7 Critical Issues

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Introduction:
A call for Berean Christians

Imagine yourself back in time ten years. It’s 2006 and American Idol is America’s most popular TV show. Superman Returns and Casino Royale are among our most popular movies.

Twitter is launched in July; Facebook becomes available to the world in September. “Hannah Montana” introduces Miley Cyrus to the world.

Would you have imagined then that our culture would be where it is today?

Same-sex marriage is now the law of the land. Transgender bathrooms dominate headlines and court proceedings. The morality of homosexuality continues to divide our churches and culture. ISIS is the most brutal terrorist organization we’ve ever faced. Illegal immigration is perhaps the most divisive issue in our country. Abortion continues to kill a million babies a year. Christians are facing unprecedented threats to religious liberties we once took for granted.

How should followers of Jesus respond to these critical issues today? We have three choices.
**One:** We can withdraw from culture by ignoring the challenges our society faces. But didn’t Jesus warn us not to keep our light under a basket (Matthew 5:16)?

**Two:** We can succumb to cultural pressure, choosing to adopt society’s new norms as our own. But isn’t that akin to loving “the things of the world,” a temptation we are warned to avoid (1 John 2:15)?

**Three:** We can use our influence to stand up and speak up for biblical truth and morality in a decadent day. Didn’t Jesus go to those who would not come to him (Mark 1:38–39)? Didn’t he call us to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19), beginning in our “Jerusalem” (Acts 1:8)?

In the following chapters, we will explore the crucial issues our nation faces today. What follows is intended to serve as a handbook with information relevant for believers who want to make an impact on our culture for our Lord.

This is not a political book. My purpose is not to endorse a candidate or political party. My goal is to help you think biblically about the critical issues we face. It is essential that Christians base our views regarding these important subjects on God’s word and will.

When I lead study tours to Greece, we often stop at the town of Berea. Not because it is a large city—its population today is less than 70,000. Not because Paul spent a long time there—his ministry in Berea occupies only six verses of Acts 17 and probably encompassed just a few days.

We stop in Berea because it’s my favorite church in the New Testament. Here’s why: when Paul preached to them, they “examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11 NIV).
As we face crucial cultural issues today, let’s be Berean Christians to the glory of God. And let’s remember this:

*Changed people change the world.*
How to defeat ISIS

*The battle of our lifetime*
How to defeat ISIS
The battle of our lifetime

“We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women. If we do not reach that time, then our children and grandchildren will reach it, and they will sell your sons as slaves at the slave market.”

–Islamic State Spokesman Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Adnani

Nicholas Young has worked for the Washington, DC, Transit Police for twelve years. His father was a social studies teacher in Virginia. Now he is the first American law enforcement officer to be charged with supporting the Islamic State and is one of more than 100 Americans accused of trying to assist ISIS over the years.

According to a man who joined the Islamic State and is now in a German prison, ISIS has created an intelligence unit responsible for exporting terror abroad. Known in Arabic as the Emni, this group trained the terrorists responsible for the recent Paris attacks and built the bombs used in a Brussels airport and subway station. Emni has sent “hundreds of operatives” back to Europe, according to senior US authorities.¹
In the fall of 2014, Australian police thwarted a plot to behead random civilians in “demonstration killings” and post them on YouTube. The president of France announced in July 2016 that ISIS-inspired terrorists slit the throat of an eighty-six-year-old Catholic priest in Normandy.\(^2\)

He is one of more than 1,200 people outside of Iraq and Syria who have been killed in attacks inspired or coordinated by the Islamic State.\(^3\) As attacks escalate against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, the deadliest terrorist group in history is escalating its attacks against the world.

The “War On Terror” began after 9/11. From 2001 to 2014, spending on Overseas Contingency Operations to fund wars in Iraq and Afghanistan totaled $1.492 trillion. During the war in Iraq, 4,488 U.S. soldiers were killed and 32,226 were wounded. For years, al-Qaeda was seen as our primary threat and Osama bin Laden as our chief enemy. Then a group calling itself the Islamic State captured world headlines, superseding our longtime adversary and becoming our greatest global enemy.

ISIS fighters make news nearly daily with horrific executions, staging mass beheadings and burning victims alive. They have slaughtered more than 5,000 victims since beginning their campaign of terror. Captured women have been sold as sex slaves by the hundreds. Women and children who refused to convert to their version of Islam have been buried alive.

The group burned the library at Mosul, including 8,000 rare books and manuscripts. Now they claim that they will assault “Rome” (interpreted variously as Turkey, Italy, or American and Western armies) and call for followers to attack Westerners in malls and wherever else they can murder us.

How can we defeat the most powerful and brutal terrorist group in history?
I have taught world religions for thirty years with four seminaries and have traveled widely and frequently in the Muslim world. I wrote *Radical Islam: What You Need to Know* as a primer on this divisive and dangerous subject. In this chapter I will discuss my reflections on ways to defeat ISIS, looking at the issue culturally, geopolitically, and biblically.

I suggest four steps:

1. Take away its caliphate.
2. Apprehend or kill its leader.
3. Defeat its ideology.
4. Advance spiritual awakening.

**1. Take away its caliphate**

Let’s begin with what makes ISIS so attractive to its followers.

The Islamic State is by no means the only Islamic terrorist group in the world. Hezbollah, Hamas, al-Shabab, Jemaah Islamiyah, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Tehrik-i-Taliban are just a few of many such groups operating around the globe.

What makes ISIS unique is its claim to have established the “caliphate.” If we drive ISIS from this base (sometimes called the “primary tumor” of Islamic terrorism), we refute its claim to legitimacy and severely undermine its global operations.

So, what is the “caliphate”? Why is it so critical?

*The history of ISIS*

The Islamic State is different from any enemy America has confronted in her history. Like al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups, it is not fighting a conventional war for conventional reasons. Its goals are ideological and spiritual. It seeks nothing less than the imposition of its version of Islam on the entire world.
In its current form, the organization now describing itself as the “Islamic State” is known by at least five different terms.

- Its Arabic name is transliterated as ad-Dawlah al-Islamiyah fi al-Iraq wash-Sham. This name leads to the Arabic acronym Da’ish or DAESH.

- The group’s Arabic name translates in English to “The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham,” or ISIS.

- “Al-Sham” is another name for Syria, so that the organization is sometimes called “The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria,” with the same acronym.

- Since “Levant” is an academic term for the larger Middle East, some call the group “The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant,” or ISIL.

- On June 29, 2014, it proclaimed itself a Worldwide Caliphate (to be explained below), and renamed itself “The Islamic State.”

In May 2014, the U.S. government announced that it would refer to the organization as ISIL. However, many Arab groups reject the group’s claim to be an Islamic state of any kind, and so prefer the acronym DAESH. Many U.S. officials now use this name, though ISIS rejects it and flogs those who use it.

The Islamic State began operations in 1999 as a jihadist group in Iraq, calling itself “The Organization of Monotheism and Jihad.” Composed of Sunni extremists (I will explain “Sunni” and “Shiite” below), its founder was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. He swore allegiance to Osama bin Laden and merged his group with al-Qaeda in October 2004. Al-Zarqawi was killed in a U.S. air strike in 2006 and succeeded by Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. Later that year, the group merged with other factions to form the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).
After Abu Omar al-Baghdadi was killed in an air strike in 2010, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was elected by a Shura council (religious assembly) in Nineveh to succeed him. When civil war unfolded in Syria two years later, al-Baghdadi sent fighters there and added “al-Sham” (Syria) to his group, now known as ISIS. After refusing demands to withdraw from Syria by Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda, his group broke from al-Qaeda in early 2014.

On June 9, 2014, ISIS fighters seized Mosul, the second-largest city in Iraq. Two days later it took control of Tikrit. It has continued expanding its territory, and now controls land the size of Great Britain or the state of Indiana. On June 29, 2014, al-Baghdadi announced that the lands he controlled in Iraq and Syria were part of the “Islamic State,” and that he was its “caliph,” or leader. (More on the “caliph” follows.) In July, the group seized control of Syria’s largest oil field and has captured others since.

Its followers in Syria have been seizing territory from other rebel groups. In Iraq, al-Baghdadi has successfully unified opposition to the Shiite government as former officers of Saddam Hussein’s Baath Party and other tribal militias have joined his coalition. They are committed to destroying Iraqi security forces and killing their Shiite enemies.

ISIS now controls more than $2 billion in assets, and receives $1.3 million a day from oil revenues. It has mounted the most sophisticated social media strategy of any extremist group in history. Estimates of its active fighter forces range from 20,000 to 31,500 and are expanding daily. More than a thousand Westerners have joined, including more than 100 Americans; all would have Western passports.

According to Thomas Friedman, today’s Islamic State is made up of three loose factions. One comprises foreign volunteers—some are hardened jihadists, but many are misfits and adventure seekers. A second comprises the group’s backbone—former Sunni
Baathist army officers and local Iraqi Sunnis and tribes giving ISIS passive support. They are united in their hatred for the Shiites who oppressed them under Iraq’s previous Shiite-led government. A third faction is composed of true ideologues such as al-Baghdadi, with their own apocalyptic version of Islam.\(^6\)

Al-Baghdadi’s followers believe he has established the only righteous government on earth. It collects taxes, regulates prices, operates courts, and provides health care, education, and media. It is also reproducing the norms of early Islam: slavery, crucifixion, and beheadings.

Militants are carrying the ISIS flag in Indonesia and across North Africa. It is establishing military affiliates in Afghanistan, Algeria, and Egypt as well as Libya. Boko Haram, a Nigeria-based jihadist group, pledged allegiance to ISIS. Extremists are also pledging loyalty to ISIS in Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Yemen. In the minds of many observers, ISIS is the most significant threat the West has faced since 9/11.

\textit{Why the caliphate matters}

The prophet Muhammad died in AD 632 without appointing a successor (“caliph” in Arabic). Those who led Islam after his death were known as “caliphs,” and the region from which they governed was called the “caliphate.”

The first four caliphs led Islamic expansion across the Middle East and the world, extending to modern-day Iran in the east, Libya in the west, and the Caucasus in the north. The Umayyad caliphate followed in AD 661, based in Damascus. It was succeeded by the Abassid caliphate in AD 750, based in Baghdad.

After Mongols sacked Baghdad in 1258, the Ottoman Empire rose to power. Its caliphate was based in Constantinople (Istanbul), ruling Islam until it was abolished in 1924.
On June 29, 2014 (the first day of Ramadan), the Islamic State announced that it had reestablished the caliphate in Iraq. It declared its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as the new caliph, or leader of Islam.

This caliphate spans the border between Iraq and Syria, extending west nearly to Aleppo, Syria and east nearly to Baghdad, Iraq. It controls an area the size of Jordan or Belgium. This “state” gives ISIS a base for its military operations. Even more significantly, it gives the group legitimacy in the eyes of radicalized Muslims around the world.

So long as ISIS maintains its caliph and caliphate, it can claim to be the heir of Muhammad and the first caliphs. It can claim to have reestablished “true” Islam on earth. And it can continue to attract followers to its base and mobilize terrorists around the world.

**How do we take it away?**

One strategy is financial.

US military jets have recently been targeting major ISIS financial centers, destroying them and turning millions of US dollars into confetti. The US has also killed ISIS financial leaders. Other terrorist groups did not rely on significant financial resources: the 9/11 Commission reported that the September 11 attacks cost only $400,000 to $500,000. But ISIS is trying to maintain a country—paying soldiers, operating schools and utilities, purchasing arms and supplying pensions. The more we can cripple its cash flow, the more we can undermine its ability to wage jihad.

A second strategy is military.

If we don’t kill terrorists where they live, they will kill us where we live. Clearly, we need to coordinate and support a broad coalition of fighters drawn from countries and groups directly affected by ISIS in the Middle East. This is more difficult than it appears, since
many of these groups are in conflict with each other. Some support the al-Assad regime in Syria; others want to overthrow it. Some are backed by Iran and its Shiite proxies; others reject their version of Islam. The Kurds are fighting ISIS, but they are also in conflict with Turkey, which is a US ally. The Saudis could do more to fight ISIS, but they are mortal enemies of the Iranians. The post-Saddam Shiite leadership of Iraq ostracized many Sunnis, leading directly to the creation of ISIS.

If we send US ground troops to Iraq and Syria, we must be sure they have the numbers and support they need. ISIS has as many as 30,000 troops in the Middle East. According to Michael Eisenstadt of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, we would need 90,000 troops to defeat them, backed by 270,000 support personnel. We would also have to coordinate with Russia and Iran to avoid escalating conflict with them.

We must be aware that sending troops to fight ISIS is just what ISIS wants. As we will see later in this chapter, the group’s apocalyptic vision calls for a massive battle against “Rome” (the West), leading directly to the return of their Mahdi (a kind of Messiah) and global domination by Islam.

And we must realize that destroying ISIS in the Middle East will likely result in thousands of ISIS fighters moving into Europe and America to bring the battle to us.

Despite these challenges, it is vital that we defeat ISIS in the Middle East in order to destroy their global credibility and financial base for exporting terror.

**Is war justified biblically?**

Jesus was clear: “Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matthew 5:39). However, his words had to do with personal slander, not self-defense or war.
We find warfare throughout the Old Testament, from Egypt’s armies pursuing Israel at the Red Sea to the Jewish conquest of Canaan, to Assyria’s destruction of the Northern Kingdom, Babylon’s conquest of the South, and the Persians, Greeks, and Romans.

There is no question that God commanded his people to go to war in Canaan. For instance, at Jericho they followed the order of Joshua, God’s anointed leader: “As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpet, the people shouted a great shout, and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they captured the city. Then they devoted all in the city to destruction, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys, with the edge of the sword” (Joshua 6:20–21).

Is warfare still God’s will for us? What does Christian theology teach us for such a time as this? For most of Christian history, the “just war” theory has been extremely helpful. Used for sixteen centuries, the theory states that war is justified when it meets these criteria:

- Just cause—a defensive war, fought only to resist aggression.
- Just intent—fought to secure justice, not for revenge, conquest, or money.
- Last resort—all other attempts to resolve the conflict have clearly failed.
- Legitimate authority—military force authorized by the proper governmental powers.
- Limited goals—achievable, seeking a just peace.
- Proportionality—the good gained must justify the harm done.
• Noncombatant immunity—civilians protected as far as is humanly possible.

By these standards, would our wars against ISIS be “just”? Here are the factors to must consider:

• These wars would respond to aggression on the part of our enemies.

• They would be fought to secure justice for those threatened by ISIS.

• All other diplomatic attempts to resolve the crisis have failed.

• Our leaders followed proper political processes.

• We must know how these wars will neutralize the threat of future aggression and bring about lasting peace in the region.

• The good gained must justify the suffering and death caused by war.

• Civilians must be protected as much as possible.

All the while we are required to obey Jesus’ order: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:44–45). Have you prayed for Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and ISIS militants today?

2. Apprehend or kill its leader

One of the secrets of Islamic terrorism’s success is its indigenous strategy. Unlike Hitler’s Third Reich, jihadist groups are fueled more by ideology than singular leaders. However, ISIS’s caliph is different. And his unique significance to his organization cannot be overstated.
Who is Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi?

The leader of ISIS is the most-wanted terrorist in the world, with a $10 million bounty on his head. He was born Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarra and grew up in Samarra, part of the Sunni region north of Baghdad. He received undergraduate, Masters, and Ph.D. degrees from the Islamic University in Baghdad.

There he changed his last name to al-Baghdadi. When he became a cleric, he took for his first name Abu Bakr, the prophet Muhammad’s father-in-law, chief advisor, and successor. He claims to be a direct descendant of Muhammad.

For more than a decade, al-Baghdadi lived in a room attached to a small mosque on the western edge of the city. He was known as a shy religious scholar who eschewed violence and for his skill as the best player on his mosque’s soccer team.

A teacher of Salafi (fundamentalist) Islam, al-Baghdadi focused his doctoral work on sharia (Islamic law). After finishing his Ph.D., he married and became a father a year later. His son is now twelve or thirteen years old.

Al-Baghdadi’s conversion to jihadist terrorism is still something of a mystery. While he was a member of al-Qaeda in Iraq, eyewitnesses say he did not participate in its violent uprising against the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. However, in 2005 he was imprisoned by American forces in Camp Bucca when intelligence reports claimed that he had been fighting against the US occupation. He kept such a low profile that he was released when the prison shut down in 2009. His parting comment, “I’ll see you guys in New York,” was not taken as a threat by the guards.

However, observers believe that al-Baghdadi was radicalized in prison by al-Qaeda jihadists he met there. When he was released, he reaffirmed his membership in al-Qaeda of Iraq. In 2010, the group’s leader was killed in a US air strike. Surprisingly, al-
Baghdadi was elected to succeed him and lead al-Qaeda’s Islamic State of Iraq. As noted, he broke from al-Qaeda in 2014.

**His strategic significance**

Al-Baghdadi has constructed a functioning state founded on his leadership. His family claims to be directly descended of Muhammad; his followers view him as chosen by God to be the leader of Islam.

However, his strategic significance goes beyond his lineage and title. Al-Baghdadi has been able to align secular military leaders with radical Islamist constituents and advanced technological strategies. After the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, many of Saddam Hussein’s Republican Guards joined what became ISIS. They are sophisticated military strategists and organizers, and know how to operate a modern state. For reasons unknown to outsiders, they have chosen to follow al-Baghdadi’s ideological leadership.

His expertise in Islam enables him to energize the spiritual side of his coalition as well. And he has mobilized the most sophisticated technology and social media initiative ever constructed by a terrorist organization.

Observers believe that al-Baghdadi’s death would lead to a fracturing of the coalition that is ISIS. Some of his religious followers would proclaim a new caliph and continue seeking to defend and expand their caliphate. Others would return to al-Qaeda or join another group. The secular elements would likely follow whatever strongman emerges. These factions would be much easier to defeat if separated than if together.

*Is killing al-Baghdadi justified biblically?*

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has committed what the Bible classifies as capital crimes. He repeatedly raped an American NGO worker, Kayla Mueller, then apparently had her killed in early 2015. He
has reportedly raped other women as well. He has called for ISIS fighters to rape women and slaughter men, women, and children. Many have been tortured, crucified, burned alive, buried alive, and beheaded on his command. Rapists are to be executed (Deuteronomy 22:25–27), as are murderers (Leviticus 24:17).

However, we do not live in an Old Testament theocracy. Is executing rapists and murderers still biblical today?

“Capital punishment” derives its name from the Latin caput, meaning “head, top or leader.” A “capital” crime is the most serious, a crime at the top of the list. Punishment for such crimes is thus “capital” as well.

Biblical arguments for capital punishment:

• “For your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. ‘Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image’” (Genesis 9:5–6).

• “Whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death” (Leviticus 24:17).

• “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.

For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience” (Romans 13:1–5).
Those who argue against capital punishment note that the Genesis statement is descriptive, not prescriptive, and that Old Testament laws endorsing capital punishment are not repeated in the New Testament. They believe that Paul’s reference to the “sword” deals with punishment, not execution. They note that God did not seek the death of Cain, Moses, or David after they participated in murder. They argue that enforcing the death penalty brutalizes society, and claim that life in prison is a worst punishment than death.

We can debate the morality of capital punishment as a response to certain crimes. However, given Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s clear strategic significance to ISIS and its future, it is obvious that arresting or executing him is vital to defeating this enemy.

3. Defeat its ideology

ISIS has inspired multiplied thousands of Muslims in the Middle East and around the world to join its brutal movement. The attraction of the caliphate and strategic leadership of al-Baghdadi are part of the reason. But its attraction centers in its unique ideology, a worldview we must understand and defeat. Otherwise, destroying ISIS will not end this conflict. Other groups persuaded by its ideology will pick up its mantle and continue the battle.

What follows is a primer on the beliefs of Muslims, radical Muslims, and the Islamic State. (For much more on Islam, its history, and its beliefs, see my *Radical Islam: What You Need to Know.*)

**Who was the Prophet Muhammad?**

“Islam” means “peace” or “submission.” The religion, followed by 1.6 billion adherents around the world, begins with the Prophet Muhammad. Born in AD 570 in the Arabian city of Mecca, Muhammad ibn Abdallah grew to become a successful businessman in his community. Each year during the month of Ramadan (the ninth month on the Arab calendar),
he would retreat to a nearby mountain called Mount Hira for contemplation and prayer.

