



e m b r a c e

**GOD, THE BIBLE, AND HUMAN SEXUALITY:
A Response to Revisionist Readings**

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The Evangelical Covenant Church
MAKE & DEEPEN DISCIPLES

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INTRODUCTION

In cooperation with the Make and Deepen Disciples mission priority of the Evangelical Covenant Church, the biblical faculty of North Park Theological Seminary have endeavored to write a clear, user-friendly commentary and interpretation on the texts of the Bible that explicitly address same-sex sexual relations. Along the way, we will contextualize our arguments along the broader theological contours of biblical teaching on human sexuality; however, the focus of this work is to help the reader navigate texts that directly engage with the topic of same-sex sexual relations.

The Evangelical Covenant Church has discerned and adopted “faithfulness in heterosexual marriage, celibacy in singleness” as constituting “the Christian standard,” a position that aligns with two thousand years of global Christian conviction. However, more recently a number of revisionist readings have emerged by individuals including laypeople like Matthew Vines (author of *God and the Gay Christian* [2015]), LGBTQ+ pastors in mainline denominations, scholars of the Bible such as James Brownson (author of *Bible, Gender, Sexuality* [2013]), and theologians such as David Gushee (author of *Changing Our Mind* [3rd ed., 2017]). These readings view the prohibitions of the Bible as referring to something other than same-sex acts or as referring to a specific or delimited type of same-sex act. One theological and ethical implication of said readings would be that monogamous same-sex marriages are not biblically prohibited and should therefore be blessed by the church.

This resource responds to these revisionist readings of Scripture, ultimately undergirding the sexual ethic of the historic church and the discerned and adopted position of the Evangelical Covenant Church. In our efforts, we have operated on two basic principles:

1. We have focused on the strongest and most popular revisionist arguments and have refrained from engaging obscure and minor interpretations by scholars and theologians.
2. For lack of better nomenclature, we have adopted from Brownson the terms “revisionist” to refer to readings of the Bible that reinterpret the prohibitions against same-sex sexual relations and “traditionalist” to refer to interpretations that defend the church’s long-standing understanding that the Bible is prohibitive of all same-sex sexual relations, including the monogamous kind.²

²<https://covchurch.org/resources/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2015/10/Guidelines-for-Covenant-Pastors-and-Congregations-Regarding-Human-Sexuality.pdf>

It is important to emphasize that by adopting the term “traditionalist,” we are not uncritically recapitulating past ways in which the church has interpreted certain biblical texts. In fact, robust engagement with revisionist readings has required us to re-examine the texts and to articulate in a clear and detailed way why the church’s long-standing prohibition of same-sex sexual relations is, in fact, the most faithful way of interpreting Scripture and therefore of glorifying and obeying God.

We also want to be clear that we in no way endorse the insensitive, unloving ways in which a prohibitive reading of the texts has sometimes been applied. While the prohibitions remain, the church must always minister compassionately, humbly, and sacrificially with and for those who experience same-sex attraction and provide a biblical framework by which they and all people can live into their Christian identity and experience abundant life in Christ. At the conclusion of this paper, we offer suggestions for the kind of compassionate pastoral practices that honor and heed what Scripture teaches on human sexuality.³

1. THE BIBLE, HUMAN SEXUALITY, AND HERMENEUTICS

2.1 The Nature of the Bible

The Bible is the word of God. It is God’s special revelation, intended by God to communicate divine truth to human beings: “so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11).

The truth that the Bible communicates is the identity of the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and the work of God from creation to the last things. By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Bible’s multiple texts, written across many centuries, in different languages and cultural contexts, bear unified witness to the story of God’s saving and judging acts. This story finds its center and focus in Jesus of Nazareth, himself the divine Word made flesh (John 1:1-14), whose life, death, and resurrection are bringing about “the restoration of the entire cosmos and the whole life of humankind.” Through its communication of this good news, the Bible calls all human

²James Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church’s Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 3-4.

³For further resources toward this end, see the Embrace initiative of the Make and Deepen Disciples mission priority of the Evangelical Covenant Church. Embrace is a suite of human sexuality discipleship resources and experiences which are in harmony with the ECC’s discerned and adopted position of faithfulness in heterosexual marriage and celibacy in singleness. A special emphasis of Embrace is to equip the church to flourish in love for LGBTQ+/SSA individuals and communities. Learn more at covchurch.org/embrace.

beings to repent, to believe in Jesus, and to be set free from the power of sin and death. United with Christ by faith through the bond of the Spirit, we are to participate in his work in the world. Therefore, the Bible is able to make human beings “wise for salvation” (2 Timothy 3:15, NIV) and to equip us for “every good work” (2 Timothy 3:17).

Through the witness of the Bible, God “creates his own audience with his word.” By means of the Bible and the Spirit of God, God calls into existence the people of God. The church is to be the community of the word, formed and shaped by the Bible. As such, the church across history and around the globe is the primary locus for the interpretation of the Bible. Yet the people of God exist not for their own sake, but also to provide a fully embodied proclamation of the gospel to the world. Its interpretative activity is oriented toward mission: “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24:46-48).

The Bible is therefore comprehensive and holistic. Its witness to the all-encompassing salvation granted in Jesus Christ means that the Bible is for every human being and every part of life. It tells us the truth about the world, ourselves, and human society. It can be trusted in life and death. For these reasons we rely upon and submit to the Bible’s authority and assert it to be “the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct.” We must understand what is good, what is loving, and what makes for human flourishing in the eyes of God on the basis of the Bible’s teaching. This is why in relation to interpreting the Bible, the key question for the Evangelical Covenant Church has historically been, “Where is it written?”

2.2 Interpreting the Bible in Contemporary Culture

It is in this context of commitment to the authority of the Bible that the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC) approaches all social issues. In times of profound cultural change, reliance on the Bible gives a distinctive perspective.

⁴All Scripture citations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*, unless otherwise noted.

⁵Michael W. Goheen and Michael D. Williams, “Doctrine of Scripture and Theological Interpretation” in *A Manifesto for Theological Interpretation*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew and Heath A. Thomas (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 64.

⁶Robby Holt and Aubrey Spears, “The Ecclesia as Primary Context for the Reception of the Bible,” in *A Manifesto for Theological Interpretation*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew and Heath A. Thomas (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 73.

On the one hand, we refuse to dismiss all change as inevitably in tension with divine purposes. Some cultural shifts can bring our social practices more in line with the teaching of Scripture while others invite us to reexamine our presuppositions. In every case, we are led back to the text to examine again what the Bible teaches and to ask questions that may reveal deeper biblical truths. No church that stands in the heritage of the Reformation should dismiss new perspectives simply because they are new; instead, we examine whether they conform to Scripture.

On the other hand, we also refuse to adopt new perspectives simply because they are new and regarded as positive by a majority in society at large. Human beings are fallen creatures, and rejection of traditional values and expectations of behavior may simply be an expression of human sinfulness. The fall of humanity includes the fallenness of our minds, our desires, and our ability to recognize truth, goodness, and beauty. Sin has estranged us from God and distorted our capacity to think rightly, bringing us into darkness (Romans 1). The word of God simultaneously brings both revelation and reconciliation to bear on the church. If a proper re-examination of relevant biblical texts results in the conclusion that the existing teaching of the church is a faithful witness to the Bible's teaching, then the church must continue to teach unpopular truths.

This submission of all traditions and innovations to the test of Scripture is our only safeguard against a cultural idolatry that identifies the purposes of God in a wholesale manner with either conservative or progressive values. The ECC does not accept that to adopt what many would label a progressive position on one issue precludes adopting what many would label a conservative position on another issue, or vice versa. The consistency we seek is conformity to the teaching of Scripture in the way of Christ, not conformity to the dictates of contemporary society.

2.3 Interpreting the Bible and Ancient Culture

When the church interprets and applies the Bible, it is interpreting ancient texts in and for the contemporary world. This fact is perceived by some as inhibiting the authority of Scripture by very reason of the cultural distance between us and the authors and first readers of the texts. We regard this perception as an expression of cultural idolatry that improperly exalts the perspectives and values of the present day. The God of the word is the Lord of eternity and of all times and places, and the Spirit speaks now through texts written then. The biblical texts are purposed by God to empower the ministry and mission of the church spread through time and space.

⁷Preamble to the Constitution and By-laws of the Evangelical Covenant Church.

The task of the church is not to regress to the time and place in which the texts were composed but rather, guided by the texts, to freshly participate in the work of Christ in the world in every generation.

Yet, because the Bible is the God's special revelation written in and for particular contexts, it is necessary to pay careful attention to the human languages and cultures in which the texts were given in order to hear clearly what the Spirit is saying today. The Scriptures do not disclose Christ despite the historical processes to which the texts were subject in their formation; it discloses Christ by means of them. Israel as a community, inclusive of the Law, the prophets, and their liturgy, is the matrix that God nurtured to prepare God's people for the incarnate Son of God. Although we must interpret the biblical texts in and for twenty-first century western culture, we must not interpret them as if they were written in that context. Doing so would then lead us to inevitably misinterpret their message and read into the texts meanings that are not present. Instead of practicing exegesis (accurately interpreting the meaning of the texts), we would thus practice eisegesis (importing our own meaning into the texts), and so produce yet another form of cultural idolatry and bondage. Commitment to the authority of Scripture demands the most rigorous and disciplined historical study of the authors' intentions as well as how the authors' words were meant to be understood within their own cultural contexts. Only when this is done is it possible to make appropriate contemporary applications.

