

The background of the cover is a photograph showing the silhouettes of two people standing on a rocky shore, looking out at the ocean during a sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright, shimmering reflection on the water's surface. The sky is a mix of orange and grey. The title is printed in large, bold, yellow-outlined letters at the top.

# THINKING CHRISTIANLY ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY

Essays From The Pages Of critique By

**Denis Haack**  
**Mardi Keyes**  
and **Wesley Hill**

Edited By Matthew Hundley

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Ransom Fellowship  
Publication

**Getting A Grip** on  
Youth Culture, Adolescence, Homosexuality, Marriage  
by Mardi Keyes

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# Speaking Truth In Love

By Mardi Keyes

There are few issues that have generated more political heat and extreme rhetoric; more anger and hatred; confusion and pain, than the issue of homosexuality. Christianity has come under fire for its traditional teaching that homosexual behavior is intrinsically immoral. For those who believe that a person's homosexual orientation is biologically determined, as much as race and sex are, the traditional Christian teaching seems cruel and intolerant—akin to racism or sexism. It appears to many that the God of the Bible condemns people for expressing the innate identity He gave them.

There are many—Christians and non-Christians—who feel alienated from all camps. They cannot celebrate their homosexual feelings and wholeheartedly embrace a homosexual lifestyle because they are convinced (for any number of reasons) that their homoerotic feelings are the result of something having gone wrong. I have friends in this situation, and my heart goes out to them.

Those who identify with the gay rights movement talk a lot about respecting diversity, but they do not always respect the diversity among those with homosexual feelings. They need to allow space for those who interpret those feelings as the result of something having gone wrong...including those who seek help to change.

Richard Hays, a New Testament scholar, wrote about his best friend from college, who spent a week with his family shortly before dying of AIDS. Hays writes: “(Gary) was angry at the self-affirming gay Christian groups, because he regarded his own situation as more complex and tragic than their stance could acknowledge. He also worried that the gay subculture encouraged homosexual believers to ‘draw their identity from their sexuality’ and thus to shift the ground of their identity subtly and idolatrously away from God.

“For more than 20 years, Gary had grappled with his homosexuality, experiencing it as a compulsion and an affliction. Now, as he faced death, he wanted to talk it all through again from the beginning, because he knew my love for him and trusted me to speak without dissembling...In particular, Gary wanted to discuss the biblical passages that deal with homosexual acts...

“He had read hopefully through the standard bibliography of the burgeoning movement advocating the acceptance of homosexuality in the church...In the end, he came away disappointed, believing that these authors, despite their good intentions, had imposed a wishful interpretation on the biblical passages... Gary, as a homosexual Christian, believed that their writings did justice neither to the biblical texts nor to the depressing reality of the gay subculture that he had moved in and out of for 20 years.”<sup>1</sup>

Hays writes that both he and Gary were frustrated that “the public discussion of this matter has been dominated by insistently ideological voices: on one side, gay rights activists demanding the church’s unqualified acceptance of homosexuality; on the other, unqualified homophobic condemnation of homosexual Christians.” Hays wrote this article, after Gary’s death, in the hope that it would “foster compassionate and carefully reasoned theological reflection within the community of faith.” I have quoted Hays because both here and in his studies on the Bible’s teaching about homosexuality, he expresses so well the spirit with which I have attempted to reflect on this terribly sensitive issue.

Let me start by pointing out that there are enough differences between male homosexuals (gay men) and lesbians that they should not automatically be lumped together, even though the two groups are often political allies. For example: few men are aware of choosing to be gay. Many women are not either, but a significant number of women “convert” to lesbianism, sometimes after years of marriage and raising children. For radical feminists, lesbianism can be a political choice, motivated more by feminist ideology than by an exclusive sexual attraction to women. For them, lesbianism is the strongest possible statement of contempt for men (or of their irrelevance). While many women become lesbians after experiencing abuse by men, there are also compelling ideas that draw feminists to embrace lesbianism. Obviously, to communicate with these women, we need to understand their thinking. We must also be prepared to face the uncomfortable fact that many of them



grew up in families and churches where they experienced Christianity as bad news for women.

### **The Debate Among Christians**

A growing number of scholars now claim that the Bible passages traditionally used to censure all homosexual behavior have been misunderstood and cannot legitimately be applied to the contemporary moral debate about homosexuality. These revisionist scholars include Catholics and Protestants, including some from an Evangelical background, like Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Mollenkott who together wrote *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?*

What unites these people is the conviction that Scripture nowhere teaches that homosexual behavior is intrinsically, and therefore always, wrong. They admit that the few biblical texts referring to homosexual acts all express disapproval, but it is argued that in each case there is something in the context that makes that particular expression of homosexuality immoral. For example: attempted gang rape or inhospitality in Sodom (Genesis 19), idolatry and ritual defilement in the Old Testament Holiness Code (Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13), lustful promiscuity in Romans (1:24-27), and pederasty (the sexual relationship of adult men with boys) in Corinth (1 Cor 6:9-11) and Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:9-10). They argue that what is censored in the Bible is not homosexuality itself, but only abusive, exploitive, uncommitted, or in other ways destructive expressions of it.

The question under debate is: *Does the Bible teach that homosexual behavior is intrinsically wrong no matter what the context and personal motivation?*—OR (as with heterosexuality)—*Does its rightness or wrongness depend on the specific context and motivation of the people involved?* I don't have the space to analyze each of the Biblical references to homosexuality, so I will focus on Romans 1 because this passage clearly addresses the intrinsic moral status of homosexuality.

Romans 1:24-27: "Therefore, God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

"Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion."

Paul's reference to homosexual behavior in Romans 1 appears in the context of his sweeping theological analysis of the fallen condition of humanity. The widespread practice of homosexuality in the pagan world is cited as evidence that human beings are in rebellion against the Creator.<sup>2</sup> Their exchange of natural sexual

relations for unnatural reflects their exchange of the true God for idols. Paul is not arguing in a case-by-case way that every individual homosexual has consciously and willfully rejected God, rather he is making a sweeping diagnosis of the fallen human condition, and some of its tragic consequences.

The most influential revisionist scholar is the late Catholic Yale historian, John Boswell, author of *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* and *Same Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe*. According to Boswell, Romans 1 isn't talking about homosexuals at all. He writes, "There is no clear condemnation of homosexual acts in the verses in question." Instead, Paul is condemning individual heterosexuals who go against ("exchange") their own "natural" heterosexual inclinations to engage in homoerotic behavior.<sup>3</sup> Boswell contends that to Paul, "nature" did not mean a universal moral order, but "the personal nature of the (individual) pagans in question."

There are two problems with this view. First of all, men who commit homosexual acts because they are "consumed with passion" or "inflamed with lust" for other men, are by any normal definition homosexual, not heterosexual. Paul is condemning homosexual acts committed by men with an erotic attraction to other men. He is describing men who are homosexual—psychologically and behaviorally. Secondly, Boswell's argument depends on ignoring or rejecting the most likely meaning of the Greek phrase *para physin* (unnatural) in favor of his own idiosyncratic meaning. *Para physin*

was a common “stock phrase” or literary convention used by Graeco-Roman (Stoic) Moralists and Hellenistic Jews [4] and had the accepted meaning of against or contrary to nature, frequently used to designate homosexual acts as immoral, in contrast to heterosexual acts, which were natural or according to nature. To Paul and his audience, nature did refer to a “universal moral order.” Furthermore, Jewish writers, like Paul’s contemporary, Josephus, specifically associated the natural with God’s Creation and Law.

Robin Scroggs, in *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, argues that Paul’s clear denunciation of homosexual acts in Romans 1 refers only to pederasty, the predominant model of homosexuality in Paul’s culture. Pederasty was an intrinsically exploitive, temporary, and unequal relationship between an adult male and a pre-adolescent boy (often a slave).<sup>5</sup> Scroggs argues that the contemporary gay Christian model of mutual, consenting, monogamous adult homosexual partnerships is so different that the N.T. teaching simply cannot be applied to it.

It is probably true that pederasty was in the forefront of Paul’s mind, but he explicitly condemns the homoerotic element (male with male) not the pederastic element (man with boy) of the sexual practice. And the fact that Paul explicitly included female same-sex behavior in his condemnation indicates that he had more in mind than pederasty. This is the only biblical reference to lesbianism, and the Graeco-Roman texts rarely refer to it. The fact that Paul departed so dramatically from the literary conventions by including lesbianism

baffles Scroggs because of his insistence that Paul “could only have had pederasty (an exclusively male phenomenon) in mind.” [6] But if Paul is condemning all homosexuality as contrary to the universal created nature of things, then the inclusion of lesbianism is not at all surprising. It is perfectly fitting.

I believe Scroggs, Boswell, and others miss the obvious in this passage: Paul uses homosexuality, in and of itself, as an illustration of the moral confusion and unrighteousness that comes from refusing to acknowledge the Creator who, as Jesus said, “made them male and female at the beginning, and said, ‘For this reason a man shall...be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’”(Mt. 19.4-5). Marriage between a man and a woman, two complementary equals, was established at creation as the only legitimate context for sexual intimacy.

