

**Classis Grand Rapids East Study Report on
Biblical and Theological Support Currently Offered
by Christian Proponents of Same-Sex Marriage
January 2016**

Committee Members:
Rev. William De Vries (Chair), Rev. David Beelen,
Mr. Nathan Bierma, Mr. John Chapin,
Dr. Jeff Fisher, Dr. Loren Haarsma,
Ms. Karen Helder, Dr. Arthur Jongsma, Jr.
Dr. Linda Naranjo-Huebl

Mandate

The Study Committee on the Bible and Life-long Same Sex Relationships is requested to examine and summarize the biblical/theological support currently offered by Christian proponents of gay marriage. How and where does this understanding of the texts in question differ from the biblical/theological perspective that served as the basis of the Report on Homosexuality of 1973? How and where does the 1973 report provide a common biblical/theological perspective? How can we as congregations, and as a classis, navigate these turbulent waters?

In the course of its work the study committee also is requested to identify and summarize some of the following things:

- Common affirmations (commitment to the bible/creeds, commitment to life-long fidelity, shared concern over damaging effects of promiscuity/infidelity, etc.)
- Points of contention (hermeneutical approach to Scripture, contextualized understanding of specific passages, departures from creedal/confessional understandings of Scripture, etc.)
- Recent scientific literature on sexual orientation that should be considered in the discussion
- Pastoral approaches for dealing with same sex unions within our congregations and communities and available resources for assisting the churches

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Report Summary

Background

The official position of the Christian Reformed Church of North America (CRC) is that any homosexual practice—even within life-long committed relationships—is incompatible with Scripture and in all cases to be considered sin. The CRC calls same-sex attracted individuals to life-long celibacy. The basis for this position is the report to Synod 1973 of the Committee to Study Homosexuality. The report’s first three pastoral guidelines summarized: “(1) Homosexuality (male and female) is a condition of disordered sexuality which reflects the brokenness of our sinful world and for which the homosexual may himself bear only a minimal responsibility. (2) The homosexual may not, on the sole ground of his sexual disorder, be denied community acceptance, and, if he is a Christian, he is to be whole-heartedly received by the church as a person for whom Christ died. (3) Homosexuality—as explicit homosexual practice—must be condemned as incompatible with obedience to the will of God as revealed in Holy Scripture.”

There has been significant theological consideration of these issues since 1973, both in the Reformed tradition and in the wider Christian church. Scientific understanding of same-sex attraction has grown during that time. In recent years, the social and legal landscape has changed considerably, with same-sex marriage becoming legal in Canada in 2005 and in the U.S. in 2015. The CRC’s latest official statement regarding biblical teachings on this issue is now more than forty years old. Classis Grand Rapids East has on two recent occasions unsuccessfully asked Synod for a re-examination of the biblical/theological arguments in the Synod 1973 report. In January 2014, in response to an overture from Sherman Street CRC citing these factors, Classis Grand Rapids East appointed this study committee.

The mandate of this committee is to examine and summarize the biblical/theological support currently offered by Christian proponents of same-sex marriage. This committee also was asked to summarize how and where this biblical/theological understanding agrees with, and differs from, the Synod 1973 report. The committee was also asked to summarize recent scientific literature on sexual orientation, and to recommend pastoral approaches and available resources for dealing with same-sex unions within our congregations and communities.

This committee was not asked to write a report giving “equal time” to two or more contrasting views. This committee found that arguments made by current scholars who oppose same-sex marriage on biblical/theological grounds essentially follow the analysis of the Synod 1973 report on homosexuality. This report addresses the 1973 report, and arguments by current scholars opposed to same-sex marriage, in various places. However, because of this committee’s mandate, the analysis of the 1973 report is not duplicated in this report. If churches wish to discuss pros and cons of multiple views on this topic, this report can stand alongside the 1973 report as the basis for such a discussion.

Summary of arguments made by Christian proponents of same-sex marriage

When arguments in favor of same-sex marriage focus exclusively on the life experiences of individuals with same-sex attraction, as powerful as those stories might be, they often fail to convince Christians who hold traditional views because those with traditional views believe that the Bible clearly teaches against same-sex marriage. When the debate is framed this way, it can seem like Christians face an over-simplified choice between obedience to God's law versus compassion for individuals with same-sex attraction. This is a false choice. Individuals on each side can be compassionate. Individuals on each side believe that their position is biblically sound and obedient to God's will.

When arguments in favor of same-sex marriage focus exclusively on alternative interpretations of particular biblical passages, as plausible as those alternative interpretations might be, they often fail to convince Christians who hold traditional interpretations of those passages. This is because it appears to them that those alternative interpretations allowing for same-sex marriage, taken only by themselves, are not preferable or conclusive compared with the traditional interpretations that oppose same-sex marriage.

The most convincing arguments made by Christian proponents of same-sex marriage come from weaving together multiple strands. The strength of the overall argument comes from how these different strands reinforce each other. Ten such strands are summarized in this Report Summary and discussed in greater length report sections. The final section of this report provides advice on maintaining unity within churches.

Our tradition, historically, has attended to the natural and social sciences and to other means the Holy Spirit sometimes uses to prompt and to guide reinterpretations of Scripture. Therefore, Section 1 discusses the Holy Spirit and the reinterpretation of Scripture throughout history, while Sections 2-3 summarize improving understandings about gender and sexual identity from the natural and social sciences. Sections 1-3 create space and theological motivation for considering possible reinterpretations of Scripture on this issue.

Sections 4-6 of this report directly address interpretation of Scripture. Section 4 summarizes Reformed hermeneutical principles, and Section 5 summarizes areas of scholarly agreement and disagreement and analyzes biblical passages referring to gender differentiation and same-sex intercourse. The reinterpretations of these biblical passages offered by proponents of same-sex marriage might not, in themselves, be convincing and compelling to Christians who hold traditional interpretations opposing same-sex marriage. However, a case is made that Christian proponents of same-sex marriage can uphold the inspiration and authority of Scripture and follow good hermeneutical principles for discerning the teaching of Scripture. Section 6 provides more samples of writings of scholars on several sides of this issue and references for further reading.

Sections 7-9 argue that a reinterpretation of Scripture that allows for same-sex marriage, if the reinterpretation is biblically sound, will also promote human flourishing. Section 7 discusses the theology of marriage. Section 8 discusses the social goods enabled by marriage. Section 9 examines the psychological impacts of the church position on individual members.

Section 10 includes brief personal stories of several Christian LGBT individuals. The report closes with Section 11, which offers additional pastoral advice on maintaining unity within churches.

Below is a brief summary of each of the eleven sections of the report. We encourage the reader not to rely on this summary but to closely review the detail provided in each section.

Section 1: Guidance of the Holy Spirit and the reinterpretation of Scripture. At various times in history, the Holy Spirit prompted and guided the church into reinterpretation of some parts of Scripture through a variety of means. The early church saw the gifts of the Holy Spirit given to Gentile believers without requiring them to obey the Law of Moses (Acts 11:15-18; Acts 15:12-15). The church saw the suffering caused by social evils such as anti-Semitism, slavery, and racism. The church saw the good that came out of social innovations such as democracy and allowing banks to loan money at modest interest rates. The church saw advances in science such as Galileo’s discoveries. Through these various means, the church was led to better interpretations of parts of Scripture. Comparing the issue of same-sex marriage to these other historical cases suggests that this might be another occasion in church history when the Holy Spirit is prompting a re-examination of Scripture.

Section 2: Advances in scientific understandings of sex and gender, intersex and transgender. The science of sexual orientation and gender has proliferated since the Synod 1973 report. While early research focused on whether homosexuality was inborn or environmentally influenced, most of the current science acknowledges that sexual orientation and gender identity are influenced by a complex and indeterminable number of biological and social factors that are often intertwined. Further, science informs us that while most people are unambiguously male or female biologically and psychologically and are heterosexually attracted, not everyone is. Some individuals are born anatomically and hormonally intersex, due to chromosomal or genetic factors. Some are transgender, biologically one gender but psychologically identifying with the other gender, involving a variety of neuronal and hormonal factors. The fields of neuroscience, endocrinology, and genetics have discovered some of the factors that influence biological sex and gender identity, but there is still much to learn. Attempts to assign intersex and transgender individuals to be unambiguously male or female—through medical intervention, therapy, or social pressure—often lead to destructive results. The fact that male and female exist on a spectrum, rather than as a dichotomy, has profound implications for our understanding and definitions of *same-sex* marriage.

Section 3: Same-sex attraction and gender variance: disorder versus creational variance. Because of various genetic and hormonal influences, biological sex is not a simple binary but exists on a spectrum among humans and other animals. As with other congenital features which exist on a spectrum (e.g. height, eyesight acuity, eye color, handedness), identifying what constitutes a “genetic defect” as opposed to “normal variation” is problematic and historically contingent. These variants arise naturally in human and animal populations by the ordinary operation of genetic and other biological processes. Theologians of disability, who reflect on the experiences of individuals who are part of a marginalized minority because of a condition that the majority find undesirable, offer helpful perspectives for this discussion. Some Christians who are congenitally deaf or otherwise “disabled” embrace their difference and do not

consider it a mistake or misfortune, but as fundamental to their identity and part of the diversity which God created within humanity. Many Christian sexual minorities experience their identities the same way. Numerous advances in science over the last few decades lead us to reconsider whether various forms of same-sex attraction and intersex conditions should be seen as “creational variants.”