2.4 Interpreting the Bible in the Church

Scripture is the divine gift through which the Spirit generates the life of the church: "Scripture is not an initial textual stage in divine revelation that is then completed by churchly activity....The church does not illuminate Scripture but is illuminated by it and is wholly dependent upon Scripture to dispel its ignorance." There can therefore be no contradiction between the message that the Spirit inspired the human authors of the Bible to write and the interpretative activity that the Spirit guides in the church today. It is the same Spirit active in the interpretation of the biblical texts that was active in their composition, and therefore the same truth. Such biblical truths need to be applied in different contexts according to time and location but are not themselves culturally relative. The Spirit may at different points in history guide the church deeper into biblical truths that the church has misperceived or neglected, and in order to do so the Spirit may use a wide variety of different types of readers of the Bible. The

⁸John Webster, "Biblical Theology and the Clarity of Scripture" in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig R. Bartholomew, Mary Healy, Karl Möller, and Robin Parry (Carlisle: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 372.

interpretation of Scripture is the work of the whole people of God, not only across time but also around the globe. Yet, if the truths so revealed are authentic, they will prove to be exegetically valid when explored through rigorous historical study of the biblical texts. When there is irresolvable conflict between what the texts teach and what contemporary Christians claim the Spirit is saying, then it is the perceptions of contemporary Christians that have erred. Conversely, when there proves to be agreement between the teaching of the biblical texts and what is claimed to be the fresh guidance of the Spirit for the church, then the church receives genuine illumination and must not quench the ongoing work of the Spirit.

2.5 Interpreting the Bible and the Canon

Although the witness of the biblical texts is unified, this is not the result of a sterile uniformity. The collection of texts contained in the Bible is rich and diverse, yet their unity stems not from shared human characteristics but from the common inspiration of the Spirit. When approaching issues in interpretation, all the relevant texts must be studied and any trajectories in the treatment of an issue within Scripture explored. Do the texts challenge the dominant values of the original context? If the Old Testament provides a particular teaching, how is the teaching treated in the New Testament? Is it shown to belong exclusively to the time before Christ and to the life of Israel, or is it reaffirmed and applied to the life of the church in some way?

This canonical approach avoids the danger of interpreting single texts in isolation and insists that we look across Scripture to discern the direction of revelation. It also insists that the witness of texts be taken with the utmost seriousness. Among other practices, this means that we do not arbitrarily exclude texts or rewrite texts so that positions are adopted that lack biblical support. Rather, each relevant text is assessed as part of the overall biblical witness. In this way, the important principle that Scripture interprets Scripture is honored, and those who seek to obey Scripture can be sure that if their words and actions conform to its teaching, they will express appropriate love of God and neighbor.

Since God is love and the Bible is God's word, the principle that authentic interpretations lead to love is valid and crucially important. However, our definition of love must itself be biblically based. Love never leads people into error or leaves them in darkness. True love always works in fellowship with true light. The Scriptures teach us that "God is love" (1 John 4:8) and "God is light" (1 John 1:5).

A canonical approach to interpretation has historically characterized the Evangelical Covenant Church's handling of Scripture in relation to controversial issues. For example, the document *Called and Gifted*, which re-affirms the biblical basis for the

full participation of women in the ministries of the church, engages with all relevant texts within an approach that reflects on the totality of the biblical witness concerning this issue from creation through redemption. Its authors state that “women ought to minister not because society says so but because the Bible leads the church to such a conclusion.” If we are to be faithful to the first Covenant affirmation, then any possible changes in the teaching and practice of the church in relation to other issues must meet the same test and only be undertaken if the Bible leads the church to such a conclusion. The ECC asserts that the Bible’s witness reveals “significant hermeneutical differences” between the revisionists’ view of human sexuality and the ECC’s view of the ministry of women. While “there is no necessary relation” between the two topics, this example highlights the thorough way in which the ECC approaches the interpretation of Scripture on any subject.

2.6 Implications

As we approach the subject of human sexuality from this hermeneutical perspective, there are a number of implications:

1. Such topics are properly to be subjected to Scripture. Unless we are to abandon the first Covenant affirmation, the positions we reach must faithfully reflect the teaching of the Bible.
2. We need not fear new perspectives on human sexuality simply because they are new nor fear to maintain traditional perspectives simply because they no longer command majority assent within wider society.
3. We may be confident of the capacity of Scripture to lead us into truth in relation to understanding human sexuality in our contemporary world and also to empower the church to be God’s emissary of love and light, of divine revelation and reconciliation.
4. We can only experience that empowerment when we are prepared to seriously engage with the texts of Scripture and undertake careful exegesis that understands what the texts say about the subject of human sexuality within their original historical and cultural contexts.
5. The church is created by the word of God and is the primary location of biblical interpretation. The Spirit who leads all of God’s people in this work is the same Spirit who inspired the texts. The authentic witness of the Spirit in the life of church and careful exegesis will therefore corroborate each other in relation to God’s design for human sexuality.

⁹*Called and Gifted*, p. 5 quoting Robert Johnston, Jean Lambert, David Scholer, and Klyne Snodgrass, *A Biblical and Theological Basis for Women in Ministry* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1987).

¹⁰Klyne Snodgrass, “A Case for the Unrestricted Ministry of Women,” in *Covenant Quarterly* 67.2 (2009), p. 27.

6. Our approach to interpreting what the Bible says about God’s design for human sexuality must be a canonical one. We cannot reach appropriate conclusions on the basis of isolated texts or by excluding or rewriting texts.

The conversations surrounding human sexuality in contemporary western contexts are complex and varied, raising many profound questions for community life and pastoral care. The main question to be explored here is this: throughout its history, the global church has practiced marriage only between men and women – is this the correct interpretation of Scripture, or does it misunderstand the witness of the relevant texts? If there is such misunderstanding, then it may be possible to make a case for a change in the practice of the church. However, if the case for same-sex marriage proves to be exegetically weak; if there are no texts that support it, and no trajectory within Scripture on which to base an altered practice, then to change the practice of the church could only be an act of unfaithfulness. The decisive question for the Evangelical Covenant Church is and has always been, “Where is it written?”

3. OLD TESTAMENT TEXTS

3.1. Identifying Relevant Texts

The prohibition of same-sex intercourse in the Old Testament is found in the holiness code of Leviticus:

Leviticus 18:22 – “You shall not lie with a male with a woman; it is an abomination.”

Leviticus 20:13 – “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.”

Since our interpretation of biblical texts is governed by their historical-grammatical context and trajectory in the canon, we do not include the Sodom narrative of Genesis 19: “They called to Lot, ‘Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may have relations with them’” (Genesis 19:5). This text is not included for the following reasons:

- The wickedness named in Genesis 19 is the intended violent homosexual rape of the guests in Lot’s home. It is the homosexual violence that is condemned in particular (cf. ECC 2007, p. 10).
- The trajectory of “wickedness of Sodom” named in the biblical canon (e.g., Ezekiel 16:49; Amos 4:11; Isaiah 1:10-17) also highlights the arrogance, violence, oppression, and injustice of Sodom rather than homosexual intercourse in particular.

The problematic translation of “sodomite” in the New Testament is addressed with the discussion of those texts below.

3.2 The Rationale of the Prohibitions in Leviticus

The traditional prohibition of same-sex intercourse is given in God's own voice. The Lord's specific explanation for this command is God's concern for the identity of his people.

God's direct command frames the narrative of Leviticus 18 precisely in comparative cultural terms. Thus, Leviticus 18 is more than a list of laws regarding an ancient past priesthood. In it, the Lord God makes an argument for the whole community, based on allegiance to the Lord with one's embodied self. The preface states it boldly, in God's own voice, as a matter of their identity in relation to the Lord's identity:

Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: I am the LORD your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not follow their statutes. My ordinances you shall observe and my statutes you shall keep, following them: I am the LORD your God. You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances; by doing so one shall live: I am the LORD. (Leviticus 18:1-5)

The voluntary participation in this newly defined social contract with the Lord is precisely the point for Christians who seek to follow this same Lord. This new countercultural identity has been understood by Jewish and Christian interpreters for more than two thousand years:

- The peculiar cultural identity of a people who participate in this new community, formed by the word and works of God, includes a chastity that is defined over against the dominant cultures of that day.
- Abstinence from commonly accepted cultural practices is presented as an act of worship of God. This includes abstinence from common physiological and emotional attractions that are accepted by Egyptian and Canaanite cultures and which compete for the people's allegiance (idolatry) throughout Scripture.

This cultural competition for hearts, minds, and bodies is not irrelevant or insignificant; rather it is precisely the point made in Scripture for sexual holiness:

- Leviticus 18 makes the theological argument that it is idolatrous to make sexuality your personal or cultural identity.
- It stands opposed to the dominant cultural sexual values of Canaan and Egypt just as the New Testament is opposed to the same in the Greco-Roman world.
- Leviticus 18 portrays a wide variety of sexual actions which are outside the bounds of monogamous, heterosexual marriage. It does not limit love among God's people, but it does limit diverse sexual practices outside of traditional marriage.