In Romans I, Paul establishes the intrinsic immorality of homosexual behavior, irrespective of social context, personal motivation or anything else. This means that when Paul condemns pederasty (in 1 Cor 6:9-11) he not only condemns the exploitation involved in that practice, (which he surely hated), but also the homoeroticism itself. Paul’s teachings must therefore be taken seriously by Christians and applied (with love, care and sensitivity) in every culture to whatever model of homosexuality emerges.

## **Implications of the Bible’s Teaching**

Homosexual behavior is wrong. But it is not the worst sin. It is not even singled out as the worst sexual sin. And it does not set people apart as sub-human or some kind of moral freaks. In dealing with this issue, two mandatory Christian attitudes are essential: humility and love.

First humility. It is scandalous when heterosexual Christians rant and rave about homosexual sin as a detestable abomination to God, while excusing themselves of other sins the Bible calls abominations—like lying, pride, stirring up dissension (or gossip), dishonest business practices and injustice in the law courts.<sup>7</sup> These things are also detestable to God. Furthermore, human nature is such that, given the circumstances, any of us could be tempted to commit sins, sexual or otherwise, that we now consider ourselves incapable of.

In Romans 1, Paul sets up what Richard Hays calls a “homiletical sting operation. The passage builds to a crescendo of condemnation ‘against those wicked pagans...’ But then, in Romans 2:1, the sting strikes: ‘Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself....’ All people—Jews and Greeks, Christians and non-Christians, heterosexuals and homosexuals stand in radical need of God’s mercy.”<sup>8</sup>

The second mandatory Christian attitude is love: Jesus says we must love our neighbor as ourselves, including our homosexual neighbor. James wrote that we cannot praise God and with the same tongue curse men and women who are made in God's likeness. Gay bashing and jokes are sinful and reveal unreality and hypocrisy in our praise of God.

We're commanded to show hospitality, literally to "love the stranger." God's word does not say: welcome people into your homes, lives and churches, except of course homosexuals. Paul even rebuked the Corinthian Christians for refusing to associate with sexually immoral non-Christians (1 Cor. 5:9). He said we would have to leave the world to avoid them, and that is not an option for Christians! We must be salt and light in the world, with non-Christian friends. If we try to walk the delicate line of loving practicing homosexuals without condoning their sexual practice, we will be accused of homophobia by those who demand acceptance and even celebration of homosexuality. Listen to the words of Black feminist bell hooks: "In the past year, I talked with a black woman Baptist minister, who though concerned about feminist issues, expressed very negative attitudes about homosexuality, because, she explained, the Bible teaches that it is wrong. Yet in her daily life she is tremendously supportive and caring of gay friends. When I asked her to explain this contradiction, she argued that it was not a contradiction, that the Bible also teaches her to identify with those who are exploited or oppressed." [9] This woman is a good example to us, yet bell hooks

goes on to accuse her of “homophobic attitudes” that “encourage persecution of gay people” in the black churches.

### **Homosexual Orientation in a Biblical Perspective**

We must understand homosexuality in light of the brokenness and abnormality of living in a fallen world. All of the Bible’s references to homosexuality specify homosexual behavior or acts; there is no Hebrew or Greek word for a “homosexual person” as such. It cannot be denied that some people can only remember, as far back as they can recall, being attracted to the same sex. They are not aware of ever having had a choice in the matter. This raises a terribly troubling question. Isn’t God cruel and unfair to prohibit homosexual behavior for those with a homosexual orientation they did not choose?

We must never minimize the suffering experienced by those with persistent homosexual desires, who struggle to be celibate. At the same time, ever since the fall, every one of us has been born with an orientation, or predisposition, to sin which we have not consciously or freely chosen. Yet God holds us morally accountable for our acts. Paul puts it very strongly. “We are slaves of sin” (Romans 6:17)—so much so that we need redemption, a word that means emancipation from slavery. We have the “first fruits” of redemption, but our struggle against sin will not be over until the final redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:23). Even if some people are biologically predisposed to homosexuality—that is not the same thing as causation—it does not determine behavior.



We are, in fact, in deep trouble if we believe that a biological predisposition for certain behavior (aggression for example) frees us from moral responsibility for our actions. Pre-Menstrual Syndrome affects some women dramatically. That does not excuse them morally if they abuse their children when suffering from PMS. The fact that the Bible speaks of homosexual behavior but not homosexual persons should encourage us all. God does not define us by, or stigmatize us for our particular temptations (sinful dispositions or orientations), whatever they are! To define any person by their sexual orientation is to radically reduce a splendid Image bearer of God.

Thankfully, God sees everything, and understands the combination of factors—biology, environment, and choice—that influence our behavior. And He offers forgiveness and help to anyone who genuinely asks Him. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Paul says that some of the Christians in Corinth had been practicing homosexuals, but, by God's grace, were no longer. The same is true for many today. There are no "quick fixes," and Christians must beware of promising total healing for any problem in this still fallen world. Nevertheless, it is a fact that a great variety of therapeutic approaches have helped many homosexuals change both in orientation and practice.

Many find help in one of the ex-gay ministries, but it is also crucial for Christians struggling against homosexual temptation to have the love and support of a local church or Christian community, and particularly, close, affectionate, non-erotic friendships with

heterosexual people of the same sex (healthy opposite sex friendships are also important).

### **Homosexuality, an Urgent Apologetics Issue**

My husband and I speak on secular college campuses quite frequently, and our three sons have attended secular liberal arts colleges in New England. There is no question that in the non-Christian academic and media world today, homosexuality is the single issue that Christians feel most intimidated by, and are most scorned for. Where tolerance is believed to be the highest virtue, Christians who believe homosexual practice is wrong are perceived to be on the lowest moral ground.

In terms of public opinion, the higher the prevalence of homosexuality, the more it appears to be just one among other sexual lifestyles—as morally neutral as being left-handed. The media, which tends to be strongly committed to “normalizing” homosexuality, makes the most of this, which is probably why we still hear the claim that 1 out of 10 people are homosexuals, even though that figure has been completely discredited. The figures for exclusive homosexuality are more like 1 to 3% for white males and half of that for females. But in fact, the prevalence of homosexuality has no logical bearing on the question of its morality. One can never argue from an “is” to an “ought.” For example, pride, greed and lust are extremely common in our culture, but that does not make them morally neutral or morally right. According to Genesis 19:4-5, the percentage of homosexual men in Sodom was far higher than in

America today: “all the men, from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old” demanded to have sex with Lot’s guests. If we allow the Apostle Paul’s argument in Romans 1 to interpret the story of Sodom, then a high incidence of homosexual behavior does the opposite of normalizing it. It is evidence that a culture is in a state of significant confusion, distortion, and rebellion against God’s created order.

The Christian faith is unthinkable for many people today because of its teaching that for homosexuals, there is no morally legitimate way to express their sexuality, whereas for heterosexuals, there is at least the possibility of enjoying sex within marriage. This is true, but Francis Schaeffer wrote in 1968: “If a person who has homophile tendencies, or even has practiced homosexuality, is helped in a deep way, then they may marry. On the other hand, there are a certain number of cases who are real homophiles. In this case they must face the dilemma of a life without sexual fulfillment. We may cry with them concerning this, but we must not let the self-pity get too deep, because the unmarried girl who has strong sexual desires, and no one asks her to marry has the same problem. In both cases this is surely a part of the abnormality of the fallen world. And in both cases what is needed is people’s understanding while the church, in compassion and understanding, helps the individual in every way possible.”<sup>10</sup>

The same can be said of single men, widows and widowers, divorced and those who are sexually incapable. Teaching that

distorts the Bible by making an idol of marriage (including sexual fulfillment within marriage) is not only false teaching, but is extremely unhelpful to all single people—some of whom may never marry. There is no denying that some Christians are “homophobic,” in the way that term is defined by the gay movement. But the Bible’s prohibition against homosexual practice is not “homophobic.” It does not single out homosexual behavior for censure, nor does it condone hatred toward any person. In fact, the moral line the Bible draws is not between heterosexual behavior (good) and homosexual behavior (bad). All sexual activity that is not consensual, and in the context of heterosexual, monogamous marriage is immoral, and falls short of God’s norms.

This teaching is particularly difficult to swallow in an individualistic culture like ours, which has made sexual freedom into an idol. Our whole culture screams at us that to be human, to avoid neurosis, etc., everybody must be sexually active. Too many Christians have their own version of that lie by treating sex within marriage in an idolatrous way. At the same time, ironically, we are increasingly seeing the tragic and destructive fall-out of the idolatry of sex: a soaring divorce rate, unwanted pregnancies; abortions; single mothers and fatherless children; a whole array of STD’s (at epidemic levels on many college campuses today), sexual addictions; and of course, AIDS—which due to such high levels of promiscuity among gay men, has taken a particular toll in that population. All this is what comes from so-called “freedom!”