Section 4: Guidelines for interpreting Scripture according to a reformed hermeneutic. Reformed hermeneutics, affirming the inspiration and authority of Scripture, seeks the best interpretation of Scripture by taking into account the literary, linguistic, historical, and cultural context of passages, using knowledge gained from the study of God’s general revelation, acknowledging God’s accommodation to human limitations, taking into account Scripture’s progressive revelation, and remembering Scripture’s overall purpose, which is the redemptive revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

Section 5: Interpretation of biblical passages referring to gender differentiation and same-sex intercourse. Some scholars for a “traditional” interpretation see the creation of male and female as associated with the creation of humanity in God’s image, indicating that gender differentiation gives a complete picture of the image of God. Some traditional scholars believe procreation is fundamental to the governance of creation to which humanity is called, and gender differentiation is a necessity for marriage. Some scholars for a same-sex “affirming” interpretation question whether gender differentiation can be seen as necessary for the full bearing of God’s image. Affirming scholars also reject procreation as a requirement for fulfilling God’s mandate to govern creation, since not all people who carry out this mandate reproduce. Affirming scholars interpret the Old Testament usage of words and phrases related to “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” as signifying kinship bonds rather than gender differentiation. Biblical references to “male and female” were a common way of speaking in the culture of the original authors and audiences. They refer to the biological norms necessary for reproduction but do not prescriptively teach that each individual must be in one of those two categories. In addition, ancient cultures commonly believed in a hierarchy of genders (males above females not only socially, but also biologically and spiritually) that we no longer believe today. These passages are not intended to teach “gender polarity” or “gender essentialism,” in which each gender is assigned different essential characteristics or social roles. Therefore, a marriage of one man and one woman will be the most common creational pattern but need not be considered a prescriptive creational norm. Same-sex practices in ancient cultures typically involved pagan temple prostitution, pederasty, or high-status males using their power to convince or coerce low-status males (youth, poor, slaves, war prisoners, etc.) into submitting to exploitative sex. These practices constitute sinful disobedience to God and a disordering of the creational purposes for sex. The idea of life-long same-sex unions of equal partners was rare in ancient times: biblical writers assumed gender hierarchies and did not have the benefits of modern scientific understandings of the biological factors associated with sexual orientation. For those reasons, when biblical writers justly condemned same-sex practices of their times, they were teaching against, or motivated by, the common practices with which they were familiar and had no way of considering the possibility or the potential benefits of life-long same-sex unions of equal partners who are innately same-sex attracted.

Section 6: Quotations of contemporary authors on biblical passages related to gender differentiation and same-sex intercourse. We have compiled a collection of direct quotations from biblical scholars and other authors on contested passages of Scripture that address gender and same-sex intercourse, and a bibliography of references that our committee has found useful.

Section 7: Historical, biblical, and theological foundations for marriage. In our tradition, marriage is an earthly ordinance intended to promote human flourishing. Two individuals leave their birth families and form a new family, creating a “kinship bond” with all of the mutuality and obligations that implies. For many married couples, marriage is the correct setting for procreating and raising children. But marriage is not limited only to couples who can procreate, and raising children well is not limited only to such families. Besides procreation and raising children, marriage promotes many other benefits to the married individuals and to society. Genesis 1 and 2 should not be understood as a lesson in science. References to male and female were a descriptive way of speaking, not prescriptive or technical. The creation account is a proclamation of God’s love for and commitment to all of creation and a call to live in grace-filled fellowship in all relationships. Scripture’s allusions to husband-wife relationships to describe God’s relationship to his people and Christ’s relationship to the church made use of common imagery with which people were familiar, but these allusions were not intended to be prescriptive. Across history, people of faith have changed assumptions about marriage several times (e.g. from favoring arranged marriages to expecting romantic choice, from allowing polygamy to mandating monogamy, from viewing marriage as inferior to celibacy to seeing it as an equal calling, from shunning interracial marriage to accepting it). Allowing same-sex individuals to share the benefits of marriage with same-sex partners could be another such occasion of changing biblical assumptions about marriage.

Section 8: Social and psychological goods typically enabled by marriage. For many married individuals, the marriage relationship is the source of many psychological, physical, social, and spiritual benefits. In addition, our society organizes many social goods ordinarily (but not exclusively) through marriage. Some of these include care for spouses, care for children, care for members of their extended families, financial support and stability, emotional support, sharing of insurance, sharing of economic costs like housing and transportation, legal support, sharing of inheritance, tax benefits, shared property ownership, power of attorney, and many more. While most of these goods can be obtained with greater difficulty without marriage, and while legal marriages without sexual intimacy are possible, it is still the case—for a variety of biological, psychological, and sociological reasons—that life-long committed relationships which include sexual intimacy are the means by which most of these creational goods are obtained by most people most of the time. Forbidding same-sex marriage denies an entire group of people the ordinary means to these creational goods.

Section 9: Psychological issues involved in considering full inclusion versus non-inclusion. The church’s current treatment of LGBT Christians, including rejection of same-sex marriage, has caused suffering. Research shows that sexual orientation is beyond the individual’s control and, in all but a few cases, cannot be altered by anguished prayer, will, or intervention. Given that gays and lesbians have the same emotional, intimacy, and social needs as heterosexuals, many experience great psychological harm from enforced lifetime celibacy, which

denies them any possibility of the flourishing that is enjoyed by heterosexuals in relationship with a loving, affirming spouse and supported by the church. Depression and suicidal ideation is a consequence of feeling rejected by God, the church, family, society, and friends while being forbidden a cherishing partner. Non-inclusion has produced some bad fruits. Empathy for those who are suffering has led the church to reinterpret Scripture in the past. Some conservative, evangelical, and Reformed church leaders (e.g., Brownson, Smedes, Wilson, Gushee, Johnson, Pauw, etc.) are beginning to step forward, many of them after their conscience demanded they acknowledge the pain suffered by LGBT Christians at the hands of the church, to reexamine Scripture, and they find it does not condemn Christian gays in committed relationships.

Section 10: Personal stories of LGBT Christians. The church's traditional treatment of same-sex attracted, transgender, and intersex individuals has caused a great deal of pain. Some of these individuals share that when they saw their gender identity as a variation which God created rather than a disorder, and when in some cases they entered into a life-long committed relationship, this brought about flourishing in their lives and enabled them to better use their spiritual gifts for God's kingdom. These stories add weight and urgency to the other arguments.

Section 11: Additional pastoral advice on maintaining unity. There is a range of views within the CRC on this topic. Concern and love for the CRC runs deep in many of us, and none of us wants this debate to create differences such that we cannot listen to and dialogue with one another with the care and respect that is due to brothers and sisters in Christ. To be reformed means to be constantly reforming, and yet we must always be true to God's Word, which never changes. Unity in our diversity may well need to arise from much prayer, listening, storytelling, and study, all in the context of grace, mercy, and respect. It may well be that the outcome will not be a baseline level of agreement, but rather a broader perspective and understanding that relates to the image of God, God's grace and mercy, genuine pastoral care, acceptance, and embracing of differences. This may be a situation where all continue to grow and learn, but where full agreement at a foundational level will not be achieved this side of heaven. And, perhaps, our loving God, who knows we do not know all things, will extend grace to us in our uncertain knowledge of God's will in this matter.

Suggestions for using this report and pastoral recommendations

This committee is willing for this report to be shared with the CRC synod and with member churches of Classis Grand Rapids East. The committee would like to see this report, along with the Synod 1973 report and other resources referenced in this report, used as a resource for discussion of this topic within member churches.

A CRC synodically-appointed Committee to Provide Pastoral Guidance re: Same-sex Marriage has submitted their report for consideration at Synod 2016. That committee was specifically instructed not to revisit the theological/biblical basis for the CRC's current stance on same-sex marriage. We see this classis report as complementing that denominational report. Because the denominational report focuses on pastoral recommendations, this report does not wish to duplicate their work. However, we believe we should offer a few recommendations in this report.

Recommendations for reflection and discussion of this material:

1. Pray together for wisdom, discernment, and the mind of Christ as you study and discuss this most difficult issue for the church.
2. Remember that we discern with our head, our heart, and through our experience.
3. Listen well for God’s leading and guidance through the words of others; listen twice before speaking once.
4. Encourage each person to share one’s personal thoughts and reflections throughout your discussion.
5. Share stories of your personal experiences that have influenced your thinking about this issue.
6. Remember that God has created us with different personalities, styles, and experiences in life but that we share one faith in a God who leads and guides.
7. Accept that this will be a journey of discernment without easy answers, but that the Holy Spirit will provide insight and understanding to enrich the ministry of the church.

There are many useful resources listed in this report to help congregations and denominations navigate this issue. This committee recommends in particular these words of Wendy VanderWal Gritter: “With our best faith attempt—with our prayerful, fasting, scholarly, informed, searching of scriptures—we all need to have the humility to say, ‘These are my deep convictions ...’ or ‘These are my uncertainties and my questions, but I could be wrong. And because I could be wrong, I can come to the table with you, my sibling in Christ. And we can reason together—not with some weird superficial tolerance where every view is equal—but because at the end of the day there is something greater than our disagreement. And that is our unity in Christ, who has already defeated all that would separate us from God.’”¹

¹ Gritter, W. (2015, April 8). Generous Spaciousness: Responding to Gay Christians in the Church. Lecture presented at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Retrieved from <https://vimeo.com/124479537> at 44:20.

Section 1: Guidance of the Holy Spirit in the Reinterpretation of Scripture

Reformed theology emphasizes God’s sovereignty in all things. The Holy Spirit guides our interpretation of Scripture. At times, the Holy Spirit prompts and guides the church in a reinterpretation of parts of Scripture. On those occasions in church history when scientific discoveries or social developments prompted the church to reinterpret parts of Scripture—when those new interpretations proved theologically sound—ultimately, this was the work of the Holy Spirit.

Christian proponents of same-sex marriage believe that we are in the midst of another such occasion in church history. They acknowledge that interpreting Scripture as not prohibiting life-long same-sex unions would mean changing some traditional interpretations. They argue that this issue is similar, in many significant ways, to other Spirit-prompted, Spirit-led reinterpretations of Scripture throughout history.