On the seventeenth day of Ramadan in the year AD 610, he was gripped by an experience Muslims call “the Night of Power and Excellence.” They believe that Muhammad was met by the angel Gabriel, and received the first in a series of revelations that became the Qur’an (“the Reading”). For the next twelve years, he shared these “revelations” with his family, friends, and community in Mecca. They centered in the assertion that there is only one God, and offered a conciliatory tone toward those who disagreed:

“Let there be no compulsion in religion” (2:256).
“To you be your Way, and to me mine” (109:6).

By 622, however, such opposition had arisen that Muhammad and his seventy followers fled from Mecca 250 miles north to the town of Yathrib, renamed Medina (“the city” or “the city of the Prophet”). There he established the first global Muslim community (known as the “ummah”). And there his “revelations” took on a more militant tone, calling Muslims to defend Islam from all attackers:

“Fight in the cause of God those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for God loveth not transgressors. But if they cease, God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful” (2:190, 192).

Toward the end of his life, Muhammad’s preaching became even more militaristic, now calling on Muslims to initiate aggression against non-Muslims:

“Fight and slay the pagans wherever ye find them. . . . Fight those who believe not in God” (9:5, 29).

Many Muslims believe that these later pronouncements (often called “sword verses”) should be interpreted in light of the earlier, more conciliatory revelations. They view calls to initiate violence
in the same way Christians and Jews view God’s commands to kill the Canaanites—essential in that formative period of Jewish history, but not precepts for us today.

However, jihadists believe just the opposite. Following the doctrine of “abrogation,” they claim that the later the revelation, the more authoritative it is. To them, killing infidels (non-Muslims) and apostates (former Muslims) is a duty required by their religion.

_Who are “Sunni” and “Shiite”?_

“Sunni” and “Shiite” are the two main branches of Islam. “Sunni” is most likely a derivation of “Sunnah” (“the way”), showing that Sunnis follow the example or path of Muhammad. “Shiite” means “followers,” and refers to disciples of Ali (explained below).

Their differences originated in a dispute over leadership of the Muslim world. Muhammad did not appoint a successor before his death in AD 632. Sunni Muslims believe that the “caliphs” (“successors”) of Muhammad have been the rightful heirs of the prophet and leaders of Islam.

These heirs ruled continuously in the Arab world until the breakup of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. Sunnis view the destruction of the caliphate by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923 as catastrophic (roughly analogous to abolishing the papacy for Catholics). We will return to the “caliphate” below.

Shiites, by contrast, claim that only the heirs of the fourth caliph, Ali, are the legitimate successors of Muhammad. They refer to these heirs not as “caliphs” but as “imams.” Most of them believe that the Twelfth Imam disappeared in AD 931 but will appear again at the end of history to dominate the world for Islam. They call him the Mahdi (the “rightly-guided one”).

Sunni Muslims comprise some 85 percent of the Muslim world. Shiites, some 15 percent of Islam, live primarily in Iran, Iraq, and parts of Syria and Yemen.
What do all Muslims believe?

Muslim beliefs can be summarized by the “five pillars of Islam.”

One: The “witness.” Muslims the world over affirm that “there is no God but God, and Muhammad is his prophet.” This creed is their central statement of faith. Stating it slowly and reverently in the presence of two witnesses makes one a Muslim. Many Muslims make it the first and last words they speak during the day and want it to be their dying words as well.

Two: Daily prayers. Observant Muslims pray five times each day, facing toward Mecca.

Three: Pilgrimage to Mecca. Known as the “hajj,” this is required of every Muslim. Those who cannot make the journey are expected to pay for someone to go in their place.

Four: Fasting during Ramadan. From sunup to sundown, observant Muslims are not permitted to swallow. After sunset, they can eat as they wish.

Five: Alms-giving. All Muslims are expected to contribute at least 2.5 percent of their goods to the poor.

What do radical Muslims believe?

Why did the 9/11 terrorists attack America? Why are radical Muslims such as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi committing such atrocities in the name of Islam? Because they hold two tenets in addition to the “five pillars.”

One: They believe that the West has been attacking the Muslim world since the Crusades. Remember that Muhammad established the “ummah,” the global Muslim community, at Medina in AD 622. From that time to this, Muslims believe that all followers of Islam across all time are part of this community. Any act against any Muslim is an act against all Islam.
As a result, the Crusades are still remembered by radical Muslims and retribution is sought. In their minds, Western troops stationed on Saudi soil during the first Gulf War and later in Iraq and Afghanistan also constitute aggression against Islam.

They believe (as do most Muslims) that the Jews are not God’s chosen people, claiming that Abraham offered Ishmael rather than Isaac to God. As a result, they see the creation of Israel in 1948 as a theft of land from its rightful Palestinian owners, and view American support for Israel as an act of violence against the Palestinians and thus the Muslim world. Since they believe the Qur’an requires retribution against enemies of Islam, they consider such violence to be God’s command.

**Two:** They claim that there are no innocent victims in the West. This tenet most distinguishes radical Muslims from the larger world. Since America and Western countries are democracies in which we elect our leaders and support our military, jihadists view us as we viewed Germans who supported Hitler or Japanese citizens who supported the emperor in World War II.

To radical Muslims, 9/11 was not an unprovoked attack on innocent Americans. On the contrary, they view it as a defense of Islam required by the Qur’an, striking at the heart of “Crusader,” imperialist America—the Twin Towers representing the financial, the Pentagon the military, and the White House (the presumed target of the jet that crashed in Pennsylvania) the political. To them, killing any American or Westerner is an act that defends Islam and obeys the Qur’an.

How many Muslims accept these two tenets of radical Islam? According to Gallup polls, approximately seven percent of the Muslim world. This finding does not mean that seven percent of Muslims living in America are radicalized. The percentage would be much lower in the U.S., but much higher in Yemen or Pakistan.
While seven percent does not seem frightening, remember that there are 1.6 billion Muslims in the world. Seven percent of their number represents 112 million radical Muslims, a fighting force three times larger than the enemies we faced in World War II and the Cold War, combined.

And half of the radicalized Muslim world told Gallup they would be willing to die in defense of Islam, a finding that equates to fifty-six million potential suicide bombers. Even if that number is ten times too high, there would still be five million suicide bombers willing to die by killing citizens in the West.

**What does ISIS believe?**

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his followers are fully committed to the tenets of radical Islam. In addition, on June 29, 2014, al-Baghdadi announced that his group had established a caliphate, and that he was now the successor of Muhammad and caliph, global leader of Islam. His group demands that all Muslims accept him as their head.

**Its ideology**

ISIS is following the strategy set out by Sayyid Qutb, known as the “intellectual godfather” of radical Islam. His book, *Milestones*, is the primer that helped lead Osama bin Laden into terrorism and influenced al-Baghdadi as well.

Qutb argued that every person on earth deserves a chance to become a Muslim. However, he believed that this opportunity exists only if the person lives in a nation that is truly Islamic, one governed solely by sharia. Thus Muslims must topple every government and impose strict sharia on every civilization. Only then can people see true Islam and have an opportunity to choose it. ISIS intends to fulfill this vision, in Iraq and Syria, the U.S., and the entire world.
Its theology can be summarized by these verses from the Qur’an:

- **Doctrine of abrogation:** “Whatever communications we abrogate or cause to be forgotten, we bring one better than it or like it” (2:106).

- **Christians and “moderate” Muslims** are to be attacked: “Strive hard against the unbelievers and the hypocrites and be unyielding to them; their abode is hell, and evil is the destination” (9:73).

- **Christians** are to be conquered: “Fight those who believe not in Allah . . . even if they are of the People of the Book, until they pay the Jizyah with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued” (9:29).

- **Unbelievers who will not repent** are to be killed: “Slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them captive and besiege them and lie in wait for them in every ambush, then if they repent and keep up prayer and pay the poor-rate, leave their way free to them” (9:5).

- **How to punish enemies:** “The punishment of those who wage war against Allah and His messenger and strive to make mischief in the land is only this, that they should be murdered or crucified or their hands and their feet should be cut off on opposite sides or they should be imprisoned; this shall be as a disgrace for them in this world, and in the hereafter they shall have a grievous chastisement” (5:33).

- **Women captives** can be raped: “All married women are forbidden unto you save those captives whom your right hands possess. It is a decree of Allah for you” (4:24).

- **Those who die in jihad** are guaranteed paradise: “Allah hath purchased of the believers their persons and their goods;
for theirs in return is the garden of Paradise: they fight in His cause, and slay and are slain: a promise binding on Him in truth . . . then rejoice in the bargain which ye have concluded: that is the achievement supreme” (9:111).

Its motives

In our eyes, ISIS is simply a band of murderous thugs, perverting Islam and using it for their own nefarious ends. But such a reading misses the group’s own beliefs and intentions. As Graeme Wood notes in his excellent analysis, “Much of what the group does looks nonsensical except in light of a sincere, carefully considered commitment to returning civilization to a seventh-century legal environment, and ultimately to bringing about the apocalypse.”

When ISIS crucifies, beheads, or burns alive its victims, it is not merely committing atrocities to gain public notoriety. It is also following a strategy derived from seventh-century Islamic practices. During the first 100 years of Islam, its armies achieved domination of the Middle East and beyond in large part by following just these practices. Their “shock and awe” atrocities caused the larger populace to abandon resistance and submit to their rule.

ISIS is convinced that any Muslim who does not follow its strict legalism is not a true Muslim (this is known as the doctrine of takfiri). Such people must either convert or be killed as apostates. All 200 million Shiite are thus marked for death, as are most Sunni Muslims. ISIS intends to expand its acts of horrific barbarism, and to inspire terrorism by its followers around the world. Al-Baghdadi has demanded the toppling of Baghdad, then the inclusion of the Gulf and Jordan in his caliphate. He claims that his men will not stop until they reach “Rome.”

Its view of the future

And so we come to one other doctrine we must consider in understanding ISIS: its vision of the future. Muslims have very
specific end-times expectations, as described by Islamic scholar David Liepert:

- The Euphrates River will uncover a mountain of gold, while the Arabian Peninsula fills with meadows and rivers.

- Some Muslims around the world will be transformed into apes and pigs because they try to make lawful some significant sins.

- The Mahdi will appear, uncover the Ark of the Covenant, and evangelize a significant portion of the world’s Jews.

- An anti-Messiah known as al-Masih ad-Dajjal will appear.

- Jesus will return and will defeat al-Dajjal.

- The sun will rise from the west.

- The Beast of the earth will appear.

- A wind will take the souls of the believers.

- Medina will be ruined.

- Mecca will be destroyed.

- Fire will come from Yemen to gather the people for the Judgment Day.\(^\text{11}\)

ISIS leaders apparently believe that they play a crucial role in these events. They claim that their caliph is the eighth of twelve that will appear before history ends. They expect to defeat the armies of “Rome” at the Syrian city of Dabiq. ISIS named its propaganda magazine after the town and awaits a great battle there.
Next, they expect to sack Istanbul in battle with ad-Dajjal. This enemy will succeed in destroying most of their forces, with just 5,000 remaining, cornered in Jerusalem. Then Jesus will return to earth, kill ad-Dajjal and lead them to victory. They are convinced that their caliphate signals the “beginning of the end.” Muslims around the world who agree are joining their cause.

To summarize: ISIS believes it has reestablished the caliphate and is following the proper successor of Muhammad and leader of the global Muslim movement. It will continue its military expansion, driven by atrocities and fueled by social media and oil money, until it defeats its enemy, fights its anti-Messiah, and achieves global conquest.

**What is their appeal?**

Tens of thousands of foreign Muslims are believed to have migrated to join the Islamic State. Recruits come from the US, France, the UK, Belgium, Germany, Holland, Australia, and Indonesia among other places.

The Obama administration recently acknowledged the group’s expanding threat when it requested new congressional authority to pursue its members wherever they emerge, not just in Iraq and Syria. The group has advanced beyond al-Qaeda to become a global menace before our eyes.

What is the secret to its appeal in the Muslim world? Let’s begin with the wrong answer, then look at the real factors behind its growing popularity.

It is conventional wisdom in the West that Muslims become radicalized when they are not given access to Western-style material possessions, education, and democracy. For some, frustration with decades of decadent leadership and crushing poverty are undoubtedly contributing factors.
But ideologues such as al-Baghdadi and his followers are not seeking the benefits of Western culture. In fact, they reject the very materialism we think they want. They believe democracy to be heresy—as they often retort, why would they want the laws of men when they have the laws of God in the Qur’an? They reject Western-style education, choosing to indoctrinate their children in their version of sharia. They eschew material comforts on earth, believing that such deprivation makes them more likely to inherit the eternal pleasures of Paradise.

As one analyst notes, many in the Muslim world now view ISIS as the “winning group.” Its highly sophisticated social media and marketing strategies, coupled with expansive financial resources derived from territories it has conquered, position it on a global stage.¹²

As CNN explains, ISIS plays on a recruit’s sense of identity and religious duty. It uses media to desensitize children and attract recruits online. (The terrorist who beheaded Americans James Foley and Steven Sotloff spoke with a British accent, showing that Westerners can join ISIS.) Once they travel to join ISIS, they submit to the group’s cult-like control.¹³

**Does ISIS threaten the West?**

As noted, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi told his American captors in 2009, “I’ll see you guys in New York.” How should we take his words?¹⁴

First, will Westerners who join ISIS and then return home be a threat? The FBI believes so and is working to identify Americans fighting with ISIS and stop them from attacking citizens if they return to the US.

Officials worry that “homegrown” terrorists” will learn bomb-making and combat skills from ISIS and could then mount a major attack on the homeland. For example, al-Qaeda authorized a terrorist assault in 2009 to be carried out by three returning
Americans, and gave the group’s leader bomb-making materials he intended to use in attacking New York’s subways. The plot was uncovered and the conspirators convicted.

A second threat concerns “lone wolf” terrorists who are trained for missions in the US. In May 2014, an American volunteer from Florida carried out a suicide attack in Syria on behalf of al-Qaeda’s affiliate in that country. Days after the Paris attacks, US authorities announced that they had arrested an Ohio man who claimed to be an ISIS supporter and planned to bomb the U.S. Capitol.

A third scenario involves groups trained by ISIS but entrusted to develop their own terrorist resources when they return home. As an example, remember the July 7, 2005, suicide bombings in London that killed fifty-two people and injured more than 700. At least one of the four suicide bombers received terrorist training in Pakistan, but no materials. British authorities are concerned that a number of fighters already returned from Syria and Iraq are planning similar attacks.

The fourth and most likely scenario involves individual attacks such as random shootings of civilians and attacks on uniformed military personnel and their families. For example, ISIS recently identified 100 American soldiers and called upon its sympathizers to kill them. In addition, an Army National Guardsman and his cousin were recently arrested for planning to conspire with ISIS. One was plotting to attack a northern Illinois military facility, while the other attempted to fly to Cairo to wage violence on behalf of ISIS. ISIS encourages followers to use guns or even their vehicles as weapons against civilians. The San Bernardino shooting is a tragic example of this strategy at work.

In addition to sending or encouraging terrorists to attack Americans in the US, ISIS presents a mounting military threat to our allies in the Middle East. It intends to continue seizing land and destabilizing countries where its caliphate is located. It wants to topple every regime in a Muslim country, since none govern
according to its version of sharia. Its presence in Libya could serve as a significant launching point for attacks in Italy and across southern Europe. Its growth would destabilize the global economy, directly affecting Americans.

House Intelligence Chairman Mike Rogers, R-Michigan, warns: “This is a problem that we will have to face and we’re either going to face it in New York City or we’re going to face it [in Iraq].” He explains: “These are sophisticated, command and controlled, seasoned combat veterans who understand the value of terrorism operations external to the region, meaning Europe and the United States. That is about as dangerous a recipe as you can put together.”

Retired Gen. Peter Chiarelli adds that “all Americans should be concerned” by ISIS’s rise to power. According to Sen. Lindsey Graham, “The seeds of 9/11s are being planted all over Iraq and Syria. They want an Islamic caliphate that runs through Syria and Iraq . . . and they plan to drive us out of the Mideast by attacking us here at home.”

How do we defeat the murderous ideology of this international terror movement?

4. Advance spiritual awakening

The growth of the Islamic State does not surprise our Lord. The psalmist declared that “God reigns over the nations; God sits on his holy throne” (Psalm 47:8). Note the present tense. No matter our circumstances, God is Lord over them.

Our sovereign Father redeems all he allows. How would he redeem the threat of ISIS? What does he want his people to do? A. J. Gordon noted: “You can do more than pray after you have prayed; but you can never do more than pray until you have prayed.” Consider three biblical calls to prayer.
First, pray for those who are being victimized by ISIS.

In 2003, more than a million believers lived in Iraq. Since the US-led invasion that year, at least half fled the country as Sunni Muslims attacked them and their churches. Now many believers are fleeing to Kurdistan and other more protected places. The fall of Mosul to ISIS was especially devastating. It is the most important city in Iraq to Christians and is said to be the burial site of the prophet Jonah.

Christians are people without a party in Iraq and face increased persecution wherever ISIS strikes. In February 2015, the group executed twenty-one Coptic Christians. That same month, it was reported that ISIS had kidnapped more than 100 Christians in Syria. Their reign of terror against God’s people continues. In August 2016, the new leader of Boko Haram threatened to bomb churches and kill Christians in Nigeria.17

(For more on Christians facing persecution, I recommend missionary Tom Doyle’s excellent Killing Christians: Living the Faith Where It’s Not Safe to Believe.18)

Scripture calls us to “remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them” (Hebrews 13:3). Ask God to intervene on their behalf. Pray for their miraculous release and safety. Pray for outside forces to protect Christians and rescue victims. As God’s angel released Peter from Herod’s prison in answer to the church’s intercession (Acts 12:1-19), so his angels can protect his people today.

Second, pray for our leaders and encourage them to defend believers and stop ISIS.

God’s word commands us to “rescue the weak and needy; deliver them out of the hand of the wicked” (Psalm 82:4). When we are attacked, he calls us to “fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses” (Nehemiah 4:14).
God’s word also calls us to intercede for our leaders (1 Timothy 2:1–2). Pray for leaders in America and around the world as they search for effective options in responding to ISIS. Pray for our soldiers in harm’s way, in the Middle East and around the world. And pray for their families at home, that they would be protected from terrorism and know the peace of God.

Third, pray for spiritual awakening to continue in the Muslim world.

God redeems all he allows. One way he is using the threat of ISIS is to call his people to intercede with greater intensity.

As Christians in the West come to understand that ISIS threatens not just the Middle East but the entire world, we will begin praying more fervently for the Holy Spirit to bring more jihadists to Jesus. Muslims already venerate Jesus as one of their six greatest prophets. They believe he was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, ascended to heaven, and will return at the end of history.

Now Jesus is appearing to Muslims around the world in visions and dreams. As a result, more Muslims have come to Christ in the last fifteen years than in the previous fifteen centuries. For a hardened jihadist, committed to attacking the West and all Muslims who are not part of his or her sect, such a transformation is the only lasting answer. Every militant Muslim who finds Christ as Lord is not only one less enemy to the world—he or she is one more member of our eternal family.

If Jesus is your Lord, you’re on the front lines of this battle with “the cosmic powers over this present darkness” (Ephesians 6:12). Our Father is calling his people to fight this battle on our knees. Please pray today for a great spiritual awakening in the Middle East. Pray for Jesus to reveal himself personally to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and other leaders of IS. Paul was converted from terrorist to apostle; what would happen if Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi came to Christ? Pray for Christians to be protected and for their witness to
be courageous and effective. And pray for your own witness to be strong and joyful.

A pastor in Iraq was asked by an American missionary how he has maintained his joy in the face of mortal danger and national turmoil. His answer: “My Savior Jesus is with us wherever we go and he will never leave us.” I recently received an email from a Syrian believer living in an area under attack from ISIS. He appeals for Christians to ask for God’s protection, but says, “We are ready to go to Jesus now.”

What price will American Christians pay to follow Jesus today?


5. “Jihad” is the Arabic word for “struggle”; “jihadist” is often used to describe those who use terror to advance their version of Islam.


14. The following discussion is informed by Brian Michael Jenkins, “When Jihadis Come Marching Home,” *Rand*


Abortion

The ethical crisis of our day
On June 27, 2016, the Supreme Court delivered what has been called “the greatest victory for abortion rights since Roe v. Wade.” The Texas law struck down by the Court required abortion doctors to have admitting privileges at a hospital within thirty miles of the clinic so they could treat patients who need surgery or other critical care. The law also required abortion clinics to have hospital-grade facilities for the same reason. Twenty-five other states had similar regulations.

