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Gay Sex and Grace: What Does Grace Have to Do with Homosexual Practices?

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What an odd question to ask in the midst of today's unrelenting, emotionally charged, torrent of books, articles, blogs, resolutions, votes, court decisions, debates, discussions, protests, boycotts, shouting matches, and hate crimes regarding LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) issues. What does grace have to do with homosexual practices? Further, what does grace have to offer in the raging wars over gay sexuality?

The short answer to both questions is "plenty." I would like to explain this answer by first looking at some terms. I am using "gay" to refer to all who include themselves within the LGBT rainbow, especially homosexuals: those who are romantically and exclusively attracted to persons of the same sex. Homosexuals as thus defined are said to have a homosexual orientation. They are also referred to as "constitutional" homosexuals. They firmly state that they have no romantic or sexual interest in those of the opposite sex.

In this article the noun "homosexual" refers to someone with the orientation. As an adjective, however, "homosexual" describes the actions themselves, whether these actions are by constitutional homosexuals or those who do not think of themselves as such (those in prison, for example, who engage in same-sex practices), or those who are not sure of their sexual identity.¹ I am using "gay sex" to refer to the consensual erotic activities of a gay couple.

¹A remarkable and encouraging work by Wesley Hill, a self proclaimed celibate homosexual Christian and New Testament seminary professor, is *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010). This small book, in the author's words, was written "to convey something of what it's like to have survived—or rather, to be surviving—the anguished journey of struggling with homosexuality" (14). Hill explains his terminology: "In this book I have chosen not to discriminate between various terms for homosexuality. So, for instance, I use 'same-sex attraction,' 'homosexual desires,' 'homosexuality,' and related terms interchangeably. Likewise, I've used a variety of designations for gay and lesbian people. Instead of sticking to one term, such as 'homosexual Christian,' I also refer to myself as a 'gay Christian' or 'a Christian who experiences homosexual desires.' . . . None of [these terms] should be taken necessarily to imply homosexual practice; in each case I am most often placing the emphasis on the subject's sexual orientation and not the corresponding behavior" (21). The terminology in this article is the same as that of Hill.

I am not going to discuss specific practices, but I will draw attention to gay and lesbian sexual actions in general, as a whole. My reason for narrowing the vast field of LGBT issues to the matter of erotic activities will become clear, I trust, as this essay progresses.

Even though most everyone knows—at least to some extent—what gay and lesbian sexual activities involve, hardly any of the debate focuses on the practices themselves. Except for crude comments in some places—perhaps a rowdy bar here or a macho locker room there—discussions of LGBT issues tend to focus on such matters as companionship, loyalty, covenant, marriage, human rights, civil rights, discrimination, justice, ordination of non-celibate homosexuals, coming out, individual freedom, sexual and gender identity, and personal happiness.

While most people are quite content—even relieved—to discuss the issues just listed without mention of specific erotic actions, others believe that the practices must be considered as well. After all, the activities themselves—whether in long-term relationships or one-time stands—are the reason for most of the debate in the first place. A very large percentage of the world’s population finds the practices highly objectionable, and therefore to be opposed. This is simply a fact. Each of the issues listed above is certainly important, but so is the very basic matter of homoerotic acts.

I understand those who say that dwelling on the actions themselves misses the whole point—the fundamental concern—about being lesbian or gay in matters of everyday life and relationships. I think I get that. I agree that dwelling on the acts involved is not getting to the heart of LGBT issues, but not to bring them into the discussion at all is dishonest.² If we do not, we are avoiding a very large elephant in the living room.

I have no personal interest in writing on this subject apart from a deepening concern over the very serious matters at stake, especially the way some who call themselves Christian are now interpreting the Bible on these and other matters of sexuality.³ Due to the relentless and rapidly-growing

²Hill emphasizes this point throughout *Washed and Waiting*. He writes: “Somehow every part of my relational makeup was affected by this [homosexuality].” He wrote to a friend: “A sexual orientation is such a complex and, in most cases, it seems, intractable thing; I for one cannot imagine what ‘healing’ from my orientation would look like, given that it seems to manifest itself not only in physical attraction to male bodies but also in a preference for male company, with all that it entails,” such as “conversation and emotional intimacy and quality time spent together” (42). At times conservative Christians fail to grasp the intensity of a homosexual person’s longings for same-sex relationships, even apart from sexual activity or lustful thoughts.

³It is for good reason that the most highly-regarded scholarly study of the biblical materials concerning same-sex relationships in serious dialogue with contemporary pro-gay research, is Robert A.J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001). As Gagnon, who defends the position of non-acceptance toward homosexual practices, indicates by his subtitle, the very serious matter of the science of scriptural interpretation (biblical hermeneutics) is at the core of today’s raging debates. Not only studying a specific verse or passage in itself (exegesis), but also understanding the principles and approaches of biblical interpretation—one’s own and those of others—is

pressure from so many directions on everyone to accept and affirm fully the rightness and goodness of (loving) homosexual practices, I believe I should put down some thoughts and trust that they will create more light than heat.

David Gushee, a noted ethicist and advocate of gay marriage—the most prominent writer and leader in ethics today who considers himself evangelical—has written recently: “Whether rightly or not, the LGBT issue has become the hottest of hot-button issues in our generation, so ultimately avoidism proves insufficient. Everyone will have to figure out what they will think and do about this.”⁴ Gushee argues strenuously but not belligerently in favor of full inclusion of LGBT individuals in church and society. His words here are entirely correct.

I believe it will be best to present my basic line of thought in the form of a personal account. I am a heterosexual man who has for many years—even before I became a seminary professor of ethics—studied much from all sides of the issues in question. I have paid close attention, in particular, to the perspectives of those who have grown up in conservative Christian churches. I write not as one who has all the answers, nor as one who refuses to consider arguments and personal stories from a variety of perspectives. Everyone who can speak or write thoughtfully on these matters should have a voice.