This argument includes

1. summarizing some historical examples of Spirit-prompted reinterpretations of Scripture,
2. summarizing some common themes of Spirit-prompted reinterpretations of Scripture passages,
3. considering ways in which this issue is similar to other historical examples, and
4. thinking about how we will discern the Spirit’s leading going forward.

Some historical examples of Spirit-prompted reinterpretations of Scripture

It is prudent to start with a note of caution. Simply because a proposed reinterpretation of Scripture has numerous advocates who are motivated and articulate does not guarantee that it is a good reinterpretation of Scripture. Church history includes a long list of reinterpretations of Scripture that were strongly advocated by some Christians for a time, but which the church ultimately decided were bad reinterpretations. For example, the early church battled many forms of Gnosticism for centuries. Likewise Arianism, the concept that Christ is a creation of God rather than the Son of God who always existed with the Father, is a heresy that has recurred in the history of the church. Throughout church history various sects have proposed that the universal love proclaimed in the Bible should permit libertine sexual ethics. In modern times, various forms of “prosperity theology” have popularized the idea that Christian faith provides a formula to guarantee health and wealth. Extreme forms of liberation theology put so much emphasis on helping the poor and politically oppressed in this world that they lose sight of Jesus Christ as the one who restores our relationship with God and who redeems us through forgiveness of our sins. Examples like these should make us cautious about too quickly embracing a proposed reinterpretation of Scripture.

Church history also gives us numerous positive examples in which the Holy Spirit prompted and guided the church into better understandings of Scripture.

A. Through the giving of spiritual gifts. Acts 8:26-40 tells the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch who, by Old Testament tradition, was doubly excluded from the temple

because he was a eunuch and a Gentile.² Yet the Spirit prompted Philip to preach the gospel to him. The Spirit had also been working in the heart and mind of the Ethiopian prior to his encounter with Philip to prepare him, and during the encounter, to prompt his desire to be baptized. The church did not immediately take this incident as a sign to begin sharing the gospel with all Gentiles. But decades later, this story was recorded and shared by believers as an early example of the Spirit leading the church to change its traditional interpretation of Scripture passages regarding who should be included in the fellowship.

Acts 11 tells the story of the apostle Peter and the centurion Cornelius. After Peter's visit to Cornelius, the other apostles criticized Peter for going into a Gentile's house and breaking the Law of Moses. Peter told them about his prophetic dream and then explained how the Holy Spirit came upon Cornelius and his household even before they were baptized. This stopped the argument (v. 19). Through the clear giving of spiritual gifts to many individuals, the Holy Spirit led the church to understand that Jesus, the Messiah of the Jews, was also granting Gentiles repentance of sins and new life in Christ.

Similarly, the Church Council in Jerusalem several years later was debating whether new Gentile believers scattered all over the Roman Empire should follow the Law of Moses. We can imagine the scriptural arguments made by both the traditionalists and the non-traditionalists. That debate (described in Acts 15:12-15) was settled when Paul and Barnabas testified to the miraculous works of God among the Gentiles. God gave the gifts of the Holy Spirit to Gentile believers without their first having to obey the Law of Moses. This convinced the assembly that Gentiles could be followers of Christ without following the Law of Moses. The church's interpretation of an extremely important theme throughout the Old Testament scriptures—the importance of obeying the Law of Moses—changed to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Throughout much of church history, some Christians interpreted Scripture as teaching that women should not be allowed to have positions of serious authority over men in politics, in business, in academics, or elsewhere. But over time and especially in the last century, many parts of the church have changed their interpretation of those scripture passages by seeing that the Holy Spirit has given many women gifts well suited to such leadership positions.

B. Through advances in science. In the fifth century, St. Augustine and other educated people, both Christians and non-Christians, knew from the science of the time that there were not oceans of water above the sky nor oceans of water beneath the earth. But some Christians of that era, citing numerous passages in Scripture, believed that Scripture clearly taught about waters above the sky and below the earth. These Christians derided the learning of the Greeks about the natural world as pagan and opposed to Scripture. But St. Augustine and others eventually led the church to a better interpretation of those Scripture verses, an interpretation that did not require Christians to believe that there are bodies of water above the sky and below the earth.

The church's errors with Copernicus and Galileo constituted a particularly painful historical lesson, errors that continue to cost the church today as some non-Christians still point to these examples to justify their belief that science and religion are incompatible. Theologians

² A few scholars argue that the Ethiopian's status as Gentile or Jew is not clear (see Shauf, 2009).

before Galileo understandably assumed that the earth was fixed and did not move based on verses like Psalm 93:1. Galileo, because of scientific studies, contradicted the church's belief and argued that the earth moved around the sun. He was tried for heresy by the church, found guilty, and sentenced to home imprisonment until his death ten years later. But scientific advances eventually led the church, after decades, to rethink its interpretation of passages like Psalm 93:1. As we look back today, we acknowledge that all truth, including scientific truth, ultimately comes from God, so we now see this painful episode of church history as another example of the Holy Spirit leading the church into a better reinterpretation of Scripture.

Throughout much of church history, Christians thought that the best approach to wilderness was to “tame” it by chopping down forests, turning prairie into farmland, straightening rivers, and filling in wetlands—thereby turning as much wilderness as possible into cities and farms. This practice was supported by interpretations of Scripture such as Genesis 1:28. But eventually, advances in science revealed some of the problems we created with this approach. Water quality was reduced as wetlands were destroyed; many species went extinct through hunting or habitat destruction. Water and air pollution became health problems. Now the church sees the wisdom in preserving some wilderness, cleaning pollution, and keeping species from going extinct. Now the church interprets Genesis 1:28 and other passages as calling us to wise stewardship, which includes maintaining some wilderness.

C. Through the suffering caused by social evils. Repeatedly, for a variety of social evils, the Holy Spirit used social and cultural change to speak to the church before Scripture was reinterpreted and before suffering related to secular and religious persecution was rejected by the church.

Consider the social evils of slavery. For centuries, many Christians quoted Scripture to justify the practice of slavery (1 Peter 2:18, Eph. 6:5-6, 1 Tim. 6:1, Col. 3:22). But the Holy Spirit confronted the church again and again with the suffering caused by slavery and forced the church, in part through historical events that led to a U.S. civil war, to rethink its interpretation of those passages.

Through most of church history, it was common practice for the church to actively support anti-Semitism. Many Christians interpreted Scripture to support hatred of Jews (Matt. 27:25, 1 Thess. 2:14-16, John 8:44). It took the horrors of genocide in the twentieth century to prompt many churches to rethink those interpretations.

For several centuries before and after the Reformation, some churches tortured and killed people judged to be heretics. Some churches encouraged political leaders to use violence and warfare to suppress theological disagreements. At that time, these practices were justified from interpretations of Scripture. Secular lawmakers eventually put an end to the practice where the church had not. Today, most Christians look back with abhorrence at the idea of using torture and murder as means to maintain theological correctness within the church.

Over the same period, leaders of Christian countries denied the personhood of indigenous peoples and cited biblical principles to justify the possession of land “discovered” by Christian nations. The systematic dehumanization of Native inhabitants has resulted in grave injustices.

Public scrutiny of those historical actions, the activism of those who have been victims of the injustice, and legal reforms made on the behalf of those victims have made us more sensitive to the wrongfulness of those actions.

Until a few decades ago, it was common for Christians to interpret Scripture to justify racial segregation. Through the courageous action of those who opposed segregation, and through witnessing the violence inflicted upon those who opposed segregation, many Christians finally came to see the injustice and suffering caused by institutionalized racism. Discrimination against racial minorities was declared illegal by secular lawmakers at a time when parts of the church still supported it. While racism is still a problem in our societies, far fewer Christians today try to interpret Scripture to justify it.

D. Through the good caused by some social innovations. For centuries, many Christians justified monarchy as a divinely instituted means of government, and quoted Scripture to support it. Yet reflection on the abuses of power that often occur under monarchy, and reflection on the social goods which come with democracy, eventually led many Christians to decide that democracy is a form of government more in line with what Scripture teaches about human nature. Today, few Christians would say that monarchy is a more biblical form of government than democracy.

Consider banking practices, specifically giving and receiving interest on loans. There are several passages in the Bible that speak against charging interest on loans and no passages that treat it favorably. For many centuries, the church argued that Scripture clearly teaches Christians should never charge interest. But eventually the church saw that when banks are allowed to set modest interest rates to attract savings and give out loans, social good could be generated by allowing people to buy a home, get an education, start a business, save for old age, and so forth. Today, very few Christians believe that Scripture teaches that banks should never be allowed to give loans and receive savings at modest interest rates.

Interracial marriage was opposed for centuries by many Christians who interpreted Scripture to support their views (Gen. 28:1, 2 Cor. 6:14). As the suffering caused by racism became more visible to the church as a whole, simultaneously, Christians began to see more examples of the good that came from interracial marriages—good within the families, good within the churches, and good within society as a whole.

For much of church history, Christians who divorced—even those who bore little responsibility for their divorce and who worked to prevent it—were told that they should not remarry but should remain single and celibate until their former spouse died. Those who did remarry were often marginalized or expelled from their churches as they were judged to be living in adultery (Matt. 19:9, Matt. 5:31-32, Rom. 7:2-3, 1 Cor. 7:10-11). In recent decades, much of the church has changed its views on remarriage. It is not that divorce is viewed as a good thing, or even as a trivial thing. But the church has also seen the good that can emerge in the lives of some individuals through remarriage—good for them as individuals, good for their children and extended families, and good for their ability to serve God’s kingdom.

Some common themes of Spirit-guided reinterpretations of Scripture

Each historical example of the church reinterpreting Scripture under the Spirit's guidance has unique aspects, and no historical example perfectly corresponds to our current debate over same-sex marriage; however, some common themes recur.