The Court determined by a five-to-three vote that these requirements place an undue burden on women exercising their constitutional right to an abortion. The majority found that they provide “few, if any, health benefits for women” and pose “a substantial obstacle to women seeking abortions” as well as “an ‘undue burden’ on their constitutional right to do so.”

The Court’s ruling reflects a troubling pro-abortion trajectory in the US. Approval of legal abortion jumped from 51 percent to 58 percent last year. Pressure is escalating on those who object to abortion for moral or religious reasons.

What does the Bible say on abortion, the ethical crisis of our lifetime?
The scope of the issue

In 2014, 32,675 people died on American roadways. Every eleven days, that number of abortions were performed in the US. That year, doctors conducted 1,058,490 abortions in America, approximately the total of all our nation’s war dead across history.

Since the US Supreme Court’s *Roe v. Wade* decision legalized abortion in January of 1973, more than fifty-eight million abortions have been performed in America. This is a number larger than the combined populations of Kentucky, Oregon, Oklahoma, Connecticut, Iowa, Mississippi, Arkansas, Kansas, Utah, Nevada, New Mexico, West Virginia, Nebraska, Idaho, Maine, New Hampshire, Hawaii, Rhode Island, Montana, Delaware, South Dakota, Alaska, North Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming. Depending on the year, an abortion occurs for every three or four live births in our country.

Why do so many people in America believe that a mother should have the right to choose direct abortion?

*Roe v. Wade* overturned state laws limiting a woman’s right to abortion. The Court’s decision was largely based on the argument that the Constitution nowhere defines a fetus as a person or protects the rights of the unborn.

Rather, the Court determined that an unborn baby possesses only “potential life” and is not yet a “human being” or “person.” It argued that every constitutional reference to “person” relates to those already born. The Fourteenth Amendment guarantees protections and rights to individuals, but the Court ruled that the amendment does not include the unborn.

The Court further determined that a woman’s “right to privacy” extends to her ability to make her own choices regarding her health and body. Just as she has the right to choose to become pregnant,
she has the right to end that pregnancy. The Court suggested several specific reasons why she might choose abortion:

- “Specific and direct harm” may come to her.
- “Maternity, or additional offspring, may force upon the woman a distressful life and future.”
- “Psychological harm may be imminent.”
- “Mental and physical health may be taxed by child care.”
- Problems may occur associated with bearing unwanted children.
- “The additional difficulties and continuing stigma of unwed motherhood” should be considered.⁶

Since 1973, four positions have been taken in the abortion debate:

- There should be no right to an abortion, even to save the life of the mother. This has been the Catholic Church’s usual position.
- Therapeutic abortions can be performed to save the mother’s life.
- Extreme case abortions can be permitted in cases of rape, incest, or severe deformation of the fetus. (Most pro-life advocates would accept therapeutic and extreme case abortions.)
- Abortion should be available to any woman who chooses it. This is the typical “pro-choice” position.
Moral arguments for abortion

“Pro-choice” advocates make five basic claims:

1. No one can say when a fetus becomes a person, so the mother is the most appropriate person to make decisions regarding it.

2. Abortion must be protected so a woman who is the victim of rape or incest does not have to bear a child resulting from such an attack.

3. No unwanted child should be brought into the world.

4. The state has no right to legislate personal morality.

5. A woman must be permitted to make pregnancy decisions in light of her life circumstances.

Many theologians, pastors, and denominational leaders consider these claims to be both biblical and moral.

First, “pro-choice” proponents argue that a fetus is not legally a “person.” They agree with the Supreme Court’s finding that the Constitution nowhere grants legal standing to a pre-born life. Only 40 to 50 percent of fetuses survive to become persons in the full sense. A fetus belongs to the mother until it attains personhood and is morally subject to any action she wishes to take with it.

Second, abortion must be protected as an alternative for women who are the victims of rape or incest. While this number is admittedly small in the US (approximately 1 percent of all abortions), it is growing in many countries around the world. As many as one in three women may become the victim of such an attack. Society must spare them the further trauma of pregnancy and childbirth, it is claimed.

Third, no unwanted children should be brought into the world. If a woman does not wish to bear a child, she clearly will not
be an appropriate or effective mother if the child is born. Given the population explosion occurring in many countries of the world, abortion is a necessary option for women who do not want children. The woman is more closely involved with the fetus than any other individual and is the best person to determine whether or not this child is wanted and will receive proper care.

**Fourth**, the state has no right to legislate our personal moral decisions. The government has no authority to restrict homosexuality, consensual sex, cigarette consumption, or other individual decisions which many people consider to be wrong. Since there is no constitutional standard for when life begins, decisions made regarding a fetus are likewise a matter for individual morality.

The state should impose legislation on moral questions only when this legislation expresses the clear moral consensus of the community and when it prevents conduct that obviously threatens the public welfare. Nearly everyone condemns murder, for instance, and believes that it threatens us all. But Americans are divided on the morality of abortion. It is hard to see how aborting a fetus threatens the rest of the community.

And so abortion should not be subject to governmental control. It is better to allow a mother to make this decision than to legislate it through governmental action. Many who personally consider abortion to be wrong are persuaded by this argument and thus support the “pro-choice” position.

**Fifth**, the rights and concerns of the mother must take precedence over those of the fetus. Even if we grant fetuses limited rights, they must not supersede the rights of mothers, as the latter are clearly persons under the Constitution. If we allow abortion to protect her physical life, we should do so to protect her emotional health or quality of life as well.

This was one of the Court’s most significant arguments, as it sought to protect the mother’s mental and physical health. Many
“pro-choice” advocates are especially persuaded by this argument and view the abortion debate within the context of a woman’s right to control her own life.

**Moral arguments against abortion**

“Pro-life” advocates counter each of these claims with their own ethical arguments.

**First,** they assert that a fetus is a human life and should be granted the full protection of the law. The fetus carries its parents’ genetic code and is a distinct person. It does not yet possess self-consciousness, reasoning ability, or moral awareness (the usual descriptions of a “person”), but neither do newborns or young children. As this is the central issue of the debate, we’ll say more about it in a moment.

**Second,** most “pro-life” advocates are willing to permit abortion in cases of rape and incest or to protect the life of the mother. Since such cases typically account for only 1 to 4 percent of abortions performed, limiting abortion to these conditions would prevent the vast majority of abortions occurring in America.

**Third,** “pro-life” advocates agree that all children should be wanted, so they argue strongly for adoption as an alternative to abortion. They also assert that an unwanted child would rather live than die. By “pro-choice” logic, it would be possible to argue for infanticide and all forms of euthanasia as well as abortion.

**Fourth,** “pro-life” supporters do not see abortion legislation as an intrusion into areas of private morality. Protecting the rights of the individual is the state’s first responsibility. No moral state can overlook murder, whatever the personal opinions of those who commit it. The state is especially obligated to protect the rights of those who cannot defend themselves.

But what of the claim that legislation must always reflect the clear will of the majority and protect the public welfare? The collective
The will of the culture must never supersede what is right and wrong. For instance, heroin is so popular that as many as 4.2 million Americans say they’ve used it at least once. Nonetheless, we ban it because its harmful effects are clear to medical science. The effects of abortion on a fetus are obviously even more disastrous to the fetus. And just because society is unclear as to when life begins does not mean that the question is unknowable.

If more of the public understood the physical and ethical issues involved in abortion, a large majority would consider abortion to be a threat to public welfare. Abortion threatens the entire community in three ways: (1) it ends the lives of millions, on a level exceeding all wars and disasters combined; (2) it encourages sexual promiscuity; and (3) it permits women to make a choice which will plague many of them with guilt for years to come. And so abortion meets the standard for legislative relevance and must be addressed and limited or abolished by the state.

Fifth, “pro-life” advocates want to encourage the health of both the mother and the child and do not believe that we must choose between the two. As the rights of a mother are no more important than those of her newborn infant, so they are no more important than those of her pre-born child. The stress, guilt, and long-term mental anguish reported by many who abort their children must be considered.

The legal right to abortion subjects a woman to pressure from her husband or sexual partner to end her pregnancy. Killing the fetus for the sake of the mother’s health is like remedying paranoia by killing all the imagined persecutors. For these reasons, “pro-life” advocates argue that a moral state must limit or prevent abortion.

**When does life begin?**

This is obviously the crucial question in the abortion debate. If life does not begin until the fetus is viable or the child is born, one can argue that the “right to life” does not extend to the pre-born
and abortion should be considered both legal and moral. But if life begins at conception, there can be no moral justification for abortion since this action kills an innocent person.

There are essentially three answers to our question.

“Functionalism” states that the fetus is a “person” when it can act personally as a moral, intellectual, and spiritual agent. (Note that by this definition, some question whether a newborn infant would be considered a “person.”)

“Actualism” is the position that a fetus is a person if it possesses the potential for developing self-conscious, personal life. This definition would permit abortion when the fetus clearly does not possess the capacity for functional life.

“Essentialism” argues that the fetus is a person from conception, whatever its health or potential. It is an individual in the earliest stages of development and deserves all the protections afforded to other persons by our society.

Our Declaration of Independence begins, “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” If an unborn child is considered a person, it possesses the “inalienable” right to life as well.

So, can we determine when life begins? Our answer depends on the definition of “life.” A “pro-choice” advocate recognizes that the fetus is alive in the sense that it is a biological entity. But so is every other part of a woman’s body. Some consider the fetus to be a “growth” and liken it to a tumor or other unwanted tissue. Biology alone is not enough to settle the issue.

What about capacity? Many ethicists define a “person” as someone able to respond to stimuli, interact with others, and make individual
decisions. A fetus meets the first two standards from almost the moment of its conception and clearly cannot fulfill the third only because it is enclosed in its mother’s body. Would a newborn baby fulfill these three conditions?

What about individuality? If we view a fetus as a “growth” within the mother’s body, it would be easier to sanction her choice to remove that growth if she wishes. But a fetus is distinct from its mother from the moment of its conception. It is alive—it reacts to stimuli, and can produce its own cells and develop them into a specific pattern of maturity. It is human, completely distinguishable from all other living organisms, possessing all forty-six human chromosomes, able to develop only into a human being. And it is complete—nothing new will be added except the growth and development of what exists from the moment of conception.

It is a scientific fact that every abortion performed in the United States is performed on a being so fully formed that its heart is beating and its brain activity can be measured on an EEG machine. At twelve weeks, the unborn baby is only about two inches long, yet every organ of the human body is clearly in place.

Theologian Karl Barth described the fetus well:

The embryo has its own autonomy, its own brain, its own nervous system, its own blood circulation. If its life is affected by that of the mother, it also affects hers. It can have its own illnesses in which the mother has no part. Conversely, it may be quite healthy even though the mother is seriously ill. It may die while the mother continues to live. It may also continue to live after its mother’s death, and be eventually saved by a timely operation on her dead body. In short, it is a human being in its own right.8

And note that you did not come from a fetus—you were a fetus. A “fetus” is simply a human life in the womb. It becomes a “baby” outside the womb. But it is the same physical entity in either place.
For these reasons, “pro-life” advocates believe that the US Supreme Court was wrong in deciding that a fetus is not a person entitled to the full protections of the law. Apart from spiritual or moral concerns, it is a simple fact of biology that the fetus possesses every attribute of human life we find in a newborn infant, with the exception of independent physical viability. Left unharmed, it will soon develop this capacity as well. If a life must be independently viable to be viewed as a person, a young child might well fail this standard, as would those of any age facing severe physical challenges.

**The Bible and abortion**

These statements are based on moral claims and legal arguments. They are intended to persuade society regardless of a person’s religious persuasion. But many in our culture also want to know what the Bible says on this crucial subject.

*Silent on the issue?*

The term “abortion” appears nowhere in the Bible. No one in the Bible is ever described as having an abortion, encouraging one, or even dealing with one. The Bible says nothing that specifically addresses our subject. And so many have concluded that the issue is not a biblical concern but a private matter. They say that we should be silent where the Bible is silent.

“Pro-life” advocates counter that by this logic we should be silent regarding the “Trinity,” since the word never appears in Scripture. Or “marijuana” and “cocaine,” since they are not in a biblical concordance. However, these issues came after the biblical era, while abortion was common in the ancient world. So this argument doesn’t seem relevant.

If abortion is a biblical issue, why doesn’t the Bible address it specifically? The answer is simple: the Jewish people and first Christians needed no such guidance. It was an undeniable fact of their faith and culture that abortion was wrong. How do we know?
Consider early statements on the subject. The *Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides* are a book of Jewish wisdom written between 50 BC and AD 50. They state that “a woman should not destroy the unborn babe in her belly, nor after its birth throw it before the dogs and vultures as a prey.”

The *Sibylline Oracles* are an ancient work of Jewish theology. They include among the wicked two groups: women who “produce abortions and unlawfully cast their offspring away” and sorcerers who dispense materials which cause abortions (2:339–42).

The *Mishnah* (“instruction”) was the written record of Jewish oral teachings transmitted since the time of Moses. These teachings were committed to writing around 200 BC. In the Mishnah tractate *Sanhedrin* we read: “We infer the death penalty for killing an embryo from the text, He who sheds the blood of a man within a man, his blood shall be shed; what is ‘a man within a man’? An embryo” (*Sanhedrin* 57b, quoting Genesis 9:6).

An abortion was permitted only to save the life of the mother:

*If a woman was in hard travail [life-threatening labor], the child must be cut up while it is in the womb and brought out member by member, since the life of the mother has priority over the life of the child; but if the great part of it was already born, it may not be touched, since the claim of one life cannot override the claim of another life* (*Oholoth* 7:6).

The Jews in the Old and New Testaments did not need to address the issue of abortion because no one considered it a moral option. In a similar vein, when I was a pastor I never preached a sermon against heroin use. The Bible does not specifically speak to this subject, but no one in our congregation would have considered it to be a moral or healthy choice.

However, when the Christian movement expanded beyond its Jewish context, it encountered a culture which accepted the
practice of abortion. And so, after the New Testament, Christians began speaking specifically to the subject.

For instance, the Didache (the earliest theological treatise after the Bible) states, “Thou shalt not procure abortion, nor commit infanticide.” And the Epistle of Barnabas (early second century) adds, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor more than thy own life. Thou shalt not procure abortion, thou shalt not commit infanticide.” These books were widely read and accepted in the first centuries of the Christian church.

*Important biblical passages*

While the Bible does not use the word “abortion,” it contains a number of texts which relate directly to the beginning of life and the value of all persons. Let’s look briefly at the most pertinent passages.

*Exodus 21:22*

“Pro-choice” scholars usually begin the discussion with this statement in Exodus:

> When people who are fighting injure a pregnant woman so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no further harm follows, the one responsible shall be fined what the woman’s husband demands, paying as much as the judges determine. If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe (Ex. 21:22–25, NRSV).

The ancient Jewish historian Flavius Josephus commented on this text:

> He that kicks a woman with child, so that the woman miscarry, let him pay a fine in money, as the judges shall determine, as having diminished the multitude by the destruction of what
was in her womb; and let money also be given to the woman’s husband by him that kicked her; but if she die of the stroke, let him also be put to death, the law judging it equitable that life should go for life.”

But notice the translator’s note: “The law seems rather to mean, that if the infant be killed, though the mother escape, the offender must be put to death; and not only when the mother is killed, as Josephus understood it.” And note this later statement by Josephus:

The law, moreover, enjoins us to bring up all our offspring, and forbids women to cause abortion of what is begotten, or to destroy it afterward; and if any woman appears to have done so, she will be a murderer of her child, by destroying a living creature, and diminishing human kind.

If this text does indeed teach that a person causing a miscarriage is only to be fined, while one causing “harm” is to receive severe punishment, we would have an important indication that the fetus is not as valuable as its mother. Is this what the text clearly teaches?

The New Revised Standard Version renders the text, “so that there is a miscarriage.” The New American Standard follows suit, as does the New Jerusalem Bible. But the New International Version translates the text, “she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury.” The New Living Translation similarly states, “they hurt a pregnant woman so that her child is born prematurely. If no further harm results . . .” The English Standard Version renders the phrase, “so that her children come out, but there is no harm.” Why this crucial difference in translation?

The Hebrew phrase is literally rendered, “And they come forth children of her.” “Children” is the plural of yeled, the usual Hebrew word for child or offspring (the Hebrew language has no separate word for “fetus” or the pre-born). “Come forth” translates yatsa, a
word that does not specify whether the child is alive or dead, only that it leaves the womb.

And so the Hebrew of Exodus 21:22 does not indicate whether the woman suffered a miscarriage (NRSV, NASB, NJB) or experienced a premature healthy birth (NIV, NLT, ESV). But it does refer to the fetus as a “child.” And it is important to note that the text does not use shachol, the Hebrew word for “miscarriage” (this word is found in Exodus 23:26 and Hosea 9:14 among other occurrences).  

I believe that verse 23 settles the issue: “But if there is serious injury . . .” (NIV), implying that no serious injury occurred in verse 22. In other words, both the mother and her child survived the attack and were healthy. And so this passage does not devalue the pre-born life or speak specifically to the issue of abortion.

**Genesis 2:7**

The Bible describes man’s creation in this way: “The Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature” (Genesis 2:7).

It seems that Adam did not become a “living creature” until he could breathe. And so some believe that a fetus is not a “living being” until it can breathe outside the mother’s womb. Until this time, it is not yet a person.

President Bill Clinton explained his pro-choice position as based significantly on this logic. He said that his pastor, W. O. Vaught, former pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Arkansas, told him that this was the literal meaning of the text. (Vaught, however, stated in a December 1981 sermon that a baby from conception is a “sacred thing” and that “nobody has a right to have an abortion.”)
There are three problems with this argument.

First, Adam was an inanimate object until God breathed into him “the breath of life,” but we know conclusively that a fetus is animate from the moment of conception. Second, the fetus breathes in the womb, exchanging amniotic fluid for air after birth. Third, Adam in Genesis 2:7 was a potential life even before he became a human being. By any definition, a fetus is at the very least a potential human being. We’ll say more about this fact in a moment.

Psalm 139

One of David’s best-loved psalms contains this affirmation:

You formed my inward parts;
    you knitted me together in my mother’s womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
    Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well.
My frame was not hidden from you,
    when I was being made in secret,
    intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
In your book were written, every one of them,
    the days that were formed for me,
    when as yet there was none of them (Psalm 139:13–16).

David clearly believed that God created him in his mother’s womb and “saw my unformed substance” before he was born. “Pro-life” theologians point to this declaration as proof that life is created by God and begins at conception.

Of course, those who do not accept the authority of Scripture will not be persuaded by this argument. And some who do believe that David’s statement is poetic symbolism rather than scientific description. They claim that he was simply stating that he is God’s creation, without speaking specifically to the status of a fetus.
As part of God’s call to the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord issued this declaration: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations” (Jeremiah 1:5). God clearly formed Jeremiah in the womb and “knew” him even before that time (“knew” translates the Hebrew ידָעָה, meaning “to understand, comprehend, know completely”). He “consecrated” or called him to special service even before he was born. God’s plan for Jeremiah began before his conception and his birth.

It’s hard for me to see how those who accept biblical authority could make a “pro-choice” response to this statement. I suppose they could claim that the verse is symbolic and spiritual, not scientific, that it is a metaphorical description of God’s eternal plan for Jeremiah. But the text seems to be related specifically to Jeremiah’s conception and gestation.

Luke’s gospel records the visit of the pregnant Mary to the pregnant Elizabeth:

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord” (Luke 1:39–45).
When Elizabeth said that “the baby in my womb leaped for joy” (v. 44), she made clear the fact that her “fetus” was a fully-responding being. She used the word *brephos*, the Greek term for baby, embryo, fetus, newborn child, young child, or nursing child. It is the same word used to describe Jesus in the manger, where the shepherds “went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the *baby* lying in a manger” (Luke 2:16, emphasis added).

Paul used the word in reminding Timothy “how from *childhood* you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15, emphasis added). The Bible makes no linguistic distinction between the personhood of a human being, whether before or after its birth.

*The rights of the innocent*

The Bible consistently defends the rights of those who are innocent and undeserving of punishment or death. For instance:

- “Do not kill the innocent and righteous, for I will not acquit the wicked” (Exodus 23:7).