As indicated above, I write as one who recognizes the significance of homosexual orientation as different from homosexual practice. My concern here is with the actions, although I fully realize the two categories are closely related. But not every person with a gay orientation is involved in gay sexual activities, just as not every straight person is involved in straight sexual

crucial to a careful exposition of the Scriptures. Gagnon has also written, with Dan O. Via (who supports practicing homosexual relationships), *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003). Both books support the same overall position on homosexual practice, and supplement each other. In subsequent notes, Gagnon’s books will be referred to as *Texts* and *Two Views*.

⁴David P. Gushee, *Changing Our Mind: A Call from America’s Leading Evangelical Ethics Scholar for Full Acceptance of LGBT Christians in the Church*, 2nd ed. (Canton: Read the Spirit Books, 2015), 43. Gushee studied under now-deceased Glen H. Stassen at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, from 1984–87. He earned his Ph.D. in 1993 from Union Theological Seminary in New York, and taught for three years at Southern Seminary. He also served on the faculty of Union University, Jackson, Tennessee, and is now Distinguished University Professor of Christian Ethics at McAfee School of Theology, Mercer University, Atlanta, Georgia. In the spring of 2016 I had extensive e-mail correspondence with Gushee. Our dialogue was respectful even though we closed our correspondence with major disagreements on the issues. As I write, Gushee is the President-Elect of the Society of Christian Ethics and Vice President of the American Academy of Religion. He recently published, in the *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* “Reconciling Evangelical Christianity with Our Sexual Minorities: Reframing the Biblical Discussion” (2015, 141–58). Here he concludes: “The LGBT issue is a Gospel issue, . . . not fundamentally a sexual ethics issue” (153). Gushee and Stassen authored a major textbook, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), in which the authors upheld the conservative, non-affirming position on homosexual practices which Gushee now rejects and even repents of publicly. A revised edition of *Kingdom Ethics* is now available (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

activities. There are celibate gays and celibate straights. Those with a gay orientation, whether practicing or not, are as sought after by God as those with a straight orientation, whether practicing or not. Neither group should ever be demeaned. Furthermore, in this essay the focus is on gay people as they are now, not how they became such. There is a considerable amount of scholarship devoted to the study of homosexual causation, but this essay does not address that issue.⁵

What about the Bible?

The starting point and foundation for my beliefs on all sexual issues and sexual morality (hetero as well as homo) is the Bible, both Old and New Testament Scriptures. I realize that just saying this is a major turnoff for many. I am aware of the reasons—at least some of them—for this aversion. One major objection is that the Bible seems so out of touch with real life today. The objection is thus, no book written thousands of years ago, even if it is considered to be inspired by God, could possibly anticipate and address the complexities of sexual and gender issues and identities as we know them today. The relatively recent (in human history) research and findings regarding the homosexual orientation and loving, homosexual unions were not available to the Scripture writers, so obviously they could not have had such knowledge in mind as they wrote against homosexual practices.⁶ I take seriously this objection to the relevance of the Bible.

In this brief essay I cannot expound on why I ground my views on the Scriptures, other than to say that the wisest and holiest person who ever lived, the most merciful and just human being of all time, certainly in my opinion, the one called Jesus of Nazareth, based his personal life, teachings, and deeds on the Old Testament Scriptures, and commissioned his disciples to go and teach the nations his message. He also promised his followers that he would send his Spirit to lead them into all truth, which resulted in the New Testament Scriptures. Because I am 100% committed to this remarkable One sent from the Father, this crucified and resurrected Savior, and trust him completely, I choose to follow him without reservation as I learn from the blessed book that he embraced as the written center of his life, ministry,

⁵On causation, see the thorough discussion in Gagnon, *Texts*, 380–432. Two additional, highly valuable works on causation are Elizabeth R. Moberly, *Homosexuality: A New Christian Ethic* (Greenwood: Attic, 1983); and Jeffrey Satinover, *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996). Moberly received her Ph.D. in psychology from Oxford University for her study of homosexuality; her book, while slim (56 pages) is based on her eight years of research on the topic. Satinover is a psychiatrist and past president of the C.G. Jung Foundation. Theologian Karl Barth considered the primary causative factor in homosexuality to be human sin. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark: 1961), 166.

⁶These common objections are widely argued in contemporary pro-gay literature. See, for example, Via and Gagnon, *Two Views*, 1–39, and throughout the older but influential work by New Testament Professor L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and their Implications for Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

teachings, and promises, and commissioned his disciples to complete. Further, my personal experience with Christ supports hugely, as much and probably more than, my cognitive understanding of these matters.

The Bible has much to say about sexual issues. While these are not the most important matters in the Scriptures, they are by no means insignificant. Two of the Ten Commandments are concerned with our sexual lives (Deut 5:18, 21). After having read the whole Bible about 12–15 times (some Bible books many more times), and after studying in detail the numerous sections on human sexuality, I have reached an overall conclusion: every scriptural reference to interpersonal sexual activity approved (either explicitly or implicitly) by God is within the marriage of one man and one woman; every reference to interpersonal sexual activity outside of a heterosexual monogamous marriage is presented as improper or explicitly wrong.

Furthermore, I believe that this conclusion reveals God's loving heart and mind, his supreme goodness and holiness, his moral character and will, and his gracious intention and longing that these scriptural teachings be followed by all people everywhere in every age, for their overall way of life and for their eternal blessedness. God has not established this standard out of some arbitrary freakishness about sex. After all, God thought up the whole matter of our sexuality and said it was "very good" (Gen 1:26–31; 2:18–25; 4:1–2; Prov 5:15–23; Heb 13:4).⁷

I have learned from both personal experience and study of the Scriptures that God purposes true joy and happiness for human beings in every command he gives. He who made us knows us much more deeply than we know ourselves, and is infinitely wiser than the brightest among us. God gives his commands not to block our happiness but to give us true joy, freedom from every enslavement, and genuine peace in our inner being, even in the midst of the ever-present struggles and sufferings of life. In addition, God never expects anything of us that he is not willing and able to empower us to do. God's standard is not a carrot on the end of a stick. He longs to enter, with great power, the minds and wills of all who seek truth and desire to follow that truth wherever it leads.

