). As beggars helping beggars find bread, we share with you the healing grace we need as well.

17. Are we under spiritual attack?

“We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12).

Between 2003 and 2013,

- The number of Americans who say homosexuality should be accepted by society increased from 47% to 60%.
- The number who would not be “upset” to learn that their child was gay or lesbian grew from 36% to 55%.
- Those who believe homosexual behavior is a sin decreased from 55% to 45%.

Even more telling: while only 22% of white evangelical Christians favor same-sex marriage (the lowest percentage of any group in the study), 70% are convinced it is “inevitable.”⁵²

I believe there is a satanic strategy behind the same-sex marriage debate as Christian leaders are currently conducting it. When you consider how Satan attacks God's people, then look for these strategies in our debate, I think you'll agree with me.

Satan questions biblical authority

In the Garden of Eden, the serpent asked the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'" (Genesis 3:1). This was a *distortion* of God's instructions which restricted the first humans only from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17). From distortion the enemy moved to *denial*: "You will not surely die" (Gen. 3:4). Finally, he moved to *deception*: "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God" (v. 5).

Are we seeing distortion, denial and deception with regard to biblical teachings on homosexuality?

As we have noted, the Bible clearly forbids homosexual activity. A strategy that questions the authority and legitimacy of God's word seems very similar to the Genesis 3 deception. We know that Satan "snatches away" the word of God from those who do not understand it (Matthew 13:19). Are Christian leaders being victimized?

The enemy promotes divisions

Paul appealed to Roman Christians to "watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine you have been taught" (Romans 16:17). Then he assured them that "the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (v. 20). From Ananias and Sapphira to today, Satan has been sowing seeds of division in the soil of God's Kingdom (Acts 5:3).

Paul forgave his critics in Corinth "so that we would not be outwitted by Satan" (2 Corinthians 2:11). He warned us: "do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil" (Ephesians 4:26-27). Clearly, divisions within the body of Christ are such an "opportunity."

Is this strategy at work in the Church's response to same-sex marriage?

The United Church of Christ, Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and Presbyterian Church (USA) are large American denominations that affirm homosexual clergy and same-sex marriage in various ways. By contrast, the Roman Catholic Church, Southern Baptist Convention, Assemblies

of God, and Presbyterian Church in America consider homosexual activity of any kind to be unbiblical. The United Methodist Church continues to debate the issue of homosexual clergy and same-sex marriage.

Well-known leaders such as Rick Warren and Rob Bell are similarly divided on this issue. Paul asked, “If the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?” (1 Corinthians 14:8, NIV). Christian leaders will find it difficult to persuade the culture on an issue if they cannot persuade each other.

The enemy undermines our witness

By weakening our commitment to biblical authority, Satan divides our fellowship. Such division clearly harms our witness to the world, conflicting with Jesus’ prayer for us “that they may all be one . . . so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21).

In addition, our enemy tempts us to live in such a way that others will slander us: “I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander. For some have already strayed after Satan” (1 Timothy 5:14-15). Our fallen culture increasingly criticizes and castigates those who take a biblical stand on this issue.

And our enemy tries to undermine the public character of Christian leaders: An overseer “must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil” (1 Timothy 3:7). When pastors and other spiritual leaders are branded homophobic, bigoted and intolerant, the entire Christian movement is cast into disrepute.

Christian leaders play into his hands when we play the part. Westboro Baptist Church is a tiny congregation with no more than 40 members, most of whom are members of the pastor’s family. But their pickets and protests, employing horribly inflammatory language against homosexuals, routinely make national headlines. When Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson criticized “the feminists and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle” after 9/11, their remarks were widely (if unfairly) interpreted as blaming homosexuals for the attacks.⁵³

We know that “the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:4). Is he using the same-sex marriage debate to this end?

The devil entices us to pride

Solomon warned that “pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18). Satan is working to hasten such a “fall” for Christian leaders. Thus Paul warned that an overseer “must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil” (1 Timothy 3:6).

Are we witnessing such conceit in the same-sex marriage debate?

On one side stands Rev. Mel White, who claims that those who warn of divine judgment over same-sex marriage are “holy terrorists.”⁵⁴ South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu: “I would not worship a God who is homophobic . . . I would refuse to go to a homophobic heaven. No, I would say sorry, I mean I would much rather go to the other place.”⁵⁵

On the other side, a North Carolina pastor made headlines for recommending that we “build a great, big, large fence, 150- or 100-mile long, put all the lesbians in there, fly over and drop some food. Do the same thing with the queers and the homosexuals, and have that fence electrified so they can’t get out. . . . In a few years they’ll die.”⁵⁶ A minister-blogger identified Hurricane Sandy as God’s wrath against “a pro-homosexual Mormon along with a pro-abortion/homosexual, Muslim Brotherhood promoter, Hard Left Fascist [who] are running for president.”⁵⁷

Do such presumptuous statements manifest the “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” that are the “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22-23)? Do they draw lost people closer to Jesus?