Christians need to challenge our culture's idolatry of sexual freedom. In the first century, when pagans were converted to Christ, it was in the area of sexual morality that their lives tended to change most quickly and dramatically. And the pagans marveled at the Christians' sexual freedom, defined as freedom from being driven by their passions, heterosexual and homosexual. It was a freedom that empowered them to live as chaste when single, and monogamously when married. This kind of freedom benefits the whole community—men, women and children—and protects the vulnerable, those who are hurt the most by individual sexual freedom run wild.

### **Commending the Bible's Sex Ethic**

One of the reasons a strong gay rights movement has emerged is that over the last decades, heterosexual marriage has lost its attractiveness and moral authority—both of which are needed to make the normativity of marriage persuasive and plausible. Many homosexual men and lesbian women quite reasonably point their fingers at the breakdown and ugliness of so many marriages today, and the abuse of women and children, which many of them have experienced first hand, in the so-called traditional family. It is not surprising that many are commending alternative “family forms.” Bill Bennett has astutely pointed out that conservatives are in a panic about the issue of homosexual marriage while virtually ignoring the issue of divorce, which has been far more widespread and devastating to our culture. The breakdown of heterosexual marriage has come in large part from the idolatry of individual freedom and unwillingness to live within God's marriage norms.

Homosexual marriage is just another step further down that same road.

This poses a huge challenge to us who believe that faithful, monogamous, heterosexual marriage is the Creator's norm, and is good for us. We, of all people, must be demonstrating that. This must mean much more than living with prohibitions. Our marriages and family lives must positively demonstrate the goodness of God's sexual and family norms; they must be beautiful, attractive and life affirming for men, women and children. They must also be welcoming to others—including homosexuals—and a source of rich blessing in society. Celibate singleness must also be seen as a good, positive and productive call, as it was in the lives of Jesus, Paul, and other disciples, both men and women (Mt 19:12, 1 Cor 7, Mary, Martha and Lazarus, etc.). If these things are not living realities, we cannot expect our verbal apologetics for Biblical faith and sexual morality to be persuasive.

These are sensitive and complicated issues. Christians need to think them through in a sane and careful way and provide an alternative to the polarized rhetoric from extremists on all sides. This is one of the most important apologetics issues the Christian Church is facing today, and it is not likely to go away soon.

I have only touched on a few of the challenges surrounding this terribly difficult issue. We need God's grace to walk the tightrope, following His word with humility in all that it teaches, loving those

who disagree with us, and reaching out in compassion to those men and women who are suffering the sad and tragic consequences of living outside the created sexual boundaries that God gave us for our good.

## SOURCES

<sup>1</sup> Richard B. Hays, *Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies, Sojourners*, (July 20, 1991), pp.17-21.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell's Exegesis of Romans 1," *Journal of Religious Ethics* (Nov 14, 1986) p.189.

<sup>3</sup> John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the 14th Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Phoenix Edition, 1981) p. 109.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural..." p. 192-194. Josephus (whose life overlapped with the apostle Paul) wrote, 'The law (Lev. 18 and 20) recognizes no sexual connections except for the natural (kata physin) union of man and wife...But it abhors the intercourse of males with males.'

<sup>5</sup> Even in those rare homosexual relationships (for example, between same age young men) that "stretched" the normal

pederastic model, inequality was still built in. One always took the passive role, for the pleasure of the other who took the active role.

<sup>6</sup> He concedes that the “negative judgment made on both female as well as male homosexuality...could be considered a general indictment” (p. 121); and that Paul’s “general language” for men (males with males, as Leviticus stated it, with no age difference indicated) could be too. But he continues to insist that Paul “could only have had pederasty in mind” (p. 122).

<sup>7</sup> Pr. 17:15 “acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent” [8] Richard Hays, “Awaiting the Redemption of our Bodies,” *Sojourners*, (July 20, 1991) p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> Bell Hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1989) pp. 122-123.

<sup>10</sup> Excerpted from *Letters of Francis A. Schaeffer*, Lane T. Dennis, ed., (Westchester, Il., Crossway Books, 1985).



# **“A Few Like You”: Will The Church Be The Church For Homosexual Christians?**

by Wesley Hill

In 1947, the great English poet W. H. Auden wrote a letter to his friend Ursula Niebuhr in which he confessed: “I don’t think I’m over-anxious about the future, though I do quail a bit before the possibility that it will be lonely. When I see you surrounded by family and its problems, I alternate between self-congratulation and bitter envy.” The root of Auden’s fear of loneliness and his envy of the comforts of family is not hard to uncover: Auden was a homosexual Christian. And this dual identity created a tension for him: As a Christian of a relatively traditional sort, he believed homosexuality missed the mark of God’s good design for human flourishing. But as a homosexually oriented person, despite his Christian beliefs, he craved intimacy and companionship with other men. Caught on the horns of a dilemma like that, what was he to do with his loneliness?

Four years before writing to Niebuhr, Auden corresponded with another friend, Elizabeth Mayer. He described to her how he felt inescapably “different” from others because of his preference for same-sex relations: “There are days when the knowledge that there will never be a place which I can call home, that there

will never be a person with whom I shall be one flesh, seems more than I can bear.”

I am drawn to these haunting confessions of Auden’s because I, too, am a homosexual Christian. Since puberty, I’ve been conscious of an exclusive attraction to persons of my own sex. Though I have never been in a gay relationship as Auden was, I have also never experienced the “healing” or transformation of my sexual orientation that some formerly gay Christians profess to have received. But I remain a Christian, a follower of Jesus. And, like Auden, I accept the Christian teaching that homosexuality is a tragic sign that things are “not the way they’re supposed to be.” Reading New Testament texts like Romans 1:26-27 and 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 through the lens of time-honored Christian reflection on the meaning and purpose of marriage between a man and a woman, I find myself—much as I might wish things to be otherwise—compelled to abstain from homosexual practice.

As a result, I feel, more often than not, desperately lonely.

In recent years I have made it a point to read as many biographies of homosexual Christians as I can find. (“We read to know we’re not alone,” as the characters in the movie *Shadowlands* say.) Invariably, they talk about loneliness.

Henri Nouwen, to take one example, the late Catholic priest and popular author on spirituality who was also a celibate gay man, wrote this in one of his last journal entries before his death: “[I have an] inner wound that is so easily touched and starts bleeding again... I don’t think this wound—this immense need for affection, and this immense fear of rejection—will ever go away.”

Philip Yancey describes the reason for Nouwen’s loneliness:

*[Knowing about his homosexuality,] I go back through Nouwen’s writings and sense the deeper, unspoken agony that underlay what he wrote about rejection, about the wound of loneliness that never heals, about friendships that never satisfy.... Nouwen sought counseling from a center that ministered to homosexual men and women, and he listened as gay friends proposed several options. He could remain a celibate priest and “come out” as a gay man, which would at least release the secret he bore in anguish. He could declare himself, leave the priesthood, and seek a gay companion. Or he could remain a priest publicly and develop private gay relationships. Nouwen carefully weighed each course and rejected it. Any public confession of his identity would hurt his ministry, he feared. The last two options seemed impossible for one who had taken a vow of*

*celibacy, and who looked to the Bible and to Rome for guidance on sexual morality. Instead, he decided to keep living with the wound. Again and again, he decided.*

Yancey concludes, poignantly: “I know of no more difficult path for a person of integrity to tread.”

The same theme—loneliness—is sounded over and over in the biographies of homosexual Christians I’ve read. Auden’s, Nouwen’s, many others’ I can’t name here—it comes up in all of them. And it is my experience.

Perhaps the greatest unresolved question of my life is, How can I give and receive love, how can I experience intimacy and mutual self-giving commitment, if I am not permitted to marry a person of the gender to which I am attracted?

With every year that passes, I realize more and more that I don’t want to live life on my own. More than anything, I would like to have a life partner. But I keep circling back to the conclusion Nouwen arrived at: fulfilling that desire seems impossible, so long as I continue looking to Scripture to guide my moral choices.

When I quoted earlier from W. H. Auden’s letter to Elizabeth

Mayer, I stopped mid-sentence. Here's the full quotation: "There are days when the knowledge that there will never be a place which I can call home, that there will never be a person with whom I shall be one flesh, seems more than I can bear, and if it wasn't for you, and a few—how few—like you, I don't think I could." Mayer was a supportive friend to Auden, one who helped him bear his loneliness. He felt wouldn't have been able to endure it otherwise.

I know well-meaning Christians who often remind me, "God's love for you is better than any love you might find in a human relationship." While I believe this is true in an ultimate and profound sense, putting it this way seems to set up a false dichotomy. A statement more in sync with the drift of the New Testament might go something like this: "God's love for us is expressed and experienced mainly *through the medium of* human relationships."

Jesus, after all, reminds Peter and his other disciples that in choosing to follow him, they are not asked to give up human community altogether. Although the demands of discipleship may entail putting their commitment to the Kingdom of God ahead of cherished familial ties (see Matthew 10:37-38), Jesus' disciples also have the assurance of being welcomed into a new family, one knit together not biologically but spiritually

(Mark 10:29-30). Similarly, the apostle Paul holds up a model of mutual burden-bearing as the template for Christian living (see Galatians 6:2). “Above all, keep loving one another earnestly,” adds Peter. “Show hospitality to one another” (1 Peter 4:8, 9).