What I am saying here is far broader and much more consequential than simply presenting moral guidelines on matters of gay and lesbian activities. The conclusion above actually has far more to say to heterosexuals than to homosexuals, since our world is populated mostly by heterosexuals. God's pattern for sexual morality is for everyone today, for our lasting benefit in this life and in the life to come.

Grace has much to do with gay sex, straight sex, and all matters of sexual identity, desire, and practice. God made us, and even though the entrance of sin into our world has led to terrible brokenness in the order of nature—and we are all part of the natural order—God is actively working, because

⁷Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the New International Version, 2011.

of and through Jesus Christ, toward the restoration of all creation, including every person today who sincerely cries out to him for sexual wholeness, with faith as a little child.

What Exactly is Grace?

The word “grace,” and what it has to do with gay sex, calls for explanation, even as I keep the focus on erotic activities as mentioned above. One non-negotiable point here is that every discussion concerning the broad range of sexual identities and issues in our world needs to be conducted, by followers of Christ above all, in a spirit of grace.

As commonly used in our language today, “grace” refers to a nexus of attitudes (ideally followed by words and actions) such as kindness, generosity, favor, non-judgmentalism, patience, acceptance, goodwill, mercy, benevolence, and (especially in certain Christian circles) rejection of legalism. Each of these attitudes, when accompanied by appropriate language and deeds, is part of the total pattern of grace that characterizes truly gracious human beings.

When we consider *God’s* grace, however, as flowing (metaphorically) from his very being, the central biblical teaching is that grace is both God’s inexpressible favor toward human beings, because of Jesus Christ (Eph 1:5–8; 2:4–9), and God’s great power to work in us and through us more than we can ask or think (1 Cor 15:10; 2 Cor 12:9). Grace is both God’s unmerited favor and his mighty power on our behalf.

If God’s grace is only his favor and goodwill toward us, this attitude in itself does not provide what we actually need to live and flourish daily as we do our work and relate to others. We also need God’s power, energy, and strength flowing into us and through us, just as our bodies need nutrition and as engines need fuel. Both aspects of biblical grace are seen in the epistle to the Hebrews: “Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (4:16). God’s grace, then, in both senses, has much to do with gay sex or any kind of sex by extending to us both his pure kindness and his perfect strength to enable us to follow the scriptural pattern in our daily lives.

Our longings for relational and sexual intimacy are very real, and temptation to sin is sometimes very, very powerful. Every responsible person who has ever lived has faced temptation often. Even the man Jesus faced the full force of it, without relying on his deity for escape. But the good news, as expressed by the apostle Paul, is that “No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it” (1 Cor 10:13). This is God’s almighty grace protecting and empowering us to live godly and radiant lives one day at a time.

What Are the Specific Bible Verses?

There are seven major Bible texts that mention homosexual actions: Genesis 19:4–5; Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Deuteronomy 23:17–18; Romans 1:26–28; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10. (Other texts that are sometimes considered: Gen 9:20–27; Judges 19:22–25; 2 Sam 1:26; 1 Kings 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; 2 Kings 23:7; Job 36:13–14; Ezek 16:50; 18:12; 33:26; Acts 15:28–29; 2 Pet 2:7; Jude 7; Rev 21:8; 22:15). Most of my study has been in the verses found in Leviticus, Romans, 1 Corinthians, and 1 Timothy. These are the crucial texts that unmistakably reveal God’s attitude regarding homosexual activities, and these are the texts that ground my thinking on the subject.

Below I will quote the most pertinent words from these Scriptures, but I do so reluctantly because of the absolute necessity of studying any Bible text in the full light of its context—both the immediate and broader contexts. Probably the most common errors in Bible interpretation are due to the violation of this all-important guideline.

Because the work has been done so well elsewhere, I will not be offering an exposition of the following Scriptures, but I ask readers who have questions to at least read the whole biblical chapter in which each text is found, with a mind and heart open to the teaching of God’s Spirit.⁸ In the Bible version (NIV) I am using here, the translation of each text is accurate.⁹ The plain sense is the true sense in these cases. Even many gay–theology advocates acknowledge the accuracy of the translations below. They have objections to the traditionalist use of these texts, but not to the way they are translated.¹⁰

Leviticus 18:22: “Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.”

Leviticus 20:13: “If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable.

⁸Excellent studies arguing convincingly for the non-affirming position on same-sex practices are the two volumes from Gagnon, as well as Donald J. Wold, *Out of Order: Homosexuality in the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998); especially for Old Testament materials, see Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation; A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996).

⁹Gushee argues that the translations in the NIV and other leading English Bible versions are not all accurate. Gushee, *Changing Our Mind*, 54–90.

¹⁰An example is from Dan O. Via: “The four pertinent Old Testament texts—two narrative and two legal—present an unambiguous and unconditional condemnation of homosexuality.” Via and Gagnon, *Two Views*, 4. Robin Scroggs, a major pro-gay scholar, admits that the various New Testament passages on homosexuality, including 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10, condemn homosexual behavior, but he denies that these Scriptures apply directly to the contemporary debate. Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 123–29.

They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads.”

Romans 1:26–28: “Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error. Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done.”

1 Corinthians 6:9–11: “Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men [technically ‘nor those who are the passive partner in homosexual intercourse nor those who are the active homosexual partner’], nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. 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.”¹¹

1 Timothy 1:9–11: “We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine that conforms to the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.”

For many years I have researched and pondered these texts in their contexts and studied them from all sides of the controversies swirling about today, listening carefully and respectfully to each viewpoint and the support for that viewpoint. I have also paid close attention to numerous personal stories. One gay student from a liberal seminary in which I was guest teaching stayed up all night after the class session on homosexuality and wrote a ten page letter to me, worded strongly but respectfully, in which he expressed his opposition to my view. I have been willing and open to follow the truth wherever it leads.

¹¹See Gagnon, *Texts*, 306–32, and NIV text note on v. 9, “The words *men who have sex with men* translate two Greek words that refer to the passive and active participants in homosexual acts.”