A. The authority and inspiration of Scripture is not reduced but is maintained in the reinterpretation. In each historical example, the scriptural passages in question were not discarded or ignored. Rather, the church was led to a better interpretation that continues to affirm scriptural authority and is more true to the redemptive story of Scripture.

B. Fundamental teachings at the core of these passages are maintained, even as some aspects of the passages are reinterpreted. The following are some specific historical examples of this principle: Gentiles need not obey the Law of Moses, but they should still strive to live as Christ's followers according to the spirit of the law, as Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. Psalm 93:1 does not teach that the earth is fixed in place, but Psalm 93:1 does continue to teach about God's power and faithfulness. Banks are not forbidden from giving and receiving loans at modest interest, but the rich and powerful must not use social institutions to oppress and further impoverish the poor. Slavery is wrong, but workers have an obligation to work honestly for their employers, and supervisors have an obligation not to abuse their power. Divorce for trivial reasons is still wrong because of the harm it causes, especially to those in the family who are least powerful and most vulnerable; nevertheless, remarriage after divorce is good for some people.

C. Scripture interprets scripture. A reinterpretation of some parts of Scripture must not contradict what is clearly taught in other ways in other parts of Scripture. Rather, a case must be made that the new interpretation fits with the themes and insights taught elsewhere in Scripture. The following are some examples: Although many passages in the Old Testament talk about the importance of obeying the Law of Moses, numerous prophetic passages talk about the deeper importance of humility before God and foretold how one day Gentiles would be brought into God's kingdom. Several passages teach about Christ's removal of ethnic divisions to make us "all one body" (Eph. 4:4) in the church, and this should overflow in how we live together in the rest of society. False teachings in the church must be opposed, and sin within the church must not be ignored, but Christ's way of opposing false teachings and calling sinners to repentance does not include torture or death threats.

D. God inspired Scripture in a way that accommodated the original audience's language, culture, and general level of understanding. A case for reinterpreting Scripture often is made by saying that the new interpretation maintains the fundamental teaching of Scripture, while discarding deductions which were made on the basis of God's accommodations to the original author and audience's cultural beliefs. For example, God accommodated ancient cultural beliefs about a flat, fixed earth to teach through poetry a theological truth about God's power and faithfulness. Prior to Christ, God accommodated the practical need for Israelites to live separately and not intermarry with members of surrounding cultures to teach them that worship of God is not to be mixed with idolatry. In Old and New Testament times, God accommodated ancient practices of slavery to teach that ultimately we are all dependent on God and responsible

to God for how we act, and that our relationship to God should determine how we treat each other.

E. Slippery-slope concerns are addressed appropriately. When Scripture is reinterpreted, questions are often raised about how far such reinterpretations will ultimately shift from traditional interpretations. “Slippery slope” arguments are often logical fallacies and by themselves should not carry much weight; however, they often do point to legitimate concerns, which must be addressed. Consider the following examples: The church’s decision that Gentiles do not need to obey the Law of Moses did not lead to a slippery slope where any sin was tolerated; rather, the church continued to teach that all Christians should obey God’s moral law and follow Christ’s example in obedience to God’s will. The church’s decision that Psalm 93:1 does not teach that the earth is fixed in place did not lead to an undermining of the authority of Scripture or a situation in which science dictates our interpretation of Scripture; rather, the church came to realize that Scripture passages like these reflect God’s accommodation to the ancient author’s and audience’s pre-scientific beliefs about the natural world. When the church decided that part of our God-ordained dominion over the natural world includes preserving some wilderness and keeping species from going extinct, it did not lead down a slippery slope to nature-worship or for prioritizing the care of creation over the care for people; rather, the church realized that caring for creation is done out of obedience to God and thankfulness to God, and in addition to being a good thing in its own right, is one means by which we care for people.

F. The gospel of Jesus Christ advances through the reinterpretation. Christ’s kingdom is advanced when the church is the welcoming channel of God’s love and mercy. For example, Gentiles are welcomed into the fellowship of believers; intellectual barriers to the gospel—such as claims that Scripture teaches things that are scientifically false—are removed; and social barriers to the gospel, such as racial divides, are reduced.

G. Human flourishing increases through the reinterpretation. When the church is God’s voice for love, for justice, for truth, for reconciliation, his image bearers thrive. The multi-cultural fellowship of believers grows as Gentiles are welcomed. Science advances. Human suffering decreases. Political freedom and economic opportunities increase.

Same-sex marriage and the reinterpretation of Scripture

Christian supporters of same-sex marriage believe that their proposed reinterpretation of Scripture has the hallmarks of historic *Spirit-prompted* reinterpretations.

A. Social goods. The institution of marriage enables many social goods in the lives of individuals and families and in society as a whole. Marriage partners support each other psychologically, socially, medically, financially, legally, and in many other ways. Often they care for children together; often they help care for each other’s parents, siblings, and extended families. Together they pay taxes, support schools and charities, and participate in their church. By allowing same-sex marriage, the number of individuals who can share in these benefits increases, and society is strengthened.

B. Science: Our scientific understanding of human nature, sexual attraction, and gender identification has advanced in recent decades. Medical science shows us that some humans are born intersex, with a biology that cannot be sorted into one of two sexes. Medical science is starting to help us understand the genetic, neuronal, and hormonal causes of many different types of intersex and transgender conditions. Likewise, same-sex attraction in individuals who are not intersex or transgender also appears to have genetic, neuronal, hormonal, and possibly early environmental causes. Neuroscience, developmental biology, and social sciences are showing how deeply same-sex attraction is rooted in the biology of some individuals at very early ages. Animal studies show varieties of same-sex behaviors are not uncommon among many species, pointing to deep biological causes for same-sex attractions. From these scientific studies, it now appears that various forms of intersex conditions, transgender conditions, and same-sex attraction in individuals who are neither intersex nor transgender arise from a collection of causes, many of them purely biological, which science is still in the process of understanding. The Synod 1973 report raised the question of whether same-sex attraction was a “creational variant” or a “result of the Fall,” and argued for the latter. But numerous advances in science over the last few decades lead us to reconsider whether various forms of same-sex attraction and intersex conditions should be seen as “creational variants.”

C. Suffering and social evils: Historically, the church’s collective treatment of individuals with same-sex attraction has caused a great deal of suffering. The Synod 1973 report acknowledges this. Its call for churches to do better in their treatment of same-sex attracted individuals, while at the same time calling for their lifelong celibacy, unintentionally resulted in a continuation of their suffering. The report to Synod 2002 of the Committee to Give Direction about and for Pastoral Care for Homosexual Members also acknowledges the pain suffered by same-sex attracted Christians because the church has not been compassionate toward them. Advocates of same-sex unions believe that this suffering will continue as long as their fundamental sexual identity is perceived as a “result of the Fall,” and as long as they are denied access to the many social goods of marriage.

D. Spiritual gifts: Many married heterosexual individuals find that their marriage facilitates the exercise of their spiritual gifts. Some Christians who are in life-long same-sex unions have been given spiritual gifts for church leadership. They also experience their life-long same-sex unions as an important support for them to use those spiritual gifts on behalf of the church.

Christian advocates of same-sex marriage also believe that their proposed reinterpretation of Scripture has the hallmarks of historic *Spirit-guided* reinterpretations.

A. The authority of Scripture is upheld. In proposed reinterpretations, the authority and inspiration of Scripture is still affirmed.

B. Fundamental teachings are maintained. Fundamental teachings at the core of these passages are affirmed, even as some aspects of the passages are reinterpreted. In this case, the passages in question still teach that sexual relationships that are casual and libertine, or part of pagan religious practices, or indulgent and exploitative expressions of social power of one

individual over another, are forbidden. Sexual relationships should occur in committed, mutually beneficial, life-long partnerships (i.e., marriage), which form the core of new families.

C. Scripture interprets scripture. A reinterpretation of some parts of Scripture must not flatly contradict what is clearly taught in other ways in other parts of Scripture. Rather, a case must be made that the reinterpretation fits with the themes and insights taught elsewhere in Scripture. Those who argue for same-sex covenantal relationships still teach that sexual relationships should occur within marriage. Marriage is an earthly ordinance, a social convention, and a covenant between individuals that creates a new family within society in which partners care for each other, their children, and members of each other's extended families. In marriage, self-sacrificing love is practiced and honored over a lifetime. All of these things are possible with same-sex marriages.

D. God inspired Scripture in a way that accommodated the original audience's language, culture, and general level of understanding. The case for reinterpretation is made by noting that the new interpretation maintains the fundamental teaching of Scripture while discarding deductions that were made on the basis of those accommodations. In this case, we understand that when the Holy Spirit inspired these passages, the Spirit accommodated ancient beliefs about *gender essentialism* (a belief which modern science does not support) and cultural practices at that time, while *teaching* that sexual relations should be restricted to committed, loving life-long relationships, and teaching about how marriage partners should treat each other with love and self-sacrifice.

E. Slippery-slope concerns are addressed appropriately. In regard to same-sex marriage, two concerns often raised are whether such a reinterpretation would lead to slippery slopes justifying sexual promiscuity or polygamy. In this case, arguments in favor of same-sex marriage do not justify sexual promiscuity. The arguments for reinterpretation summarized here simply support the idea that the social, psychological, physical, and spiritual benefits of heterosexual marriage should be made available to individuals who, because of their biology and psychology, could not obtain such benefits from a heterosexual marriage but could obtain such benefits from a same-sex marriage. Also in this case, the arguments in favor of life-long monogamous same-sex unions do not justify polygamy. Historically, while some individuals who have been in polygamous marriages might have benefited from such relationships, collectively, the practice of polygamy in cultures has been shown repeatedly to have numerous harmful effects, to many individuals in such marriages, and harmful effects to societies as a whole. The reinterpretation arguments summarized here only support extending the social, psychological, physical, and spiritual benefits of monogamous marriages to same-sex attracted individuals.