Seven times in the chapter the Lord warns the Israelites not to behave like the Canaanites or Egyptians (18:3, 24, 26, 27, 29, 30.) *Sexual behavior and practice* is a question of a believer's cultural identity *in the Lord*:

- The Lord's direct speech and repeated admonitions ground the prohibitions emphatically in the Lord's identity: "I am the LORD your God" (18:2, 4, 5, 6, 21, 30).
- Sexual morality is portrayed as something that distinguishes the people of God's kingdom from their neighbors.
- Leviticus 18 delimits sexual practice, in specific contrast to their surrounding cultures.
- The Lord's conclusion: "So keep my charge not to commit any of these abominations that were done before you...I am the LORD your God" (Leviticus 18:30).

3.3 Alternative Proposals

Recently a variety of alternative proposals have asserted that Leviticus 17-20 is culturally irrelevant today since it belongs to an ancient context that has nothing to do with our culture. These proposals include the idea that it concerns ancient ritual impurity only (by connecting Leviticus 17-20 with the context of Leviticus 1-16). Each of these arguments lacks merit:

- The biblical text itself sets Leviticus 17-20 apart from the priestly and purity instructions of Leviticus 1-16. It directly and repeatedly says that these practices are for "all the people," at the beginning of each of the four chapters (17:1, 18:1, 19:1, 20:1).
- The wording of the text and its narrative context claim an ongoing and central relevance for Leviticus 18 as the living word of God. Even the alternating Hebrew verbs work against the claim that this is not intended for the contemporary reading audience. The tension between the past and future forms is a device that contemporizes the law for each audience hearing this speech of the Lord.

Another recent proposal is that Leviticus 18 only refers to ancient cultic male prostitution. This claim, too, lacks merit:

- Violation of the Leviticus 18 sexual prohibitions is the reason God gives for the end of Canaanite rule: "Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves" (e.g., Leviticus 18:24, italics added). This is a reference to the practice of the Canaanite people, in general, not simply their priests.
- Male prostitution in Israel, whether cultic or professional, indicates an active same-sex attraction and sexual practice in the wider culture. Even if the text did support the cultic reading, it would not nullify the general prohibition. "Cultic" simply means that a central value of the culture has been given religious status and representation. If same-sex sex were ritually sacred, it would be confirmed as

a wider culture issue, one which the prohibition does also encompass. The biblical text directly indicates a general prohibition for “all the people” (Leviticus 18:1; 19:1; 20:1).

Recent proposals attempt to make specific and restricted something which, in context, is general and which historically has been interpreted as general.

Sexuality is part of the creation. Serving its powerful impulses is a form of idolatry that endures in every generation. Idolatry, in Scripture, is more than worship of a simplistic wooden or metal object. Idolatry happens whenever human beings worship or serve a part of the creation instead of the Creator. Many centuries after Leviticus was written, the letter to Colossians interpreted the Leviticus holiness code in this way:

- “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, *which is idolatry*” (Colossians 3:5, NIV, italics added).

Rabbinic law, like the New Testament, has always understood that Leviticus 18 was for all people at all times:

- Rabbinic law intensified Leviticus 18:22, forbidding two men from even lying under the same blanket to avoid temptation (*Qiddushin* 4:14).
- Lesbian relationships were also forbidden, including them under Leviticus 18:3, “You shall not do as they did in the land of Egypt, where you lived” (*Sifra acharei mot* 9:8).

Every Jewish interpreter of the Second Temple period (approximately five hundred years) applies the same-sex prohibitions of Leviticus to all people in all times including “friend with friend.” This consistent application is found in all the apocryphal and pseudepigraphal writings, Philo, and all Qumran texts.

¹¹For the comprehensive listing of ancient sources, see William Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 32-33.

4. NEW TESTAMENT TEXTS: JESUS

4.1. Jesus's Approach to the Law

Does Jesus replace the Old Testament laws? Is this what fulfilling the law means (Matthew 5:17-19)? Jesus does come to fulfill the law, but when he says this, he clarifies that he does not mean that the significance of the law has come to an end. Jesus warns against teaching the obsolescence of the law by saying it three ways in one text:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly, I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:17-19)

Jesus brought a fuller revelation of the purpose and relevance of the Old Testament law.

Does Jesus's summary of the law, to love God and neighbor replace the Old Testament laws? Jesus summarized the intent of the law (love) and went on to interpret the application of individual laws throughout his teaching ministry. Certainly he fulfilled the purpose of the laws of blood sacrifice with his death and resurrection. On the other hand,

- Jesus quoted and summarized the commandments as love of neighbor and love of God (Leviticus 19:17-19, 34; Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:36-40).
- In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus intensified and internalized the teaching of the Ten Commandments (Matthew 5:21-37; 15:18-20; Mark 10:11-12). He also recited and reinforced the Ten Commandments often in his teaching (Matthew 19:16-21; Mark 10:17-22; Luke 18:18-22).
- Jesus sustained but reapplied the Sabbath law (Matthew 12:1-1; Luke 6:1-9; 13:10-17; 14:1-6; Mark 2:23-28; 3:1-6).
- Jesus sustained and intensified laws against violence and vengeance (Matthew 5:38-44).
- Jesus reiterated and reinforced laws of sexuality as well as laws against violence, deceit, etc. (Mark 7:21-23).

4.2 SIN AND GRACE

Aren't we all sinners, saved by grace? Yes, we are saved by grace since we all fall short of the glory of God in our messy lives:

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. (Romans 3:21-25, ESV)

Our personal and corporate identity in Christ is sinners saved by the gift of grace (Romans 3:23-24). The context of this key text, however, is the reiteration of the enduring relevance of Old Testament law as a measure of a faithful life, lived by God's instruction:

Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law. (Romans 3:31)

Grace, all the way through life unto salvation, is provided so that we might live in God's kingdom (by God's law) for the sake of good works (see Ephesians 2:8-10).

The paradox of biblical faith is that salvation is through faith by grace and that Christians are held accountable to the law by Jesus until the final judgment. What we do reveals the actual faith of our hearts and minds and will be measured by God's law.

The claim that "biblical law was destroyed by Jesus" is a false axiom that is not found in the New Testament.

Come to a sober and right mind, and sin no more; for some people have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame. (1 Corinthians 15:34)

Jesus did not destroy or bring the Old Testament law to an end. He brought a fuller revelation of it, living it out perfectly in his obedient life as the true Israelite in faithful covenant with his Father.

4.3 JESUS AND LEVITICUS

Which parts of Leviticus does Jesus sustain and interpret as relevant for his followers? Jesus's teaching, death, and resurrection transformed the Levitical priestly laws found in Leviticus 1-10 and the sacrificial laws with their purity statutes found in Leviticus 11-16. These laws were given, in biblical context, as the practices for life around the Tabernacle. These two sections of laws end in chapter 16 with the Day of Atonement. Jesus fulfilled in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension all the laws given for Levitical Tabernacle service (Leviticus 1-16) when he became the high priest in heaven, up to and including the Day of Atonement (e.g., Hebrews 7:27).

The following chapters of Leviticus 17-20, however, address key moral and holiness concerns which were given for all Israel no matter where they were in the world. These concerns emerge from the intrinsic nature and sovereignty of Israel's God, "I am the LORD your God" (18:30). These moral concerns and commands are therefore sustained by Jesus and the New Testament church. In his life and ministry, Jesus reinterpreted and sustained the relevance of the holiness code found Leviticus 17-20 for Christian practice. Even in the Book of Leviticus, these laws are set apart rhetorically, by repeatedly addressing the whole people of God in the introduction of each of the four chapters: "The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say..." (Leviticus 17:1; 18:1; 19:1; 20:1).

Leviticus 21 closes this general holiness section for God's people when it changes the audience back to the priests: "Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them..." (Leviticus 21:1). The text itself provides evidence that Leviticus 17-20 is indeed still relevant for Christians today.

Leviticus 17-20 is also set apart as the most relevant instruction for the Lord's followers in a variety of rhetorical markers in the text:

- Chapters 17-20 are highlighted when chapter 17 shifts from case law form (e.g., "When you do this...") to God's direct commands ("You shall not").
- They are addressed to the "people of Israel" rather than to Aaron and the priests.
- These chapters stand, structurally, between sets of Aaronic priestly instructions, thereby highlighted as the central section, addressing the holiness of the whole people.

Finally, the trajectory of Leviticus 17-20 through the prophets, the Gospels, and Acts 15 echoes the following key concerns repeatedly:

- sanctity of all animal life (the original purpose of the blood law prohibitions)

- sexual purity
- economic justice and equal treatment of all under the law
- freedom from idolatry of any kind, with red-flag warnings about some (Leviticus 19:20-23)

When Jesus's teaching focuses on grievous offenses against God's law, he is reiterating and reinforcing the laws of Leviticus 17-20. For example, Jesus focused on the key themes of Leviticus 17-20—violence and sexual immorality:

For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person. (Mark 7:21-23)

4.4 JESUS AND SAME-SEX SEXUAL RELATIONS

Why does Jesus not address same-sex sexual relations specifically? First, it is vital to remember that Jesus did and said many things that the gospels do not record (John 21:25). It is difficult to make a strong and persuasive argument from silence. As we have record in the New Testament, Jesus did not say much about sexuality or idolatry in general. In the culture and rule of first-century Pharisaic Judaism, there was no need to say more than he did about those issues. On the other hand, when the New Testament entered the Greco-Roman Gentile world, it had to address both idolatry and sexuality more directly since those were salient issues of that culture.