In the subsequent, post-New-Testament era of the Church, whenever Christians took on vocations of celibacy, they did so most often in community—in monastic orders, for example. (Peter Brown’s book *The Body and Society* tells this story magnificently.) Those committed to a life of sexual abstinence recognized that such a commitment would best be undertaken not in isolation but with others and would be sustained by the rhythms of corporate worship and the mundane tasks of providing for one another’s daily needs.

In light of all this, I would echo Auden’s sentiment: If it weren’t for other people, I don’t think I’d make it. For me to live faithfully before God as a sexually-abstinent homosexual Christian must be to trust that God in Christ can meet me in my loneliness not simply with God’s own love but with God’s love *mediated through the human faces and arms of my fellow believers*.

When I graduated from college, I had talked with no one else my age about my sexuality. One night shortly after graduation, sitting on the dirty carpeted floor of the bedroom of a dingy

bachelor pad in a circle of guy friends, I came so close to breaking down and asking them for help and for prayer. A black light was glowing, incense was burning on a shelf, one of the guys was strumming a guitar, and we were shooting the breeze after a spaghetti dinner. Knees tucked under my chin, I listened as someone brought up the topic of homosexuality. I felt my heart start to pound and my palms grow sweaty. “Have any of you ever had a gay or lesbian friend?” he asked. Another one of the guys, Charlie, said yes, he had had a close friend in college who had wrestled with homosexuality. “He and I would go climbing together and talk about it,” Charlie said. “Mainly I listened. We would get excited when he hadn’t looked at porn for a day or two—or even just for several hours. And we would talk about the grace that God always held out to us because of Jesus.”

As I listened to Charlie describe his relationship with his friend, I heard what seemed to me at that time to be a rare compassion, understanding, and respect in his voice. A few weeks later I decided to take a risk and trust that that same sensitivity might be there for me. After an anxious dinner at an Indian restaurant, I finally blurted out, “Could we talk about something before we head home?”

“Sure,” Charlie said. Did he wonder why my voice was shaking?

He pulled off the road, parked his Explorer in an empty lot, and turned off the engine.

“There’s something I’d like you to know about me....” I began weakly. I told him that I knew I was gay. I had known since puberty or soon after and had probably experienced some foretastes of my sexual orientation even as a child. I told him I had prayed for healing. I said I just wanted Christian friends who would be there for me, who would help me figure out how to live with a tension and confusion that felt overwhelming.

We talked that night until we got too cold, then Charlie started the engine again, prayed for me, and drove me back to my apartment. It was the very first time I had shared my deepest secret with a peer, and I felt some relief. The burden of loneliness wasn’t quite so heavy that night as it had been before.

After that, I grew less timid. I began to take chances on my fellow Christians. I shared my story with other people I went to church with and began a process of learning to wrestle with my homosexuality and loneliness in a community. If it weren’t for these few—how few...



In a recent reflection on contemporary society, novelist Marilynne Robinson posed the simple question: “will people shelter and nourish and humanize one another?” Read in light of the Christian Church’s relationship to its gay members, her question takes on an added poignancy. Will the Church shelter and nourish and humanize those who are deeply lonely and struggling desperately to remain faithful?

# **Discernment Exercise: Loving Lesbian Neighbors**

By Denis Haack

As Christians we believe that living faithfully before the face of God includes treating non-Christians as persons made in the image of God. As precious individuals for whom Christ died and for whose salvation we are called to be willing to give up everything—our reputations, our stuff, our time, even our lives. This is part of what we mean by following Christ, and is an implication of the doctrine of the Incarnation. Yet truth be told, this is easier with some non-Christians than with others. Some have lifestyles we find objectionable, or beliefs we find repulsive, or sins with which we are uncomfortable. So, though it may not be intentional on our part, we find ourselves treating some according to their sin (or our feelings about that particular sin), rather than simply as people bearing God's likeness. This is something Jesus never did, which may be one reason why sinners flocked to him.

With that in mind, consider this situation requiring discernment.

A Christian student moves with his wife and young son into a new apartment. They pray they can be a light for the gospel to their neighbors, and set out to meet and befriend the others living in their building. Among the friendliest is the family living in the apartment next door to them, who welcome them warmly, inviting them to dinner, and happily accepting an invitation in return. The family in

question, it turns out, consists of a lesbian couple and their two adopted children. They consider marriage to be a life-long commitment (“divorce is not an option”), believe in monogamy (“sexual promiscuity is wrong”), remember their wedding ceremony with fond seriousness, and are delighted to learn their new Christian neighbor has taken some seminary counseling courses in marriage and family. Though not interested in “traditional Christianity,” they are very interested in spirituality. They ask the Christian couple to pray for them, and say they would love to talk more, especially about how to build a strong family and deepen their relationship. After several more contacts, like the kind that naturally occurs between neighbors living on the same floor in an apartment building, they offer to exchange babysitting.

Now, just what does Christian faithfulness look like in this situation? Since living in a pluralistic culture means that we should expect to face such situations, it would be wise to think the issues through biblically ahead of time. Whatever faithfulness looks like, it surely is not merely reacting to the situation when it arises.

## **QUESTIONS**

1. What is your first (knee-jerk) reaction to this situation? Why do you think you reacted this way? What similar situations have you encountered or heard about?
2. If the Christian reports that he doesn't feel free to bring this up to

his pastor or to the small group his wife and he are in, how would you respond? Why might many evangelicals not be open to discussing this with sensitivity? To what extent does “thinking Christianly” about these questions require all believers to come to identical conclusions as to what faithfulness looks like?

3. How would you pray for the lesbian couple? Are there things that you would not pray for them? Why?

4. If you would be unwilling to give them advice on building their relationship, why are you unwilling to do so? Write out a continuum as to the sorts of advice that they might ask for, and where, if anywhere, you would draw the line on granting help. (Advice on colors with which to paint their dining room, on establishing a household budget, on setting bedtimes for children, etc.) Why would you draw this line? How helpful is the metaphor of “drawing a line” in this scenario? To what extent are you comfortable with fellow believers drawing very different lines or suggesting a different metaphor?

5. To what extent would you be willing to share with them positive experiences from your own marriage as to how to build a strong relationship? Your failures? Why? Would it make any difference if the non-Christian neighbors were heterosexual? Why or why not? Let’s assume the neighbors were heterosexual but confessing materialists (and therefore according to Colossians 3:5, idolaters). Which sin is greater? How should this influence our thinking and

choices? Why? What biblical passages are relevant to sorting out this issue? (Be sure your list involves not merely texts dealing with marriage and homosexuality, but also with Christian interaction with non-Christians in a fallen world.) Also see “Homosexuality: Speaking the Truth in Love” by Mardi Keyes.

6. Would you consider exchanging baby-sitting with these neighbors? Why or why not?

7. Though becoming Christians would require this couple to refrain from sexual sin (as it does all believers), would it require them to give up their children for adoption? Why or why not?

8. The church is called to be uncompromising on sin, yet to be the most welcoming and safe place for sinners. To what extent have we fulfilled this calling? To what extent is this true of our homes? What might we do to better maintain this biblical balance of truth and love? How did Jesus demonstrate it?

# **Discernment Exercise: Questions for Dr. Laura**

by Denis Haack

Though biblical illiteracy tends to be rather widespread—even among believers—many unbelievers know enough about the Bible to raise questions about how believers understand and interpret the Scriptures. These questions deserve a thoughtful answer, which means it would be wise for Christians to reflect together on how to explain their hermeneutic (how they go about interpreting the Scriptures) to non-Christians in a pluralistic culture.

A recent example of such questions concerns the controversy surrounding some of Laura Schlessinger's comments about homosexuality on her daily radio talk program. Apparently, Dr. Laura used Old Testament texts while speaking against homosexual behavior. In response, a listener wrote the following letter, in essence challenging what they consider to be her selective, and thus inconsistent, use of biblical law:

Dear Dr. Laura,

Thank you for doing so much to educate people regarding God's law. I have learned a great deal from you and try to share that knowledge with as many people as I can.

When someone tries to defend the homosexual lifestyle, for example, I simply remind him that

Leviticus 18:22 clearly states it to be an abomination.

I do need some advise from you, however, regarding some of the specific laws and how best to follow them.

1. When I burn a bull on the altar as sacrifice, I know it creates a pleasing odor for the Lord (Leviticus 1:9). The problem is my neighbors. They claim the odor is not pleasing to them. How should I deal with this?

2. I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as it suggests in Exodus (21:7). In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?

3. Leviticus 25:44 states that I may buy slaves from the nations that are around us. A friend of mine claims this applies to Mexicans but not Canadians. Can you clarify?

4. I have a neighbor who insists on working the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly states he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself?