Having said these things, I cannot in good conscience read these crucial texts after the study I have done and conclude that any interpersonal homoerotic actions, even within a covenantal, monogamous union (or marriage) have ever been or ever will be approved by God. To me and to millions like me the biblical viewpoint comes across loudly and clearly.

How Can the Bible Possibly Be Workable in Today's Modern Culture?

What about the point raised earlier? Even if the Bible is considered to be God's inspired Word that clearly opposes homosexual practices, are we simply to insert these ancient teachings into our modern world amid the complexities of sexual and gender issues as we understand them now?

To the objection that the biblical writers knew nothing of homosexual orientation as we know it, and therefore were not addressing the evident wholesomeness of many gay unions or marriages today, I reply that indeed there was no word for "homosexual" in ancient Hebrew or Greek—the two main biblical languages. However, this in itself is a non-issue, since the biblical prohibitions concern the actions only, in whatever context they may be practiced.

Furthermore, the objection is based on the logical fallacy known as "argument from ignorance" and therefore carries very little weight. One type of argument from ignorance says that the lack of evidence (proof) against some statement supports the truth of that statement. Many advocates for gay theology, even those who agree that the Scriptures mentioning homosexual behavior condemn the practices, argue that these biblical statements refer only to selfish, promiscuous, and/or abusive practices. These advocates point out that the Bible does not refer to—and therefore does not condemn—the activities of those with a homosexual orientation (constitutional homosexuals) who are seeking love within their own "kind," in the same way as heterosexuals seeking love within their own "kind." In this view, the Bible condemns only reckless, wanton, lustful, perverted eroticism, such as sex with children or sex that goes against one's sexual orientation (this last is the interpretation held by some gay theologians concerning the first chapter of Romans).

From the above considerations, the argument goes, because the Bible writers were ignorant of the homosexual orientation, and said nothing against gay sexual activities within loving, covenantal unions, one must conclude that such behaviors are not violations of God's moral law. Also, since so many people—straight and gay—are now approving of gay marriage (true, but this leads to the logical fallacy of "argument to the people"), and since many gay men and women are very fine people with real sexual desires (true, but this leads to the fallacy of "argument to pity"), the Bible cannot be used to oppose proper homoerotic behavior today. Further, because Jesus never mentioned homosexuality (true, but this leads to an "argument from silence") but taught love for God and neighbor, the loving attitude for Christians today must be

both welcoming and affirming of gays and their sexual behaviors, as long as these are consensual and not abusive or destructive.

My reply concerning the major scriptural materials on homosexuality and their applicability for today is that, while the writers do not address the matter of gay orientation as we know it, they were addressing behaviors, not matters of underlying predisposition. This is obvious from the major texts given above, from both Old and New Testaments. Further, it is extremely difficult to believe that, with homosexual desires and behaviors present as they were in certain ancient societies (Gen 19:16–19, 29; Lev 18:1–3, 22, 29–30; 20:13, 23–24; Judg 19:22), it did not enter at least some peoples' minds to think that some individuals in their communities had strongly—perhaps predominantly—homosexual longings.¹² (Among the Jewish people, of course, such tendencies would be kept very much hidden.)

Regardless of matters of orientation, the texts in Leviticus, Romans, 1 Corinthians, and 1 Timothy are plainly teaching that homosexual activities are sinful. If nothing else, the lists of sins in 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 and 1 Timothy 1:9–11, which include the mention of homosexual offenders, make this point unmistakably. When homosexual offenders are listed right next to adulterers, thieves, those who kill their fathers or mothers, and slave traders, it becomes absolutely clear—even without the book of Leviticus—that such offenders are violating God's moral law. In these biblical materials God is concerned with the actions, and it is for this reason that I have chosen to focus on them. Moreover, since every other practice in the 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy lists is clearly sinful, then and now, we have no authority to extract only these references to gay sexual activities and pronounce such practices good in certain instances.

Even if the writers did not have the social-scientific studies we have today, God knew that some people had homoerotic desires, even exclusively, yet he still prohibited sexual relationships based on these longings, just as he prohibited heterosexual relationships with one's neighbor's wife, relatives, and animals (Lev 18:1–30). Whether individuals had longings for erotic relationships with those of the same sex, or with relatives or animals, God forbade such relationships because of (among other reasons) his loving desire to bless his people abundantly in the long term even though his prohibitions went against their preferences in the short term (Lev 18:5, 20–24).

Further, as Peter Mommsen, editor of *Plough Quarterly*, notes, when Jesus addressed the topic of marriage (Matt 5:27–32; see also 19:3–12), he did so “in terms so demanding that they've shocked Christians for two

¹²After a thorough review of the materials, Wold concludes that a “survey of Ancient Near Eastern sources regarding homosexuality reveals that the practice existed widely, although it was not mentioned in Mesopotamian legal texts before the Middle Assyrian laws at the end of the second millennium B.C. . . .” though “we have only scanty sources to determine the practice of homosexuality in antiquity.” Wold, *Out of Order*, 60.

thousand years. . . . As N.T. Wright points out, this teaching was just as hard to accept in the first century as in the twenty-first.”¹³

God knew all that was occurring then and today in this world of sexual relationships, orientations, very real confusion within some about their sexual identities, gay and straight marriages, academic studies, and court decisions, and yet he gave for all people in every age a set of standards for their sexual lives. The overarching standard I see, for biblical times and today, is that erotic activities between human beings are pleasing to God only within the context of a one-man, one-woman marriage. (This is not to say, of course, that all such activities are automatically pleasing to God, but that erotic activities are pleasing to him only within monogamous marriage.)

As mentioned earlier, this standard applies to far more people on earth (heterosexuals) than homosexuals. In the current debates it is important to keep this in mind. In fact, conservative Christians (especially pastors, writers, and other Christian leaders) who declare firmly that homosexually-oriented persons must, in their actions, live sexually pure lives, should also declare just as firmly that heterosexually-oriented persons must, in their actions, live sexually pure lives. Christian leaders need to contend just as strenuously against heterosexual fornication, cohabitation, and pornography use, as against gay sexual activities. This emphasis is often missing, however, in declarations concerning homosexual behavior. This double standard is tragic.