Jesus taught quite a lot about human relationships in general. He spoke directly about sexual practice on two occasions that are recorded in Scripture. In Matthew he says:

But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile. (Matthew 15:18-20)

Jesus did not need to say more about sexual immorality since he was addressing Jewish people who were deeply committed to the law of Moses. In addition, his primary conversation partners concerning the law were the "lawyers" of the Pharisees who already were quite stringent in their teaching. This included, for example, the stoning of adulterers (Deuteronomy 22:22-23; Leviticus 20:10).

When Jesus encountered the crowd that was ready to stone the woman caught in adultery, he sent them away from the execution with the words, "Let the one among you who has no sin throw the first stone."

Jesus was not changing the prohibition against sexual sin, but he did essentially cease the Pharisaical condemnation of death by stoning (also advocated by Philo). When the mob justice dispersed, he said to the woman, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again" (John 8:11).

4.5 JESUS AND OTHER SEXUAL ISSUES

Did Jesus teach anything else about sex? Jesus warned against sexual lust (Matthew 5:27-30). Jesus also reiterated the Old Testament teaching on marriage, quoting Genesis 2:24 in Matthew 19:4-6.

He answered, "Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So, they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." (Matthew 19:4-6; see also Matthew 15:19-20)

Note that Jesus clearly reinforces here the logical connection between sexual differentiation ("male and female") and the creation of the marriage bond ("For this reason...the two shall become one flesh.")

5. NEW TESTAMENT TEXTS: PAUL

5.1 Identifying Relevant Texts

The Apostle Paul provides the most detailed teaching on why God prohibits same-sex practice by Christians. Of key importance is what Paul teaches about the relationship between same-sex practice and the idolatrous values of a secular world. In Romans, Paul frames his discussion of same-sex practice in the context of human, creaturely rebellion against their Creator. Paul sees same-sex sexual relations and society's acceptance of it as an example of how idolatrous systems work: people exchange the truth of God for a lie and instead invent their own moral values and way of life apart from what God deems as best for his creatures (Romans 1:22-32). In Romans 1, Paul specifically identifies both same-sex intercourse between females (1:26) and same-sex intercourse between males (1:27) as a sinful act.

However, it is important to emphasize that the context of Paul's rejection of same-sex intercourse is the indictment of all humanity as sinful. Romans 1-3 forms a major section of the letter whose end goal is to lead the reader to the conclusion that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23). This context of universal human sinfulness should be a humble reminder that those who do not engage in same-sex practice also stand in rebellion against God as much as those who do. Each of us is called to place our faith in Christ. Each of us needs to experience forgiveness and justification by God (Roman 4:1-25). Paul's aim in Romans 1 is to demonstrate how all human beings, Gentiles and Jews alike, need to be reconciled to God. Same-sex

intercourse is just one of many sins which characterize a world in rebellion against their Creator and Redeemer (Romans 1:28-32).

Paul in his other letters also consistently identifies same-sex sexual relations as just one example of the unredeemed life and inappropriate for those who have been “washed,” “sanctified,” and “justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and in the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:11). In 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Paul situates same-sex practice in what scholars identify as a “vice list,” which was a distinct literary genre employed by writers in the ancient world, including Paul. Paul unambiguously understands same-sex practice as something prohibited by those who are in God’s kingdom (6:9). Among the vices or immoral behavior in which Paul warns the church not to participate, he identifies same-sex intercourse between both the active and passive male sex partners. He uses the specific Greek terms *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* to describe the “male penetrator” and the “male who is penetrated” in his prohibition against same-sex intercourse. Paul repeats the term *arsenokoitai* in another vice list found in 1 Timothy 1:10.

The above summary of Paul’s prohibitions against same-sex intercourse has been challenged by revisionists in both popular and academic circles. We address these revisionist objections below.

5.2 REVISIONIST OBJECTION #1

In Romans 1, is not Paul only prohibiting impassioned, out-of-control homoerotic sex acts practiced among ancient Romans? Is Paul making a general indictment of all same-sex acts or just the impassioned kind—therefore allowing for monogamous, covenantal, same-sex marriage?

In Romans 1:24-27, according to revisionists, Paul is condemning not same-sex relations but impassioned, excessive homoerotic desire. This opens the possibility that non-excessive forms of homosexual unions are permissible. Brownson (ch. 8 of *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*), for example, makes his case by defining the Greek word *epithumia* (“desire”) as excessive passion. If same-sex couples can engage in loving physical intimacy that is monogamous, mutual, and characterized by controlled desires, then Paul should not be read as prohibiting these particular expressions of same-sex intimacy.

¹²The English translation for vv. 22-28 are the author’s own; the translation for vv. 29-32 are from the NIV.

But what is the core and basis of Paul's critique against same-sex relations? Is he really only interested in condemning out-of-control passion?

The answer lies in the way Paul prohibits same-sex sexual relations not as excessive desire but rather as an expression of idolatry. The internal logic of the text is driven by Paul's threefold use of the Greek verb [met]ēllaxan, or "exchange," which is what idolatry does: it makes the tragic exchange of the truth of God for a lie.

It is helpful to read Romans 1:24-27 within the larger context of Romans 1:22-32:

22 While they [Gentiles/humanity as a whole] were claiming to be wise, they became foolish

23 And they exchanged (ēllaxan) the glory of the immortal God with likenesses, that is, an image of a mortal person, and birds, and four-footed animals, and reptiles

24 Therefore God gave them over (paredōken) by the desires of their heart to impurity

with the result that they dishonored their bodies among themselves

25 (They are the ones) who exchanged (metēllaxan) the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served creatures rather than the Creator who is forever praised. Amen.

26 Because of this, God gave them over (paredōken) to dishonorable passions. For even their women exchanged (metēllaxan) natural intercourse for unnatural ones

as they abandoned natural intercourse with women,

27 In the same way (homoiōs) also, men were inflamed with their impulses for one another

as men with men committed indecent acts, and with the result that they received in themselves the consequence which was due from their delusion.

28 And just as they did not prove to have knowledge of God, he gave them over (paradōken) to a depraved mind to do unfitting deeds.

29 They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed, and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips,

30 slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; 31 they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. 32 Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

¹³Story taken from Max Lucado, *No Wonder They Call Him Savior* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986; 2004).

Notice the threefold exchange highlighted by Paul's use of the Greek verb [met] ēllaxan:

In v. 23, Paul says: And they [Gentiles] exchanged (ēllaxan) the glory of the immortal God with likenesses.

In v. 25: They exchanged (metēllaxan) the truth of God for a lie.

In v. 26: For even their women exchanged (metēllaxan) natural intercourse for unnatural ones.

Paul's central binding thesis for Romans 1 is that idolatrous systems exchange the truth of God for a lie. Paul is not singling out homosexual sin because it is the ultimate sin to be condemned above all other sins. He singles out homosexual relations precisely because they illustrate so well sin's ability to exchange the truth of God for a lie. Let us consider a modern example of how idolatrous systems work.

In a well-known illustration, a group of young people at night break into a hardware store, steal nothing, but switch all the price tags. They cover up their tracks and leave. The next day, no one realizes that the price tags have been swapped. Some customers walk away with excellent deals, and others pay far too much for their purchase. The point is this: we live in a world of switched price tags. Things that are truly precious—honesty, integrity, and purity—are undervalued. Things which are insignificant from God's perspective—like the Ferrari, the corner office, or the extra zero on your paycheck—are things which far too many people sell their souls to attain.

Same-sex sexual relations exemplify the ability of sin to exchange (metēllaxan) God's truth for a lie, or more specifically, to exchange God's truth for the cultural and moral values of the world. The very same word Paul uses to state, "They exchanged (metēllaxan) the truth of God for a lie," is used to describe how "women exchanged (metēllaxan) natural sexual intercourse for unnatural ones." The permissibility

¹⁴The origin of the temple prostitution theory is hard to track, but it seems to the first to suggest it was a PC(USA) pastor Jack Rogers who found the inspiration for this theory as a tourist of ancient Corinth; see <https://covnetpres.org/2003/10/how-i-changed-my-mind-on-homosexuality/>. Since then, Rogers has published his views in *Jesus, the Bible and Homosexuality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006; rev. exp. ed., 2009), 73-74; see also the rejoinder by S. Donald Fortson III and Rollin Grams, *Unchanging Witness: The Consistent Christian Teaching on Homosexuality in Scripture and Tradition* (Nashville: Broad and Holman Academic, 2016), 353-72 [ch. 18]. An alternative scholarly argument for the temple prostitution setting of Romans 1 is by Jeremy Townsley, "Paul, the Goddess Religions, and Queer Sects: Romans 1:23-28," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130, no. 4 (Winter 2011), 707-28; idem, "Queer Sects in Patristic Commentaries on Romans 1:26-27: Goddess Cults, Free Will, and 'Sex Contrary to Nature?'" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 1 (2013), 56-79.

of same-sex intercourse is a lie that the world maintains as truth. The world has exchanged God's truth for its own distorted version of truth. It has exchanged God's righteous decrees for its own immoral rules for living. This is how idolatrous systems work. Paul eventually concludes: "Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them" (v. 32, NIV).