5. A friend of mine feels that even though eating shellfish is an abomination (Leviticus 10:10), it is a lesser abomination than homosexuality. I don't agree. Can you settle this?

6. Leviticus 20:20 states that I may not approach the altar of God if I have a defect in my sight. I have to admit that I wear reading glasses. Does my vision have to be 20/20, or is there some wiggle-room here?

7. I know that I am allowed no contact with a woman while she is in her period of uncleanness

(Leviticus 15:19–24). The problem is, how do I know? I have tried asking, but most women take offense.

I know you have studied these things extensively, so I am confident you can help. Thank you again for reminding us that God's word is eternal and unchanging.

Sincerely,  
A Concerned Individual

There are at least two issues here that are worthy of reflection by discerning Christians.

The first is the actual controversy surrounding Dr. Laura:

- Were her comments wise?
- Was her tone appropriate?
- Is talk radio a good forum for such topics?
- Should Christians support her?
- Why or why not?

The second issue, on which I'd like you to think about, is:

- What response would we give if similar questions were raised by a non-Christian friend who learned we took the Bible's teaching seriously.

## QUESTIONS

1. Have such questions about how you interpreted the Bible (especially God's law) ever been raised to you by non-Christians?



What specifically did they raise? Were you satisfied by your response? Why or why not?

2. Some would read the letter written to Dr. Laura as being sarcastic or cynical in contrast to being simply an honest question from a friend. Should this matter to the Christian? Should it effect our response? Why or why not?

3. What principles of interpretation do you use to understand and apply Old Testament law? If you can not clearly verbalize such a set of principles, what specific plans should you make to rectify this lack? If you can verbalize a set of principles, where did you get them? How do you know they are a proper approach to Scripture as God's word? What New Testament texts would you point to as teaching and illustrating these principles?

4. How would you explain your principles of interpretation to an unbeliever using terms they might be able to understand?

5. To what extent does your life demonstrate a thoughtful, joyful, and life-affirming approach to understanding and being faithful to God's moral law?

6. How would you respond to an non-Christian who argues that since few Christians seem at all concerned to take their God's law concerning Sabbath rest seriously, they are hypocritical to be incensed when unbelievers make films depicting sexuality or

blasphemy? Or when they protest legalizing homosexual marriages?

## **SOURCE**

The letter to Dr. Laura, originally posted on the Internet, was reproduced in “A Bible Quiz for Dr. Laura (no you can’t turn the other ear)” by Brian Lambert in the Saint Paul (MN) Pioneer Press (Tuesday June 13, 2000) page F1.

# Responding to Questions About Dr. Laura

By Denis Haack

## THE ISSUE NEEDING DISCERNMENT

In a previous article we raised an exercise in discernment involving questions about Old Testament law. It revolved around a letter posted on the Internet addressed to radio personality Dr. Laura Schlessinger in response to statements she (apparently) made on her program to the effect that homosexuality was contrary to the law of God. The Internet respondent thanks her for reminding everyone that “Leviticus 18:22 clearly states [homosexuality] to be an abomination,” but says he needs advice on understanding other texts. “I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as it suggests in Exodus (21:7),” he writes. “In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?” And “A friend of mine feels that even though eating shellfish is an abomination (Leviticus 10:10), it is a lesser abomination than homosexuality. I don’t agree. Can you settle this?” And he lists five more questions in a similar vein.

We said there were at least two issues worth considering here.

First is the controversy surrounding Dr. Laura:

Were her comments wise?

Was her tone appropriate?

Is talk radio a good forum for such topics?

Should Christians support her? Why or why not?

And second:

What response we would give if similar questions were raised by a non-Christian friend who learned we took the Old Testament's teaching seriously?

In this column I will sketch out some reflections on the first of the two issues.

Christian apologetics—especially in the sense of providing answers to the questions and challenges raised by non-Christian friends—is not a matter of having snappy responses to win an argument. It is instead an honest effort within a conversation to provide creative and meaningful reasons for our faith. The goal is not to win a debate, but to persuade, to listen, to raise questions and suggest answers, while inviting challenges and taking them seriously. That being the case, please don't read what I write here as a stock response to whip out when the topic of Dr. Laura arises. Rather, read it as my attempt to help us all think and live and speak more Christianly in a society in which talk radio plays such a prominent role in the public square.

## **WHAT I'D PROBABLY SAY**

I didn't hear the program, and in fact have only listened to brief excerpts of Dr. Laura's show on a couple of occasions. As a follower of Jesus though, I find her comments, as you've reported them, to be deeply offensive. Talk radio may be popular, but I doubt that strident voices are all that helpful. In a pluralistic culture when the

very fabric of civility seem to be unraveling, we need to listen and care for one another, even when we disagree, and I don't think that happens on talk radio. Relationships seem to be fragmenting, people seem to be increasingly polarized, and that means we need to tone down the rhetoric, not inflame it. It's fashionable to say we need to tolerate one another, but actually I don't think that's sufficient. Toleration doesn't go far enough. As a follower of Christ I believe I am called to something more radical, more healing, than simply being tolerant. I am called to work for reconciliation, just as Jesus did. To break down barriers, instead of raising them. So, I don't listen to talk radio on principle. I'd rather have a conversation over dinner with friends.

## **HOW I'VE TRIED TO BE DISCERNING**

In trying to think this through and arrive at this response, I've used several basic questions to guide my thinking. My desire is not simply to react—to either the non-Christians raising the challenge nor to Dr. Laura and talk radio—but to be discerning. The questions I'm using are simple yet probing, and together they allow me the opportunity to set the issue within a distinctly Christian perspective. The four questions are a guide for discernment, whether we are responding to a film, an idea, an issue in the news, or to a challenge to our faith.

### **Discernment question #1:**

#### **What's being said—or, what are the facts?**

Many Christians are supportive of Dr. Laura, and usually give similar

reasons when I ask them why they appreciate her program. “She speaks the truth,” they say. “She uses common sense, tells it like it is, lets callers really have it when they need it, and when asked about moral issues, she bases her answers on God’s law in the Old Testament.” I haven’t listened to her enough to know, but let’s assume for the sake of discussion that this is an accurate portrayal of what is broadcast when Dr. Laura is on the air.

**Discernment question #2(a):**

**What’s a Christian response—where do we agree?**

In this post-Christian age, a desire to stand for or proclaim the truth is both noble and necessary. We can hardly expect anyone to take us and our message seriously if our approach to truth is any less rigorous than our Master’s. After all, Christ didn’t merely claim to teach or demonstrate the truth; he claimed something far more radical: he claimed to be the Truth. To this extent, then, we must see Dr. Laura as a co-belligerent, attempting to argue for the truth in a culture which doubts truth is even possible.

**Discernment question #2(b):**

**What’s a Christian response—where do we disagree?**

The Scriptures, however, don’t merely teach us to proclaim the truth. They also teach us that there are times when the truth should not be proclaimed; that just because something is true doesn’t mean it should be said. Jesus taught that there are situations in which it

would be wrong to share aspects of the truth—that doing so would be inappropriate for our listeners, and dishonoring to him. This is seldom taken seriously by believers today, but not because Jesus’ teaching is obscure. Rather, it seems that our passion to proclaim the truth to a lost world overwhelms our willingness to obey that truth ourselves.

“Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs,” Jesus taught in Matthew 7:6. “If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces.” Notice that Christ is not criticizing those he refers to as “dogs” or “swine”—they are simply acting in a way that fits their nature. Dump jewels into a hungry boar’s trough, and he won’t be pleased; if he’s hungry enough he might attack, and if he’s big enough he could very well “tear you to pieces.” The metaphor is apt, as any farmer knows. Jesus is not criticizing the unbeliever for refusing what is sacred, he is warning those to whom he has entrusted his truth not to treat it as less than sacred.

Discernment question #3: Why do we believe this? What Jesus is calling for is a form of discernment, the ability to distinguish carefully those who are prepared to appreciate what we have to offer in the gospel, and those who are not yet ready. Or more accurately, how much of the good news our non-Christian friend is prepared to receive. “A Jew,” Dr. Tasker writes in his commentary on this text, “would not invite a pagan to share his religious feasts, for that would be like throwing meat consecrated for sacrifice to an unclean pariah-

dog. Nor would he risk the jibes of his Gentile neighbors by placing before them spiritual ‘food’ which they could not assimilate; for that would be like trying to feed unclean pigs with pearls, the only result being that the pigs, finding the pearls inedible, trample them under foot and turn savagely upon the donor. Similarly, the truths that Christ taught, his pearls of great price, must not be broadcast indiscriminately to those who would ridicule and despise them, and become increasingly antagonistic.” We are required, then, to treat the gospel as not only true, but precious. Could it be that one reason so few take our message seriously is that we don’t seem to take it seriously enough ourselves?