- “There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers” (Proverbs 6:16–19).

- The Babylonians attacked Jerusalem “for the sins of Manasseh, according to all that he had done, and also for the innocent blood that he had shed. For he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and the Lord would not pardon” (2 Kings 24:3–4).
It is clear that God cares for the innocent and defenseless of the world. Children, whether before their birth or after, are among his most valued creations.

The witness of Christian history

How has the Church viewed the issue of abortion across its history? Are “pro-choice” religious leaders in step with traditional Christian thinking on this subject? Or has the Church even spoken with a unified voice when addressing the question?

Early church fathers were clear in their opposition to abortion. Athenagoras (ca. AD 150), Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–215), Tertullian (ca. 155–225), St. Hippolytus (ca. 170–236), St. Basil the Great (ca. 330–79), St. Ambrose (ca. 339–97), St. John Chrysostom (ca. 340–407), and St. Jerome (ca. 342–420) all issued strong condemnations of this practice.

However, these theologians did not specifically say when the body receives a soul. This process was called “animation” or “ensoulment” by early philosophers. Many in the ancient world followed the thinking of Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) on the issue. He believed that “ensoulment” occurred forty days after conception in males and ninety days in females and taught that abortion prior to this time was not murder.

St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430), arguably the greatest theological mind after Paul, can be quoted on both sides of the issue. As regards whether souls are given to bodies at conception, Augustine said, “He . . . who formed them, knows whether He formed them with the soul, or gave the soul to them after they had been formed. . . . I have no certain knowledge how it came into my body; for it was not I who gave it to myself.” He was critical of a theologian who was too dogmatic on this issue, claiming, “how much better it is for him to share my hesitation about the soul’s origin.” He did not believe that we can know when people “obtain their souls.”
And yet Augustine was convinced that those who die in the womb will be resurrected with the rest of humanity and given perfect bodies in heaven. If they died, they must have lived; if they lived, they will be resurrected. Babies deformed at birth will be given perfect bodies in paradise as well. It would seem that Augustine believed life to begin at conception, since the moment the fetus can die, it must have been alive.

Theologians, popes, and church councils in the centuries to follow would continue to debate this issue. St. Jerome (ca. 342–420) could speak of the “murder of an unborn child” (Letter 22:13), and yet he could state that abortion is not killing until the fetus acquires limbs and shape (Letter 121:4). Pope Innocent III (ca. 1161–1216) stated that the soul enters the body of the fetus when the woman feels the first movement of the fetus (the “quickening”). After such “ensoulment,” abortion is murder; previously it is a less serious sin, as it ends only potential human life.

Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) condemned abortion for any and all reasons. However, he agreed with Aristotle’s conclusion that a male child was formed enough to be judged human at forty days, a female at eighty. Only when the fetus could be considered human could it have a soul.

On the other hand, Pope Leo XIII (1878–1903) issued a decree in 1886 which prohibited all procedures which directly kill the fetus, even to save the life of the mother. He also required excommunication for those who sought abortions at any stage of pregnancy.

To summarize, Christian leaders across church history have been uniform in their condemnation of abortion once the fetus was considered to be a “person.” Many in the ancient and medieval world were influenced by Aristotle’s beliefs regarding the time when this occurred. If they could know what we know about the fetus from its earliest stages of life, I believe they would revise their opinion and condemn abortion from the moment of conception. But it is impossible to know their position on information they did not possess.
What about rape and incest?

The Bible makes rape a capital offense:

> If in the open country a man meets a young woman who is betrothed, and the man seizes her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall die. But you shall do nothing to the young woman; she has committed no offense punishable by death. For this case is like that of a man attacking and murdering his neighbor (Deuteronomy 22:25–26).

God’s word clearly condemns such a crime against women. “Pro-choice” advocates often point to this issue, arguing that a woman should not continue to be victimized by bearing a child as the result of such a horrific crime.

The act of unprotected intercourse results in pregnancy about 4 percent of the time. If one in three women is likely to be raped in her lifetime and incestuous relationships subject a woman to repeated sexual abuse, pregnancies resulting from rape and incest are so likely that abortion must be legal as a remedy for women subjected to such crime. Nearly all pro-life advocates concede the point, allowing for abortion in the case of rape and incest.

However, it has been established by numerous surveys over the years that rape and incest victims represent approximately 1 percent of the abortion cases recorded annually in this country. A decision to limit abortions to this exception would prevent the deaths of nearly all of the one million babies who are aborted each year. Only about 3 percent of the abortions performed each year in America relate to the health of the mother, and 3 percent relate to the health of the child. Ninety-three percent are elective.

To allow for abortion because of the very rare incidence of abortions performed because of rape and incest is something like suspending all heroin laws because of the small number of patients who could benefit from its medicinal effects. We could stop the use
of traffic lights because of the incidents when they slow a sick person’s rush to a hospital, but would we not cause more harm than we prevent?

At the same time, Americans should be conscious of the fact that rape and incest are far more common in some other countries and cultures. Rape in particular is a typical means of coercion and military control in some societies. There the percentage of abortions related to rape may be much higher than is the case in America.

This caveat stated, I’m not sure that even this decision is the moral choice. I must quickly admit that my status as an American white male makes it very difficult for me to identify with women around the world who have experienced such trauma as rape and incest. But it is hard for me to understand how the child produced by this terrible crime does not deserve to live.

Ethel Waters, the famous gospel singer, was the product of a rape. So was a student I taught at Southwestern Seminary, an evangelist with a global ministry today. I tread very lightly here, but would at the very least suggest that this issue is far from the primary cause of abortion in America today.

A way forward?

“Pro-life” advocates typically believe that life begins at conception, so that abortion is wrong. “Pro-choice” advocates typically argue that life begins when the fetus is viable independent of its mother or at birth and that abortion should be a legal choice for the mother prior to that point. The framers of the Constitution did not address this issue. The Supreme Court in 1973 interpreted this silence to mean that constitutional rights to life do not extend to the pre-born. And yet the Bible speaks with a single voice in viewing the pre-born as the creation of God and as children deserving of protection and care.
In light of these contradictory facts, is there a way to move forward?

Given that the participants in this debate come from a variety of religious and personal worldviews, it seems implausible to find common ground by beginning with biblical teachings or religious convictions. So I suggest the following non-religious, constitutional strategy.

**First**, we should build a consensus for permitting abortion to protect the life of the mother or in cases of rape and incest. These account for a small percentage of the one million abortions performed each year. Even though some question the morality of this position, most would concede the point in order to reduce the 93 percent of abortions which are elective in nature. Allowing for this exception removes the most obvious and emotional obstacle to the “pro-life” position.

**Second**, we should understand that the pre-born possess at least the potential for “life,” however it is defined. Many of us believe that a fetus is a human being by every definition of the term except independent viability and note that the pre-born will attain this status unless harmed. But even those who disagree with this assertion will admit that every fetus is in the process of becoming a “person.”

**Third**, “pro-life” and “pro-choice” advocates should work together to fulfill President Bill Clinton’s desire that abortion be “rare.” It would seem that even the most ardent “pro-choice” supporters surely would support an agenda intended to decrease the number of abortions performed each year. (However, the Democratic Party’s call for the Hyde Amendment to be repealed calls this supposition into question.)

One way to achieve this goal would be for both sides to promote adoption as the best answer to an unwanted pregnancy. Both sides could also support abstinence and birth control education. Some “pro-life” advocates view birth control measures as promoting
sexual promiscuity, but we may have to choose between sexual activity or unintended pregnancy and a resulting abortion.

Both sides could join forces in educating the public about the actual characteristics of the fetus. It has been proven that women are far less likely to choose abortion when they see a sonogram of their unborn child or learn about its present capacities. Adoption would then become a more likely option for the mother to choose.

Leaders from both sides could be asked to adopt a united agenda aimed at decreasing the number of abortions performed each year in our country. If this strategy is successful, it may change the public’s opinion regarding the morality of abortion.

Fourth, whatever the “pro-choice” position decides to do to help limit abortions, “pro-life” advocates must do all we can to care for both the unborn child and its mother. We must care for the mother and the father of the child and help those who have chosen abortion in the past. We must work hard to advocate adoption and to provide life necessities for at-risk families. We must be “pro-life,” not just “pro-birth.”

It may be that these steps would eventually help to change the legal status of abortion. A constitutional amendment extending legal protection to the fetus would be more likely to pass if more Americans were taught to view the fetus as a life. Alternately, it would be more likely that the courts would recognize the rising consensus against abortion and rule in light of this conventional wisdom.

Conclusion

How can Christians best defend and advance life today?

One: Make clear the significant health risks for those who choose abortion.

Studies show that women who have an abortion face an increased risk for substance abuse, anxiety, depression, and other mental
health problems. The suicide rate associated with abortion is six times higher than the suicide rate associated with childbirth, and three times the general suicide rate. There is an 86 percent increased risk of very preterm birth among women with previous first-trimester abortions. Women who have abortions experience a 6 percent lower fertility rate; several studies have linked abortion to increased risks for breast cancer.23

Two: Be consistently pro-life.

We should advocate for adoption as well as against abortion. We should care for the mother, father, and family as well as the unborn child. Many women who choose abortion do so for financial reasons—we should seek resources to help them bear this burden so they can choose to give their children life. And we should support our physicians and care providers as they help patients deal with this difficult issue.

Three: Respond to abortion with truth and grace.

It is vital that we maintain our consistent commitment to Christian principles regarding the sanctity of life from the moment of conception. Abortion is a tragedy that affects the biological parents and extended family as well as the unborn child. But it is also vital that we share these principles with grace, “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15).

Mother Teresa, writing to the US Supreme Court as it was considering petitions related to the abortion issue, stated boldly:

Your opinion [in Roe v. Wade] stated that you did not need to “resolve the difficult question of when life begins.” That question is inescapable. If the right to life is an inherent and inalienable right, it must surely obtain wherever human life exists. No one can deny that the unborn child is a distinct being, that it is human, and that it is alive. It is unjust, therefore, to deprive the unborn child of its fundamental right
to life on the basis of its age, size, or condition of dependency. It was a sad infidelity to America’s highest ideals when this Court said that it did not matter, or could not be determined, when the inalienable right to life began for a child in its mother’s womb.\textsuperscript{24}

I attended my first National Prayer Breakfast in 1995, where I heard remarkable speakers address the president and other national leaders. Those attending were still talking about the previous year’s keynote speaker. Mother Teresa, 83 years old in 1994, had said to the 3,000 in the audience, “I feel that the greatest destroyer of peace today is abortion, because it is a war against the child, a direct killing of the innocent child, murder by the mother herself. And if we accept that a mother can kill even her own child, how can we tell other people not to kill one another?” Later in her speech she implored the gathering, “Please don’t kill the child. I want the child. Please give me the child.”\textsuperscript{25} She received a standing ovation. After her speech, she approached President Clinton, pointed her finger at him, and said, “Stop killing babies.”

Would abortion be a moral choice when a family is very, very poor, with fourteen children and another on the way? That unborn child was John Wesley. What about a father who is ill and a mother with tuberculosis; their first child is blind, the second is deceased, the third is deaf, and the fourth has tuberculosis? Now she is pregnant again. Her son would be called Beethoven.

A white man rapes a thirteen-year-old black girl and she becomes pregnant. Her child is Ethel Waters. A teenage girl is pregnant, but her fiancée is not the father of the baby. Her baby is Jesus.

In a church I once pastored, a woman gave me her unsolicited testimony regarding an abortion she had chosen eleven years earlier. Here’s her story:

\textit{I cried tears of shame, tears of pain, tears of heartache. I cried for my sin so black I didn’t believe that there could ever be}
a way that I could make amends—ever be a way that I could atone for what I had done. That there could ever be a way that I could be clean again. For eleven years I cried for myself, because I couldn’t get away from what I had done.

But God blessed me. In the depths of my dark and lonely valley he was there. His grace and mercy are great—his love is so wonderful. He wooed me back to his side, saying to me, My child, my child, I love you. O my child I love you. Yes, I forgive you.

I am blessed. I know that I am forgiven. I have forgiven myself—God has headed me. But many are not so blessed—they never get to meet my Jesus; they never experience his love and forgiveness. For them, the crying goes on.
References


6. Ibid.


12. Ibid., 100.


15. This and all subsequent biblical citations are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Crossway: Wheaton, Illinois, 2007).


18. Ibid., 1:17; p. 322.


Homosexuality
What does the Bible say?
I am not gay, have no family members who are, and have no experience with this lifestyle. So who am I to judge? Why don’t we just let consenting adults do what they wish so long as no one else is hurt?

Many in our society take this approach to LGBT (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and transgender) people, whatever their personal sexual preferences might be. To do otherwise seems to be intolerant and judgmental, two words our relativistic society condemns.

However, as we will see, God’s word consistently teaches that homosexuality is an unbiblical lifestyle. The Bible speaks to the subject across the Old and New Testaments. It offers not a single statement which affirms homosexuality. To the contrary, every time it discusses the issue it makes clear that homosexuality is not God’s will for his children.

Of course, this is not conventional wisdom in today’s culture. It seems clear that the conflict between LGBT rights and religious freedom will continue to escalate. The recent attempt in California to regulate religious schools that uphold biblical sexuality (discussed in the chapter on religious liberty) is just one example.
If/when Christians are called to defend our biblical beliefs regarding homosexual activity, how should we respond? What does the Bible say about this divisive issue? How can we preserve biblical truth and our witness to our culture?

**The short version**

Here’s the short version of what you’ll read in this chapter: The Bible teaches that homosexual activity is wrong; this sin is not unforgivable; and God loves all his children, LGBT people included. This position usually makes both sides mad. Those who affirm homosexuality obviously disagree with it. And many who agree that the Bible condemns homosexuality want to condemn homosexuals as well, a sentiment the Bible strongly rejects.

My purpose in this section is not to give you my opinion but God’s, as objectively and fairly as I can. This book is written from the perspective that the Bible is the timeless truth of God. As I have taught principles of biblical interpretation at seminaries over the years, I have often told my students, “The Bible can never mean what it never meant.” We should always seek the intended meaning of the text. I have also said often, “The only word God is obligated to bless is his word.” I am not writing to tell you what I think, but to give you God’s position on the subject as I understand it.

Many who deal with the issue of homosexuality do not share my confidence in biblical authority. For instance, James A. Forbes, Jr., senior minister emeritus of Riverside Church in New York City, states: “Where the Bible mentions homosexual behavior at all, it clearly condemns it. I freely grant that. The issue is precisely whether that biblical judgment is correct.”

I respect Dr. Forbes for his many years of ministry. But I could not disagree more strongly with his assertion, “The issue is precisely whether that biblical judgment is correct.” I believe every word of the Bible to be the word of God. I believe that the Scriptures
possess the same authority for our lives today that they possessed for their first readers. As a result, I’ll seek to answer the question, what does the Bible say on this subject? And how does this teaching relate to the issue in our culture?

**Sodom: Gone but not forgotten**

The Supreme Court made history on June 27, 2003 when it struck down the “sodomy laws” of the state of Texas. In a 6–3 decision, the justices reversed a ruling made seventeen years earlier that allowed states to punish homosexuals for private consensual sex. Such activity is typically called “sodomy” because of the story we’ll explore first.

A man named Lot entertained two angels who came to his city to investigate its sins. These angels came in the physical appearance of men. Before they went to bed, “all the men from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old—surrounded the house. They called to Lot, ‘Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them’” (Genesis 19:4–5, NIV). For this sin, “the Lord rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah” (v. 24), destroying the entire city.

Is this text a condemnation of homosexuality today? Scholar Walter Wink said no, calling the gang rape in Sodom “a case of ostensibly heterosexual males intent on humiliating strangers by treating them ‘like women,’ thus demasculinizing them.”

However, Dr. Wink offered no biblical evidence that the men were “ostensibly heterosexual.” His guess is not shared by the majority of scholars who have studied the story.

The late Dr. Peter Gomes, onetime minister at Harvard’s Memorial Church and Plummer Professor of Christian Morals in Harvard College, offered a different approach. He wrote a very helpful introduction to the Bible and its message, *The Good Book.* Dr. Gomes, himself a homosexual, viewed this passage as an attempted homosexual rape and argued that it does not condemn homosexuality per se.
A third approach was suggested by D. Sherwin Bailey in his influential *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*. Dr. Bailey believed that the Hebrew word for “know,” translated “have sex” by the New International Version, should be translated “show hospitality” instead. He noted that the word appears more than 943 times in the Old Testament, only twelve times in the context of sexual activity.¹

However, ten of these twelve occurrences are in the book of Genesis, the setting for our story. Lot offered his daughters to the men so they could “do to them as you please” (v. 8). Apparently he understood their desires as sexual. Everett Fox’s excellent translation of Genesis includes the note, “the meaning is unmistakably sexual.”² And Jude 7 settles the question as to whether sexual activity is meant in our story: “Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion.”³

Many interpreters throughout Jewish and Christian history have understood the “sin of Sodom” as homosexuality, not attempted rape, and have viewed God’s punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah as his sentiment about all gay people. But I’m not sure their position is justified. Without doubt, the men of Sodom wanted to have sex with the “men” who had come to their city. But it is also clear that they would have assaulted these visitors to do so.

If a person wishes to see the sin of Sodom as attempted rape, I don’t see how we can prove them wrong. At the very least, it seems to be a mistake to build a theology about homosexuality on this single event.

**Leviticus: Outdated legalism?**

Leviticus 18:22 is much less ambiguous: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.” The Hebrew original is as clear as the English translation.
The obvious sense of the command seems to be that homosexual sexual relations are forbidden by Scripture. This is the way the text has typically been understood by Jewish and Christian interpreters across the centuries. It is the way most read the text today.

But those who advocate homosexuality as an acceptable biblical lifestyle have found ways to dissent. Dr. Wink admitted that this text “unequivocally condemn[s] same-sex sexual behavior.” But he theorized that the ancient Hebrews saw any sexual activity which could not lead to the creation of life as a form of abortion or murder. He added that the Jews would have seen homosexuality as alien or pagan behavior.

He then cited the penalty for homosexual behavior: “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” (Leviticus 20:13). In his reasoning, if we see this punishment for homosexuality as obsolete today, we should see the prohibition of this behavior as equally outdated.

Other scholars suggest that these laws expressed worship codes binding only on Hebrew priests, not universal moral standards. And they connect them with kosher dietary regulations and other rules which they view as intended only for the ancient world.

Is there an objective way to respond to these assertions?

First, let’s consider the claim that this Old Testament law has no relevance for New Testament believers. A basic rule of biblical interpretation is that any Old Testament teaching which is repeated in the New Testament is still binding on the Christian church and faith. As we will see, prohibitions against homosexuality are as clear in the New Testament as in the Old. Even those Old Testament statements which are not repeated in the New Testament carry the force of principle; for instance, kosher laws tell us that God cares about our health.
Second, let’s respond to the view that the Leviticus passages related only to the priests and not the larger community. Note that the chapter in question begins, “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Speak to the people of Israel and say to them . . .’” (18:1). Nothing in the chapter limits its application to the priests. In fact, it prohibits incest, child sacrifice, and sexual relations with beasts—moral standards most people would consider universal.

Third, let’s deal with the Leviticus mandate that homosexuals are to be executed (Leviticus. 20:13). If we no longer execute those who practice homosexuality, aren’t we justified in ignoring this prohibition against such activity?

No one I know would argue that homosexual practice should result in the death penalty today. But note that this law was given to Israel at a crucial time in her early formation. The nation had no court system. Her moral character was not yet formed. And so the Lord gave the nation clear and enforceable standards which would help solidify and preserve her spiritual future. The spirit of the prohibition is clear: homosexuality is not to be practiced or accepted by the nation.

Also note that reinterpreting the penalty does not mean that we ignore the law. Leviticus also prescribes the death penalty for child sacrifice (20:2), adultery (v. 10), and bestiality (vs. 15–16). I presume we would not accept these practices as moral and lawful today on the basis that the Leviticus punishment for them is not prosecuted by our society.

To sum up, these two passages in Leviticus seem clearly to forbid homosexual activity in any form. However, some claim that the Bible was wrong on slavery, and that it is wrong on homosexuality as well. We’ll consider this subject next.

What about slavery?