Nowhere in the New Testament is idolatry ever permissible for the Jew or Christian. It violates our fundamental conviction that the only One who should be worshiped is the God of Jesus Christ. Therefore, regardless of whether same-sex relations are excessive or covenantal, they are idolatrous and therefore sinful.

5.3 REVISIONIST OBJECTION #2

But what about other theories concerning Romans 1 that limit the context of Paul's prohibitions to the very specific historical situation of temple prostitution or to the Greek practice of pederasty (in which an older man who is sexually intimate with a younger boy)? If Paul had either of these as the target of his prohibitions, could not Paul then be prohibiting these specific forms of sexual misuse and abuse but not same-sex sexual relations in general?

There is no specific textual link from Romans 1 to any of these alternative situations. In other words, the key terms that would signal to the reader that Paul is addressing temple prostitution or pederasty are missing from Romans 1.

Let's examine first the issue of temple or sacred prostitution.

Temple Prostitution Theory

Temple prostitution was the ritual practice where slaves (male and female) were often forced by pagan priests to re-enact sex acts that dramatized the myths surrounding the deities of the temple, or worshipers themselves would engage in the sex acts as part of some ritual observance of the temple cult. Arguments for the temple prostitution setting for Romans 1 generally have the following logical scheme:

1. Paul denounces idolatry in Romans 1 referring to images of "a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles" (v. 23, NIV).
2. Paul therefore must be referring to a specific religious cult or temple where the idols are housed.
3. Paul's prohibitions against unnatural sex acts are therefore made in the context

¹⁵Stephanie Budin, *The Myth of Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Brian Rosner, "Temple Prostitution in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20," *Novum Testamentum* 40, no. 4 (1998), 336-51, who thinks that environment or setting for prostitution in Paul's day was the Greco-Roman banquet and not the temple cult.

of the sacred prostitution practices of the temple, particularly the goddess cult of Cybele which was prominent in Rome.

4. The unnatural sex acts which take place in temple prostitution are not homoerotic, but rather unnatural heteroerotic acts: that is, women unnaturally act like dominant male figures, and men unnaturally are penetrated by women wearing phallic devices. Paul does not have homoeroticism in mind in his prohibitions but unnatural heterosexual sex acts that were particularly characteristic of the Cybele cult and other mother goddess religions.

There are several reasons why the above theory does not properly interpret Paul's prohibitions in Romans 1.

1. Most important, the inferences drawn from Romans 1 that point to temple prostitution are speculative. Romans 1 does not address a particular goddess cult in Rome. Paul's reference to idolatry does not refer to a specific idol or temple. Rather, the literary, narrative, and theological context of Romans 1 is much broader in scope. Romans 1 addresses the history of humankind's rejection of God as Creator and his divine design for humanity and God's order of creation. The prohibitions of Paul are framed in his denunciation of practicing idolatry and participation in idolatrous systems without a special reference to a particular Greco-Roman religion, deity, or idol. Romans 1 addresses a much larger context than the specific situation of temple prostitution.
2. If Paul was addressing temple prostitution, he uses none of the words associated with the practice. Missing from Paul's discourse are the words for temple (hieron), priest (hiereus), priestess (hiereia), sanctuary (naos), temple slave (male: hierodoulos; female: hierodoulē), prostitute (pornē / hetaira), or any specific cult or goddess (e.g., Aphrodite, Cybele, Demeter, Artemis, or other mother goddesses). Arguments for a temple prostitution setting rely on reading into the Romans 1 text a religious context that is not supported by Paul's own language.
3. Some historians have argued that the practice of temple prostitution not only was exaggerated by ancient writers such as Strabo, but that it existed mostly in the Greek period and fell out of prominent use in the Roman era. While this criticism may have been overstated, the biblical interpreter should nevertheless exercise extreme caution in applying the context of temple prostitution to any New Testament text without clear evidence.

¹⁶To read more about pederasty in ancient Greece, a classic study is by William Armstrong Percy III, *Pederasty and Pedagogy in Archaic Greece* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

¹⁷Robin Scroggs, *New Testament and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 99-122, who states "much of my argument depends upon the judgment frequently stated above, that the only model of male homosexuality [in the ancient world] was pederasty." Mark D. Smith has since demonstrated that there are documented examples in Paul's day of non-pederastic homosexual practices between same-aged adults; see his "Ancient Bisexuality and the Interpretation of Romans 1:26-27," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 2 (1996), 223-56.

4. What is identified as “unnatural” or “against nature” by Paul in Romans 1 cannot be heteroerotic acts where the dominant and passive roles between men and women are reversed. The syntax of Romans 1:26-27 does not allow for this identification. Whatever Paul meant by “their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural ones” (v. 26), it is connected with the clause that follows (in v. 27) by the Greek word *homoiōs* (“in this way”). Paul links the female exchange to the male-male equivalent when he says: “In the same way (*homoiōs*) also, men were inflamed with their impulses for one another... men with men (*arsenes en arsesin*) committed indecent acts” (v. 27, author’s translation). It seems clear that Paul is referencing natural male-female sexual intercourse being exchanged for unnatural female-female or unnatural male-male intercourse.

The Pederasty Theory

Pederasty is the ancient Greek practice of an older adult male having intimate sexual relations with a younger pubescent or adolescent male boy. The practice predates the New Testament and was especially prominent in classical Athens in the 6th century B.C. Its practice was embedded in the pedagogical and athletic system of the Greeks. The Greeks believed that the more intimate the personal relationship between the teacher and his student was, the more effective the learning experience. The relationship could last until the adolescent boy finished his educational curriculum and graduated from his studies. Once finished with his education, the young man was expected to marry in a traditional marriage, have children, and raise an heir for his family legacy. The Roman world tended to look on the practice as objectionable even though as a whole Roman civilization adopted many of the pedagogical practices of the Greeks.

What was said of temple prostitution can be said of the Greek practice of pederasty. If Paul was singling out the specific misuse or abuse of young boys by older men in Romans 1, he used none of the Greek terms that would have signaled to the reader that pederasty was in view. Conspicuously absent are the terms “adult male lover” (*erastēs*) and “younger male lover” (*erōmenos* / *paidika*), “love of boys” (*paiderastia*), or “to love boys” (*paiderasteuō*). It is much more likely that Paul’s homoerotic prohibitions are more general in nature and that these would include pederasty as well as other forms of adult-adult homoerotic acts. There is nothing in Romans 1 to indicate that Paul was limiting the prohibition of same-sex intercourse to pederasty alone.

¹⁸See, e.g., Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, 237-55.

5.4 REVISIONIST OBJECTION #3

“Nature” (the Greek word physis) refers to custom or cultural norms but not to an absolute standard. If homosexuality is “natural” or culturally acceptable today, doesn’t this imply that Paul’s prohibition against same-sex sexual relations as “unnatural behavior” is no longer applicable?

Revisionists often cite 1 Corinthians 11:14 as an example that Paul understood “nature” as being a subjective reference to the cultural norms of the day. What is considered “natural” is decided by the community in which one belongs.

“Does not nature (i.e., human custom) itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him” (1 Corinthians 11:14).

Here 1 Corinthians 11:14 understands that the naturalness of a man as having short hair, not long, is a social, cultural, communal value. The revisionist therefore concludes that all other uses of the word physis should likewise be interpreted as meaning human custom. If the custom or cultural values change over time, what is considered “natural” also has to change with the culture. If today’s words consider same-sex relationships as “natural,” then Paul’s prohibitions against what is “unnatural” no longer applies to homosexual intimacy.

Yet words have a wide semantic range and can be used in a number of different ways depending on their context. The revisionist reading of “natural” as meaning “custom” unilaterally across the New Testament is what exegetes called a prescriptive fallacy. Revisionists wrongly assume that since the word means something in one or a few of its appearances in the New Testament, it then has that particular meaning elsewhere.

But this is hardly the case. Take the word sarx, for example. Paul often uses the word sarx to describe “sinful nature” in Romans 7:5, 14, 18, 25. In Galatians, he likewise exhorts the church: “Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature (sarx)” (5:16, NIV).

But in Philippians 1:22, Paul uses the same word sarx in a different way to refer to the “human body” with no sinful connotations. Here he states:

If I am to go on living in the body (sarx), this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body (sarx). (1:22-24, NIV)

¹⁹Ibid., 254-55.

Here we would run into all sorts of misunderstanding and theological trouble if we read *sarx* as meaning “sinful nature” rather than “human body.” A single word in Greek can have multiple or polysemous meanings which are not necessarily operative at the same time. The reader must determine which meaning of a word makes the best sense within its particular context.

Revisionists try to make the 1 Corinthians 11:14 text prescriptive for other uses of *physis*, but the meaning of “custom” does not follow the logical progression of Romans 1. Given the context of Romans 1 as an indictment of Gentile sinners who see the stamp of the Creator upon the created world and yet refuse to acknowledge God, the best definition for *physis* in this context is “divine design.”

Brownson, for example, ignores the definition of *physis* as “divine design.” If, as he admits, *physis* is a Stoic category, adopted by Jewish moralists to explain ethics to Gentiles; and if Paul pedagogically also appropriates this Stoic term as a Christian interpreter to explain the gospel to his Gentile congregations, then the one Stoic category we should not jettison from our discussion of nature is “divine design.”