**Discernment question #4:**

**How do we speak about and live out the truth creatively in a pluralistic and fallen world?**

If they turn on us when we throw pearls to swine, we must not imagine the result to be persecution, for it is not. It is, rather, nothing more than the natural result of treating the truth as less than precious. The opening phrase in the Greek (“Do not give”) is a strong prohibition which means, “Never think of giving.” So, if the question about how we understand God’s law in the Old Testament arises as an honest question raised by an interested friend, they deserve an honest answer. But if the question arises because we have treated the truth as less than sacred, proclaiming it indiscriminately in terms inappropriate to our listeners, they still



deserve an honest answer, but when the conversation is finished we must repent for treating the truth more lightly than it deserves.

Just because something is true is not sufficient reason for it to be said. The truth is sacred, precious beyond our imagining, and Christ expects his followers to act accordingly. And though I have heard so little of Dr. Laura that I wish to speak with great care about her program, as a Christian I find it impossible to support what she and others are doing on talk radio. Talk radio may be a forum where the truth can be proclaimed, but it is not a forum where the preciousness of truth can be safeguarded. As a Christian, therefore, I cannot be supportive of such programs. And I will gladly distance myself from them—even when talking to a person with whom I happen to disagree far more than I do with Dr. Laura on any particular point.

Many of our postmodern friends feel they have considered the claims of Christianity and found them wanting, when all that has happened is that they have heard some tirade by someone claiming to stand for the truth, or been on the receiving end of a regurgitated spiel told without regard for their questions or concerns. They need to hear the truth, certainly, but from someone who loves them enough to invite them home for dinner. Someone who will listen, ask questions, and then listen some more before talking. Someone who loves the truth so deeply that they refuse to reduce it to sound bites. Someone who is eager to share the truth because it has so captured

their heart and mind and imagination that they share it for what it is—as something more precious than life itself.

Questions I might ask my friend...

This is, as I have already stressed, a conversation with a non-Christian, not a debate in which we launch withering arguments against an opponent. That being the case, I would want to ask questions of my challenger. I would want to get to know them better, and try to understand what is behind their challenge. Although I am eager to answer questions—including saying, “I don’t know” or “I’m not sure” when it’s appropriate—I am also eager to listen. My desire must be to treat my challenger as a person of significance, made in God’s image. I ask my questions willing to learn from my non-Christian friend, and willing to admit it when my position, in part or as a whole, is revealed to be contrary to the truth. And I ask them realizing that to the extent their ideas and values are contrary to the truth, that weakness in their world view might, by God’s grace, become increasingly clear as I ask them what they believe, and why. And if such weakness becomes evident, I will not gloat because I know the shame of being wrong, and because regardless of how my challenger conceives of our interaction, it is a conversation between friends, not a debate between enemies.

Here are a few of the questions I would consider raising:

What did you think of Dr. Laura’s statement?

How did it make you feel? Why?

Did you actually hear her statements about homosexuality?

Have you found Christians to be intolerant?

How was their intolerance expressed?

Do you find me intolerant?

If you converted to Christianity today, do you think your life would become larger, fuller, richer, more attractive and creative, more involved with people and culture?

Or do you think your life would be smaller, narrower, more withdrawn, more reactionary, less winsome, less involved with people and culture?

What has convinced you of this?

Do you think Jesus was uncreative or reactionary or negative?

How do you know?

How do you define tolerance? Intolerance?

Since we live in a pluralistic society, who sets the boundaries for intolerance?

If we disagree with someone's beliefs or values, how do we live together in a civil society?

How can we express our disagreement without appearing intolerant?

What ideas or beliefs or values or lifestyles do you find so distasteful, or wrong, or dangerous that they are hard to tolerate? Why?

# Responding to Questions About Old Testament Law

By Denis Haack

Here's the situation: A non-Christian friend asks how I can possibly take Old Testament laws against homosexuality seriously when other laws make provisions I obviously reject—such as buying slaves or stoning someone who works on the Sabbath.

Alert readers may notice this is actually a continuation of a discussion which began in the article, "Questions for Dr. Laura." In that article I raised an exercise in discernment around a letter to Dr. Laura which was posted on the Internet. The writer objected to her appeal to Old Testament law to characterize homosexuality as an "abomination," and asked her advice on other aspects of the law. "I have a neighbor who insists on working the Sabbath," the writer says. "Exodus 35:2 clearly states he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself?" I noted that there were two issues worth discussing. The first involves the controversy surrounding the comments Dr. Laura allegedly made on her radio program—which I addressed in "Responding to Questions About Dr. Laura." The second challenge involves explaining the Christian's approach to Old Testament law in general, and to homosexuality more specifically. Both of these are addressed in this article (on law) and in Mardi Keyes' essay, "Homosexuality: Speaking the Truth in Love."

Please bear in mind that I am approaching this as if it were a conversation with a friend; not merely as a response to the letter addressed to Dr. Laura. I will begin with what I'd probably say to my friend, then give more details (which could be discussed if my friend is interested and the conversation warrants), and finally raise a few questions.

Remember this is supposed to be a conversation. Christian apologetics—especially when responding to challenges raised by non-Christian friends—does not consist merely of winning an argument. It must be, rather, an open-hearted effort within a give-and-take conversation to provide meaningful reasons for our faith. Our goal is not to win a debate, but to listen with care and to speak with warmth. And since Christ taught that the final apologetic is love, our attempt to speak the truth must be matched with an ongoing and practical effort to live out that truth in committed friendship, even at cost.

*Since this is a conversation, much more could and should be said. I would invite you to join this ongoing conversation by telling us what you would say, and why. Have I left something out? Could I have explained something more clearly? Do you have questions about something I've included?*

### **What I'd probably say...**

Good question. Your question assumes that all the Old Testament laws are equally valid today, but that's not the Christian

understanding. I do believe God has revealed himself in the Bible, and so I take his law seriously, but not the way your question implies. More important, though, as a Christian I am called to follow Jesus, and he came as a servant, not a judge. He treated every person as created in God's image, as precious, worthy not only of true friendship, but actually worth even dying for. I, too, am to be a servant and friend, not a judge.

### **More detail, as the conversation warrants...**

As a Christian I believe Jesus is both divine Lawgiver and Judge, but when he entered space and time as a baby in Bethlehem, he came as a Servant. He did not come to make sure the laws and penalties listed in the Old Testament were followed. Nor was his ministry like that of the Old Testament prophet Elijah who warned the people about worshiping idols, and when they wouldn't stop, taunted the priests of Baal, and finally executed them (1 Kings 18:16-46). Instead, Jesus befriended people like prostitutes who would have been executed if the law had been followed (Matthew 11:19). He was never dismissive of sinners, but loved them, and didn't even judge those who rejected him. He even prayed for the very people who crucified him, that God might forgive them. And to make all this clear to his followers, he told them he had the power to judge and punish (Matthew 26:52-54), but refused to use it.

One time Jesus was walking with his disciples through a province known as Samaria (John 4)—which Jews usually tried to avoid since they hated the Samaritans. In any case, tired and thirsty, he asked a

Samaritan woman for a drink and soon they were talking not just about water, but about spiritual thirst, about the yearning for transcendence. Jesus makes the astounding claim to be the source of what satisfies that yearning, but the woman deflects the issue, implying she has no such yearning that needs to be fulfilled. So Jesus asks her to go get her husband, but she has none, she says. Quite right, Jesus replies—you've had five husbands, and you are living with a man right now without being married to him. The woman is shocked that he would know, and suddenly realizes she is talking to a prophet. In asking that simple question, Jesus put his finger on the evidence of her spiritual yearning, a yearning that has driven her from relationship to relationship seeking something that will finally satisfy. It's the turning point in the conversation, and she quickly comes to believe in him, becoming his disciple. But notice: this sort of sexual behavior would have warranted death under the law, but Jesus never chides her for her behavior. He brings it up not to judge her, but to help her face, in the clearest way possible, her spiritual yearning and his ability to satisfy it.

What is more, Christ calls his disciples to follow his example. We are supposed to be servants, to love people, not to call down judgment on law-breakers (Luke 9:51-56). Judging would be arrogant, since if the law tells me anything, it tells me I am a sinner. I have broken God's law, and am in need of divine forgiveness. I am sent not to judge, which God reserves for himself alone, but to represent Christ as an agent of reconciliation and healing and grace and forgiveness.



Christians will be concerned about all sorts of cultural and moral issues, because Christ is Lord of all. Nevertheless, whatever we say and do about such issues must never subvert our calling as his ambassadors of reconciliation. The test of our faithfulness in this is not merely that we speak the truth, but also that our fellow-sinners can be our friends. After all, that was the response sinners had to Christ. He was perfectly righteous, never compromising, but rather than his righteousness repelling sinners, they were attracted to him—after listening to him teach they invited him home, ate dinner with him, and wanted to talk. It's easy to fulfill this with people whose sins we feel "comfortable" with, but that isn't sufficient. My desire is that even after I have explained the Christian understanding of homosexuality, homosexuals will feel welcome to talk to me, knowing that I neither hate nor despise them, but desire to be their friend. They may still reject me, of course, but this must be my goal. "Unless we demonstrate grace," Jerram Barrs insists, "we have been unfaithful to Christ. To what extent? Until they crucify us. To want to judge our enemies now may seem natural, but it is anti-gospel and anti-Christ. It is similar to Peter saying No to the cross because he wanted his agenda of Christ's enthronement as King and Judge to occur instead. And to that Christ said, 'Get behind me, Satan.'"