When my family moved to Atlanta in 1994, we quickly fell in love with the Old South. Being from Texas, I thought something
was historical if it happened while Tom Landry was coach of the Cowboys. Southern history goes back to the Revolutionary War and colonial times. I was especially fascinated by the Civil War (though Southerners will say that “there was nothing civil about it”).

But there’s a dark side to the story, as you know. While traveling one day in the beautiful city of Charleston, South Carolina, my wife and I came upon a “slave trading warehouse.” This was the horrific place where slaves were brought to America on ships and then sold at market in chains. I can still remember the crumbling limestone 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 both our problems.

Given our tragic history with racism, thinking about the subject of slavery in the Bible is a bit repugnant for most of us. However, since many say the Bible was wrong on this issue and is therefore wrong on homosexuality as well, we must discuss this painful subject briefly.

**Slavery in the Old Testament**

It is an unfortunate fact that slavery was an accepted part of life in the ancient world. No early society or literature questioned its existence or necessity. People in Old Testament times became slaves in a variety of ways: they were born to enslaved parents (Genesis 17:23), purchased as slaves (Genesis 37:28), or sold themselves to pay a debt (Leviticus 25:39–55). Breaking into a home was punished by enslavement (Exodus 22:3), and 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 property to be bought and sold (Exodus 21:32). However, they were granted protection against
murder, permanent injury, or undue physical labor (Exodus 21:20, 26; 23:12). Hebrew household slaves were included at religious meals (Exodus 12:44). Such privileges and protections were extremely rare in the ancient world.

But why did the Old Testament not condemn this practice?

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 (Exodus 21:8). A slave permanently injured by his master was to be set free (Exodus 21:26). Hebrews were to be held as slaves for no longer than six years (Deuteronomy 15:12). The Jubilee Year, which occurred every forty-nine years, was to free all Israelite slaves (Leviticus 25:50).

But still we ask: Why did the Old Testament sanction this practice at all? Its rules minimized this evil, protected slaves from physical harm, and provided for their eventual freedom. But the New Testament gives us God’s complete word on the subject.

*Slavery in the New Testament*

In the Old Testament era, people were enslaved primarily through war. But in the first century AD, the procreation of slaves swelled their numbers enormously. And many people actually sold themselves into slavery to improve their lives. Owning and using people as slaves was so common in the Roman Empire that not a single Roman writer condemned the practice. But this acceptance of slavery would begin to change with the growth and influence of Christianity.

Slavery in the Roman era was dramatically different from the despicable practice in American history. If you walked through any first-century Roman city, you would not be able to tell most slaves from free people. Slaves performed manual labor, but they were also doctors, nurses, household managers, and intellectuals. They managed finances and cities. They were often 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 wanted to be a Roman citizen could sell himself to a citizen and then purchase his freedom. For many people, slavery was more a process than a condition.

While there is no doubt that many slaves were abused physically, sexually, and socially, at least as many were part of the more privileged strata of society. The total dependence of the Roman economy upon the labor of slaves made it impossible for the ancient world 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.

As a result, no New Testament writer attempted to end slavery itself, as this was not possible in their time. But several other facts should be noted as well.

One: Paul abolished all racial and social discrimination for Christians:

In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:26–28).

Every believer is our sister or brother. None in the Christian family are to be viewed as slaves.

Two: Free Christians viewed slaves as their equal. Paul appealed to Philemon to see his slave, Onesimus, “no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved 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). 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.”

Three: 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 church leaders came from the ranks both of slaves and free. Christians made no distinction between the two, for their Father welcomed all as his children.

Four: Not a single New Testament leader owned slaves, even though many had the resources to purchase them. 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 a mistake to claim that the Bible is wrong or outdated on the issue of homosexuality since it was wrong or outdated on the issue of slavery. The fact is that slavery was eventually abolished because of biblical insistence on the equality of all people. God’s word is not outdated on this subject or any other, including homosexuality. Truth is still true.

*What about New Testament grace?*

I grew up with a mental image of two gods—the Old Testament Judge of wrath and the New Testament Father of love. The Old Testament Judge might condemn sin, but the New Testament Father loves his kids. Christians live by New Testament grace. Even if the Old Testament consistently teaches that homosexuality is wrong, we should view such legalism in the light of Christian mercy and love—or so some say.
Except that the New Testament is as consistent on this issue as the Old and even more explicit.

Let’s begin with Romans 1:26–27:

*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.*

It seems clear that Paul believed homosexuality to be wrong, doesn’t it? Not to everyone. Consider four responses.

**One:** Paul was addressing heterosexual men and women who chose homosexual activity which would of course be “unnatural” for them. If this is true, Paul’s statement bears no relevance to those who consider themselves homosexual by innate or “natural” orientation.

However, Paul described homosexual acts as “dishonorable passions” (v. 26) and “shameless acts” (v. 27). To suggest that his descriptions relate only to the (supposed) decision to engage in such activity by heterosexuals is to strain the Greek syntax beyond its meaning. Nothing in the text suggests that it relates only to heterosexuals.

And he stated that men who engaged in homosexual activity “gave up natural relations with women,” making clear the fact that he considered heterosexuality to be “natural.” Likewise, he described lesbian activity as “contrary to nature.”

**Two:** The “exploitative option” suggests that Paul had in view men who oppress men sexually (pederasty, prostitution, master-slave sex, etc.) rather than consensual, loving relations. The Genesis 19 gang rape story is (supposedly) an example of the behavior he forbade.
However, the apostle’s statement that men “were consumed with passion for one another” shows that he had consensual relations in mind, not just exploitative acts. In addition, Paul included lesbians; there are no examples in his day of women being exploited sexually by other women.

**Three:** Paul was rejecting behavior at the Roman imperial court, which was infamous for its gross sexual immoralities. By extension, he argued that God’s people are to be different from their culture.

However, the apostle nowhere limited his discussion to the imperial court or even to Roman culture and context.

**Four:** Paul was not aware of innate homosexual orientation and thus addressed homosexual acts as “unnatural.”

However, the apostle addressed “passions” (v. 26), the expression of sexual orientation. Thus he was clearly aware of orientation and did not convey ignorant or misleading principles in this regard. Paul was a biblical writer inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 3:15–16). If he did not understand innate homosexual orientation and thus was wrong in addressing homosexuality as he did, we are left to wonder where else the Bible has misled us for twenty centuries.

The next passage to consider is 1 Corinthians 6:9–10:

*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.*

“Men who practice homosexuality” are clearly among those considered “unrighteous” by Paul. This phrase is translated from
two Greek words, *malakoi* and *arsenokoitei*. The first is a technical term for the passive partner in homosexual activity; the second seems to have been coined by Paul. As we will see, some claim that it refers to economic exploitation, not sexual behavior. As a result, it is possible to interpret the phrase as prohibiting homosexual prostitution, not loving, monogamous homosexual relations.

However, *arsenokoitei* is derived from the Greek translation of Leviticus 20:13, which employs *arsenos koiten*, “a male having sexual relations” with another male. Clearly Paul had this prohibition against homosexual sexual relations in mind.

The last passage for our study is part of Paul’s first letter to Timothy. Here is the paragraph in which our verse is found:

*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* (1 Timothy 1:8–11).

The phrase in question is found in verse 10, translated by the ESV as “men who practice homosexuality.” The phrase is translated from the Greek *arsenokoites*. As we saw above, it was coined by Paul to refer to men who have sexual relations with men.

**Common questions**

Assuming we view the Bible as objectively true and agree with its prohibition against homosexual behavior, we need to address some questions commonly asked by those who disagree with us.
Can homosexuals be Christians?

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 (other sins listed in the same text). 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 further repentance and consecration.

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.

Did God make me this way?

What about the argument that homosexuality is inherited? If this is true, at least for some, how can such an orientation be wrong? “God made me this way” is the testimony of many homosexuals. Did God make a mistake? Or have we misunderstood his word on the issue?
The connection between genetics and homosexuality is tenuous at best. Some researchers have claimed to discover a physical or genetic propensity toward homosexual orientation, but others have refuted their conclusions. Investigations of physical characteristics (such as the size of the hypothalamus, the most famous such study) are inconclusive at best.

According to the American Psychological Association,

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.8

It is widely believed that alcoholism can be an inherited genetic propensity, but no one would therefore endorse its practice. This fact is not meant to compare alcoholism and homosexuality. Rather, it is intended to illustrate the fact that not every genetic tendency should be endorsed (if homosexuality is in fact such).

If, however, people are homosexual completely apart from any decision on their part, it seems to me that they have a right to ask about the fairness of God. If his word teaches that homosexuality is wrong, yet they are homosexual through no choice of their own, how can God be fair in condemning what he seems to have permitted? We will discuss this question further below.

Nature or nurture?

What about family and environment? Studies have focused on identical twins who were separated at birth, where one developed
a homosexual orientation but the other did not. Some believe that specific family or circumstantial patterns contribute to a child’s sexual orientation. In particular, the absence of a strong father and/or the presence of a dominating mother is often noted in families which produce homosexual children. And so it is claimed that the children of such environments had no choice in their sexual orientation.

It would be difficult to prove this connection, of course. What about heterosexual children produced by the same family environments? Even if family conditions are related to sexual orientation, such a connection does not endorse behavior any more than an abusive parent is justified by the fact that he was the child of an abusive parent.

Homosexuals seem to fall into two categories. I have known some who can remember decisions, choices, and circumstances by which they moved into this lifestyle. I have known others who believe that their orientation existed from birth or prior to conscious choice. It is obviously both impossible and wrong for me to say which category is appropriate to a specific person. But whether homosexuality is a choice or not, this issue does not determine its validity as a lifestyle according to the word of God.

**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 is the author of *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships*. He 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.” 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.


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 twenty 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.*  

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.”

**David Gushee**

Dr. David Gushee teaches ethics at Mercer University, a Baptist school in Georgia. Recognized as a leading Christian ethicist, 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.” 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. 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? Polygamy? Consensual sexual 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.”

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

**Three crucial questions**

Most interpreters throughout Jewish and Christian history have understood the Bible to teach that homosexual activity is not the will of God. Is this all there is to the story? How should we relate God’s word to his love? Three crucial questions are important to understanding his will for his children.

**One: Why would God forbid homosexuality?**

Those who explore the biblical position on any ethical issue should also ask why the Scriptures advocate the doctrine they teach. Why would the Lord of the universe take sides on the question of our personal sexual orientation and lifestyle? So long as we’re not hurting others or ourselves, our personal consensual acts should be private and permitted, many say.
Except that homosexual behavior does hurt many who participate in it.

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. 16

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. 17

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.” 18

A typical response to these studies is that gays and lesbians in the US 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 fifties (or in their early forties if AIDS is the cause of death). 19 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. 20

Some homosexuals do commit themselves to lifelong, monogamous, apparently healthy relationships. Unfortunately, this is more the exception than the rule.
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. 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.

I mean no unkindness or disrespect in commenting on the issue of homosexuality and emotional or physical health. My point is simply that our Father has a reason for his word on the issue. His concern is for his children and our wellbeing. There is a purpose behind his position on our subject.

**Two: Is homosexual behavior pardonable?**

Absolutely. The Bible speaks of the “unpardonable sin” (Mark 3:29), but that sin has nothing to do with homosexuality. Most theologians believe that it describes the person who refuses God’s offer of salvation through Christ. The only sin the Lord cannot forgive is the sin of rejecting his forgiveness.

As a result, no homosexual stands outside the grace and love of God. This lifestyle is no more unbiblical than many other sins listed in Scripture, including hatred, slander, gossip, and gluttony. Heterosexual activity outside of marriage is as immoral as homosexuality. We are wrong to reject the person because he or she is practicing a lifestyle which we consider unbiblical. In other ways, so are we.

At the same time, and in contrast to my first statement, we do others no good if we endorse that which is unbiblical or hurtful to them. There are twin temptations here. One is to refuse any statement which might appear judgmental with regard to
homosexuality, lest we appear to be intolerant or “homophobic.” The other is to condemn the person rather than the behavior. Our Father never makes either mistake. He always warns against behavior which hurts his children, all the while loving them as his children.

Homosexuality is not the unpardonable sin. There is hope and help for all who want to change their lives. But what of those who do not?

**Three: Does God love homosexuals?**

Absolutely. He loves all his children. He does not want any to perish, but all to come to repentance and faith in his Son (2 Peter 3:9). He wants all people “to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). Homosexuality does not exempt anyone from his concern or compassion.

And so we are to maintain that difficult balance which loves the person while opposing that which is unbiblical in his or her life. Don’t we want others to do the same for us?

**Why does God permit homosexuality?**

It is clear that our Father warns us against homosexual activity, given the ways it can hurt his children. So we can answer the question, does God make people gay? Clearly not. A holy God could not intend people to possess attributes or characteristics he condemns. So, why are some people homosexual?

You and I inherited a sin nature (Romans 5:12). That sin nature shows up in a variety of ways. What tempts me might not tempt you, and vice versa. You could lock me in a liquor store and I’d leave tomorrow as sober as I am right now. I’m not bragging—it’s just a fact that nothing in my nature pushes me toward alcohol and alcoholism. However, I do struggle in other ways I’m not going to tell you about. My alcoholic friends probably don’t struggle with my temptations any more than I share theirs.
Unfortunately, God must permit these problems and conditions as a consequence of the fall. When Adam and Eve sinned, every dimension of their lives was affected. Their posterity has been affected in the same ways. We all manifest our sin nature in various ways. One of them is homosexuality.

So, why does God permit people to be gay? I could answer the question easily if all gay people chose to be so. God chooses to honor the free will he gives us, so that our misused freedom is not his fault but ours. But the large majority of gay people did not choose to be homosexual. Their sexual identity may be a product of their genetics or circumstances, but either way it’s not their fault.

How can God be fair and permit them to struggle with this problem?

Let’s note this fact: Every word used in the Old or New Testament to describe homosexuals refers to action: “have sex with them” (Genesis 19:5 NIV); “lie with a man” (Leviticus 18:22); “if a man lies with a man” (Leviticus 20:13); “shameless acts” (v. 27); “men who practice homosexuality” (1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10). In every case, the Hebrew or Greek words refer to the actions involved, not the persons themselves.

So it seems to me that the Bible does not condemn a person for being tempted by homosexual activity. However, it forbids the person to act on those inclinations, since such actions are harmful to the person and others. The Bible does not condemn me for noticing a beautiful woman, only for acting on that attraction. It does not condemn you for being angry with people who have hurt you, only for acting on that anger by hurting them. It’s not wrong to want popularity or wealth, but it is wrong to act sinfully to achieve those goals.

God does not make people gay. He permits some to be gay by nature or nurture as a result of this fallen world, just as he permits all of us to experience a sin nature as a result of the fall. He does not reject us for being disposed toward sin, but he condemns the sin which comes from acting on that disposition.
Redeeming homosexual people

I am convinced that God redeems all he allows. How, then, does he redeem the homosexual sin nature he permits some people to experience? In the same way he redeems our sin nature however it is manifested: by using it to teach and grow us, and by helping someone else through us.

Mother Teresa said we’ll never know that Jesus is all we need until Jesus is all we’ve got. The great Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon testified that he never grew half so much as upon a bed of pain. God wants to use all our problems to help us grow in faith, to mold us into Christ-likeness.

And God wants to use our problems to help others with the same problems. Cancer survivors make the best cancer counselors. Those who have been through the pain of divorce can best help those going through that living death. What happens to us, can then happen through us.

God has a way to redeem every person’s sin nature, however it shows itself. He wants to use it to teach you, to grow you, and mold you into the image of Christ. And he wants to use it to help someone else who struggles as you struggle.

The Lord wants to do the same with people who are tempted by homosexuality. It seems to me that a person who resists acting on his or her sexual orientation is going to need to depend greatly on God. Sexuality is our strongest drive. Refusing its inclinations must be an enormous challenge. Celibate homosexuals must be people of great faith, prayer, Scripture study, worship, and intimacy with the Father. I can think of few life challenges which could be used more powerfully to help a person grow spiritually.

As God wants to redeem homosexuality by calling the person to himself in faith and dependence, so he wants to use that person to help others trust him. I am friends with several celibate
homosexuals and admire them greatly. When I get to know people who struggle in this area, I always want to introduce them to these friends. Their story is so much more credible and compelling than anything I might say.

If you struggle with homosexuality, please forgive me if these thoughts seem naïve or unrealistic. You’re probably thinking that I have no idea how hard it is for you, and you’re right. If my nature required me to be a celibate heterosexual, I can only hope that I’d accept my own theological advice. I don’t offer it because I think I’d do any better with this issue than you, but only because it seems the most biblical way to approach this painful issue.

God wants to redeem your homosexuality for his glory and your good. Your Father loves his children, where we are, as we are. But he loves us too much to leave us there.

**Homosexuality and God’s grace**

Homosexual people deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. If they act on their orientation, they behave in ways which are unbiblical and often harmful to themselves and others. But so do those who practice slander, gossip, heterosexual lust, or egotistical pride. So-called “gay bashing” is always wrong. Any action or attitude which demeans people or makes them less valuable is the opposite of the grace and unconditional love of Christ.

At the same time, while we must offer the dignity and respect of Christian grace to all persons, we cannot truly love them while endorsing that which is unbiblical in their lives. As intolerant as the next statement may seem, it is honestly motivated by a sincere desire to speak the truth in love: we can and should hope for people in the homosexual lifestyle to come to repentance and transformation.

After including homosexuality in his list of sins (1 Cor. 6:9), Paul next told the Corinthians: “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 have known homosexual men and women who were transformed by God’s power so fully that they were freed of their homosexual desires. Some now live in an asexual orientation, while many experience heterosexual desires. What God did for the Corinthians, he can do for us today.

I recognize that some will read this chapter as bigoted prejudice. However, any of us would want to help those we care about to practice a biblical lifestyle that leads to the fullest abundance of Christ’s joy (John 10:10). This is the honest motivation behind my reflections and my suggestion that such hope is appropriate for the homosexual people we know and love.

Let’s conclude: God does not make people gay, but he permits homosexuality along with all other manifestations of the sin nature. Homosexual activity is forbidden because it hurts those who are involved. At the same time, God redeems the homosexual sin nature by using it to draw the person to himself in faith and by using that person to help others who struggle in the same way.

I offer this chapter with the prayer that the Lord of Scripture will use his word to bring help, hope, and healing to hearts and homes troubled by this difficult issue. To the degree that our discussion has shed more light than heat, my prayer will be answered.
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6. Wink.


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Same-Sex Marriage

*Is the family in jeopardy?*
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.”

According to the Institute of Medicine, 3.8 percent of the American population is homosexual. However, relating to homosexuals and same-sex marriage has become an issue far larger than demographics would suggest.

On June 24, 2015, the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage (SSM) in all fifty states. What does this decision mean for those who affirm biblical marriage? What does it say about the future of the family in our culture? How can God redeem this divisive issue to strengthen our churches, ministries, and witness?

What does God say about marriage?

God invented marriage. His word contains numerous statements on this institution and its relevance to our society. An in-depth study of the Bible on this subject
is beyond the purpose of this chapter, but a brief survey may be helpful to our conversation.

**What the Bible says**

We begin in Genesis, where we find that God made humans “in his own image” as “male and female” (Genesis 1:27). Next we read that God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (Genesis 2:18). Ultimately the Lord made the woman and “brought her to the man” (v. 22). The text comments: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (v. 24).

There is no biblical definition or description of marriage that includes a same-sex relationship. To the contrary, Scripture teaches that “each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband” (1 Corinthians 7:2). Everywhere Scripture teaches principles for marriage, it assumes that the couple is heterosexual (cf. 1 Peter 3:1–5; 1 Corinthians 7:12–15; Ephesians 5:22–33). And Jesus quoted Genesis 2:24 in affirming the sanctity of marriage (Matthew 19:5).

**The argument from silence**

Of course, SSM advocates might claim that the biblical era did not know of monogamous, consensual same-sex relationships. And as we noted in the chapter on homosexuality, 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 relations or marriage. Not once does the Bible refer to same-sex 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, but 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, 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. First-century historians Tacitus and Seutonius 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.” 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.”

Such marriages continued in the Empire until they were outlawed on December 16, 342 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 same-sex relationships and marriage were part of God’s plan, we would expect biblical writers to condone them. In fact, we find precisely the opposite. SSM proponents have no evidence that Scripture ever views such relations favorably. If same-sex relations and marriage were part of his design for humanity, why has his word been so misleading on this issue?