F. The gospel of Jesus Christ advances through the reinterpretation. In this case, same-sex attracted individuals will be allowed to participate more fully in the life of the church, and some who do not feel welcome in the church now will again feel welcomed. The church will be enriched and God's kingdom will be advanced through the diverse gifts of these individuals. The public witness of the church to gracious acceptance will be advanced in society rather than a reputation for condemnation.

G. Human flourishing increases through the reinterpretation. In this case, same-sex attracted individuals will be allowed to participate fully in the life of the society, and the social goods of marriage will be made available to those who have been denied it in the past.

Discerning the Spirit's leading on this topic

The church collectively must seek the leading of the Holy Spirit to determine whether or not this proposed reinterpretation of Scripture is Spirit prompted and Spirit led. The scriptural arguments—both for the traditional view calling same-sex attracted individuals to life-long celibacy and the proposed reinterpretation allowing for same-sex marriage—will need to be examined and discussed carefully. It might be the case, as has happened in the past on other issues, that Christians who uphold the inspiration and authority of Scripture and who use sound hermeneutical methods can make strong arguments for both positions.

While Christians are examining and discussing scriptural issues, they should simultaneously be seeking the answers to other important questions. What is the latest science telling us about this issue? What social goods are enabled by each position? What social evils might be entailed or avoided by each position? Where do we see evidence of the Holy Spirit at work? These are all ways by which the Spirit might guide and direct us as we seek the best understanding of Scripture.

Section 2: Advances in Scientific Understandings of Sex and Gender, Intersex and Transgender

The Science of Homosexuality since 1973

Scientific understandings of same-sex attraction, sexuality, and gender have progressed significantly over the last forty years alongside sociological research related to LGBT individuals. The terminology used today to discuss and research sex and gender only began to take shape over the last century. The English term “homosexual” was first introduced at the end of the nineteenth century concurrent with the rise of the “medicalization of sex,”³ when “medicine and psychiatry were effectively competing with religion and the law for jurisdiction over sexuality” (Herrick, 2012). Homosexuality was first classified as a medical/psychological pathology in the early twentieth century; this classification was considered by some a progressive step because a “sick” person was less culpable than a “sinner or criminal” (Herrick, 2012). Some early twentieth-century theorists believed homosexuality was innate (Ellis, 1901) while others thought it was a result of parental relationships and social conditioning (Freud, 1905). Throughout the twentieth century, theories about the nature of homosexuality were in flux, but the psychiatric and psychological communities classified it as a mental disorder until the 1970s. By contrast, most churches continued to categorize homosexuality as immoral, although evidence of the medical community’s influence can be seen when, in 1946, Bible translators adopted the term “homosexuality” in their interpretations of passages of Scripture dealing with male sexual behavior.⁴

By the 1970s, a number of shifts occurred. In 1973, as a result of several decades of research and changing social norms, homosexuality was removed from the DSM-II.⁵ In 1975, the American Psychological Association noted, “Homosexuality, per se, implies no impairment in judgment, stability, reliability, or general social and vocational capabilities” (Conger, 1975, 633). Theories holding that homosexuality results from family dynamics began to be challenged, and research into possible biological determiners increased. Homosexuality was not listed as a mental disorder in the DSM-III published in 1980, although it did include the diagnosis of “ego-dystonic homosexuality,” which referred to distress about homosexual arousal. In 1986, the third edition of the DSM was revised and contained neither homosexuality nor ego-dystonic homosexuality in its list of mental disorders (Bayer, 1987). With the removal of homosexuality from the DSM, the field of psychology began to take an active role in removing the stigma long associated with homosexuality.

Concerns about possible negative influences of gay and lesbian persons on families and children led to several studies in this area showing these fears to be misplaced. Research on children of lesbian and gay parents has revealed that the majority are heterosexual and they are

³ “Medicalization” describes the changes that have come about in our understanding of biological and psychological conditions as a result of modern medical interventions.

⁴ Many Bible translators conflate the Greek words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* in 1 Cor. 6:9 as “homosexual” despite the fact that the English definition applies to male and female whereas the Greek terms refer to males only and describe two different sexual roles.

⁵ The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), published by the American Psychiatric Association, is a classification of mental disorders.

just as likely to be heterosexual as those raised by heterosexual parents (Bailey et al., 1995; Huggins, 1989). Children of lesbian parents show no more developmental problems than do children of heterosexual mothers (Patterson, 1995). Peer relationships among these children evince normal development and socialization (Golombok et al., 1983; Green, 1978; Green et al., 1986). These findings are complemented by the research that shows same-sex couples are strikingly similar to heterosexual couples. Many studies have revealed that lesbians, gay men, and bisexual individuals tend to be as healthy and well adjusted as their heterosexual counterparts (e.g., Cabaj & Stein, 1996; Gonsiorek, 1991). Among same-sex couples, a substantial number have been in their relationships for over ten years. They report similar levels of satisfaction and commitment and face the same challenges as their heterosexual counterparts (Peplau & Spalding, 2000; Kurdek, 2004; Peplau & Beals, 2004).

Research since 1973 also documents the discrimination that LGBT individuals encounter on a regular basis. The majority of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people have been victimized because of their sexual orientation at individual, institutional, and sociocultural levels (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001). Living in a stigmatizing environment creates chronic stress (labeled “minority stress”) (Brooks, 1981; Meyer, 1995, 2003) resulting from internalized homophobia, fear of being mistreated, and concealment of their sexual orientation resulting from subtle and overt instances of discrimination (Meyer 1995, 2003). LGBT youth are particularly vulnerable to these stresses. A lack of acceptance and fear of persecution lead many LGBT youth to leave their homes and live in transitional housing or the streets (Ray & National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2006). Studies reveal that LGBT youth experience much higher rates of homelessness, rejection by families, discrimination by faith communities and faith-based ministries, poverty, drug use, mental health disorders, and risky sexual behaviors (Cochran et al., 2002).

As noted, the last several decades have seen a plethora of research into possible biological and environmental origins of homosexuality. To date, the evidence suggests that biology and, to a lesser extent, social conditioning can play roles in sexual orientation but that in the majority of cases, sexual orientation is well established at puberty and rarely changes. Demographic data show that women’s sexual orientation seems to be more fluid, but researchers note the dearth of studies into possible etiology.⁶ The consensus of researchers is that sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender role behavior are influenced by a complex and indeterminable number of biological and social factors that are often intertwined. The innumerable possible permutations from the interaction of these factors make it impossible to identify any single determinants contributing to sexual orientation or gender identity (Hines, 2005; Hershberger, 2001; Rahman, & Wilson, 2008). Researchers concur, however, that while “biological influences are important for both men and women, they are probably more important in influencing male sexual orientation” (Hershberger, 2001; Rahman & Wilson, 2008).

A number of studies have documented various differences in biological characteristics of gays and lesbians, as compared to heterosexuals, that cannot be attributed to environmental explanations. Gay men and straight women have, on average, equally proportioned brain hemispheres while lesbian women and straight men have, on average, slightly larger right brain hemispheres (BBC, 2008). A variety of differences between gays and lesbians compared to

⁶ The dearth of study in the area of women’s sexual orientation is yet another example of the historical prioritization of male over female sexuality corresponding with the cultural-historical devaluation of women.

heterosexuals are also found in smaller regions of the brain such as the hypothalamus (Roughgarden, 2004), anterior commissure (Allen & Gorski, 1992), suprachiasmatic nucleus (Swaab & Hofman, 1990; Swaab et al., 1995), and the amygdala (Safron et al., 2007). Additionally, the brains of gay men react differently to Prozac (Kinnunen et al., 2004) and, along with lesbian women, gay men are significantly more likely to be left-handed or ambidextrous than straight men and women (Lippa, 2003). Finally, finger length ratios between the index and ring fingers have frequently been reported to differ, on average, between straight and lesbian women (Kraemer et al., 2006).

Subtle cognitive differences are also reported between gay and straight people as to how they process certain kinds of data. Lower rates of spatial cognition are reported among gay males and correspondingly higher rates among lesbians (Hershberger, 2001, and Rahman et al., 2003b), and gay men receive higher scores than non-gay men on tests of object location memory (Rahman et al., 2003b). Gay men and lesbians may be more verbally fluent than heterosexuals of the same sex (Rahman et al., 2003).

Research into the biological etiology of sexual orientation focuses on two primary factors: neurohormonal and genetic. Neurohormonal approaches hypothesize that “sexual orientation depends on the early sexual differentiation of hypothalamic brain structures” (Hershberger, 2001, 28), and research focuses on the hormonal environment during critical periods of brain development (Hines, 2005, 85). Studies show that androgen presence or absence affects masculinization and feminization, respectively, and can affect core gender identity and sexual orientation. Genetic studies hypothesize that genes may play direct or indirect roles in variations in sexual orientation and gender identity. Family and twin studies have found probable genetic components to sexual orientation (Wilson & Rahman, 2005; Langstrom et al., 2010), and markers have been identified on X chromosomes in concordance with homosexuality that may explain the higher rate of older male siblings among homosexual males (Wilson & Rahman, 2005; Bocklandt, 2006). Indirectly, genes can affect personality traits and hormonal mechanisms that may influence sexual orientation and gender identity (Hines, 2005). While identical twins have a significantly higher concordance rate of homosexuality than the larger public, a little less than 50% share a sexual orientation. Researchers hypothesize that “some of the remaining variation could be determined by hormone levels during early development” (Hines, 2005, 106).