Anthony Long, emeritus professor of classical philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley, describes this definition of *physis* from the writings of the Stoic Epictetus, who is a near contemporary of Paul:

As a cosmic rationality, God also exists outside every individual's mind because he is the structuring principle of the entire universe...The Stoic God is nature, extending through everything...the Stoic outlook on God can be viewed as an invitation to reject this-worldly values and become completely assimilated to the divine rationality.

For Epictetus and all orthodox Stoics, “obedience,” “conformity with the divine will and law,” and “living according to nature” are all synonymous concepts. Therefore, nature is not a human construct but can be defined as “divine design,” and that is precisely the contextual use of the term *physis* by Paul in Romans 1. The issue then becomes: who decides what is good? Do we exert our own moral autonomy against what God as Creator says is good and evil (Genesis 1-3)? Do we assert our system of idolatrous values over God's truth? Do we exchange the truth of God for a lie? The emphasis of Paul in Romans 1 is on the idolatrous assertion that God is wrong and our moral system is correct. The permissibility of same-sex sexual relations in Greco-Roman society is an illustration of acting against God's divine design for humanity and refusing to let God tell us who we are and what our identity is.

²¹Thomas Hubbard's *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

Paul's greatest indictment against humanity is not the sinful acts themselves but rather the sinful attitude of human beings that we are in the right and God is wrong, whether it be what God's word says about human sexuality or any other area of life. Notice what Paul says in v. 32 as he rhetorically moves now from the topic of same-sex sex and starts to list other sins and idolatrous values:

They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them. (Romans 1:29-32, NIV, italics added)

What Paul identifies as most egregious is not the act of same-sex sexual relations or any other sinful actions listed above. His greatest indictment is against those who know God's truth and righteous decree but reject it. They make God out to be a liar. They approve and encourage others to live the lie and to practice it over against what God has decreed to be good and true.

5.5 REVISIONIST OBJECTION #4

Paul only had negative examples of same-sex intercourse in his day and did not have a conception of orientation or consensual, monogamous homosexual relationships. Therefore, is not what Paul writes in Romans 1 simply irrelevant to current expressions of homosexuality, especially in a loving context?

More recent studies on same-sex relations in the ancient world do make the case for the existence of these sexualities. For example, there is evidence for similarly aged men in homosexual relations, women in lesbian relations, and consensual monogamous unions that are catalogued in Thomas Hubbard's *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome* (2003). Hubbard lists some 447 examples of references to sexualities from texts and inscriptions spanning ancient Greece, through Hellenism, and into the Roman era. Of those examples, 167 are especially relevant to the New Testament era. Given this evidence, it is likely that Paul and his contemporaries would have been aware of the concept of orientation and sexuality.

Without listing all 447 examples, below are some excerpts that feature an acknowledgment that one could be born with same-sex attraction and stay same-sex attracted throughout the entirety of one's life. Here are two excerpts:

[Megilla]: "I was born as a woman like the rest of you, but my mind, desire, and everything else in me are that of a man." (Lucian, *Dialogue of the Courtesans*, 5:4)

[Roman astrology]: "If the Sun and Moon are in masculine signs and Venus is also in a masculine sign in a woman's chart, women will be born who take on a man's character and desire intercourse with women like men." (Matheseos libri viii 7.25.1)

Hubbard also catalogues some famous consensual same-sex couples, including Agathon and Pausanias, Achilles and Patroklos, Emperor Hadrian and Antinous (though Hadrian was married to Sabina), Emperor Galba and Icelaus, and the woman-woman couple of Megilla and Demonassas.

Summary of Paul's teachings in Romans 1 (in response to revisionist objections):

1. Paul is not condemning only impassioned or excessive homoerotic desire.
2. Paul is not limiting his prohibitive injunctions to specific forms of sexual malpractice such as temple prostitution or pederasty.
3. Paul is not limiting his understanding of "natural relations" to human customs alone. The strongest in-context interpretation of physis is "divine design."
4. It is likely that Paul was indeed aware of the concept of orientation given that it was a documented conceptual category in the ancient world.

Instead, Paul insists on the following (which corroborates a traditionalist interpretation):

1. Paul considers all same-sex intercourse, monogamous or not, as being prohibited by a God who as our Creator knows us intimately and wants us to flourish.
2. The core of Paul's prohibitions is that same-sex practice exchanges (metēllaxan) God's truth for a lie. Same-sex intercourse is an example of moral autonomy at work in rebellion against God. Those who teach its permissibility deny God's truth as false or wrong, usurping God's created design for the cultural and (im)moral values of the world.
3. Furthermore, people not only exchange God's truth for a lie; they also "continue to do these very things" and "approve of those who practice them."

²²J.A. Loader, *A Tale of Two Cities: Sodom and Gomorrah in the Old Testament* (CBET 1; Kampen: Kok, 1990), 37, which reads: "Their [= men of Sodom] sin is a three-in-one matter. They violate the sacred law of hospitality and in so doing give themselves over to depravity of a homosexual nature.... At the same time it must be said that the sin here not just a private homosexual act, but homosexual mob rape." But also see Robert A.J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 71- 91.

Other Pauline Prohibitions Against Same-Sex Sexual Relations (1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10)

While Romans 1 is arguably Paul's most detailed and important teaching on same-sex sex, he addresses same-sex intercourse in two other places in his letter corpus:

1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. Both of these texts use the unique Greek word *arsenokoitai*, whose meaning will be addressed shortly. First Corinthians 6:9 employs an additional Greek word, *malakoi*, that also contributes to our understanding of Pauline prohibitions to same-sex sexual relations. The English translations of these terms vary, and the most problematic one is the NRSV which reads:

1 Corinthians 6:9-10: "Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes (malakoi), sodomites (arsenokoitai), thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God."

1 Timothy 1:9-11: "This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites (arsenokoitai), slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching."

5.6 REVISIONIST OBJECTION #5

In 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10, in Paul's identification of "sodomites" who are "lawless and disobedient" and will not inherit the kingdom of God, is not Paul referring to sexual violence of Sodom? Is not Paul simply condemning sexual violence without addressing those who engage in same-sex acts?

A popular revisionist argument focuses on the NRSV use of the old English word "sodomite." The basis of the argument is as follows:

1. By use of the word "sodomite," Paul refers to the episode in Genesis 19 where the men of Sodom demanded that Lot send out his two guests with the purpose that men of Sodom might "know" them or have sex with them (Hebrew *yāda*).
2. The sin of Genesis 19 is not homoerotic sex but gang rape or sexual violence.
3. Therefore, what Paul prohibits in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 is sexual violence, not loving, mutual, uncoerced intercourse between same-sex partners.

²³Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*, 303-39.

²⁴NIV modified. The NIV translates this as: "nor men who have sex with men" but we have used the English verb "to bed" in order to highlight its connection with Leviticus 18 and 20.

There are several problems with the above revisionist interpretation. One is that the textual link to Genesis 19 comes by way of the English translation “sodomite” and not the Greek word arsenokoitai. The Greek arsenokoitai does not allude to Genesis 19 but points to Leviticus 18:20 and 20:13. The primarily ethical critique in Genesis 19 is indeed against sexual violence.

We should not be confused by the English rendition of “sodomite” that is found within the NRSV translation. Instead, our focus should be on how to best translate the term arsenokoitai in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 and its paired term malakoi found in 1 Corinthians 6:9 alone. Most scholars accept that the word is drawn directly from Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, not the Sodom and Gomorrah episode of Genesis 19. Robert Gagnon gives a detailed description of how the compound word arsenokoitai likely originated with Paul himself who used the term to point the reader to the Greek Septuagintal text of Leviticus (the go-to Bible for both Diaspora Jews and Paul’s Greco-Roman converts). It is helpful to view the Leviticus texts side by side with 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10:

Leviticus 18:22: You shall not bed with a man (meta arsenos ou koimēthēsēi koitēn gunaikos) as with a woman; it is an abomination.

Leviticus 20:13: If a man beds with a man (hos an koimēthēi meta arsenos koitēn gunaikos) as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is an abomination.

1 Corinthians 6:9: Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers **nor men who bed with men** (oute malakoi oute arsenokoitai) nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God (NIV, modified).

In both Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, the words arsenos (man) and koitēn (bed) are proximate to each other (especially in 20:13, where they are directly adjacent and it reads: arsenos koitēn). This strongly suggests the meaning of “a man who lies with a man.” Together the two terms refer to a man having same-sex relations with another man (or having sex with another man as if the partner was a woman, so in this case the one who does the penetrating). While in Leviticus the Septuagint Greek has the words arsenos (man) and koitēn (bed) as two separate words (nouns), Paul combines the two words together to form one compound word. He uses the plural form arsenokoitai which means “men who lie with men.” If one reads out loud Leviticus’s arsenos koitēn (two words) and Paul’s arsenokoitai (one compound word),

²⁵Dan O. Via, “The Bible, the Church, and Homosexuality,” in *Homosexuality and the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 1-39. See Gagnon’s rejoinder about Paul’s moral use of the term in an essay in the same volume, “The Bible and Homosexual Practice,” 40-92.

even the casual listener can hear how they almost sound identical. Paul's Christian readers would not have missed the connection. The implication, therefore, is that arsenokoitai refers to the male penetrator in a same-sex act with another man and that Paul was intentional in creating this compound word in order to direct the reader to the Leviticus texts.