Fortunately, in whatever one’s situation, the Bible continues to be as relevant as it always has been and always will be, and God continues to offer his remarkable grace to everyone who comes to him for washing, sanctification, and justification, as shown above in the first letter to the Corinthians. Concerning the sinners listed (and we are all sinners), Paul says to the converts, “And that is what some of you were!”

Where is Grace in This Impossibly High Standard?

For those who believe that the biblical standard on sexuality is impossibly high (which it definitely is apart from God), and certainly without grace as they see it, a look at the world as a whole is important. In the broader picture of human life on earth there are hundreds of millions—probably billions—of people who are not in a monogamous heterosexual marriage, yet desire sexual relational intimacy.

Not only homosexuals, but also heterosexuals who long to be married but cannot find an appropriate partner, as well as those who are postponing or abstaining from marriage for important reasons, those who are divorced, those in unhealthy marriages, teenagers, widows, widowers, and spouses of sexually unresponsive partners (due either to emotional or physical disabilities) are all people with real relational needs that often involve hearty sexual longings.

¹³Peter Mommsen, “No Time for Silence,” *Plough Quarterly* (2015): 34.

Those with strong sexual desires, whether gay or straight, are not thereby inferior or less spiritual than those without intense sexual longings. There is not necessarily “something wrong” with the one who has a strong sex drive. Similarly, those who have same-sex attractions are not thereby lesser human beings than those who have opposite-sex attractions. We all live in, and are part of, a broken world, disordered in numerous ways—including our sexual ways, whether straight or gay.

Even if, for the sake of argument, we grant that one’s sexual orientation is not a matter of choice (as traditionalists are so often reminded), we must not overlook the obvious: there are far, far more individuals with opposite-sex attraction than those with same-sex attraction, who long for relational sexual intimacy but do not have it. For many of these their biblical convictions rule out certain possibilities for opposite-sex activities, including marriage. They may go through their lives without sexual relationships, not because they want to live in such a way, but because they resolve to follow God rather than their own will. Even though the world says, “follow your heart,” they choose to follow their Master.

There are godly gay Christ-followers who choose likewise. While it is true that the comparison here between those having opposite-sex attraction and those having same-sex attraction is not quite parallel, in that the former may marry if they have appropriate partners, the basic point remains: large numbers of people—far more straight than gay—are living within the biblical guidelines for sex and marriage even though they have real relational sexual longings that are not being fulfilled and may never be fulfilled.

Even as I contemplate this great segment of humanity, however, I can see no way, in good conscience, to set aside the biblical standard for such individuals. If I choose to do so, I will find it very difficult to know which erotic relational activities to be opposed to. Most religiously inclined individuals will draw the line on matters of age, consent, abuse, and (generally) adultery. Other than these, however, the prevailing ethical guideline, even among many prominent “Christian” ethicists, is to “act responsibly,” whatever that means in the heat of the moment. Some of these ethicists use the term “just love,” stressing “justice” and “fairness” (as they define these terms) to govern sexual activities. Others promote “appropriate vulnerability.”¹⁴

¹⁴It is highly revealing that Gushee, before he openly declared his support for the gay marriage position, wrote the following, after arguing for the covenantal understanding of marriage followed by historic Christianity since its beginning. In the quotation below he refers to a 2012 “Conference on Sexuality and Covenant” he helped organize under the auspices of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

At our conference last spring, I encountered gays and lesbians who simply want to be welcomed into the historic Christian covenantal understanding of marriage, some of whom are deeply committed to such relationships. They evoke in me an instinctive respect. But from other voices, including a few key platform speakers, I heard much greater discomfort with the constraints of a covenantal paradigm. And it is fair to say that most of the literature emerging in elite Christian sexual ethics today is not written

And what about bisexuals? It is significant that gay-marriage advocates who consider themselves Christian rarely mention bisexuality. Yet this is the “B” in LGBT, and presumably (for such advocates) appeals to love, kindness, and inclusivity should apply to bisexual individuals as they do to monosexuals. We hear often that people should be able to marry those they love, in the church. If a person is sexually attracted to men and women equally, we should then, it would seem, “welcome and affirm” such a person in a marriage ceremony. Why is bisexuality (conveniently?) omitted from most discussions of LGBT issues within churches?¹⁵

I maintain that God’s way is the best way, and that God is always willing and able to accompany those who long to do his will, even though we sometimes fail to do that as we should.

We have a grace-full God, one who restores us when we fall as we seek his forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Because we sin at times we have no warrant to accept or justify a lower standard of sexual morality. And we have no authorization from God to transform moral wrongs into human rights.

Just as there are millions of people right now with unfulfilled erotic relational longings, so there are millions of people right now within this category who are living, by God’s loving strength, lives of deep joy and deep contentment. They are living the truth of Paul’s words concerning the love of money, which are every bit as applicable to the love of sexual intimacy, “Godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Tim 6:6).

from a covenantal perspective, but from a “just love” (Margaret Farley) or liberationist perspective.

In such cases, the claim is not that gays and lesbians should be invited into binding, lifetime covenantal Christian marriage but that the entire Christian sexual ethic should be recast, for everyone. If “just love,” then the standard is not lifetime covenant but essentially a relationship (of whatever duration) that is non-exploitative, fair, reciprocal, and loving; if liberationist, then the paradigm is essentially throwing off the shackles of historic Christian sexual repressiveness, especially of previously marginalized groups.

So here is an acute dilemma. If we understand “the homosexuality debate” as about inviting gay and lesbian Christians to make the same kinds of deeply countercultural, permanent, exclusive, monogamous covenants that we are calling straight Christians to make, and thus as a path to strengthening Christian sexual ethics overall, that is one thing; but if the issue is instead accepting the final abandonment of covenantalism in Christian sexual ethics, that is quite another.