One of the stories that captures my imagination is of the hero who dies so another can live. It's one reason why *The Matrix* and *Saving Private Ryan* are such compelling films. These stories of redemption

touch us deeply, and I believe they find their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus. He is the innocent one who served even though it cost him his life.

Just as Christ took the Old Testament seriously—as the word of God—so I must take it seriously as his follower. Taking it seriously, however, means I must make proper distinctions about the various types of laws found in the Old Testament. (This isn't merely the Christian understanding, by the way. It's a Jewish understanding as well.) Old Testament law falls naturally into a number of different categories, and those categories matter. The political, economic, or judicial laws, for example, applied directly to ancient Israel when the people of God were a single nation. In Christ, however, the church is transnational (1 Peter 2:9-10; Revelation 7:9), so they don't apply directly to the church today. Then there is what's called the ceremonial law, involving issues of purity and diet which were explicitly given to make God's Old Testament people separate from the surrounding pagan nations (Deuteronomy 4:5-8; Mark 7:15-19; 1 Timothy 4:3-5). The New Testament makes clear that Christians no longer have to regard certain foods as unclean, but we are called to a life of holiness. The sacrificial laws were fulfilled in Christ, who came as the ultimate sacrifice, the Lamb of God (John 1:29; 1 Corinthians 5:7; Hebrews 9:11-10:18). The New Testament insists that Christ fulfilled the sacrificial law, yet interestingly, the ceremonial language is used to describe the Christian's life of faithfulness. We are to present not a lamb, but ourselves as "living sacrifices" (Romans 12:1), and our worship of God is called a

“sacrifice of praise” (Hebrews 13:15; see also 1 Corinthians 5:8; 2 Timothy 4:6; 1 Peter 2:5). Taking Old Testament sacrificial law seriously as a Christian means I understand it as no longer directly applicable because in Christ it finds its final fulfillment. And finally there is the moral law, echoed in both Old and New Testaments, and summarized in the Ten Commandments. As a Christian I believe it reveals a basis for ethics. The Old Testament laws dealing with homosexual behavior are part of the moral law and are echoed in the New Testament (Romans 1), unlike, for example, the ceremonial food laws which are repealed (Acts 10). And though I reject public denunciations of certain sins as “abominations,” I believe the moral law of the Bible reflects a deep understanding of what it means to be human, providing a basic ethical framework for living together in community before the face of God.

### **Questions I might ask...**

Are you really interested in talking about Old Testament law? Or is this really about the Christian understanding of homosexuality? (See "Homosexuality: Speaking the Truth in Love" by Mardi Keyes).

Would you be willing to read an article on the Christian understanding of homosexuality, while I read one of your choice—and then discuss them?

Do you feel judged by me? By other Christians? How do I/we communicate it?

How do you determine right and wrong? How do you know you are right? What happens if you are wrong?

Have you ever read the story of Christ in the New Testament for yourself? Would you be willing to read through a gospel with me?

# Film Review: Milk

By Wesley Hill

There's a scene in the middle of Gus Van Sant's *Milk* that, for me, captures the heart of the movie. The apartment Harvey Milk and his partner, Scott Smith, share is crammed with volunteers who are trying to get Milk elected to San Francisco's Board of Supervisors. It's late, after dark, and Harvey looks haggard as he talks loudly to a couple of volunteers above the din of everyone else's conversations. Scott takes a pot off the stove and looks for Harvey. "Harvey! Dinner": he barks it as a command, trying to make Harvey take a seat and relax for a few minutes. He doesn't have much success. Finally, exasperated and exhausted, Scott raises his voice, "Everyone: This apartment is now off limits! Good night!" In a few minutes, it's just he and Harvey sitting down at the table together. "Don't say anything," Scott orders. "Can I just tell you...?" Harvey asks meekly after tasting his first bite, a mischievous smile playing at the corners of his lips. Scott rounds on him: "If you say anything about politics or the campaign or what speech you have to give or anything, I swear to God I'm gonna stab you with this fork." Undeterred, Harvey keeps looking sweetly at his partner and finishes his sentence: "I just wanted to say... that this is the most wonderful dinner I have ever had." And with that, the tension dissolves. Harvey places a hand on Scott's shoulder, Scott can't suppress a smile, the two laugh. They're back to being a normal couple again, forgetting for a fleeting moment the rigors of the campaign and the opposition they're facing.

That's what the movie *Milk* is about. A biopic of the figure who became the first openly gay man elected to major political office in San Francisco and who galvanized a generation of gay rights advocates in the process—in the end, it's a love story. Andrew Sullivan, a writer for *The Atlantic*, put it like this: "The movie's brilliance is... that it begins and ends with Milk's love for another human being... This reach for intimacy—always vulnerable, ... never safe—endures past movements and rallies and elections. [The] manifestations of the political are the means to that merely human end."

The film opens in 1970 in New York City. Harvey Milk (played brilliantly by Sean Penn) is nearly middle-aged, eking out a living as an insurance salesman. "Forty years old, and I haven't done a thing I'm proud of," he complains. Randomly, Milk meets Scott Smith (James Franco), who would become his long-time lover, and persuades Smith to leave New York with him to begin a new life in "the Castro," a San Francisco neighborhood that, partly through Milk's activism, becomes widely known as a refuge for gays who come from every corner of the country looking for a fresh start.

After withstanding one too many attacks from a hostile police force, Milk decides to run for a position on the Board of Supervisors, to advocate for the "us's," the embattled minorities, who bear the brunt of institutionalized bigotry. Winning doesn't come easy—it "isn't my strong suit," Milk confesses at one point with a wan smile—but

eventually the hard work pays off, and he gains a seat on the Board. He uses his influence to campaign for equality, but shortly after his greatest victory—the defeat of Proposition 6, which would have prohibited gays and lesbians from teaching in California’s public schools—Milk’s life is cut short by a fellow Board member. Dan White (Josh Brolin), a conservative Roman Catholic (who, the film hints, may himself have been a closeted homosexual), assassinates Milk in his office. With Milk’s death, San Francisco is deprived of one of its most powerful champions for social justice and, perhaps more poignantly, Scott Smith loses his lover and beloved.

For Christian viewers, Milk raises many questions. We Christians, after all, have in Scripture and in the teaching of the Church throughout the ages a moral judgment against same-sex eroticism. Homosexual behavior is sinful, according to the Christian grammar. And yet a film like Milk confronts us with a poignant, at times heartrendingly beautiful portrayal of loving, caring, loneliness-diminishing gay relationships. How should we respond?

One way is to refuse to accept the film on its own terms. Where the movie urges us to see a community of loving, caring people beleaguered by an ignorant majority culture wielding restrictive power, we may instead offer an alternative, suspicious interpretation: Far from being loving and caring, the gay men depicted in the movie are perverted and promiscuous, deceiving themselves about the true nature of their destructive behavior. What

the movie names as love, we may choose to see as self-gratifying lust.

Another way to respond to *Milk* is, of course, to do the opposite—the take it at face value, to affirm its outlook, approve its politics, and abandon the traditional Christian view of the wrongness of homosexual practice as a vestige of an outmoded worldview that will only lead to violence and oppression if we continue to promote it today.

Either of these approaches is possible—and one doesn't have to look very far to find viewers who have already embraced one or the other of them. But I wonder if there isn't another way. Might we glimpse in *Milk* a portrait of genuine human love and courage, which, however cracked and marred, nevertheless gestures toward what we Christians believe is embodied fully and ultimately in Jesus Christ? Or, to put it more provocatively: Can sinful behavior, in some paradoxical way, when it is a groping for intimacy and an effort to stave off loneliness, be seen as a hunger for grace?

After visiting an AIDS ward once in San Francisco, the late Henri Nouwen reportedly said of the gay men he met there: "They want love so bad, it's literally killing them." Maybe we should watch *Milk* from the same vantage point. When we see Harvey and Scott touch each other tenderly over a shared meal, we may catch a glimpse of what it looks like to reach for love and the end of loneliness. And we may also see a challenge for ourselves—to so embody the holy love



of Jesus that men like Harvey and Scott might be moved to consider it more than just a ploy to perpetuate their isolation and legislate their oppression.

## QUESTIONS

1. What did you notice about the artistry and technical aspects of the film? As a piece of cinematic art, how would you rate it? Did you find it complex or moralistic, dramatically sophisticated or cliché, interesting or banal? Why?
2. The Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas has written an essay with the provocative title “Why Gays (as a Group) are Morally Superior to Christians (as a Group).” This title might be taken as a good description of several scenes from *Milk*. In what ways do Harvey Milk and the other gay activists in the Castro demonstrate the sort of character we Christians ought to emulate? What can we learn from them?
3. Whom do you identify more with in the film—the conservative Christians (Senator Briggs, Anita Bryant) or the sexually promiscuous gay characters? Why? Did you feel torn between wanting to disagree with one or the other’s political positions while at the same time wanting to affirm their longings, hopes, fears, worries? If so, describe.
4. W. H. Auden once suggested a game: Pick two people who are

known to be arch-enemies and imagine what would have to happen for them to come to terms, understand, and maybe even start to love each other. Try playing this game with characters from the film. For example, what would Cleve Jones and Anita Bryant, or Harvey Milk and Dan White, need to do or say in order to move towards reconciliation, forgiveness, mutual respect, understanding, and love?