Social environmental factors may play a role in sexual orientation and gender identity in early years, but no research has identified specific factors that may be involved (Wilson & Rahman, 2005). There are cases of individuals born with ambiguous genitalia who are assigned a sex that is later determined to be inconsistent with their chromosomal and/or hormonal makeup and who, nevertheless, acquire a sexual orientation consistent with their assigned sex (Hines, 2005, 91). While this is not always the outcome (see the discussion of intersex below), such cases suggest socialization may play a role in sexual orientation. The same researchers are careful to point out, however, there is no evidence that social (or hormonal) factors have any influence in adulthood on sexual orientation. This supports the findings that no empirical evidence exists to suggest that “reparative” or “conversion therapies” (attempts to change sexual orientation) are effective (Stein, 1996). The American Psychological Association’s (APA, 2008) summary of the research shows that sexual orientation (i.e., erotic attractions and sexual arousal oriented to one sex or the other, or both) is unlikely to change due to efforts designed for this

purpose (e.g., James, 1978; McConaghy, 1976; Tanner, 1974, 1975). Belief in the hope of sexual orientation change followed by the failure of the treatment has been identified as a significant cause of distress and negative self-image (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Shidlo & Schroeder, 2002).⁷ While stories exist, particularly within the church, of individuals who have experienced a change from a homosexual orientation to a heterosexual orientation, such cases are extremely rare. Many of these stories describe a change from promiscuity to chastity—a spiritual healing, indeed, for both heterosexual and homosexual persons. Some such cases may also involve bisexual individuals who choose monogamous heterosexual relationships they find fulfilling and rewarding.

Regarding gender identity and gender role behaviors, no determinants have been identified although most researchers agree that hormonal contributions correlate with “play preferences, personality traits, including aggression, dominance, and nurturance, and even patterns of cognitive abilities” (Hines, 2005, 108). Additionally, homosexuality is often associated with childhood gender nonconformity. Variations, however, are multitudinous among individuals, and ultimately, determinants cannot be isolated. This is no surprise, considering that neurobiologists remind us that the brains of “few, if any, individuals correspond to the modal [typical] male pattern or the modal female pattern. Variation within each sex is great, with males and females near the top and bottom of the distributions for every characteristic. . . . In fact, although most of us appear to be either clearly male or clearly female, we are each complex mosaics of male and female characteristics” (Hines, 2005, 18-19).

Male and Female, Intersex and Transgender

Scientific understandings of sex and gender identity have tremendous repercussions for discussions of same-sex relationships. Our discussion of homosexuality and same-sex marriage is generally premised on an understanding of sex as dichotomous: God “made them male and female.” Certainly this is the typical situation and a necessity for the perpetuation of human life. But many people do not fit into the simple categories of male and female, man and woman, masculine and feminine. While the science in this area is relatively recent, historical records, including sacred texts, reveal that definitions of male and female have varied over time and across cultures. Modern science—biology, psychology, and sociology—confirm that sex and gender are not absolute but exist on spectrums. In the context of our study about same-sex marriage, then, scientific understandings of gender and sex posit serious challenges to our definitions and beliefs about marriage in the church. The lives of intersex and transgender persons—people who do not fall into our male/female or man/woman cultural categories—deconstruct our understandings at their most basic level.

Gender historians and cultural anthropologists tell us that across time and cultures, sex has not always been understood as binary. Historical records of people who do not fit neatly into a biological male or female category and transgender people and/or performances go back as far as 1500 B.C. with references in ancient plays, epic poetry, mythology, and sacred texts (Bolich, 2007). Prior to the medicalization of sex in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most cultures followed a “one-sex” model (always hierarchical) in which male and female were considered

⁷ Additional research in this area is reported in Section 9 on psychological issues.

variations of a common type, and gender was determined by behavior as much as by anatomy (Laqueur, 1990; Dreger, 1998; Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Cultural attitudes toward people who fall in the middle of the spectrum have also varied widely across time and cultures—from reverence to acceptance to acknowledgment to denial to rejection. Some cultures acknowledge them as a third gender, thus creating a cultural space for them. In most cultures, including Western, people who do not fit into cultural categories or who fall on the borders have historically been marginalized and often feared, found repulsive, or rendered invisible by the majority. As Bouma and Looy (2005) point out, “for thousands of years, human cultures have reacted with fear and horror at the birth of a sexually ambiguous child” (171).

Oppression of the “other” is fueled by the understanding (conscious or unconscious) that the other’s difference threatens the norms by which the majority understands itself, its values, and its rules. Thus, where gender hierarchies are strongest, oppression of liminal persons is greatest. Christianity teaches that Christ came to us as one of these marginalized people, “despised and rejected by humankind.... Like one from whom people hide their faces, he was despised, and we held him in low esteem... We considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted” (Isaiah 53:3-4, NIV). Christ challenged many cultural hierarchies (“the last shall be first”) and identified with those considered “punished,” “stricken,” and “afflicted.” We ignore or dismiss “the least of these” at our spiritual peril (Matt. 25:40). What might the marginalized—the feared, freakish, despised, rejected, discomfoting, or invisible—in our culture teach us about the way we understand gender and sexuality? How do we as the Church understand our fellow image bearers of God who fall outside the norms, and what does that teach us about how we have privileged those norms?

Most debates in the church around human sexuality—and by extension, marital unions—are based on the assumption of sex as dichotomous: “male and female he created them” (Gen 1.27). But in Matthew 19, Jesus acknowledges those who do not fall into the gender binary as it applied to marriage in his culture. He responds to the Pharisees’ test question about divorce under Mosaic law by quoting the passage from Genesis, but his response does not stop there. He continues with comments about eunuchs, acknowledging people who do not clearly fit the male-female paradigm associated with traditional marriage in his culture, including those who are born with sexual difference (v. 12). Other historical documents from various cultures similarly mention such people using a variety of terms. In our era, biomedical science has identified several variations in sex characteristics that make it impossible to classify certain individuals as simply male or female; these variations are referred to as *intersex* conditions or disorders/ differences of sexual development (DSDs).⁸ The field of psychology likewise recognizes individuals whose psychological perception of their own gender does not correlate with their biology; these individuals are referred to as *transgender* persons, and any discomfort they experience because their gender identity does not correlate with their biology is called *gender dysphoria*. What does the reality of intersex and transgender persons mean for discussions about human sexuality and marriage in a Christian context?

⁸ Medical research refers to such conditions as Disorders of Sexual Development (DSDs), but other professionals, international councils (World Health Org., Council of Europe), and individuals themselves prefer the term “intersex” because they consider it a naturally occurring variation in humans and not a medical condition or “disorder” necessarily requiring medical intervention. Still others are appropriating the acronym and redefining it as *differences* in sexual development. It is with this latter understanding that DSD is used in this report.

Intersex Persons

Consider the following stories of people who do not fit into our male/female binary:

Barbara was born and raised a girl, content and happy. However, by age 14, she began to realize that something was wrong. She was not menstruating and her breasts were not growing. To her amazement, her voice began to deepen, her clitoris enlarged greatly, testes descended into her labia, and she started experiencing sexual interest in girls. Gradually, Barbara realized that she was turning into a boy. (Bouma & Looy 2005, 166).

“Barbara” learned that she was born with an intersex condition called 5-alpha reductase deficiency and that she had XY (male) chromosomes. In another case, “Ms. C” sought psychiatric help because she realized she was sexually attracted to women, which violated her church’s position on homosexuality as sinful. She also realized her sense of herself was male (Bostwick & Martin, 2007). She shared how, after a childhood of gender identity confusion, she learned she had been born with ambiguous genitalia and underwent surgery at six months old. At puberty she was given estrogen, which allowed her body to develop as a female, but she never experienced menstruation. She married, but her relationship fell apart and she fell into alcoholism. She then found solace and support in the church but still struggled with her sexual attraction to women. Church counselors told her that celibacy was her only option. Her psychiatrist recommended chromosomal testing, and Ms. C learned she had an intersex condition with majority XY chromosomes.

Intersex individuals are people who cannot be biologically classified as male or female. They have been referred to with various terminology throughout history. In the Western tradition, they have been called *androgynes* or *hermaphrodites* (from the Greek myth of Hermaphroditus, the two-sexed child of Hermes and Aphrodite). While these terms are still in use, they are considered inexact and archaic. In biology, intersex refers to congenital variations in sex characteristics (in people and animals) including chromosomes (non- XX or -XY), gonads, genitals, and/or hormones that usually distinguish male and female. Some intersex conditions are evident at birth in ambiguous genitalia (e.g., an undersized penis or an oversized clitoris). Other conditions do not become apparent until puberty (e.g., an adolescent starts to develop secondary characteristics of the “opposite” sex, like “Barbara”). Some might only be discovered when an individual seeks help for medical or psychological problems (e.g., a person who is [mis]assigned as female at birth but who feels male, like “Ms. C”). Still other intersex conditions may be so minor that some may never be aware of their difference. Endocrinologist John Achermann tells us that biological sex exists along a spectrum: “there is certainly an area of overlap where some people can’t easily define themselves within the binary structure” (in Ainsworth 2015). Intersex conditions further complicate societal understandings of gender identity and definitions of homosexuality because there are no determinative correlations between biological sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

There are several atypical conditions⁹ associated with each category of sex characteristics, and many of them are not immediately identifiable or accurately diagnosed, so determining the incidence of DSDs in the population is difficult. Adding to these difficulties, government agencies do not collect statistics on DSDs; doctors do not always agree on what should be classified as a DSD; and some physicians are reluctant to classify some conditions as intersex because of the shame and stigma that attaches to a diagnosis (Delfondo, 2015; Preves, 2003). Cases documented at birth are about 1 in 1500, but leading researchers, using the most inclusive definitions, estimate that DSDs “occur in approximately one in 100 live births” (Arboleda, et. al, 2014, 684). This means that statistically, most churches include individuals on the intersex spectrum.