Many of us find ourselves enticed by the expressed desire for committed relationships—because we wish that was the agenda of the LGBT activist community and because we know and love some committed gay and lesbian couples and have a hard time denying them what we know to be the good fruit of committed relationships. But there is a growing suspicion among some of us that while we are allowing ourselves to be enticed by these appealing promises, what is actually taking up residence even more deeply among us as debates about homosexuality continue—thanks to academicians teaching liberationist and other noncovenantal perspectives—is an abandonment of Christian sexual ethics.

David Gushee, “On Covenant,” *Prism* (2012), 50.

¹⁵Gushee, in a 2016 message to me, stated that bisexuals, if they marry, are to marry only one person.

It may shock some readers when I suggest that Jesus quite likely desired sexual intimacy, and quite likely was tempted to sin in this area of life, if only in his thoughts. I say this (reverently, I trust) because of the scriptural teachings in the book of Hebrews that Jesus was made just like us, “fully human in every way,” and “because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (Heb 2:17–18).

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Heb 4:15–16).

It is extremely important for God’s people to know and to dwell on regularly that temptation in itself is not sin. A Christian may give in to a certain temptation because they think they have already sinned by having the temptation. Such a notion is often a successful tactic of the evil one, but is refuted by the Scriptures quoted above. Jesus triumphed over every temptation, but not because he switched on his deity mode when tempted (Phil 2:5–8).

While he was God in the flesh, Jesus lived victoriously as a fully human being through the power of the Holy Spirit in him as he exercised his human will to do his Father’s will. If this is not true, then the verses just quoted, presenting Jesus as our example and intercessor, are meaningless. If this is not true, Jesus did not face and overcome temptation in the same way we have to, and, in spite of 1 Peter 2:21–23 (regarding persecution), cannot be our example in temptation.¹⁶

The Scriptures—the written Word—are truly life giving. So is Jesus Christ—the living Word, who offers life in place of death. Yes, we will all die physically, unless we are alive when Jesus returns, but we are not bound by the power of death—either physical or spiritual. Once again, from the book of Hebrews, we find great encouragement.

Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. . . . Since the children have flesh and blood,

¹⁶Evangelicals and others reject outright the blasphemous suggestions—some by “Christian” thinkers and pastors—that Jesus, though unmarried, was sexually active, either with men, women, or both. William E. Phipps documents such statements in *The Sexuality of Jesus* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1996), 69–71. In his earlier book with the same title, Phipps erroneously suggests that Martin Luther—if Luther’s “table talk” as recorded by one of his disciples is accurate—“assumed that Jesus, unlike the ascetic saints, fully expressed his impulses. . . . Since Jesus had feminine companionship on his journeys, Luther believed that he engaged in sexual intercourse.” See William E. Phipps, *The Sexuality of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 96. Phipps presents this same erroneous interpretation of Luther in *The Sexuality of Jesus* on pages 1 and 168.

he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death (Heb 2:11, 14, 15).

Without such Scriptures as these, showing that the grace of God is available and sufficient for all our needs and fears, I believe it would be insensitive—perhaps even cruel—for any person or any religious body to establish a standard for sexual purity such as we find in the Bible. Sadly, even with God’s repeated offers to give us the will and the strength we need, many do not (perhaps because they think they cannot or simply because they will not) follow lives of sexual purity. The apostle Paul, however, offers genuine hope in one of my all-time favorite Scriptures: “I can do all things through him who gives me strength” (Phil 4:13).

What does grace have to do with gay sex? The same that it has to do with any sex, and with every area of our imperfect lives in this sinful and broken world. “But he said to me,” Paul declares, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9).

Is There Room for Both Conscience and Tolerance?

There are some, I realize, who will say that the conclusions in this essay are heartless, unfeeling, unloving, obscurantist, and even unjust. I may be accused of failing to demonstrate the very grace I so highly praise. I know that some wish I would change my mind. Others, even those who claim to regard the Bible highly, are “evolving” in their views and are now approving of gay marriage, so why can’t I?

I reply that to reverse my convictions because I do not want to be seen as unkind or out of date would be dishonest with myself (and therefore with God and, deep down, with others) and I would be violating my conscience. How can a person who studies an issue intensely from all perspectives simply discard his or her thoughtful conclusions because they are becoming increasingly unpopular? Would such a person be able to respect themselves when they violate their own intellectual integrity and conscience?

Mark Galli, editor of *Christianity Today*, states that “perhaps no false teaching is more confusing or divisive than that the church should bless same-sex relationships. It’s a good example of the doctrinal challenge before us.” Galli has some strong words:

Some scholars and popular writers have tried to make a biblical case for this teaching. But they are grasping at straws. As Richard Hays, former Duke Divinity professor who wrote the now-classic *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, puts it, the biblical passages that deal with this issue “are unambiguously and unremittingly negative in their judgment.” In a 2010 study commissioned by the Episcopal Church, even revisionists

acknowledged that same-sex marriage “exceed[s] the marriage practices assumed by Scripture,” justifying the new ethic because it “comports with the mission of God celebrated by the Spirit in the body of Christ.” Or, as those revisionists put it elsewhere, “The Holy Spirit is doing a new thing.”

Naturally, we remain unconvinced that the Holy Spirit would reverse course from a divinely inspired biblical teaching.

Whatever serious false teaching we are facing, the Bible is uncomfortably clear: When false teachers persist in their views, they will be subject to divine judgment (see especially 2 Peter). For the sake of these false teachers (that they might avoid God’s judgment) and church health (that we might flourish in God), we believe we need a shift in how we teach the Bible. In short, we need to spend more time teaching the Bible as first and foremost the revelation of God.

We understand the temptation to talk about the Bible mostly in terms of “what it means to me” and its “practical application to daily life.” But when this hermeneutic *dominates*—as it does today—Christianity becomes little more than self-help therapy. And it leaves people ignorant of Scripture’s deeper meaning, and therefore unable to spot false teaching.¹⁷

Should I try to be wiser and kinder than God, even as I understand God’s revelation to be teaching the views I express here? I surely am not infallible on these matters. I readily acknowledge that, and I long to extend grace in every way I can to those who disagree. But I also ask for grace from such ones, at least grace to assume that I am writing with noble intentions, and trying to be honest with the issues as I see them.