5. Given the recent passage of Proposition 8 in California in November 2008 and the resignation of Rich Cizik from his position as president of the National Association of Evangelicals in the wake of his controversial comments on “gay civil unions,” the issue of “gay marriage” will probably lie just beneath the surface of any evangelical Christian discussion of this film. Are Christians who hold to the traditional viewpoint on the immorality of homosexual behavior necessarily committed to opposing the legalization of gay marriage in a secular, pluralistic democracy? Why or why not? Does a film like *Milk* shed any light on this discussion?

6. Imagine yourself in a conversation with one of the movie’s gay characters. Assuming they are unfamiliar with Christianity and the contents of the Bible, how would you try to explain to them the historic, orthodox Christian views of (homo)sexuality, marriage, bodily desire, fidelity, and “purity”? Try to do this exercise without using any Christian jargon and force yourself to confront the “But why?” question at every turn. What is the logic of the Christian viewpoint? Is it credible? Is it compelling? Why or why not?

## SOURCES

Andrew Sullivan, “Milk” blog post, 27 November 2008, ([http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com/the\\_daily\\_dish/2008/11/milk.html](http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com/the_daily_dish/2008/11/milk.html));

Henri Nouwen, as quoted in Philip Yancey, ***What’s So Amazing About Grace?*** (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) p. 279.-

# Resources: Homosexuality

By Denis Haack

Few topics are as polarized in our post-modern world as the question of homosexuality, and Christians are often poorly equipped to discuss the issue winsomely with those who have become convinced that committed homosexual relationships are permitted within a biblical understanding of marriage.

Rev. Dr. John Stott writes:

The attitude of personal antipathy towards homosexuals is nowadays termed 'homophobia'. It is a mixture of irrational fear, hostility, and even revulsion. It overlooks the fact that the majority of homosexual people are probably not responsible for their condition (though they are, of course, for their conduct)... No wonder Richard Lovelace calls for "a double repentance," namely, "that gay Christians renounce the active lifestyle' and that 'straight Christians renounce homophobia." Dr. David Atkinson is right to add, "We are not at liberty to urge the Christian homosexual to celibacy and to a spreading of his relationships, unless support for the former and opportunities for the latter are available in genuine love." I rather think that the very existence of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement is a vote of censure on the church.

At the heart of the homosexual condition is a deep loneliness, the natural human hunger for mutual love, a search for identity, and a

longing for completeness. If homosexual people cannot find these things in the local “church family,” we have no business to go on using that expression. The alternative is not only between the warm physical relationship of homosexual intercourse and the pain of isolation in the cold. There is a third option, namely a Christian environment of love, understanding, acceptance, and support.”

***Same-Sex Partnerships?*** Is—as is to be expected from Stott’s pen—clearly written, balanced, and biblical. This booklet is a revised version of a chapter in Stott’s two volume work *Involvement* which was published by Revell in 1984.

We recommend ***Same-Sex Partnerships?*** to you.

## FURTHER READING

### ***The Holy War on Gays***

“The Holy War on Gays” by Robert Dreyfuss in *Rolling Stone* (March 18, 1999) pp. 38-41. “The Christian Right is on a new mission: to drive homosexuality back into the closet,” the subtitle to the article says, and the author promises to take the reader into “the war rooms of evangelical intolerance.” An overview of efforts by Christian Right leaders such as James Dobson, James Kennedy, the Family Research Council, Pat Robertson, and the National Pro-Family Forum to address homosexuality in the public square, articles such as this are essential reading for Christians who take faithfulness seriously. Christian discernment in a pluralistic culture

includes asking how we can live out and communicate the truth clearly and with humility while living among those who do not share our deepest convictions. If nothing else, “The Holy War on Gays” suggests we are far more reactionary than discerning, and perhaps in danger of winning a battle only to discover we have been mistaken as to the identity of the enemy.

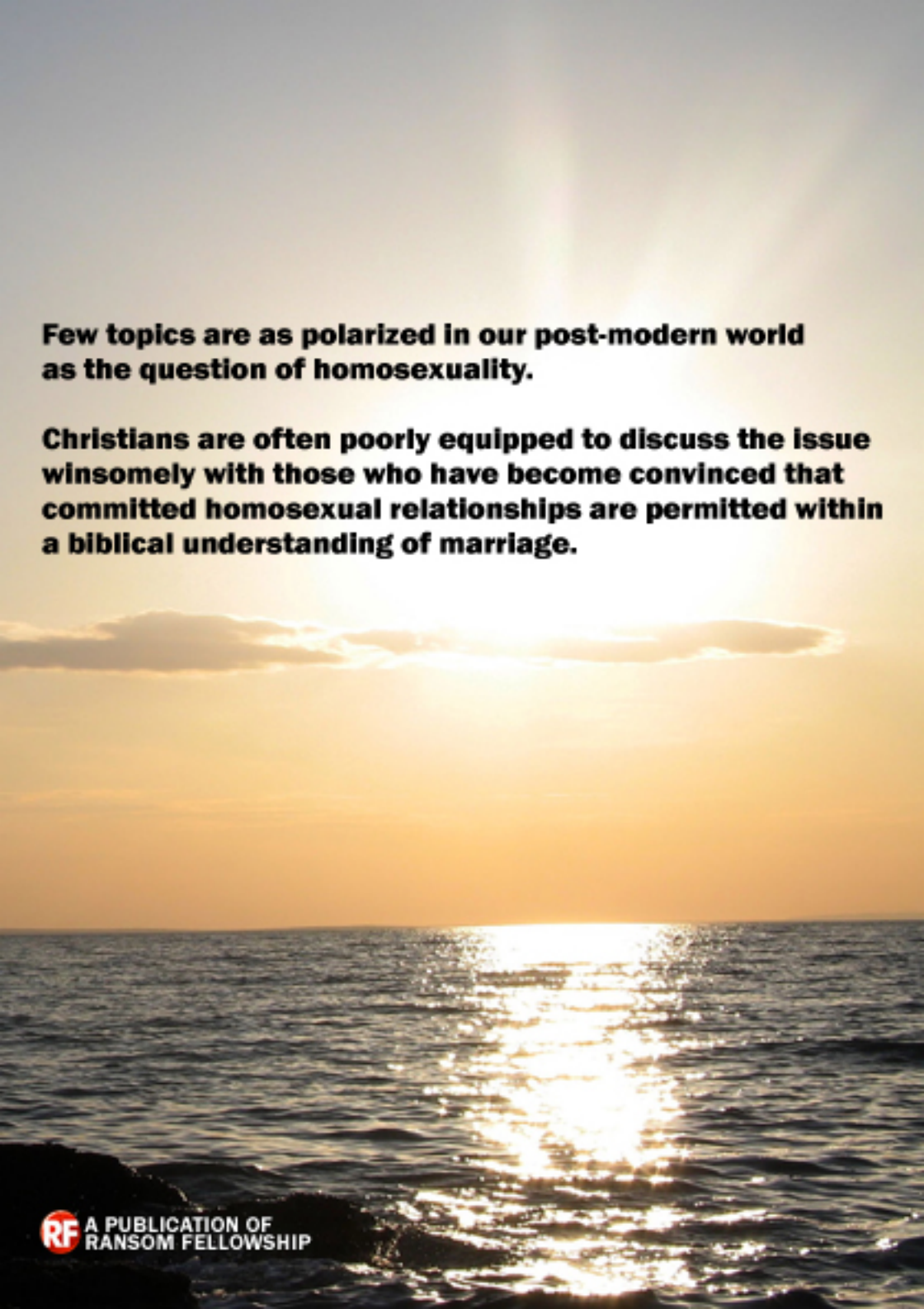
### ***Out of Order:***

#### ***Homosexuality in the Bible and the Ancient Near East***

Donald J. Wold, an evangelical professor of Near Eastern Studies, examines in careful detail the understanding of homosexuality found in ancient Near Eastern cultures and in the biblical text.

#### ***Someone I Love is Gay: How Family and Friends Can Respond***

Anita Worthen and Bob Davies present a warmly personal and practical book. The authors, both Christians, have dealt first-hand with the issues involved. Anita Worthen works with New Hope Ministries, an ex-gay ministry to family members and friends of gay people. Bob Davies is executive Director of Exodus International, a network of agencies for men and women seeking freedom from homosexuality.



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**Christians are often poorly equipped to discuss the issue winsomely with those who have become convinced that committed homosexual relationships are permitted within a biblical understanding of marriage.**