5.7 REVISIONIST OBJECTION #6

If arsenokoitai is a reference to the Levitical texts, are not these texts filled with ritual cleanliness laws that are no longer observed by the Christian today because Christ has nullified the Mosaic codes? Why then should we observe this ritual prohibition when we don't observe other ritual codes like the kosher food laws?

Revisionists like Dan Via have argued that the Levitical prohibitions are ritualistic, not moral, and thus are no longer necessary since the atoning work of Christ fulfilled the laws on ritual purity and ceremonial cleanliness. (Please refer to the Old Testament section of this resource paper for a more accurate understanding of how to interpret the Leviticus texts as moral law still to be practiced by the faithful Christian.)

Here, it is important to emphasize that Paul clearly does not read the Levitical prohibitions in chapters 18 and 20 as ceremonial and non-binding for the Christian. He sees the prohibitions as moral in content. Paul places same-sex acts in a vice list along with such other clearly immoral acts as theft, greed, drunkenness, slander, swindling, sexual immorality in general, and idolatry. He warns the reader not to commit such transgressions. We can take our interpretative cues from Paul on how to read Leviticus as moral code interpreted through the gospel and still valid today for the Christian disciple.

True disciples of Christ demonstrate the fruit of repentance with a life of holiness. Paul exhorts the Corinthians in the verse which follows:

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. (v. 11, NIV)

In his vice list Paul includes several immoral acts that characterized the pagan or secular life outside the kingdom of God. Paul tells the Corinthians: "That is what some of you were..." but not anymore! Now you are washed, sanctified, justified. So

²⁶Dale Martin, "Arsenokoitēs and Malakos: Meanings and Consequences," in *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture* (ed. by Robert Brawley; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 117-36; Dale Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), especially ch. 3.

live into this identity, says Paul. Same-sex sexual relations are uncharacteristic of a holy life and witness of the Christian; rather, they are characteristic of the immoral life that the Christ-follower is called to leave behind.

5.8 REVISIONIST OBJECTION #7

What about the word malakoi? It is a word that means “soft” in some contexts and “effeminate” in others. Is not Paul being “heterosexist” in his condemnation of effeminate men who may not be homoerotic but simply effeminate?

Revisionists who translate the Greek word malakoi not as a reference to a same-sex partner but as a reference to “soft” or “effeminate” men tend to depend on the work of Dale Martin, who accurately describes the wide semantic range of malakos (the singular form) and malakoi (plural). Malakos can mean “soft” in a variety of contexts and describes “effeminate” men in specific contexts. The question, however, is the same as in our previous discussion of the best translation of the term physis in Romans 1. Given the polysemous or multiple possible meanings of the word malakos, what is the best in-context translation of the term?

Given its pairing with the word arsenokoitai (in the Greek, 1 Corinthians 6:9 reads, *oute malakoi oute arsenokoitai*), the best understanding of the term malakos is the penetrated male partner of the arsenokoitai. The text of 1 Corinthians 6:9 should be understood to say: “neither the penetrated (malakoi) nor the penetrators (arsenokoitai),” but since this is a rather crude translation, the NIV translation renders the English in better prose with its translation of “nor men who have sex with men,” or to make the intertextual connection that is quite visible in Greek also visible in English, we can translate *oute malakoi oute arsenokoitai* together as “nor men who bed with men.”

Whatever one’s translation preference, the best interpretation of *oute malakoi oute arsenokoitai* is the male-male partners in same-sex intercourse, malakoi being the passive or penetrated partner and arsenokoitai as the active partner or penetrator.

²⁷The “Wesleyan quadrilateral” has been another useful framework in its explanation that Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience all factor into the interpretative and hermeneutical task. Using this grid, we could say that some revisionist scholars who do believe that the Bible is God’s word give inordinate weight to human reason and experience in their interpretations over against tradition and Scripture itself.

6 HERMENEUTICS AGAIN

6.1 Why do some scholars come to other conclusions?

There are a variety of reasons why some scholars come to other conclusions despite the aforementioned evidence:

- Everyone employs an interpretative lens and brings certain presuppositions with them when they read Scripture; these set different trajectories for biblical interpretations and conclusions.
- The contemporary, broad cultural presupposition that the Bible is antiquated and obsolete as a rule for personal conduct and relationships easily excludes the Scripture as irrelevant. Some scholars who comment on these texts do not believe that the Bible is the word of God. Rather, they view it as simply an ancient document that is not relevant today. Their presupposition is that the Torah was invented and written by priests. We claim it as inspired by God and a living word, for us (Deuteronomy 5:3; Matthew 19).
- Other scholars who do believe that the Bible is God's word do not believe that it is the "only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct." Rather, they view biblical inspiration as so historically bound that it can or should be matched by inspired "new canons of authority" based in human experience, reasoning, and sociology. When these three sources of inspiration are in conflict with Scripture, the current ideology supersedes Scripture.

6.2 The Bible and Experience

Considering contemporary human experience, can the ECC initiate change against the teaching of the biblical texts? Our roots in Pietism have always held that good exegesis and godly experience confirm each other. Unless we are convinced that the biblical texts, in their canonical trajectory, teach something, neither can we. We cannot bless what God does not bless:

- The first affirmation of the ECC remains an essential identity marker for us, for our embodied mission in the world: "We believe in the Holy Scriptures, the Old and New Testaments, as the word of God, and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct."
- As a result, we do not exclude or rewrite biblical texts, but rather we ask our historically key question, "Where is it written?"
- We believe that although human experience, reasoning, and sociology have a role in understanding the world, the Bible is "the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct." The value of human reason and all other forms of knowledge should be measured by the biblical canon, for we believe that is the inspired word of God.

6.3 What about Acts 15?

Like Jesus, the Council in Jerusalem confirmed the basic principles of Leviticus 17-20 as relevant for all believers by summarizing the four key points of these chapters. Their decision, described in the Book of Acts, is a redaction of the law by the "Holy Spirit."

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell. (Acts 15:28-29, NIV; also in Acts 21:25)

This redaction was not, however, the whole story. In the first-century cultural context, Christians in Jerusalem were still gathering in the synagogues to hear the reading of their Scripture, which was the Old Testament. Acts 15 describes this context:

It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath. (Acts 15:19-21, NIV)

The four requirements are defined and described in detail in the Pentateuch, so they simply alluded to those texts:

- For example, the "blood" prohibition is described in Leviticus 17.
- In the case of "sexual immorality," everyone in first-century Judaism knew that the primary text was Leviticus 18, which lists all kinds of sexual unions that God considers immoral (repeated as case law with penalties in Leviticus 20).

When the New Testament uses the term "sexual immorality," it is a reference to Leviticus 18:

- Leviticus 18 is the primary source document and ipso facto Hebraic background for the phrase "sexual immorality and impurity" found in the New Testament. Romans 1 reads like a summary of Leviticus 18-20. The identical "shameless" (asxemosunen) of Romans 1:27 and the repeated Hebraic "uncover the nakedness" (asxemosunen; 24 times; Heb. galah 'ervah) of Leviticus 18 are another obvious connection.
- Nowhere else in Scripture do we find a more comprehensive list of sexual immorality than in Leviticus 18 (Heb. zarah; Gr. porneia).
- Leviticus 18:1-20 is the deep Old Testament background, the primary torah, behind the many New Testament admonitions against immorality: Matthew 5:32; 15:19; 19:9; Mark 7:21; John 8:41; Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25; Romans 13:13; 1 Corinthians 5:1, 11; 6:13, 18; 7:2; 10:8; 2 Corinthians 12:21; Galatians 5:19; Ephesians 5:3; Colossians 3:5; 1 Thessalonians 4:3; Jude 1:7; Revelation 2:14, 20-21; 9:21; 14:8; 17:2, 4; 18:3, 9; 19:2.

- For example, 1 Corinthians 5:1-2 reflects this deep background in Leviticus 18: “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father’s wife (stepmother). And you are arrogant!”

The Apostle Paul is reflecting the New Testament church understanding of Leviticus 18:8-10:

“You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father’s wife; it is the nakedness of your father (stepmother). You shall not uncover the nakedness of your sister, your father’s daughter or your mother’s daughter, whether born at home or born abroad (half-sister). You shall not uncover the nakedness of your son’s daughter or of your daughter’s daughter (granddaughter).”

These deeper background laws remain relevant commands for Christian life.

7. PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS

7.1 Pastoral Implications for General Discipleship

Human sexuality is a marvelous gift given by God for human flourishing. Yet it is clear that there has consistently been a distinction between what the church and the world understand to be the appropriate context(s) for sexual expression. The church, as an inherently countercultural community, is called to treat human sexuality as a matter of faithful worship and discipleship. We must confess that the church can do a better job in shepherding all people—not just LGBTQ+/SSA people—toward sexual faithfulness and holiness.