Much is at stake in being assigned a gender at birth. Gender scholars remind us that strictly defined gender roles are related to privilege and power in society, so gender polarities are essential to maintaining a status quo in power relations (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; de Lauretis, 1987). In Western culture, gender and gender roles are tied to biology and anatomy,¹⁰ and thus, medical professionals experience (with varying levels of awareness) considerable pressure to assign sex at birth as either male or female. Doctors have traditionally declared the sex of newborns based on observation of external genitalia. In cases of ambiguous genitalia, they can now run tests to determine the chromosomes (XX, XY, XXX, XXY, XYY, or X) gonads (ovaries or testicles), sex hormones, and internal reproductive anatomy.¹¹ The criteria for “ambiguous” genitalia, however, have been a matter of dispute over time. What constitutes ambiguity? an undersized penis? an oversized clitoris? Who decides on appropriate size? Historically, male genitalia have received more attention by medical professionals than female genitalia, reflecting the greater concern with well-defined maleness than femaleness (Preves, 2003; Holmes, 2005).¹²

In the U.S., the medical profession has traditionally believed that a child needs a clear male or female identity for psychological stability throughout life. Starting in the mid-twentieth century, doctors recommended that infants and children with ambiguous genitalia and other intersex conditions be surgically and/or hormonally treated to fit into cultural definitions of male or female.¹³ Many “assumed that without surgery an intersex child is doomed to be a social outcast” (Holmes, 2005, 161). Many parents, sharing this view, have sought to have their child’s sex firmly established as soon as possible. Some of these medical interventions have had positive outcomes, but others have resulted in complications that impaired a person’s sexual sensation and/or functioning in adulthood (Azziz, 1994; Newman, 1991; Holmes, 2005). In still others, the

⁹ The term “condition” is used here to define a state of being, not a medical disorder.

¹⁰ In U.S. law, the legal standards for determining sex at birth have varied from state to state, but most have been based on chromosomes.

¹¹ A full description of the multitude of intersex conditions associated with chromosomes and hormonal conditions would exceed the bounds of this report. See Intersex Society of North America for a list and discussion of the difficulties of identifying the various conditions.

¹² Dreger (1998) and Preves (2003) document the history of medical sex assignment in Western culture and the changing criteria used to determine the perceived “adequacy” of genitalia. Holmes discusses the misogyny reflected in sex assignment of intersex infants.

¹³ Megan DeFranza argues that sex assignment through medical intervention caused intersex conditions to become relatively invisible in Western culture. Intersex persons were better known in previous cultures when surgery and hormone treatments were not possible (2015b).

sex that doctors and parents assigned to the child does not match the child's gender identity later in life, creating a host of difficulties, including an understanding of their sexual orientation.

The shame and stigma commonly experienced by intersex individuals lead to secrecy, which adds to their psychological distress. Intersex adults share heartbreaking stories of “pain, sorrow, bewilderment, and anger” (Preves, 2003, 60) and “report feeling deeply ashamed and abused by their medical treatments” (Holmes, 2005, 169). Such experiences have led intersex activists, health ethicists, and international organizations to advocate against surgical intervention until the person has a cohesive gender identity and can participate in the decision-making process (Hughes et al., 2006; Kessler, 1998; Wiesemann, 2010). As a result, increasingly more young people in our society are raised with an intersex identity, exercise more influence over their health decisions, are more open about their condition, and are more psychologically stable than their counterparts who have hidden their identity (Cornwall, 2014).

Transgender Persons

While intersex persons challenge our categories of biological sex (male and female), transgender persons challenge our understanding of gender identity, roles, and expression (man and woman, masculine and feminine, gay and straight). Consider the story of Halle:

When Halle was two years old, she refused to wear dresses and felt uncomfortable playing with girls. At three, she asked her parents if God could turn her into a boy. By the time she was six, she was depressed and suicidal. Her frantic parents took her to a psychiatrist, who eventually told them that Halle was transgender. Halle is convinced that she is really a boy, living in a girl's body. (Van Heukelem, 2004, in Bouma & Looy, 2005, 166)

Halle/Hal's parents and church family supported his desire to live as a boy, but they faced opposition by some friends and members of their extended family.¹⁴ Mark Yarhouse (2015b), a leading researcher on transgender Christians, tells the story of Sawyer, born a boy, who felt from the age of five that she was a girl. Sawyer grew long hair, wore feminine attire, and expressed stereotypically feminine behavior. Sawyer's anxious parents took their son to several pastors and mental health professionals for counseling. The professionals counseled them to give Sawyer time—the majority of transgender children “grow out of it.” The pastors insisted that Sawyer's persistent identification as female was a “sign of willful disobedience” requiring strong discipline, which the parents attempted. The distraught parents observed no change and blamed themselves for failing their son, who by adolescence and young adulthood was experiencing “excruciating distress” and had become suicidal. This distress curtailed when she fully transitioned to a female identity and became “Sara.” In adulthood, she began hormone treatments and eventually underwent surgery (Yarhouse, 2015b).

Transgender persons are those whose “gender identity, gender expression, or behavior does not conform to that typically associated with the sex to which they were assigned at birth”

¹⁴ The pastor of the church, who fully supported the family, eventually was subject to church discipline related to the outcome of this case and left the CRC.

(American Psychological Association, 2014).¹⁵ There is no consensus in the scientific community as to the cause of this phenomenon, and the wide diversity and fluidity of gender expression, identity, and orientation among transgender individuals suggest there is no single explanation. Many researchers believe that levels of hormones, especially androgens, during pre- and post-natal brain development are connected to gender identity. Cases of individuals who learned later in life about their intersex condition, like Ms. C, suggest the hormones related to chromosomal makeup play a role in gender identity and sexual orientation. Other researchers believe that socialization plays a role. Undeniably, environmental influence is significant: gender expression is in large part societally determined, and gender roles, which vary over time and cultures, may be more or less rigid. These understandings have led to a prevailing view that both biology and socialization are significant factors in early development of gender identity and that gender identity is relatively fixed by adulthood (Hines, 2005).

The distress experienced by many transgender persons (such as Sara) as a result of the dissonance between their biology and their gender identity (*gender dysphoria*) also varies among this group. As the professionals in Sara’s story pointed out, transgenderism in children is not uncommon—their gender identities can be quite fluid. (Simona Giordano, in her study of children with gender dysphoria, reminds us of the many fairy tales featuring characters who experience dissonance with their bodies and transform to a truer identity, e.g., Pinocchio, the Mermaid, the Ugly Ducking.) In the majority of cases, gender fluidity does not persist through adolescence (Janssen & Erickson-Schroth, 2013, 996). Those in whom it persists usually go on to identify as transgender adults (Byne et al., 2012), and among them, those who experience gender dysphoria are most likely to undergo “gender affirming” surgery.

The prevalence of transgenderism, like intersex, is extremely difficult to determine in large part because few national surveys include questions about gender identity (Stroumsa, 2014). Estimates of the incidence of *reported* gender dysphoria range widely, between 0.3 and 5% of the population (Stroumsa, 2014; Carroll et al., 2002; U.S. Dept. of Justice, 2014). Lower estimates include only those who have sought help for gender dysphoria, not those transgender individuals who do not experience discomfort with the lack of congruence between their gender identity and their biological sex nor those who, because of socio-economic circumstances, do not seek help. Transgender females (MTFs, males-to-females) outnumber transgender males (FTMs) approximately three to one (Kaplan, 2015). Gender scholars speculate that this may be the case because gender roles for females are much broader (consider the societal acceptance of tomboys) whereas male gender roles are restrictive and rigidly defined (effeminacy is derogated). Similar to the greater concern with biological markers of maleness, here we see a greater concern with male gender expression than female. Most experts believe that transgenderism is underreported because of the stigma and persecution that accompanies identification as transgender: “transgender persons know only too well the consequences of straying from compliance with the definition and appearance of what is considered ‘normal’ gender expression” (Carroll et al., 2002, 132).

¹⁵ “*Gender identity* refers to a person’s internal sense of being male, female, or something else; *gender expression* refers to the way a person communicates gender identity to others through behavior, clothing, hairstyles, voice, or body characteristics” (APA).

Transgender persons have a much higher-than-average rate of health and psychological problems due to societal discrimination, including job loss, physical and emotional abuse (including hate crimes), discrimination among health care providers, and substance abuse. The suicide rate among this population is alarmingly high—41% (compared to 1.6% in the general population), and is even higher among youth, ethnic minorities, and those participating in sex work or drug use (Stroumsa, 2014). Transgender persons find themselves in an extremely difficult position: they know that publicly affirming their gender identity can “alleviate the shame, isolation, and secrecy that often accompany attempts to pass as a desired gender,” but going public also opens them up to increased persecution (Carroll et al., 2002, 133).

Because no definitive biological marker exists to explain or predict transgenderism, it has been treated with skepticism by much of the public. Sensational cases in the media elicit scorn among people who dismiss them simply as unnatural, immoral, or perverse. Others acknowledge the phenomenon but argue that it should not be “indulged.” A few psychologists believe that those with “gender identity disorder” (GID) require treatment and therapy to help the patient align their gender identity with their biological sex (this would not address intersex conditions). The American Psychological Association has depathologized transgenderism in the current DSM-5 and has replaced the term *gender identity disorder* with *gender dysphoria* to “better indicate the distress that transpeople *may* experience when their gender identity feels incongruent” (Davy, 2015, 1165, emphasis added). Christian psychologist and researcher Mark Yarhouse in *Understanding Gender Dysphoria* (2015a) documents his sixteen years of experience in working with transgender Christians. He outlines several Christian perspectives and acknowledges that even the most conservative practitioners do not agree on the best approach in working with gender dysphoric children. He affirms, however, the persistence of transgender identity and the difficulties it raises among Christian communities.