We are commanded to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), defending the faith “with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15). Then, “when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame” (v. 16).

Opponents of the Gospel are in “the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will” (2 Timothy 2:26). I fear that some of its proponents are in danger of the same snare.

It has never been more urgent that Christian leaders stand boldly and clearly for biblical truth regarding homosexual activity and same-sex marriage. However, when our proclamation undermines biblical authority, divides the body of Christ, undercuts our witness and demonstrates arrogance rather than humility, do we attack the gates of hell or do we serve their cause?

18. How can Christians minister to homosexuals effectively?

One, know that many will consider our position on homosexual activity to be bigoted and intolerant. We must earn the right to be heard, building relationships as the basis for biblical conversation.

Two, make our motives clear. We are opposed to homosexual activity because God's word teaches this position. And we are concerned about those who practice such activity, given the physical, emotional, and psychological harm it can produce.

Three, affirm that all people are worthy of dignity, respect, and safety. "Gay-bashing" is always wrong. Any action or attitude which demeans a person violates the unconditional love of God.

Four, distinguish between orientation and behavior, and note that all sexual relations outside heterosexual marriage are unbiblical.

Five, offer hope. As we have noted, the Spirit of God sanctified those in Corinth who were engaged in immoral practices, homosexual activity among them. He can enable homosexuals to choose celibacy, and perhaps to change their attractions. Our job is to offer his love in ours, showing a skeptical culture that biblical truth is best for us all.

19. How can we defend biblical marriage?

Recent years have witnessed a massive shift in Americans' attitudes toward same-sex marriage. According to Pew Research conducted in 2001, 57 percent opposed SSM, while 35 percent supported it. Today the numbers are nearly reversed, with 52 percent in support and 40 percent opposed.⁵⁸

The Supreme Court is scheduled in June 2015 to issue a ruling on the constitutionality of SSM. Most believe the Court will rule in favor of SSM, overturning all remaining state bans. Those opposed to SSM are expected to argue:

- Judicial precedent: in a 1972 Supreme Court ruling (*Baker v. Nelson*), the Court denied marriage rights to a gay couple "for want of a substantial federal question."
- Marriage is the purview of the state, not the federal government.

- The state has a vested interest in traditional marriage with regard to procreation and the raising of children.
- History and tradition are opposed to SSM.

Lower courts that have overturned bans on SSM have determined that the 1972 ruling is no longer binding. They have also ruled that the federal government has an overriding interest in securing the civil rights of all citizens (as when it struck down interracial marriage bans in *Loving v. Virginia*), even if it must side against history and tradition. If the Supreme Court agrees, it will likely base its ruling on the Fourteenth Amendment, which forbids a state to “deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.”

Assuming the Court makes SSM legal in all 50 states, how can Christians opposed to SSM defend biblical marriage? Here are my suggestions:

(1) Engage this issue with a positive, gracious spirit.

When the Apostle Paul found himself in Athens, “his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols” (Acts 17:16). Did he respond by condemning their idolatry? After “he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there” (v. 17), he was given an audience with the Areopagus, the intellectual leaders of the day.

There he began his discourse by referring to the idols he had seen, but not in a negative spirit: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious” (v. 22). He then referred to their altar “to the unknown god” (v. 23), and revealed to them the true identity of this “god.”

In other words, Paul engaged Athenian culture in a positive, gracious way. He quoted Epimenides and Aratus, poets they respected. Having won a hearing by such reasoned engagement, eventually Paul spoke prophetic truth against their idolatry: “we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone” (v. 29). Then he proclaimed the risen Christ.

As a result, a man known as “Dionysius the Areopagite” came to faith (v. 34). The Greek Orthodox Church traces its origins to Dionysius, and considers him their patron saint today. If Paul had condemned their sins before he found commonality with their culture, he would have been rejected. As it was, his message at Mars Hill is still bearing fruit today.

In defending biblical marriage, it is vital that we show SSM advocates our respect for them and their position. While some are clearly antagonistic toward biblical truth and our faith, most view this as a simple civil rights issue. To

them, SSM (viewed as marriage between sexual minorities) is as defensible as marriage between ethnic minorities.

They believe that sexual orientation is as innate and unchosen as ethnic identity, and therefore argue that lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered/queer (LGBTQ) persons should not face marital discrimination. They view biblical marriage proponents in the same way we would have viewed those who opposed interracial marriage before it was legalized in 1967: as prejudiced and antagonistic toward a disadvantaged minority.

Most think that we advocate biblical marriage solely on the basis of our religious beliefs. Many think that we are misreading Scripture, just as some advocates for slavery misread Scripture in defending their position. At best, most are willing to grant us the right to maintain our (misguided) beliefs, but are unwilling for us to impose them on the rest of society. Just as we would oppose attempts by Jehovah's Witnesses to outlaw blood transfusions on the basis of their religious beliefs, SSM advocates oppose our attempts to outlaw SSM.