Now, let’s consider some common questions those who affirm biblical marriage must address.
Is opposition to SSM akin to racial discrimination?

One of the most common and powerful arguments for SSM is that it is akin to marriage between people of different races. For centuries, “anti-miscegenation” laws prohibited marriage between white and black people in America. In 1958, only 4 percent of Americans favored allowing black-white interracial couples to marry. By 1967, sixteen states still had laws prohibiting such marriages.\(^7\)

Tragically, some cited the Bible in opposing interracial marriage. In 1967, the Supreme Court overturned all laws prohibiting interracial marriage.

I would oppose strongly anyone who seeks to prohibit interracial marriage. I would especially oppose the misguided attempt to use Scripture to support such bigotry. This is precisely how many feel about SSM and those who use the Bible to oppose it.

This correlation also helps explain the rising threat to the religious liberty of biblical marriage proponents. Just as the government does not bestow tax-exempt status on a religious group that practices racial discrimination, many feel it should withhold such status from those who “discriminate” against LGBT people. (More on this below.)

So, is opposition to 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.”\(^8\)
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.\(^9\)

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 (Matthew 22:39).

### 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 faced up to three years in prison for refusing to conduct a SSM.

In America, thirty-one 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.
Following the Supreme Court’s legalization of SSM, 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).”

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?

**Is the slippery slope argument about polygamy a realistic worry?**

Shortly after the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage, challenges to laws prohibiting polygamy began to rise. This should not surprise us: Chief Justice Roberts noted that much of the Court’s ruling “would apply with equal force to the claim of a fundamental right to plural marriage.”

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. Will their numbers (and voting power) continue to grow?

According to a recent study, “young adults’ attitudes toward polygamous marriage were neutral.” 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.” According to the “Polyamory Society,” it is “the non-possessive, honest, responsible and ethical philosophy and practice of loving multiple people simultaneously.”

As many as 5 percent of Americans are currently living in relationships that involve “consensual nonmonogamy” or “permission to go outside the couple looking for love or sex.” 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.”

“Genetic Sexual Attraction” (GSA) is a related subject now in the news. A man in New Mexico and his biological mother have been accused of incest and could face jail time if convicted. The mother gave her son up for adoption when he was a baby. He is now nineteen years old. They found each other on Facebook last year and began a sexual relationship soon thereafter.

They have been arrested for incest and now want to bring attention to GSA. This is defined as “intense sexual desire that can arise between genetically related people who are united in Adulthood, after having been denied the opportunity to form proper emotional bonds.” Advocates want to “eliminate the irresponsible stigma associated with such relationships.”

According to Wikipedia, there are at least twenty-five organizations actively promoting pedophilia around the world today. In addition, human sexuality today is not restricted to humans. Malcolm J. Brenner is a freelance writer, photographer, and journalist. He made headlines in the spring of 2016 with his documentary, *Dolphin Lover*. It tells the story of his sexual relationship with a dolphin named Dolly.

Similarly, Huffington Post reports that “bestiality brothels are taking Germany by storm.” These stories are examples of “zoophilia,” a growing movement whose advocates seek to legitimize sexual relations between people and animals.
My point is emphatically not to compare SSM practitioners and advocates to those engaged in polygamy, incest, zoophilia, or pedophilia. Rather, it is to show that once we begin to redefine marriage and appropriate sexual relationships, it is difficult to stop. I assume that we would require such relationships to be consensual, but such a moral standard allows for each of the behaviors described above.

**What is the best way to 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.25

How can Christians best defend a definition of marriage that is becoming increasingly unpopular?

**One:** *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 whom 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, as we have seen, 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 LGBT 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.

**Two:** *Explain why God forbids SSM activity.*

As we noted in the chapter on homosexuality, physical and psychological factors related to same-sex activity help explain why it is harmful.

**Three:** *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 SSM relations or marriage.

- God’s revelation does not mislead us with regard to sexual orientation.
• The prohibitions of Leviticus were intended for the entire
nenation and serve as the context for Paul’s use of
*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.

**Four: Make clear the religious liberty implications of this debate.**

For twenty centuries, Christians have consistently understood
marriage to be between a man and a woman. Now that SSM is 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?

**Five: Engage with SSM 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 LGBT 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).

**Are we under spiritual attack?**

Paul warned: “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 percent to 60 percent.
- The number who would not be “upset” to learn that their child was gay or lesbian grew from 36 percent to 55 percent.
• Those who believe homosexual behavior is a sin decreased from 55 percent to 45 percent.

Even more telling: prior to the Supreme Court ruling, only 22 percent of white evangelical Christians favored same-sex marriage (the lowest percentage of any group in the study), but 70 percent were convinced it is “inevitable.”

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 as 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 forty members, most of whom are members of the pastor’s family. But their pickets and protests, employing horrifically 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.27

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.” 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.”

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.” 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.”

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?

**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, so the argument went, 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 and marriage. 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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6. Ibid., 1447.


The Transgender Debate

Civil rights or religious rights?
The Transgender Debate

Civil rights or religious rights?

Maya Dillard Smith was interim director of the Georgia chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union. However, she resigned her position over the ACLU’s position regarding transgender bathrooms. This after her two daughters were traumatized by encountering men in the women’s restroom.

Her explanation:

*I have shared my personal experience of having taken my elementary school age daughters into a women’s restroom when shortly after three transgender young adults, over six feet [tall] with deep voices, entered. My children were visibly frightened, concerned about their safety, and left asking lots of questions for which I, like many parents, was ill-prepared to answer.*

A transgender activist responded to her concerns by calling her “lazy” and “ill-educated.” Actually, Dillard Smith earned a degree in economics from Berkeley and a master’s degree in public policy at Harvard. She is a liberal Democrat and was one of only three African-Americans employed by the ACLU as a state director.
Dillard Smith’s story made headlines in light of the Obama administration’s directive telling every public school in the country to allow transgender students to use bathrooms that match their gender identity. This directive set off a firestorm of response. LGBT activists hailed it as a courageous step forward. Conservative activists rebuked the administration for what they characterized as authoritarian tactics that threaten children.

It seems we must choose between polar opposites: either permit transgender students to use the bathroom and shower that corresponds to their gender identity, or refuse them such access. What do Christians need to know about this controversy? Is there an approach that is both compassionate and biblical?

What is “transgender”?

Let’s begin with definitions. The American Psychological Association (APA) defines “transgender” as “an umbrella term for persons whose gender identity, gender expression or behavior does not conform to that typically associated with the sex to which they were assigned at birth.” “Gender identity” is “a person’s internal sense of being male, female or something else.”

“Gender expression” is “the way a person communicates gender identity through behavior, clothing, hairstyles, voice or body characteristics.” “Gender dysphoria” is a general term for “strong, persistent feelings of identification with the opposite gender and discomfort with one’s own assigned sex that results in significant distress or impairment.”

The APA explains that “sex” is assigned at birth, referring to one’s biological status as either male or female. “Gender” refers to “the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for boys and men or girls and women.”
A “transgender” person, then, is someone who identifies with a different gender than their sex—a male who identifies as a female (MTF, or “male to female”), or a female who identifies as a male (FTM, or “female to male”).

Transgender people may or may not seek hormonal and/or sex reassignment surgery to conform their bodies to their gender identities. Those who undergo such medical procedures are called “transsexual,” as they have transitioned physically from one sex to another. A person born as a male becomes recognizably female, and vice versa.

**Why are some people transgender?**

It has been estimated that 0.3 percent of the American adult population is transgender. This translates to roughly 700,000 people in the U.S. There are no national surveys indicating the number of transgender children and youth. According to *The New York Times*, a survey in Wisconsin found that 1.5 percent of students identified as transgender. In a Boston survey, 1.6 percent identified as transgender.

The APA states that “there is no single reason for why some people are transgender.” It cites experts who believe that “biological factors such as genetic influences and prenatal hormone levels, early experiences, and experiences later in adolescence or adulthood may all contribute to the development of transgender identities.”

Researchers have discovered physical factors that may contribute to transgender experience. For instance, recent studies found that the brains of FTM transgender subjects contained white matter in regions resembling a male brain. In other words, these brains were “masculinized.” Similarly, the brains of MTF transgender subjects were found to be “not completely masculinized and not completely feminized.”

Another study employed androstadienone, an odorous steroid known to cause a different response in the hypothalamus of women
versus men. Using functional MRI, investigators discovered that transgender boys and girls responded to the odor much like peers of their identified gender. In other words, MTF persons responded instinctively like females; FTM persons responded instinctively like males. A similar study using functional MRI to measure verbal fluency suggested “a biological basis for both transgender groups performing in-between the two sexes.”

Other studies have posited a variety of physical factors for gender dysphoria, including genetic components, regional gray matter variation in the brain, and galanin neurons in the hypothalamus. A study of transsexuality among twins concluded that “their identity was much more influenced by their genetics than by their rearing.”

However, studies on neuroplasticity show that some brain structures can be modified by circumstances such as parenting and repeated activities. In other words, it is plausible that possible transgender brain factors may be the result of life circumstances rather than inherent conditions. The nature vs. nurture argument is relevant to this issue as to so many others.

In addition, the (possible) presence of biological factors does not necessarily warrant acceptance of behavior associated with these factors. A person’s biological conditions and aptitudes are not the only factors in determining appropriate moral and practical standards.

For example, even if a so-called “gay gene” were to be discovered, we would still debate the morality of homosexual activity and marriage in light of biblical truth. Some feel the same way with regard to transgender people. We are fallen people living in a fallen world.

**What about “intersex”?**

“Intersex” is an umbrella term for conditions leading to atypical development of physical sex characteristics. These include
external genitals that cannot easily be classified as male or female; inconsistency between external genitals and internal reproductive organs; sex chromosome abnormalities; and abnormal development of the testes or ovaries.

According to the American Psychological Association, as many as one in 1,500 babies is born with genitals that cannot easily be classified as male or female. Research indicates that the number of males born with Klinefelter (a genetic abnormality that causes the person to have smaller male genitals and larger breasts, among other characteristics) is one in 1,000. Those who are neither XX nor XY are one in 1,666 births. In total the number of people whose bodies differ from standard male or female is estimated to be one in 100 births.

In addition, some identify their gender as falling outside the constructs of “male” or “female” and are referred to as “genderqueer.” They may prefer pronouns such as “zie” instead of “he” or “she.”

Other categories of transgender people include “androgynous,” “multigendered,” “gender nonconforming,” “third gender,” and “two-spirit people.” Reflecting the complexity of this issue, there are now more than fifty gender options on Facebook.

**Beyond bathrooms**

The news typically focuses the transgender issue on bathrooms. But this is just the beginning of the debate.

The logic of the Obama administration’s directive is clear: a person’s gender identity is whatever the person determines it to be. So long as a parent or guardian certifies the student’s decision to school authorities, the school must begin treating the student consistent with this identity.

The directive includes locker rooms, athletics, single-sex classes, housing and overnight accommodations, and sex-specific activities.
such as school dances, graduation ceremonies, and yearbook photographs. Schools can make individual-user options available to students who voluntarily seek additional privacy, but they are not required to do so.

The directive does not apply to single-sex schools, private undergraduate colleges, social fraternities and sororities, though they are free to allow transgender students to participate if the organizations so choose.

Numerous questions arise from this directive:

**One:** If a school does not provide individual-user changing facilities and showers, will girls be forced to change and shower with students who display male genitalia? Will boys be forced to change and shower with students who display female genitalia?

**Two:** Will MTF transgender students have unfair advantages when competing against females in sports? FTM transgender students could also have a competitive advantage against males in certain sports such as gymnastics. School admissions, scholarships, and financial remuneration could be affected. Presumably, the requirement of parental or guardian approval would make it less likely for students to claim transgender status for athletic advantage, but some parents could be motivated by financial incentives to seek unfair benefit for their students.

Note: The International Olympic Committee has ruled that transgender athletes may compete without restriction. Previously, they were required to undergo reassignment surgery and at least two years of hormone therapy. Now surgery is no longer required. FTM transgender athletes can take part in men’s competitions without restriction. MTF transgender athletes will need to demonstrate that their testosterone level has been below a certain cutoff point for at least one year before their first competition. Will such provisions be considered with regard to student athletics in the US?
Three: What about whirlpools, saunas, and other heretofore gender-specific facilities? It is implausible that schools could afford to construct single-use options for all such equipment.

Four: Will the directive be expanded to include private schools that receive public funding? Will their ability to participate in athletic and academic competitions be threatened?

Five: Will the government eventually ban transgender “discrimination” in health clubs and athletic facilities across the country (in a manner similar to legislation banning racial discrimination)?

Six: What of transgender students who are not MTF or FTM? Some are “agender,” people who do not have a gender identity; others are “bigender,” people who identify as two genders, or “genderqueer,” people who do not identify or express their gender as male or female. How will their gender identity be accommodated? For instance, could a “bigender” person compete in some sports as a male and others as a female? Could this person change bathroom/locker/shower facility choices as often as the person wishes?

Seven: Will transgender students be able to change their gender identity (as certified by parent or guardian) whenever they choose?

Eight: Will the logic of the Obama administration’s directive eventually be applied to other identity questions? For instance, Rachel Dolezal, then president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People chapter in Spokane, Washington, generated headlines in 2015 when her parents disclosed that she was born white. She has maintained that she identifies as black, though her identity is not based on biology or ancestry.

If people can choose their gender identity, why can they not choose their racial identity? This question relates to issues such as school admissions and scholarships.
The Bureau of Indian Affairs Financial Assistance and Social Services program provides assistance to American Indian and Alaskan Native tribal members. To be eligible, a person must be an enrolled member of a federally recognized tribe. If people can choose their gender identity, can they not choose to identify as Indian or Alaskan Native?

What about age designation? Could people claim that they do not feel themselves to be the age a birth certificate would show? Such chaos could extend to military service, drinking age, or the age of consent.

In short, the implications of removing gender distinctions go far beyond bathrooms. Advocates liken this issue to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, which sought equality for all races in all circumstances. I have often spoken out against racial prejudice and discrimination, convinced that God sees all races as equal (Galatians 3:26–29).

Now the same argument is being made with regard to transgender rights. Taken to its logical conclusion, this movement will remove all gender distinctions, clearly violating the biblical revelation that God created us “male and female” (Genesis 1:27) as well as social foundations affirmed across all human history and culture.

**A biblical response**

It seems clear that a certain number of people experience gender dysphoria or intersex conditions, including transgender identification. How do we reconcile this fact with Scripture?

God’s word is clear: “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27; affirmed by Jesus in Matthew 19:4). The Bible calls us to express our created sexual identity: “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 22:5).

In light of these principles, Christians take three very different approaches to the question of transgender rights.

**One:** View transgender people as God’s creation, worthy of full inclusion and support.

Jesus was especially compassionate toward those whom society marginalized. He accepted and defended children (Matthew 18:10) and would want us to do the same. In this view, a person who deals with gender dysphoria or intersex conditions should be affirmed and protected as part of “the least of these” (Matthew 25:45).

This is the view taken by many who argue for transgender rights. However, it seems to conflict with the biblical statements cited above. And as we have seen, it is also extremely problematic for those who do not want children to be in restrooms, locker rooms, and showers with people who display opposite sex genitalia.

**Two:** Refuse to address this issue.

Since the Bible seems clearly to state that God made us “male and female” (Genesis 1:27), some see the concept of “gender dysphoria” as illegitimate. In their view, such people should either decide to live according to their biological gender or change their gender medically.

While this view seems to align with the biblical statements cited above, it does not consider medical evidence indicating that unchosen physiological factors may contribute to at least some transgender and intersex experiences.

**Three:** Find a redemptive way to minister to everyone. While transgender advocates and critics would both claim their position is best for all involved, neither side agrees with the other. I am advocating for a third approach in this essay.
Jesus clearly affirmed that God made us “male and female” (Matthew 19:4). However, he also called us to minister to all people, regardless of their physical, emotional, psychological, or social challenges. He was famous for touching lepers, welcoming prostitutes, and befriending social outcasts. He was able to be compassionate without compromising biblical truth, and he wants us to follow his example.

In this spirit, I suggest the following principles.

(1) Protect the vast majority of people who are not transgender or intersex and do not want people who display opposite sex genitalia to share bathrooms, locker rooms, or showers with them or their children.

(2) Advocate for women and children, since they are especially at risk from those who would misuse the Obama administration’s directive for abusive purposes. The Bible clearly calls us to defend and support women (Ephesians 5:28–29) and children (Matthew 18:1–5; 19:13–14; Psalm 127:3–5). I am frankly surprised that more advocates for children and for women are not concerned about the ramifications of the Obama administration’s directive.

(3) Seek ways to minister to those with gender dysphoria in the context of God’s best for their lives. I view gender dysphoria as another evidence of the Fall and its consequences in our world. Few parents would want their children to live as transgender or intersex or believe that this is the best, most fulfilling way to live. So share the gospel with those who have not trusted Christ as their Savior. Offer community in Christ and help for physical and/or psychological challenges. In short, seek to help transgender people live according to their biological gender.

At the same time, we must understand that those who deal with gender dysphoria are not worse or better than anyone else. They are absolutely not to be bullied or otherwise harmed. A 2013 study found that nearly seventy percent of transgender people had
experienced significant discrimination when trying to use the restroom. But God loves them as much as he loves anyone else, including you and me. We are all broken people who live in a broken world.

**Four:** Seek practical solutions that are fair to all.

As we have seen, the Obama administration is seeking to authorize transgender access to bathrooms, locker rooms, athletics, and other sex-specific school activities. This directive is being challenged in court and in the court of public opinion. What if these challenges fail and the administration’s position prevails?

If the law eventually dictates that transgender people must be provided bathrooms, locker rooms, and showers in keeping with their gender identity, there are ways to provide such facilities without discriminating against the vast majority of the population.

As noted above, the Williams Institute estimates that 0.3 percent of the population, roughly 700,000 people, identify as transgender. However, this study focused on adults. For the sake of this discussion, we will assume the same transgender population percentage, or 0.3 percent of America’s 50.1 million students, equating to 150,000 transgender students. There are 98,817 public schools in America. Thus we can assume, on average, one or two transgender students per school.

In defending his administration’s directive, President Obama recently pointed to “our obligation as a society to make sure that everybody is treated fairly and our kids are loved and that they’re protected and that their dignity is affirmed.” He was speaking of transgender students, but his sentiment surely applies to the other fifty million students in America today. How can we protect them while providing legally required facilities for transgender students?

(1) Create and/or designate single-use bathrooms. Many movie theaters are now being built with such facilities. Rather than Men’s
and Ladies’ rooms, they offer a row of single-use bathrooms. Men’s bathrooms could be configured to remove urinals and provide only privacy stalls. Many schools have such facilities for their teachers; these could be configured for transgender use as well.

(2) Create and/or designate single-use showers and lockers. Many schools have such facilities for teachers and coaches. The cost of constructing single-use showers and lockers is not exorbitant (estimated conservatively at $1,000 per unit). Alternately, create time-sharing schedules for these facilities.

(3) Create time-sharing schedules for other single-sex facilities such as whirlpools and saunas.

(4) Determine which athletic programs can be opened to transgender students without compromising the integrity of the sport and its participants. Where there are clear and unfair advantages for transgender students, their participation should not be allowed. One student’s gender identity should not be permitted to compromise an entire athletic program for the rest of the student body.

These steps would protect children from being forced to dress and shower with students who display genitalia of the opposite sex. They would likewise protect them from unfair athletic competition with such students. At the same time, they satisfy the requirements of the Obama administration’s directive.

However, I remain convinced that God’s best is for people not to live with gender dysphoria. For this reason, I would advocate for ministry to them intended to help them live within biblical guidelines and our Father’s intention for his children.

Conclusion

The issue of transgender and intersex rights will continue to escalate in our culture, since it pits two narratives that have been in conflict for years.
On one side is the insistence on tolerance that characterizes postmodern relativism. In a society with no objective truths, the only truth is that I must tolerate your truth. This insistence extends to gender identity as it does to abortion rights, same-sex marriage, euthanasia, and a host of other moral challenges.

On the other side is the conviction that God made us and has a perfect will for our lives (Romans 12:1–2). This conviction entails a commitment to biblical truth as unchanging and authoritative, two values our postmodern culture rejects.

Those of us who believe that the Bible is still the truth of God will face escalating pressure to compromise our convictions or to forego compassion. Let us continue to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), claiming God’s promise that his word “shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11).