Two much-used words in our culture today are “tolerance” and “intolerance.” The former is noble and the latter is ignoble. Those like me who do not condone gay and lesbian sex, either inside or outside of marriage, are said to be intolerant. However, those who oppose my views are often intolerant themselves: they will not tolerate my conclusions. These feel deeply hurt and angry over views such as mine, and in some cases will cry out, “Why do you hate us?” It is very sad that some who hold my views do hate homosexuals. These verbally and sometimes physically attack homosexuals with a severity they do not display toward other sexual transgressors. I

¹⁷Mark Galli, “The New Battle for the Bible,” *Christianity Today*, October 2015, 33. Concerning biblical texts and the moral life, prominent liberal Christian ethicist Christine E. Gudorf writes: “To the extent that we can discern the movement and activity of the Holy Spirit within the struggle [of women] for liberation, our individual and communal experience of the struggle . . . is the best source of criteria for guiding scriptural selection and interpretation. . . . [In addition,] It seems to me that natural law offers a much more useful basis for a sexual ethic than Scripture.” Christine E. Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1994, 62–63). Gudorf could not be clearer in placing human experience and reason above the Scriptures.

consider such attitudes and actions evil, and I renounce them completely. These are far worse than deplorable if they are in the name of Christ!

The intolerance and hate flow in both directions, however, and must be resisted and rejected wherever they appear. It is the responsibility of both camps, especially those who say that they base their beliefs on the Bible as the word of God, to renounce the hate language and nastiness from their own camp, although they regularly may be objects of the same vitriol from the other camp. Traditionalists need to respect as human beings—even though they may strongly disagree with—those who espouse gay theology, and non-traditionalists in turn should respect as human beings those who oppose their views.

What prompted me to write this essay was to explain to those who differ with my position, especially but not only within Christian circles, why millions of Christians worldwide believe they are conscience-bound to affirm and teach the traditional viewpoint on homosexual practices as they understand the Scriptures. God knows I have been willing to change my views if the evidence should lead me in that direction. I have definitely prayed about this. I have absolutely no animosity toward lesbians and gays. But I would like the other side to tolerate the integrity and freedom of conscience of those who disagree.

Just as in times of war, when some citizens have been tolerated as “conscientious objectors” by their fellow citizens and governments, so those with traditional views on sexuality should be tolerated in our society—religious and secular. If a person refuses to carry a rifle, refuses to perform a gay wedding, refuses to stop preaching the biblical view of sexual morality, or refuses to “solemnly swear” on the Bible in a courtroom (making a simple affirmation of truthfulness instead), because of their carefully thought-out convictions on these matters, should not tolerance accept and even respect freedom of religion and freedom of conscience in such cases? It is one thing for a government to punish conscientious objectors of various kinds; all citizens need to face the consequences of their decisions. But a punitive stance has no place within the Christian community. Indeed, grace has much to do with gay sex, and grace has much to do with tolerance and freedom of religion.

I regret that this essay will cause pain to some who read it.¹⁸ The farthest thought from my mind is to shame anyone—gay or straight or whoever—

¹⁸The pain is located in, and emerges from, several groups, three of which are: practicing homosexuals with Christian backgrounds who long to be affirmed in their lifestyle, pro-gay heterosexuals who work for the full acceptance of practicing homosexuals in the church, and those Christians who have studied the issues carefully and prayerfully and conclude that homosexual practices are against the moral will of God. Included in this third category is theologian and educator Marva Dawn. In her excellent work on sexuality Dawn reveals her very real pain in upholding the non-affirming view presented in her book (and in this article). She writes: “This [section on homosexuality] has been the most difficult chapter of the entire book to write.” I share her pain and highly recommend her work, especially the final two parts of her chapter on homosexuality: “How Should the Church Respond?” and “But Is It Fair?” See Marva J. Dawn, *Sexual Character: Beyond Technique to Intimacy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,

because of their sexual desires. God made us all as sexual beings and our longings for relational intimacy are part of our core selves. None of us is necessarily a “bad” person because of our particular sexual orientation, nor is any of us necessarily a “good” person for this reason. In addition, no one of us is without some sexual sin in our past—unless they are highly unusual!

God is infinitely more concerned about homosexual people than about homosexual practices. Indeed, his reason for concern about the practices is for the real and lasting happiness of the people. Regarding the moral law of God, there is no arbitrary standard “out there” to which God demands allegiance, that is separable from his own eternally good and holy being. Everything God commands, forbids, and does is inseparable from who God is. We may not be able to know fully the reasons behind God’s laws, but we can know, in part, the good God behind the laws. As Paul the converted Pharisee and champion of grace states concerning the system of Jewish laws in which he was trained, “So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good” (Rom 7:12).

Long ago I came to realize that two extremely important Bible passages concerning our sexuality—perhaps the most important in the Bible on this major area of life—are Proverbs 5–7 and 1 Corinthians 5–7. I strongly recommend them to every reader and quote here from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians.

Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies (1 Cor 6:18–20).

These are truly life-giving words, even though many today—including a very large number of “celebrities” (especially in the entertainment industry)—have no regard for, and even mock, such “obsolete” notions. Some even mock God. However, those who desire to live for God—straight, gay, or whoever—understand both the solemnity and the safety in these inspired teachings. We also understand the struggle to live in obedience to them. We sometimes sin, but if and when we violate God’s will, his grace of forgiveness is always available and free for those who know Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord and come to him in repentance and trust. We do not have to plead for forgiveness, as if it is dependent on the emotional intensity of our confession. We simply have to admit our sin to God and receive his pardoning grace by faith, knowing that we will never deserve it.