Therefore, it is vital that we communicate our love for all persons, whatever their sexual orientation. We need to show the culture that we want the best for everyone, and that we believe the biblical position to express what is best. The spirit with which we engage this issue is crucial.

(2) Explain why God forbids SS activity.

Physical and psychological factors related to SS activity (see questions #6 and #7) help explain why SSM is harmful.

(3) Be prepared to defend your biblical beliefs.

Become conversant with the major arguments in support of SSM:

- Covenant marriage (pictured in Genesis 1-2 and described throughout Scripture) should be available for all couples regardless of sexual orientation, as all are created in the image of God.
- The “sin” of Sodom was homosexual rape, not consensual homosexual relations.
- The prohibitions in Leviticus were issued in a culture that did not understand the possibility of homosexual orientation, and are not intended to forbid loving, consensual homosexual relations.

- Paul’s prohibitions relate to homosexual lust and excess, not consensual relations. *Arsenokoites* has been mistranslated, and does not refer to loving homosexual commitments.

In response, note that:

- The Bible nowhere condones SS relations or marriage.
- God’s revelation does not mislead us with regard to sexual orientation.
- The prohibitions of Leviticus were intended for the entire nation, and serve as the context for Paul’s term *arsenokoites*.
- Paul’s prohibitions refer to all homosexual behavior, not just lustful excess.
- Every time Scripture speaks of marriage, it does so in the context of heterosexual relationships.

(4) Make clear the religious liberty implications of this debate.

For 20 centuries, Christians have consistently understood marriage to be between a man and a woman. If SSM becomes the law of the land, will churches and ministers be forced to perform such ceremonies in violation of their religious beliefs?

Advocates who liken SSM to interracial marriage might argue that such religious beliefs are discriminatory and should not be granted legal standing. Proponents of biblical marriage might then ask, What comes next? Polyamory? Consensual marriage regardless of age or family relationship? Will Christians be forced to perform any marriage requested by any person? If not, why is SSM the exception?

As we have seen, tax exemption status for churches and ministries refusing to perform SSM may be in question. The income tax status of ministers who oppose SSM may be in question as well. Will their ordination and related tax benefits no longer be recognized? Could they be subject to lawsuits, as is the case with for-profit businesses which decline to perform SSM services?

(5) Engage with SS leaders, seeking ways to work in community.

As Matthew Vines and David Gushee illustrate, we should never assume that all gay persons or SSM advocates are opposed to biblical faith. In fact, many are sincere Christians who genuinely interpret Scripture differently. Just as

Protestants and Catholics can disagree regarding significant theological tenets and yet work together on numerous issues, so Christians who disagree on SSM can find community. In addition, many non-Christian SSM advocates are open to dialogue with biblical marriage proponents, so long as such conversation is held in a spirit of mutual respect.

In my view, biblical marriage proponents should take the initiative in building such relationships. We should acknowledge that LGBTQ persons have often faced significant and even horrific discrimination in our culture. We should reject bigotry wherever it arises, even from within the Christian community. And we should find ways to work together on issues of mutual concern.

In so doing we will incarnate the gracious initiative of the Incarnate Christ. We will go to those who might not come to us. And God will use us as his hands and feet (1 Corinthians 12:27), salt and light to a culture desperate for both (Matthew 5:13-16).

CONCLUSION

It is often said that Christians who oppose same-sex marriage are on “the wrong side of history.” This claim against Bible-believing Christians has been made before.

In the 1940s and 1950s, it was conventional wisdom among many scholars that the biblical descriptions of divine miracles are now outdated and irrelevant. We were told that scientific advances had rendered such claims nonsensical, leftovers from a pre-scientific, mythological age. Preeminent scholars such as Rudolf Bultmann called for “demythologizing” the text, removing so-called mythical elements such as Jesus’ miracles and the resurrection. In this way, the argument was made, the Bible would be made relevant for the current culture.

In fact, it was this approach to the Bible that proved irrelevant. Einstein’s theory of relativity and advances in quantum physics demonstrated that Newtonian laws of fixed physical behavior are significantly flawed. The current culture is clearly open to spirituality and claims to supernatural experience. The question today is not, Is the supernatural real? Rather, our question is, Which supernatural claim is right?

I believe that history will reveal the negative consequences of endorsing same-sex behavior. Over time, God’s word will be proven right once again. In the meantime, our calling as Christians is to offer our culture God’s transforming word and transcendent grace.

St. Augustine noted that “God loves each of us as if there were only one of us.” Does our culture see his love in ours?

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“The potential for injury is exacerbated by the fact that the intestine has only a single layer of cells separating it from highly vascular tissue, that is, blood. Therefore, any organisms that are introduced into the rectum have a much easier time establishing a foothold for infection than they would in a vagina. The single layer tissue cannot withstand the friction associated with penile penetration, resulting in traumas that expose both participants to blood, organisms in feces, and a mixing of bodily fluids. . . .

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