From a discipleship perspective, the spiritual practice of faithful human sexuality within the church has long been referred to as chastity. Chastity is the commitment to honor and obey God with one’s sexuality, and it is the call of every Christian disciple—whether single or married, LGBTQ+/SSA or straight. To practice the discipline of chastity is to commit to celibacy in singleness or faithfulness in heterosexual marriage, abstaining from all other forms of sexual expression in reverence to God and despite any countervailing desires we might experience. These other forms of sexual expression include, among others, premarital sex (i.e., fornication), adultery and extramarital sex, unlawful divorce and remarriage, pornography, incest, and same-sex sexual relations. Chastity is understood to be a spiritual discipline in that it typically entails “carrying the cross” in some form—as Christ invited all disciples to do (Luke 9:23). Chastity entails, for example, the decision not to cohabit and/or to have premarital sex; the commitment to remain faithful to one’s spouse despite hardship; and the denial of same-sex sexual relations even despite persistent same-sex attraction or a perceived homosexual orientation.

Wherever the church has failed to uphold a high standard in any area relating to human sexuality and chastity, we must confess and repent. The church must avoid at all costs the creation of a “double standard” where we emphasize sexual holiness more strongly in one area than we do in others. We must also confess that the body of Christ has often exalted marriage above singleness, thereby undervaluing the great kingdom potential of single people and causing many to feel like second-class Christians.

Both singleness and heterosexual marriage are beautiful vocations with the potential to glorify God and advance God’s kingdom. The church must do more to help disciples flourish in chastity equally in both callings. It must also do more to help disciples confess, repent, heal, and experience the grace of God when it comes to all forms of sexual sin and brokenness—equally.

7.2 Pastoral Implications for LGBTQ+/SSA Engagement

If the church maintains a prohibitive stance toward same-sex sexual relations, the question remains: how do Christians today bear a loving witness to those who identify as LGBTQ+/SSA? How do we minister to same-sex attracted individuals who are a part of our congregations? We acknowledge that many individuals who experience non-heterosexual orientations did not necessarily choose these but must still consistently navigate the challenges of living out their sexuality authentically and faithfully.

Our pastoral care to every person in our congregation and our service to our neighbor should be characterized by the love of God. And Jesus commanded the highest standard for loving:

- “But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you” (Luke 6:27, NIV).
- “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven” (Luke 6:36-37, NIV).

Jesus also said:

- “They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me” (John 14:21).

²⁸For further reading on Leviticus 17-20 as the deep Old Testament background for New Testament ethics, see Brian Rosner, *Paul, Scripture, and Ethics: A Study of First Corinthians 5-7* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994).

Scripture leaves Christians in a paradoxical position of keeping the commandments and loving those who do not. The basis of love is God's holiness and power to redeem. This is the transformative love of God, consistent in both Testaments. Love has never meant simply telling people what they want to hear.

On the one hand, Scripture teaches us that sin is wrong (Romans 1:28-32). On the other hand, Scripture teaches us to be patient and kind. We are told not to judge, for that is God's prerogative: "Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" (Romans 2:4; see 1 Corinthians 5:9-13).

For pastoral practice in the church today, two texts are key: 1 Thessalonians 4:3-9 and Romans 1:22-2:2. Each of these texts names immorality as a sin against the Lord but warns readers against making themselves the judge, leaving room for God: "God will judge." This double admonition decries the sin but calls for love.

First Thessalonians echoes Leviticus, but moves beyond the call to holiness to the mission to love one another:

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God....For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness. Therefore whoever rejects this rejects not human authority but God, who also gives his Holy Spirit to you. Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another. (1 Thessalonians 4:3-9)

This transformative love is the reason that the end of Romans 1 and beginning of Romans 2 sets the paradoxically high standard of loving God by keeping the commandments and not judging those outside the faith who do not keep them, since this responsibility remains with God.

What is more, love and truth go hand in hand (Ephesians 4:15). Loving others means discipling Christian brothers and sisters to live into the truth of God. We are who God says we are. Anything else is a lie. And Scripture says in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 that even though we were once wrongdoers, we have been washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of God. We have experienced the transforming love of God that enables us to live according to his word by the agency of the Spirit and in the fellowship of the church.

²⁹For example, Jackie Hill Perry was at one time in her life committed to a lesbian lifestyle. But when she met Christ and decided to follow him as Lord, she ended her relationship with her lesbian lover and committed herself to remain single. Later, she met her future husband whom God enabled her to love. She married him and they have a daughter. <http://www.jackiehillperry.com/bio/>

Very briefly, we here make some suggestions on pastoral practice for the church, based on the testimonies and ministries of same-sex attracted Christians who have been obedient and faithful to Scripture's teachings on human sexuality. This is not an exhaustive or even detailed treatment. Rather, it is simply a starting point for further discussion and reflection. Within the biblical and theological framework of Scripture's prohibitions to abstain from same-sex intercourse, those who feel same-sex attracted can live out their Christian life faithfully through:

1) The Gift of Singleness: Singleness is a gift by God. It enables a person, in the words of Paul, to give one's undivided attention in service to Christ (1 Corinthians 7:32-35). It is sustained through spiritual friendships in the church and the Spirit's abiding agency. It is different from celibacy. Celibacy is a special calling by God much in the same way that ordination as a pastor is a special calling.

2) The Call to Celibacy: Some may have a special calling, regardless of sexual orientation, to live a single life as part of their pastoral call to ministry (Matthew 19:12). Such persons have been ordained by God never to marry as part of their testimony and witness to the power of the gospel of Christ and because their unique mission in this earthly life is most effective as a single person. The call to celibacy is different from the gift of singleness. A person called to celibacy will never marry. The single person, though experiencing same-sex attraction, might still by God's miraculous power and grace be enabled to participate in a traditional marriage between a man and a woman (this is called a "mixed orientation" marriage).

3) Mixed-Orientation Marriage: A same-sex attracted person may never be free from the desire for same-sex intimacy. Nevertheless, the same grace that enables a person to experience and flourish under the gift of singleness or the calling of celibacy may also enable a same-sex attracted person to live faithfully in a mixed-orientation marriage. There have been many testimonies of same-sex attracted persons who do not experience a change in their sexual orientation and remain attracted to people of the same biological sex. Nevertheless, they have also received from God the gift of the grace to love and marry someone of the opposite biological sex. This does not mean that the same-sex attracted individual is now heterosexual. Rather, this type of marriage is called a "mixed orientation marriage" because the orientation of the person has not changed. The same-sex attracted person is still attracted to the same biological sex, yet they enter into a traditional heterosexual marriage. Their spouse is heterosexual while the person remains same-sex attracted.

4) Complete Healing: It is possible to be so healed of one's same-sex attraction by the Spirit's agency that the person no longer desires or seeks sexual intimacy with someone of the same biological sex. To clarify, this is not an acceptance or approval of forced orientation-change therapy. While orientation-change therapy has been helpful for some, the church's undue focus on orientation-change therapy has also

caused harm to many LGBTQ+/SSA individuals who do not experience a change in orientation. Past practices of forcing people to change their orientation are to be renounced by the church as they do more harm than good. But to say that God cannot completely heal a person of their same-sex attraction (or that God has never done so) is to limit the transforming power of the gospel and to deny the testimony of those who have experienced it. Complete healing is possible, but certainly many same-sex attracted persons do not experience complete healing and instead experience the same grace through the gift of singleness, the call to celibacy, or a mixed-orientation marriage. Here we must live in an eschatological tension, as we do with all healings. We do believe that there is healing for same-sex attraction by the grace of God, and we stand patiently in hope, expectation, and solidarity with those who wait for such healing—whether in this life or in the life to come.

Testimonies from same-sex attracted Christians who abide by Scripture's prohibition on same-sex sex:

1. Christopher Yuan (same-sex attracted and single), professor of ministry at Moody Bible Institute <http://www.christopheryuan.com/main/index.html>
2. Rosaria Butterfield (same-sex attracted and in a mixed orientation marriage), former professor of English at Syracuse University and current minister <http://rosariabutterfield.com/>
3. Jackie Hill Perry (same-sex attracted and in a mixed orientation marriage), Christian hip-hop artist and founder of G.R.I.P
4. <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/love-letter-to-a-lesbian>
5. Sam Allberry (same-sex attracted and single) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mCLms7J84JY>
6. Wesley Hill (same-sex attracted and single), professor of biblical studies at the Trinity School for Ministry <https://spiritualfriendship.org/author/wahill/>

8. CONCLUSION

We live in a confusing age of pluralism in which how individuals feel can be viewed as more important than the truth. These are tough waters to navigate for the Christian who wants to live authentically and faithfully before God, and especially for the pastor and Bible study teacher who seeks to disciple their congregations and small groups according to God's word.

This document is only a partial aid to the great mission of forming biblically literate and faithful Christ followers in a broken world. On the issue of human sexuality, particularly homosexuality, the Bible's prohibitions against same-sex intercourse have fallen under strong criticism not just from non-believers but even from thoughtful believers who, in the name of trying to minister to the LGBTQ+/SSA community, have tried to revise the church's consistent, two-thousand-year interpretation that same-sex acts are sinful. To assert that the Bible teaches believers not to participate in same-sex acts, and that the church has been correct in interpreting the biblical texts as prohibitive, is not to abandon in any way the call of every Christ follower to lovingly bear witness and minister to same-sex attracted individuals. To the contrary, the Bible's prohibitions are the theological framework for the church to take up the gospel mandate to love and disciple our neighbors so that all might experience the transforming love of God.



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