In engaging culture with truth, as in all Kingdom service, our Lord measures success by obedience.
References


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Illegal Immigration

The most divisive issue for evangelicals
Illegal Immigration

*The most divisive issue for evangelicals*

Juan Francisco Lopez-Sanchez is an illegal immigrant with seven felony convictions who has been deported to Mexico five times. On July 1, 2015, he allegedly shot Kate Steinle as she was walking on a San Francisco pier with her father. She died at the hospital.¹

The prospect of murderers, ISIS terrorists, and other criminals coming into the US as immigrants is indeed frightening. Protecting Americans is one of the US president’s highest priorities. At the same time, Scripture calls us to be gracious to the “sojourners” in our midst (see Leviticus 19:33–34 and other biblical texts below). Many illegal immigrants have children and other family members who are US citizens.

Evangelical Christians are divided on this issue. According to a recent survey,² nine in ten want more border security. However, six in ten support a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants. More than two-thirds favor both priorities. Regarding recent immigrants to the US, 48 percent of evangelicals see them as “a drain on economic resources,” but 42 percent view their immigration as “an opportunity to introduce them to Jesus Christ.”
Here’s the most troubling part of the survey to me: When asked which factor most influenced their beliefs about immigration, only one in ten evangelicals chose the Bible. Only 2 percent named the church. Among other influences: 17 percent cite relationships with immigrants, while 16 percent cite the media and 17 percent point to friends and family.

Let’s explore what God’s word says on this divisive issue. However, I must warn you: Of all the topics discussed in this book, illegal immigration is likely to be the most controversial. You may well disagree with my discussion of this subject.

My objective is not to offer a proposal every evangelical will accept. Given the complexities of this issue, such a position does not exist. Rather, it is to seek objectively to apply Scripture to an issue that affects every American, today and for generations to come.

**What is the scope of the issue?**

There were 42.4 million immigrants in the US in 2014, comprising 13.3 percent of the total population. For historical comparison, immigrants made up 14.8 percent of the US population in 1890. However, the percentage has risen sharply since 1970, when only 4.7 percent of the population was composed of immigrants.\(^3\)

Congress abolished national-origin admission quotas in 1965. Between 1970 and 2014, the number of US immigrants more than quadrupled. In 2014, 1.3 million foreign-born persons moved to the US, an 11 percent increase from the year before. Their countries of origin included:

- India, with 147,500
- China, with 131,800
- Mexico, with 130,000
Canada, with 41,200

Philippines, with 40,500.

Mexican immigrants are the largest immigrant group in the US, accounting for 28 percent of the 42.4 million foreign-born persons in American. Immigrants to the US and their US-born children now number approximately eighty-one million people, comprising 26 percent of the overall population.

Of the 36.7 million immigrants ages twenty-five and older, 29 percent have a bachelor’s degree or higher. This compares with 30 percent of native-born adults. Of America’s foreign-born population, 47 percent are naturalized US citizens. In the US, there are 17.5 million children age eighteen and younger living with at least one immigrant parent. They account for 25 percent of the 69.9 million children under age eighteen in America.

An estimated 11.4 million unauthorized immigrants reside in the US. About 3.3 million of them reside with at least one US-citizen child under age eighteen. In total, there are 4.1 million US-citizen children in the US residing with an unauthorized immigrant. There were 679,996 apprehensions of unauthorized immigrants in 2014 and 577,295 deportations.

Regarding immigrants’ impact on America:

- The average immigrant contributes nearly $120,000 more in taxes than he or she consumes in public benefits.
- Illegal immigrants paid $11.8 billion in state and local taxes in 2012.
- Immigrants are nearly twice as likely as the native-born to become entrepreneurs.
- Immigrants are founders of eighteen percent of all Fortune 500 companies.
An analysis of 2011 Census data found that, at the county level, there is no statistically significant relationship between unemployment and the presence of immigrants who arrived in 2000 or later.4

To summarize:

- There are 42.4 million immigrants in America, 13.3 percent of the total population.
- An estimated 11.4 million of them are unauthorized.
- About 3.3 million of these live with a US-citizen child under age eighteen.

What does the Bible say?

God’s concern for immigrants

Scripture clearly tells us how the Lord feels about immigrants:

- “You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 22:21).
- “When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 19:33–34).
- “[God] executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 10:18–19).
- “When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that the
Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not strip it afterward. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this” (Deuteronomy 24:19–22).

- As a result of Job’s compassion, “the sojourner has not lodged in the street” (Job 31:32).

- “You shall divide this land among you according to the tribes of Israel. You shall allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the sojourners who reside among you and have had children among you. They shall be to you as native-born children of Israel. With you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribe the sojourner resides, there you shall assign him his inheritance, declares the Lord God” (Ezekiel 47:21–23).

- “Do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor” (Zechariah 7:10).

- “I will be a swift witness against . . . those who thrust aside the sojourner” (Malachi 3:5).

- “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers” (Hebrews 13:2).

- Jesus taught that the way we treat the “stranger” is the way we treat him (Matthew 25:35, 40).

Mathew Soerens and Jenny Hwang are authors of *Welcoming the Stranger.* They note that ger, the Hebrew word for a “person not native to the local area,” appears ninety-two times in the Old Testament. Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and the entire nation of Israel
were immigrants. Jesus was an immigrant to Egypt as a child; early Christians were scattered across the Roman Empire as immigrants.

Soerens and Hwang include this statement by theologian Orlando O. Espin:

Welcoming the stranger (the “immigrant,” we could say today) is the most often repeated commandment in the Hebrew Scriptures, with the exception of the imperative to worship only the one God. And the love of neighbor (especially the more vulnerable neighbor) is doubtlessly the New Testament’s constant command. . . . Whatever the cause of immigration today, there can be no doubt as to where the Church must stand when it comes to defending the immigrant.  

God loves us all, regardless of our country of origin:

In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise (Galatians 3:26–29).

About seven percent of our K-12 students have at least one unauthorized immigrant parent; 79 percent of these students were born in the US. Children were especially important to Jesus (Matthew 18:1-6; 19:13-15) and should be to us.

We should also note that the Bible assigns specific responsibilities to immigrants:

- They are to obey the law and customs of the land: “The foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant—these I will bring to my
holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer” (Isaiah 56:6–7).

- They are to assimilate into the culture of their host country: Sojourners were required to observe the Sabbath (Deuteronomy 5:14) and the other religious festivals of the nation (Deuteronomy 16:9–15).

- They are not to break the law, no matter how difficult their circumstances: “People do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy his appetite when he is hungry, but if he is caught, he will pay sevenfold; he will give all the goods of his house” (Proverbs 6:30–31).

- No one should break US laws to make more money: “The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Timothy 6:10).

**Border security**

“Securing the border” is typically the first step promised by any political leader who addresses the issue of illegal immigration. Self-defense is in fact a biblical priority:

- “When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe” (Luke 11:21).

- “If a thief is found breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there shall be no bloodguilt for him” (Exodus 22:2).

- “Like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain is a righteous man who gives way before the wicked” (Proverbs 25:26).

- As they rebuilt the walls around Jerusalem, “Those who carried burdens were loaded in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other. And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built” (Nehemiah 4:17–18).
“Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked” (Psalm 82:4).

“No one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. Then indeed he may plunder his house” (Mark 3:27).

In addition, the Bible teaches that we “do not move the ancient landmark that your fathers have set” (Proverbs 22:28; 23:10). Note this important text: “When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples” (Deuteronomy 32:8). The Promised Land’s borders are delineated in Ezekiel 47:13–23; Numbers 34:1–15 describes the borders assigned to each tribe of Israel.

Clearly, the Bible affirms self-defense and established borders for nations and peoples.

In 2013, The Week published an excellent introduction to the issue of border security.\(^8\) The report notes that in 2012, the Border Patrol apprehended around 357,000 people at the southwestern border. This represents a 78 percent drop since 2000. However, the Government Accounting Office estimates that only 61 percent of those attempted to cross the border illegally are caught. Only 44 percent of the border is under “operational control.”

Estimates from the Customs and Border Protection indicate a cost of more than $22.4 billion to complete the fence. Maintenance costs would be significant: in 2010, the agency repaired 4,037 breaches in the existing fences. The government would need to expropriate private land. And the border would still need policing, as Israel can testify regarding its West Bank security fence.

The Department of Homeland Security has fenced off 651 miles of the 1,969-mile border between Mexico and the US. These barriers are mostly near urban areas and international bridges. The US Customs and Border Patrol agency uses patrols to guard
more remote borderlands in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. The agency spends $4 billion a year, utilizing 58,000 personnel, 16,875 vehicles, 269 aircraft, 300 watercraft, 300 camera towers, and aerial drones.

The border with Canada is also a significant issue, especially with regard to preventing terrorists from entering the US. Customs and Border Protection has increased its Border Patrol agents 500 percent since 9/11 to a total of 2,200. Approximately 950 miles along the border from Washington to Minnesota are covered by unmanned aircraft as well.⁹

Of course, border security involves more than building and monitoring physical barriers. The Center for Immigration Studies also recommends:

- Maintain and expand visa investigations.
- Deploy biometrics at airports and seaports to ensure that holders of expired visas depart on time.
- Expand E-verify, the worker authorization program.¹⁰

There is a downside to increased border control as well. From 1993 to 2004, spending for border enforcement nearly quadrupled, spending $25 billion, yet the number of illegal immigrants doubled. Border enforcement strategies have resulted in increased fatalities, especially of children and women, a growth in smugglers and drug traffickers, and reduced chances of apprehension.

We should note that 40 percent of the 11 million illegal immigrants in America came here legally but overstayed their visas.¹¹ Enhanced border security would not have addressed this issue. We need a much better system of tracking immigrants on visas to ensure that they leave when their visas expire.
And we should remember that no acts of radical Islamic terror have been perpetrated by illegal immigrants. The 9/11 terrorists, the brothers who staged the Boston bombings, and the San Bernardino shooters were all here legally.

**God’s concern for justice**

Immigrants described in the Old Testament did not enter their countries illegally. They broke no laws when they came to Israel or other nations. As a result, the Bible can address their situation unambiguously, teaching that we should welcome them and provide them every means of ministry. Clearly, this should be our approach with legal immigrants in America today.

But what about the 11.4 million people who are in America illegally?

Scripture is clear about obedience to authority:

- “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed and those who resist will incur judgment” (Romans 13:1–2).

- “Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities” (Titus 3:1).

- “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good” (1 Peter 2:13–14).

- “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” (1 Timothy 1:8–10).

• “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21).

The United States has very specific procedures governing entrance to the country by non-citizens. A person must submit an application—often a series of applications—to the US Citizenship and Immigration Services and the US Department of State. A person wishing to live permanently in the US applies for a “green card.” Family members of US citizens make up the largest number of such entrants. Those intending to stay for a limited time (students, tourists, exchange visitors, etc.) apply for a nonimmigrant visa.  

There are significant penalties for seeking to enter the US illegally. Many falsely present themselves as US citizens, a felony punishable by up to five years in jail. They commonly make false statements to the government or on official documents, which incurs a fine and up to five years imprisonment. A person who uses a false Social Security number can be imprisoned for up to five years.

We should consider crimes committed by illegal immigrants as well. According to FoxNews, illegal immigrants are three times more likely to be convicted of murder than members of the general population. Illegal immigrants comprise 3.5 percent of the population but make up 13.6 percent of all offenders sentenced for crimes committed in the US., including 12 percent of all murder sentences, 20 percent of kidnapping sentences, and 16 percent of drug trafficking sentences.

However, we should note that these facts do not apply to immigrants as a whole. According to the American Immigration Council, “immigrants are less likely to commit serious
crimes or be behind bars than the native-born, and high rates of immigration are associated with lower rates of violent crime and property crime.”

Between 1990 and 2013, the immigrant share of the US population grew from 7.9 percent to 13.1 percent while the number of illegal immigrants more than tripled from 3.5 million to 11.2 million. However, FBI data indicate that during the same period, the violent crime rate dropped 48 percent and property crime fell 41 percent. According to a 2010 study, 1.6 percent of immigrant males age eighteen-to-thirty-nine are incarcerated, compared to 3.3 percent of the native-born. Only 5 percent of the total prison population is comprised of non-US citizens.

The Lord is “a God of justice” (Isaiah 30:18) who cares about every victim of every crime (cf. Amos 1–2). But while we are told to “do justice,” we are also taught to “love kindness” (Micah 6:8). How do we balance these priorities?

**A biblical response**

The **first** biblical priority we should affirm is that legal immigrants must be treated with respect. This is one dimension of the sanctity of human life, a principle all Christians should agree on. The Bible is filled with admonitions to treat the “sojourner” well, recognizing that all people are made in God’s image and are the objects of his love. Except for Native Americans, every American reading these words is an immigrant or the descendant of one.

The **second** biblical priority that seems clear is border security. As noted above, Scripture teaches that we should defend ourselves from those who would harm us. This will be a true challenge, as the costs involved in increased security are significant and the unintended consequences of such security must be considered.

The **third** biblical priority is dealing with illegal immigrants justly yet compassionately. Here we face the most difficult challenge for constructing a biblical ethic on this issue.
One million children under eighteen are illegal immigrants. Nearly half of all illegal immigrant adults are parents of minors, many of whom are citizens. There are 5.5 million children in America with at least one undocumented parent, 4.5 million of whom were born here and are thus US citizens.\textsuperscript{17} About 7 percent of K-12 students had at least one illegal immigrant parent in 2012.\textsuperscript{18} Scripture clearly teaches that God loves and welcomes all children, regardless of their immigration status (cf. Matthew 19:14; Psalm 127:3).

If we uphold the rule of law (1 Timothy 1:8–10) by deporting all immigrants who are here illegally, our decision affects children who are illegal immigrants as well as children of illegal immigrant parents. Neither group chose to be in this situation. Scripture teaches that the person who sins should be punished (Ezekiel 18:20), but the Lord hates “hands that shed innocent blood” (Proverbs 6:17).

On the other hand, if we provide all illegal immigrants a path to citizenship, we condone their illegal behavior and could privilege them over those who are engaged in the process of obtaining citizenship legally. We also encourage others to enter our country illegally. The Bible calls those who break the law to repent (cf. Acts 3:19).

As noted earlier, the biblical “sojourner” was not in the land of Israel illegally, so God’s word requiring hospitality for immigrants does not address directly the issue of illegal immigrants. I can find only one biblical example that seems to align with our dilemma.

As they entered the Promised Land, the people of Israel were to drive out all the Canaanites lest they infect the Israelites with their paganism and other sins (cf. Deuteronomy 18:9–14). In Joshua 9, the “inhabitants of Gibeon,” a people-group in Canaan, heard how Joshua and the people of Israel had destroyed the cities of Jericho and Ai. So they pretended to be sojourners from a distant country and appealed to the Israelites for shelter. Joshua and the elders believed their ruse and made a covenant with them.
When they learned that they had been deceived, they let the Gibeonites live. However, they “made them that day cutters of wood and drawers of water for the congregation and for the altar of the Lord, to this day, in the place that he should choose” (Joshua 9:27).

This text obviously does not apply directly to the question of illegal immigrants today. But there may be a principle here: Joshua did not kill or deport them, but he did not grant them full rights or status as Israelites.

If we apply this decision to our dilemma regarding illegal immigrants, we could come to this response: Do not seek to deport them, but do not grant them citizenship. Rather, create a category by which they can stay in the US and make them eligible for jobs Americans do not want. In this way they are not taking jobs from citizens or legal residents.

This approach is very similar to an proposal announced by President George W. Bush on January 7, 2004. His strategy specified:

- Undocumented aliens would pay a fee to enter “temporary worker status.” This status would be granted for three years, with an opportunity for one-time renewal. In this status, the person would be free to travel in and out of the country and would not need to hide from the Immigration and Naturalization Service or law enforcement.

- If employers cannot find an American to fill a job, they could then consider this “temporary worker.”

- The person in this status could apply for citizenship, but would be placed in line behind those who have already taken such legal initiative.

- America would contribute to the retirement program and tax-preferred savings programs of their native country, as an incentive to return home when the work period ends.
As the president noted, his proposal is not amnesty for illegal immigrants. Amnesty by definition is “an act of authority (as of a government) by which pardon is granted to a large group of individuals.”

James Edwards’s statement is instructive: “As for mass amnesty, by legalizing millions of illegal immigrants, government does not show mercy. Rather, it obligates its citizens to bear the injustices aliens have committed against the body politic.”

This plan does not pardon those who are in our country illegally. It does not overlook the fact that illegal immigrants broke the law in the way they entered the US or overstayed their visa. Nor does it allow them to take jobs from Americans.

However, this proposal could encourage more illegal immigration. That’s why border security is vital to comprehensive immigration reform. Of course, those who view any approach other than deportation as amnesty will argue that it does not go far enough.

The Bible calls us to hold all life sacred, defend ourselves, and obey the rule of law. When faced with a choice between biblical mandates, we should try to obey them all. This is the intention behind my proposal. If there are other ways to reconcile our biblical priorities, I am of course open to them as well.

Ultimately, our biblical commission is to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). Evangelicals should seek ways to respond to illegal immigrants that enhance our ability to lead them to Christ and minister to them in his name, while doing the same for all others in the US. We should view immigrants coming to America as our opportunity to share Christ with them and, through their influence, with the nations of the world.

Our Declaration of Independence states that “all men are created equal,” with “inalienable rights” to “life” and “liberty.” When our immigration strategy reflects our founding declaration, we will bridge compassion and justice today.
References


6. Ibid., 82.

7. For more, see the perceptive essay by James R. Edwards, Jr., "A Biblical Perspective on Immigration Policy," Center


Religious Liberty

Why it matters and what we can do
Religious Liberty
*Why it matters and what we can do*

James Michael Nichols is the “Queer Voices Deputy Editor” for *The Huffington Post*. In a recent article, he asked why LGBT people are not “given a place in textbooks alongside the history of other marginalized groups.”¹ He applauds the decision made by the California State Board of Education to teach LGBT history in elementary, junior high, and high school classrooms.²

His question is based on the premise that LGBT rights are civil rights. If so, do LGBT people not deserve the same civil rights granted to other minority groups? I am extremely grateful that African-Americans and other racial minorities are legally protected from discrimination on the basis of their race. Those with physical disabilities have rightfully been granted similar protections. Should LGBT people not be treated in the same way?

Here’s the difference: Racial bigotry is clearly unbiblical (Genesis 1:27; James 2:9; Galatians 3:28–29). Prejudice against those with physical handicaps is obviously contrary to Scripture (Exodus 4:11; 2 Samuel 9). However, the Bible teaches that homosexual activity and same-sex marriage are contrary to God’s intention (see chapters three and four on this issue).
Same-sex marriage and LGBT advocates recognize civil rights that are contrary to the word of God. This contradiction brings the question of religious liberty squarely into focus. Will those who defend biblical sexuality and marriage be free to express their views and live by them? Or will their words be seen as slanderous, their actions considered illegal? Will such churches and ministries retain their non-profit tax status?

A similar issue has risen in recent years regarding contraception and the Affordable Care Act. Catholics and others opposed to contraception on religious grounds have been in conflict with the federal government regarding its mandate that such services be included in employee insurance coverage.

In light of LGBT, same-sex marriage, and similar controversies, is religious liberty in America under threat? If so, are Christians called to address this threat? If so, how can you make a difference?

**Is the threat real?**

Christians today can speak on cultural issues as they wish without facing legal threats. Churches in the US can refuse to ordain gay people or perform same-sex weddings without legal repercussions. Why, then, should believers be concerned about religious liberty in our country?

**Rising bias against Christians**

Brendan Eich was CEO of web browser Mozilla. He was forced to resign when it was discovered that he had donated $1,000 five years earlier to a campaign seeking to ban same-sex marriage in California.  

Dr. Eric Walsh served as director of the City of Pasadena’s Public Health Department. He was appointed to President Obama’s Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS. He also served as associate pastor at his Seventh-Day Adventist church. In May 2014, the State of Georgia’s Department of Public Health hired Dr. Walsh.
as a District Health Director. But soon after he accepted their offer, state officials asked him to submit recordings of his sermons for their review. After listening to his sermons, they fired him.  