We are all responsible to live in this broken world in such a way that we honor God with our bodies and promote not only our personal sexual wholeness but also that of others. All who accept these responsibilities will want

to live in the light of them, speaking and acting always with grace. As the apostle Paul urges, “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (Col 4:6).

A Closer Look at Leviticus

Even though I have not considered the biblical texts on homosexuality in any detail, I want to call attention to the two verses in Leviticus (18:22; 20:13). This emphasis is due to the way these Scriptures, seemingly more than the others, are discarded so quickly in discussions about homosexual behavior, because, it is said, the texts are part of the temporary Jewish Law that has now been fulfilled—and done away with—in Christ.¹⁹ Yet these texts are of major importance for the current debate.

To be more specific, a widely-used argument from gay theology is that these two verses forbidding homosexual practices are found in the midst of a body of religious purity laws that was designed in large measure to keep the Jews set apart from the idolatrous and immoral cultic practices of Israel’s neighbors, especially the Egyptians and the Canaanites, thus demonstrating that the prohibitions are not necessarily due to some intrinsic sinfulness in the actions themselves. Because these purity laws also contain prohibitions regarding some clearly temporary matters (see below), they were obviously intended only for the Jews at one special time in their history, not for all people for all time. These laws, it is said, have served their purpose and are not God’s moral code for today.

This argument can seem quite persuasive, especially since the prohibitions against homosexual practices are found in a portion of the Bible (Lev 18–20) that also forbids such practices as wearing clothing of two kinds of material (Lev 19:19) and cutting one’s hair at the sides of one’s head or clipping off the edges of one’s beard (Lev 19:27).

Three contrary considerations, among others, reveal the serious flaws in such reasoning. One is that when we look at the context of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, and read the other prohibitions surrounding these two verses (such as forbidding sexual relations with one’s mother or with an animal, and the offering of one’s children in sacrifice to pagan gods), it is clear that these prohibitions as a whole (some see a possible exception regarding sex during menstruation) have to do with matters that are intrinsically wrong and abominable to the Lord.

God’s people then and now are to follow the instructions in Leviticus 18:1–30 and 20:1–24. A plain reading of these passages supports the truth of this statement and reveals how different the prohibitions are in these two

¹⁹Wold’s research on the Levitical texts in light of present-day objections is superb see, Wold, *Out of Order*, 91–158, as is the work of Gagnon in *Texts*, 111–57, and *Two Views*, 56–58. Gagnon states: “In taking such a severe and comprehensive stance toward male homosexual behavior, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 represent a level of revulsion toward same-sex intercourse without parallel in the ancient Near East.” Gagnon, *Texts*, 156.

passages from the obviously temporary regulations in parts of chapter 19, concerning such matters as sacrificing animals to God, eating from one's fruit trees, and cutting one's hair. It is crucial to look closely at the context of the two texts prohibiting homosexual behavior.

A second consideration is that, when one compares the penalties for most of the non-sexual transgressions and those for the most serious sexual offenses, there is a major difference. The penalties for the former, for the most part, involve the making of offerings or the banishing of the offender from the community (being "cut off" from one's people but not, in these instances, by death). However, the penalty for the most serious sexual offenses is death (Lev 20:10–16). This is the ultimate form of being "cut off" from one's people. The most serious sexual transgressions, such as adultery, bestiality, and homosexual actions, are said to be "detestable" and punishable only by death. This matter of comparing punishments argues strongly for the inherent sinfulness of the latter practices, both then and now.

Some may wonder why the death penalty should not be applied today for the most serious sexual offenses. This is a legitimate question, and the answer in brief is that the people of God today do not live under a theocracy, as Israel did, where God ruled directly (through his appointed leaders) in a chosen land devoted to his earthly people and purposes. Today God's people are scattered over the earth where we live under non-theocratic forms of government. We include these Levitical prohibitions in this article because they reveal God's consistent attitude toward the forbidden activities in themselves, not to argue for specific, localized punishments such as banishment and death.

A third argument against the view that the Levitical prohibitions are not applicable for people today, since we are under the new covenant rather than the old, is that the erotic acts forbidden in the Old Testament are also forbidden in the New, being listed alongside of such intrinsically wrong behaviors as adultery, idolatry, theft, and slave trading (1 Cor 6:9–11; 1 Tim 1:9–11). What was sinful in itself under the old covenant continues to be sinful under the new covenant. We have no authorization to extract, or re-explain without sound scholarship, the very clear mentions of homosexual offenders from the New Testament lists of people involved in other universally sinful practices.

Conclusion

One's motives for excluding or explaining away direct prohibitions in the revealed Word of God may be, in themselves, noble (such as compassion and love toward gay people, and full inclusion of those on the margins in the body of Christ). But motives divorced from the permanent teachings in God's revelation concerning sexual morality are no justification for the very serious and very bold choice to (in effect) remove the major Scripture texts

from decisions regarding gay sexual practices, especially decisions affecting Christian churches, Christian organizations, and Christian living.

Concerning present-day evangelical views on homosexual issues, Gushee states enthusiastically that “the landscape is changing dramatically.” He adds that space for conversation in evangelicalism is still very fragile, yet “a number of new books have been written and organizations founded by avowed evangelicals attempting to open up conversational space, plead for better treatment, reframe the issues, or revise the traditionalist posture”²⁰

If we choose, however, to “reframe” or “revise” certain explicit prohibitions in the Bible because of our desire to be more in line with contemporary thinking, and/or our desire to be more compassionate and inclusive, we are (perhaps without realizing it) considering ourselves wiser and more merciful than God. In addition, if we discard or distort the clear Bible verses discussed in this essay, how can we consistently accept and trust, as God’s inspired messages to us, the verses that explicitly teach us vital truths we would not otherwise know (including verses about our eternal destiny)? Setting aside or rejecting biblical teachings that make us and others uncomfortable—even sad and angry—will have consequences much more serious for the church of Christ than even those resulting from the acceptance and affirmation of gay sexual relationships.

²⁰David Gushee, “Reconciling Evangelical Christianity with Our Sexual Minorities: Reframing the Biblical Discussion,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* (2015): 141.