Martin Gaskell was an astronomy professor at the University of Kentucky. He applied to be director of the new MacAdam Student Observatory. The search committee reviewed his extensive credentials but denied him the job because of his evangelical Christian beliefs. He filed suit and the University agreed to pay him $125,000.  

According to the Family Research Council and the Liberty Institute:

- A high school valedictorian in Victor, Iowa, was told he had to give a “secular” speech after he wanted to attribute his success to his faith in Christ.
- A Cisco employee was fired for expressing his views on traditional marriage in a book he wrote, though he never voiced these opinions at work. An eight-year-old was barred from singing “Kum Ba Yah” at a Boys and Girls Club in Port Charlotte, Florida, because the song includes the words, “Oh, Lord.”

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo has declared that right-to-life Christians “have no place in the state of New York.” A study conducted by the National Religious Broadcasters concluded that “Christian ideas and other religious content face a clear and present danger of censorship on web-based communication platforms.”

Nicholas Kristof of *The New York Times* recently highlighted the challenges facing Christians in higher education. Kristof interviewed sociologist George Yancey, who told him that he has faced many challenges because he is black, “but inside academia I face more problems as a Christian, and it is not even close.”
**Shifting definition of truth**

Why is the cultural tide turning against Christians? The issue centers in the conflict between changing social norms and unchanging biblical truth.

A recent study found that only thirty-five percent of the American people believe that absolute truth exists.\(^{10}\) The vast majority view truth as personal, individual, and subjective. This postmodern shift from objectivity to relativity affects every dimension of our lives.

It is now conventional wisdom that we have no right to force our beliefs on anyone else. In a culture where there are no objective moral standards, tolerance for all standards is the new morality. We are convinced that so long as a person’s behavior does not harm others, it should be permitted.

This ethic now applies to same-sex marriage and is being claimed by those who champion polygamy, polyamory (“many loves,” regardless of biological relationship or age), and even zoophilia (sexual relations with animals). It applies to life issues, from abortion to euthanasia. It applies to genetic advances that can be used for eugenic purposes. “Who are we to judge?” is the ethos of our day.

As a result, those who are viewed as judgmental can expect the strongest repudiation from our supposedly tolerant culture. Intolerance is the cardinal sin of our day. This assumption applies across the moral spectrum.

Gay rights have especially been elevated to the status of a civil right and LGBT people to the status of a protected class. The civil rights movement of the 1960s correctly spoke out against prejudice and racial injustice. The gay rights movement of our day equates itself with the civil rights revolution and expects the same outcome.
Here’s the result: A person who defends biblical marriage or warns against homosexual behavior on biblical grounds is branded homophobic. A church that does not include LGBT people in leadership and does not celebrate same-sex marriage is equally viewed as homophobic. Legislation intended to protect the ability of Christians to object to same-sex marriage on religious grounds is viewed as discriminatory.

In short, the day is gone when Christians could articulate counter-cultural biblical principles without facing the opprobrium of our “tolerant” culture.

Religious liberty and same-sex marriage

The Supreme Court’s 5–4 ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges* was historic for reasons beyond its legalization of same-sex marriage. It was also the first time in American history that the Court recognized a civil right for all Americans that contradicts what most evangelicals consider to be biblical truth.

Even *Roe v. Wade*, while legalizing abortion, did not force the procedure on all citizens. But *Obergefell* may be used to force Americans to support same-sex marriage, whatever their religious convictions.

Justice Kennedy assured those who disagree with the ruling on religious grounds, “The First Amendment ensures that religious organizations and persons are given proper protection as they seek to teach the principles that are so fulfilling and so central to their lives and faiths, and to their own deep aspirations to continue the family structure they have long revered.”

But in a conflict between civil rights and religious freedom, what constitutes “proper protection”? Justice Kennedy’s assurance did not answer numerous questions:

- Will dissenting religious organizations face the loss of their tax exempt status? (To be discussed below.)
• Will non-church ministries that perform weddings be forced to conduct same-sex ceremonies?
• Will faith-based universities be required to provide same-sex married housing?
• Will religious non-profits be required to provide same-sex spousal benefits?
• Will the NCAA exclude athletic programs at schools which dissent to the ruling?
• Will it be harder for such schools to gain and retain students, faculty, and donors?
• Will their federal student loans be in question?
• Will non-church religious organizations be able to follow their faith convictions with regard to hiring practices?
• If churches are sued for refusing to perform same-sex marriages, will insurance cover their litigation costs?

Now we’re beginning to get answers to some of these questions.

A bill presented to the California legislature would have drastically undermined the religious liberty of Christian universities in the state. If it had passed, it could have become a model for attacks on Christian schools across the country.

In recent years, the government has required that educational institutions not “discriminate” against LGBT students lest they lose federal funding. However, religious schools have been exempted from this requirement if their “religious tenets” affirmed biblical sexuality and marriage.

The bill put this exemption at risk.
If Senate Bill 1146 had been enacted, the religious liberty exemption would have applied only to institutions whose purpose is “to prepare students to become ministers of the religion, to enter upon some other vocation of the religion.” In other words, only theological seminaries would have retained their religious liberty protections.

As Biola University warned, the bill “functionally eliminates the religious liberty of all California faith-based colleges and universities who integrate spiritual life with the entire campus educational experience.” It would “eliminate religious liberty in California higher education as we know it and rob tens of thousands of students of their access to a distinctly faith-based higher education.” One commentator warned that the bill would “ultimately erase religious schools.”

All this to solve what Andrew Walker correctly called a “non-existent problem.” As he noted, “Students who apply and attend colleges do so voluntarily. There are no victims here—unless victimhood is measured in terms of institutions singled out for their countercultural religious convictions.”

There’s even more to the story.

The First Amendment, often called our “First Freedom,” states: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” However, a few years ago, observers began noticing a distinction between “freedom of religion” and “freedom of worship” in statements by President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton. What could happen if we move from “freedom of religion” to “freedom of worship”?

The California bill was one answer: schools that teach “worship” (theology and ministry training) have religious liberty, but those that are “religious” (all other Christian schools) do not. Extending this outcome, pastors would be free to address issues such as same-
sex marriage only in sermons delivered in worship services—if they speak publicly on such issues in other forums, they could be accused of hate speech. Church facilities would be tax-exempt only if they are used expressly for worship—offices, gyms, and educational spaces could be taxed. Our personal religious convictions would be protected only when they are expressed during worship services or in private.

The California bill was just one example of this frightening trend. Fortunately, the senator who proposed the bill amended it under pressure. A coalition of Christian schools, leaders, and students rallied to protest its unfair discrimination against faith-based schools. The state senate also noted the probability of litigation against the state if the bill were enacted.¹⁷

While it’s good news that SB 1146 did not successfully discriminate against religious schools, we must expect similar attacks in the future. The bill’s sponsor did not change his mind regarding religious freedom. He and others like him remain convinced that any institution that upholds biblical sexuality is discriminating unlawfully against the LGBT community.

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.¹⁸
**Tax exempt status**

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).”

Imagine a day when 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?

The Supreme Court used the Fourteenth Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause as the basis for its ruling in favor of same-sex marriage. This clause was designed to remove slavery. If opposition to same-sex marriage is equated with racism, the courts will view such opposition as equally illegal. Then, if such opposition is found to violate “public policy,” the IRS will likely be charged with removing tax-exempt status from offending organizations.

**Future threats**

If support for same-sex marriage becomes a protected civil right and LGBT people are viewed as a protected class, what could happen to those who defend biblical marriage?

Accreditation of faith-based institutions could be challenged, along with their participation in federal grants and NCAA programs. The loss of financial support through Pell Grants and other instruments could be devastating.

We are likely to see evangelical social service providers lose their licenses and evangelical speakers barred from public forum spaces
on college campuses. Churches and religious institutions that allow non-members to use their facilities will be forced to open them to LGBT groups. Evangelicals are likely to face discrimination with regard to corporate boards and foundations. Churches will face zoning restrictions.

Evangelicals will find themselves increasingly stigmatized and ostracized by society. Elite businesses will not hire graduates of Christian colleges; elite colleges will not accept graduates from Christian high schools; elite law schools and medical schools will not accept Christian candidates.

You might believe that we don’t need to respond to such attacks on religious liberty until they come. Actually, the opposite is the case. Once our religious freedoms are gone, we will not be able to use them to regain them. For example, the California Senate bill will be much easier to defeat before ratification than to reverse if it becomes law. Once the IRS is instructed to remove tax-exemption status from any organization found to be “discriminating” against LGBT people, regaining such status will be very difficult.

The threat against religious liberty as it stands today justifies immediate response by Christian leaders. We must act while we still can.

**Why should Christians defend religious liberty?**

A second question you may be asking is understandable: isn’t defending religious liberty the job of political leaders and lawyers? There are numerous organizations at work on this issue today. Why do Christians need to join the cause?

*Why do Christians need to engage culture?*

One issue relevant to this question is the degree to which believers should engage culture in ways the culture rejects. If we do not speak out against same-sex marriage or other unbiblical moral stands, perhaps we can avoid persecution.
For example, the Deutsche Evangelische Kirche (German Evangelical Church) enjoyed the support of the Third Reich because it supported the Nazi movement. The swastika replaced the cross and *Mein Kampf* replaced the Bible.

Likewise, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement forms the only state-sanctioned or registered Protestant church in mainland China today. Registered churches face less persecution from the Chinese government than illegal “underground” churches, but their sermons are often edited and their finances and activities are carefully monitored.

Why should America’s churches be counter-cultural? Why not “stick to the gospel”? I have heard pastors say that they “speak where Jesus spoke and are silent where Jesus was silent.” If he didn’t address issues such gay marriage, why should we? (I think he did, but that’s another subject.)

Why not focus on evangelism and discipleship, leaving cultural issues that require religious liberty to the side? Because, as we will see, even evangelism and discipleship will be restricted if we lose our religious freedom.

Why focus on our fallen society? After all, “the world is passing away along with its desires” (1 John 2:17a). But John’s statement continues: “whoever does the will of God abides forever” (v. 17b). As we will see, it is the will of God that we speak the word of God to the cultural issues of our day, seeking transformation by the Spirit of God to the glory of God.

We are called to speak truth to culture

Old Testament prophets clearly spoke out against the cultural sins of their day. Hosea condemned the “swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery” of his culture (Hosea 4:2). He warned his society against drunkenness and sexual immorality (4:18) as well.
Amos condemned enslavement (Amos 1:6–8), mistreatment of pregnant women (1:13) and the poor (2:6), sexual abuse (2:7), drunkenness (4:1), greed (5:11), and corruption (5:12). Obadiah warned against violence (v. 10); Micah condemned theft (Micah 2:1–2).

Are these sins increasingly prevalent in American culture today?

Paul, like the prophets of old, was grieved by idolatry (Acts 17:16) and the sins of his day, many of which he listed specifically (Romans 1:18–32; Galatians 5:19–21). He had “great sorrow and unceasing anguish in [his] heart” (Romans 9:2) for his fellow Jews who had not made Jesus their Messiah. And he gave his life as a missionary to the Gentile world (Galatians 2:7–8).

In his cultural engagement, the apostle followed the example and ministry of our Lord. Jesus fed the hungry (John 6:1–14), healed the sick (Mark 1:33–34), and befriended the outcast (Luke 19:1–10).

He taught us to do the same, calling us to be “salt” and “light” (Matthew 5:13–16). Both transform all they contact. As a result, the first Christians gave their goods to anyone who “had need” (Acts 2:45) and ministered to “the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits” (Acts 5:16).

Clearly, they did more than “preach the gospel.” Or, better said, they preached the gospel of God’s love in actions as well as in words. They met felt need in order to meet spiritual need, earning the right to share the message of salvation in Christ.

Religious commitment requires religious liberty

The First Amendment protects our legal right to speak truth to culture in ways the culture rejects. Why is this right enshrined in the Constitution? Because the Founders believed that religion is essential to morality, which is essential to the democratic experiment.
In his *Farewell Address* (September 19, 1796), President George Washington declared to the nation:

> Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports. . . . Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle. . . . Virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government.20

John Adams likewise warned:

> We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Avarice, ambition, revenge or gallantry would break the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net. Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.21

Adam Smith is widely considered the founder of modern economics. He made popular the “paradox of the invisible hand”: self-interest, operating through markets, leads to the common good. However, his theory assumed a conventional morality that constrained this self-interest. Andrew Carnegie, in his *Gospel of Wealth*, claimed that the great wealth of the entrepreneur was not personal property but a trust to be used for the benefit of society.

Given the importance of religion to morality, the Founders ensured that religious liberty would be protected by our Constitution. It is no accident that religious liberty is the first amendment adopted by the infant nation:

> Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.
This so-called “First Freedom” protects the state from church control and the church from state control. A free church in a free state is the ideal the Founders sought to attain. For more than two centuries, this vital balance has prevailed.

Freedom of religion protects us not only from present government opposition, but from future challenges as well. The current debate focuses primarily on same-sex marriage, leading some to believe that if we remain silent on this issue we can avoid opposition. However, as we have seen, the rising tide of atheism and anti-religiosity in our culture opposes all public expressions of faith.

More examples: Some companies now restrict the right of Christian employees to wear religious jewelry or display religious items such as Bibles in public, lest their faith offend others. Workplace discussions of faith even without proselytizing are often forbidden, lest others feel oppressed. Christians in secular leadership positions are especially warned not to express their religious convictions lest those they lead feel pressured to agree.

However, it is important to note that the freedom of religion guaranteed by our Constitution is both a freedom for religion and a freedom from it. While the First Amendment protects freedom of speech for religious people, it also protects freedom of speech for those who are not religious. The “first freedom” is as vital to atheists as to believers, to Jews and to Buddhists as to Christians.

**How can you make a difference?**

We have seen that threats against religious liberty are real and escalating, and that Christians are called to engage culture even in spite of such opposition. The threat to liberty goes to the heart of our Kingdom calling in our culture.

How can Christians make a difference?
Influence the influential

James Davison Hunter is the LaBrosse-Levinson Distinguished Professor of Religion, Culture, and Social Theory at the University of Virginia. He is also founder and executive director of UVA’s Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. He is widely considered one of the most perceptive interpreters of culture in America today.

His remarkable work, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*, is essential reading for those interested in cultural transformation. Dr. Hunter explores in detail ways culture changes and ways it does not.

He begins with the negative: culture does not change simply by winning elections. For instance, during the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, divorce rates escalated. Gay marriage made significant inroads in American culture during the presidency of George W. Bush. Neither trend was the fault of the presidents, of course. But both illustrate the fact that elected officials by themselves cannot change culture positively.

Culture does not change merely through evangelism and church attendance. More than eighty percent of Americans are identified with some faith community, yet our culture is intensely secularistic and materialistic. By contrast, the Jewish community has never comprised more than 3.5 percent of our population, yet its contributions to science, literature, art, music, film, and architecture have been remarkable. At least 180 Jews have been awarded the Nobel Prize, constituting thirty-six percent of all American recipients.

Nor does culture change by popularity. While more evangelical books are being sold than ever before, they primarily target the faith community and are popular outside the cultural mainstream. Few are ever reviewed by the *New York Times* or *Wall Street Journal*. Most people have heard of Rick Warren and Joel Osteen, but we cannot claim that our culture has been changed by their popularity.
How does a culture change? By influencing the influential. Culture changes top-down, according to Dr. Hunter. Here is the progression:

**For knowledge:** From academic think tanks to elite research universities and opinion magazines, to elite publishers and colleges, to public education and Christian schools.

**For morality:** From academic philosophy and law schools to schools of public policy, to think tanks, to grass roots politics and activism.

**For aesthetics:** From visual arts to theater and dance, to museums, to public television, museums, and film, to prime-time television, mass market movies, and mass circulation publishing.

How can we influence change in these cultural arenas? Dr. Hunter encourages us to “manifest faithful presence” where we are with those we influence, seeking to develop leaders at places of the greatest effective influence in our culture.

Applying his model to the defense of religious liberty, Christians can use their influence for God’s glory. Imagine a culture where Christians expressed their faith through movies, television, music, and other media; where Christian business leaders made decisions based on Kingdom principles; where Christian health care professionals followed biblical moral guidelines; where Christian public servants exercised political office as servants of God and their constituents; where Christian leaders used their influence to articulate and defend religious freedom in all its expressions.

Consider entering public office and other places of public service. Understand the comprehensive biblical worldview, including its call for religious freedom, and choose to live biblically. Seek your highest place of influence and live there faithfully as salt and light (Matthew 5:13–16). And set the example with your own commitment to excellence.
Make public your commitment to religious freedom

Edmund Burke noted that “the people never give up their liberties but under some delusion.” It is vital that Christians show our culture that suspending First Amendment religious freedom is a delusion that will damage our nation and affect us all.

If believers do not defend the right of believers to speak truth to culture, who will? If we do not defend the right of religious organizations to operate in accordance with their religious convictions, who will? Burke was right: “Nothing is so fatal to religious as indifference.”

We must use our influence to defend religious liberty. But we must also speak and act in a manner that advances our cause and honors our Lord.

Scripture calls us to be respectful (Titus 3:2), considerate (1 Timothy 2:2), and reverent (1 Peter 3:15). “Speaking the truth in love” is to be our goal (Ephesians 4:15). But we are also to be bold (Acts 4:29; Ephesians 6:19), strong (1 Corinthians 16:13), and courageous (Philippians 1:28).

Our response starts with prayer. Ask the Lord to show you what he wants you to do and say to defend and advance religious freedom. Ask him to lead you to others you can influence for this vital cause. Ask him for the kindness and courage to manifest faithful presence with your words, actions, and lifestyle.

And be encouraged. Early Christians had far fewer religious freedoms than we enjoy today. Subjects of Rome were made to worship the emperor; Christians were often targeted for wholesale persecution and slaughter; believers had no legal protection for their faith. Yet they “turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6, KJV) and launched the largest spiritual movement in human history.
How did they do it? They demonstrated their faith by their love (John 13:35). They met felt need to meet spiritual need. They saw the secular authorities not as enemies to be defeated but as people for whom to pray (1 Timothy 2:2). They gave their lives to a movement of subversive service and grace.

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5). It never will.
References


Conclusion:

How to be Christian citizens today

No political party or candidate acts in a manner completely consistent with the word of God. This is to be expected, since politicians are as fallen as the rest of us (Romans 3:23). How, then, should Christians relate to the secular government and its leaders?

The Apostle Paul was clear: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities” (Romans 13:1). There seem to be no exceptions or qualifications here. Peter was equally clear: “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good” (1 Peter 2:13–14).

However, Paul and Peter were both executed by Rome because they would not submit to its authority when the Empire demanded that they cease their ministries. In a similar vein, when Peter and John were ordered by the religious authorities to stop preaching and teaching in the name of Jesus, they responded: “We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). When arrested again, the apostles made a similar response: “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).
So, how should Christians relate to secular authority?

**One:** Be respectful.

We are taught “to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one” (Titus 3:1–2). Peter urged us to defend our faith “with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame” (1 Peter 3:15–16).

I do not remember a time when Americans were as disrespectful to political leaders as many are today. Ridiculing and slandering those in office or running for office seems to be fair game. Social media has only exacerbated our ability to mock those who would serve us.

When Christians are respectful to those in authority, even and especially when we disagree with them, our attitude will be a powerful witness to others. Speaking the truth in love is always God’s will for us (Ephesians 4:15).

**Two:** Be prayerful.

Paul was adamantine: “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions” (1 Timothy 2:1–2). Have you prayed for our president today? For the presidential candidates? For others in political office and those campaigning for office?

**Three:** Obey your highest authority.

A “dual citizen” in America is someone with two legal citizenships. For instance, a child born in the US to foreign parents automatically has US citizenship as well as the citizenship of the parents’ home country.

In the same way, God’s word calls Christians to dual citizenship. If
you were born in the US, you are a citizen of the US. If you were “born again” as the child of God (John 3:3), you are also a citizen of heaven (Philippians 3:20).

What should you do when you are forced to choose? Obey your highest authority.

You are on this planet for only a short time. You will be in heaven with your Lord forever. This earthly life is a means to an end, a journey to a destination. One day the Lord will come to us or you will go to him.

So make your temporal decisions in light of eternal significance. Seek to glorify God with all you do. Serve Jesus in every dimension of your life (1 Thessalonians 5:23). If you must refuse people to obey God, choose your Lord.

And know that you cannot measure the eternal significance of present faithfulness.
“Building Culture—Changing Christians.”

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