Transgender persons, like intersex individuals, challenge the premises of discussions of sexual orientation and what determines “same-sex” behavior. Sexual orientation among transgender persons varies widely, as it does in the wider population; gender identity is not a definitive predictor of sexual orientation. Labels prove very problematic: “if using birth assigned sex as the referent, then a female-to-male transgender man (FTM) who is attracted to males is heterosexual, but if using gender identity as the referent, that FTM would be gay” (Meier et al., 2013, 464), and vice versa for transgender women. The APA notes that transgender persons most often define their orientation based on their gender identity: “a transgender woman, or a person who is assigned male at birth and transitions to female, who is attracted to other women would be identified as a lesbian or gay woman. Likewise, a transgender man, or a person who is assigned female at birth and transitions to male, who is attracted to other men would be identified as a gay man” (APA 2014). So if “Hal” (above) is sexually attracted to women, Hal would perceive himself as “straight,” but those who do not accept Hal’s transgender identity would see a same-sex relationship, whereas, if Hal is attracted to men, Hal would identify as gay while others would perceive Hal as straight. How might we make moral judgments about “same-sex” behavior in such situations?

While media coverage and popular culture might make it seem that the numbers of intersex and transgender—or *gender variant*—persons has increased greatly over the last two to three decades, scholars believe their numbers relative to the population have remained stable

over time (Landin et al., 1996). As mentioned, gender variant persons have been noted frequently throughout history. Greek mythology, in addition to Hermaphrodites, includes Iphis, Agdistis, Salmacis, Caenis, Teiresias, and Amazons all defying gender categories. Several scholars document the existence of gender variant historic personages in ancient civilizations (in Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, and indigenous cultures) and in Western culture from medieval times to the present (see Bolich, 2007; Feinberg, 1997; Stryker, 2006). Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions address intersex and transgender phenomena, often conflating them. Old Testament law condemns cross-dressing (Deut. 22:5) and prohibits *eunuchs* (those with damaged testicles) from access to the temple and public worship (Lev. 21:20, Deut. 23:1). Muslim tradition recognizes two types of transgender women: those who are born that way, called “mukhannathun” (“effeminate ones” or “men who resemble women”), and those who act like women for immoral purposes, e.g. prostitution. It condemns only the latter but in some cases has required the former to be castrated, thus collapsing categories of transgenderism and intersexuality. Roman culture distinguished between women’s and men’s (and children’s) clothing and behavior, scorning a crossing of boundaries, although it was quite common (Bolich, 2007). Roman law distinguished between *eunuchs by birth* (or nature) and *castrati*, castrated males (Wilson, 2014, 407, fn18). Brittany Wilson (2014) notes that under Mosaic law, eunuchs fell into the latter category: they were “ritually unclean because they mixed boundaries and their genitals did not meet the standards of bodily wholeness” (410). St. Augustine discusses “Androgyni, or Hermaphrodites” in his *City of God* (Book 16, Chap. 8) and, as Megan DeFranza notes, charitably suggests they be considered male, the “better sex” (2015b). Consistent with St. Augustine, all of these historical examples privilege maleness and devalue femaleness.

Sexual Minorities and Christianity

Returning to Matthew 19, Jesus makes reference to those who are “born eunuchs,” which would describe intersex individuals—and arguably other sexual minorities, including homosexual and transgender persons—who did not fall into a male/female classification associated with marriage in his culture. After Jesus responds to the Pharisees’ questions with strong words about divorce, his disciples respond to his difficult teaching: “If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry” (Matt. 19:10, TNIV). Jesus responds with comments about different types of eunuchs, presumably covering those who, in his culture, could not or chose not to marry: “For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven...” (v. 12). Both Jewish tradition and Latin law made similar reference to eunuchs at birth, those who did not clearly fit into a male or female category as it was culturally defined, so one can safely assume Jesus includes this group here (see DeFranza 2015b). The second type, “eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others,” were the *castrati* in Greco-Roman culture who were drafted into different types of service. In Jesus’ era, these two types of eunuchs were considered “effeminate, gender-liminal figures with ambiguous social and sexual roles” (Wilson, 2014, 407). Male eunuchs appear in the literature of the period as embodying “not only all that was unmanly, but also all that was non-elite and ‘foreign’” (Wilson, 2014, 407). The third category of eunuchs, those who choose to “live like eunuchs” for the kingdom’s sake, refers to those who choose celibacy. This type of eunuch includes St. Paul (1 Cor. 7.7) and Jesus himself. Jesus’ inclusion of the third type of eunuch in this discussion seems

quite radical: it places people like himself alongside sexual minorities who experienced cultural, legal, and religious discrimination.¹⁶

Many scholars of eunuchs in the Bible note that this moment marks the beginning of a shift in their status that was prophesied in Isaiah 56 and effected in Philip's defiance of Old Testament strictures when he rushes to share the gospel with the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. Wilson (2014), in her extensive study of eunuchs during Jesus' era, notes that the moment Luke (the writer) includes the Ethiopian eunuch as a "member of 'the Way,'" he signals the "eschatological in-breaking of God's action in the world," based on Isaiah 56:3-5 (411).¹⁷

So how might intersex and transgender persons challenge our understanding of marriage? The sexual orientations of intersex and transgender individuals vary, just like the larger population, but society would be hard pressed to define their orientation and sexuality.¹⁸ Those who believe marriage is restricted to a union between a man and a woman must face the question raised by those people who do not fall neatly into cultural categories of male and female: "what is a man?" "what is a woman?" Must candidates for marriage in the church meet a chromosomal or genital test, or must their gender identity be assessed to affirm their right to marry? Arguments against same-sex marriage that focus on complementary anatomy of males and females, while at the same time conceding that marriage and sex are not only for purposes of procreation, raise the question, "Is it really genitalia ... in which similarity and difference most profoundly inhere and on which a whole theology of marriage must rest?" (Cornwall, 2014, 26).

Many intersex and transgender persons have married and/or formed life-long unions with supportive spouses. Some Christians live with their secret, but others are known to and enjoy the support of their Christian communities.¹⁹ Intersex and transgender Christians have shared their stories of the important role their sex/gender identities have played in their spiritual journeys and their joy when embraced by the Christian community (Tanis, 2003; Mollenkott, 2001). Susannah Cornwall (2014), from her interviews with intersex Christians, reports that "feelings of being acknowledged as acceptable and non-pathological persons were central to their faith journeys" (29). Intersex and transgender persons have formed support groups and have a rich online community. Studies show that telling their stories and talking about their identities "significantly increases [their] self-esteem and psychological well-being" (Cornwall, 2014, 29).

An increasing number of intersex and transgender people whose gender identities are fluid are calling on majority culture to accept the tension and discomfort that challenges their

¹⁶ Jesus moves from a discussion of married couples (the sexual majority) to eunuchs (sexual minorities) and then goes on to advocate for children—"let the children come to me." Thus, in these verses he covers the entire human family. No one is marginalized or elided.

¹⁷ One might note that this "eschatological" moment does not include a transformation of the eunuch's physical condition; rather, he is baptized *as he is* into the family of God.

¹⁸ States that formerly disallowed same-sex marriage had to legally define what constitutes a person's sex, leading to some interesting outcomes. Texas, for example, determines sex by one's chromosomes, so, prior to the legalization of same-sex marriage, it could not prohibit the marriage of two women because one of them is chromosomally a male.

¹⁹ Acceptance is most forthcoming when the couple present as "man" and "woman," that is, if they *look like* a heterosexual couple. This suggests societal anxiety is related to the discomfort of the majority, not to an objective standard.

definitions of the normal. Christians should be particularly sensitive to their appeal inasmuch as we believe that every human being is an image bearer of God, and Jesus specifically identifies with the “least of these.” Cornwall (2008) challenges Christians who enjoy the power and privileges of majority culture to “empty themselves” of that privilege (*kenosis*) and of their expectation that others be like them. And she cautions against the dangers of believing that any of us fully understands the mind of God regarding the mysteries of gender and sex:

Phil. 2.5-11 counsels that humans are to emulate Jesus, who did not consider equality with God something to be grasped; but to exploit, to cling to, or to grasp at equality with God is exactly what is happening when humans decide that a single present or historical reading of gender tells the whole story of God. (89)

If the privilege enjoyed by those in the majority, who seem to fall easily into a male-female binary, tempts them to dismiss as mere exceptions those who fall outside these cultural categories, we are reminded again that these are the very persons with whom Jesus identifies.

So how does the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ help us to understand intersex and transgender conditions theologically and, to bring us back to the focus of our study, homosexuality and same-sex unions? How might we understand gender variance in theological terms? Are such conditions disorders resulting from the Fall (the category the CRC reserves for homosexuality), or might they be considered variances in the created order?

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Section 3: Same-Sex Attraction and Gender Variance: Disorder versus Creational Variance

Christian theological interpretations of the origin and nature of homosexuality and gender variance vary widely but are of critical importance to gay and gender variant Christians, their families, and their church families. Most major denominations have clearly articulated views on homosexuality and, while very few have official statements on transgender and intersex conditions, individual cases suggest that churches' views in these areas align with their views of homosexuality. The most extreme view is that all gender variance, including same-sex orientation, is unnatural, immoral, and represents deliberate rebellion against God, thus making it both a disorder resulting from the Fall and a personal moral failing requiring repentance and healing. This view, at its most charitable, calls Christians to "hate the sin but love the sinner."

A more moderate view, which has also been characterized as "loving the sinner but hating the sin," draws a distinction between homosexual orientation and sexual practice. This position, held by the CRCNA (Synod 1973), holds that homosexual orientation, while not sinful in itself (as contrasted to same-sex sexual behavior), is not a part of God's original design but rather constitutes a postlapsarian disorder, part of the brokenness of the world. Many evangelical churches take this position, as does the Catholic Church, which holds that the "inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin," but that the inclination itself "must be seen as an objective disorder" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1986). This contemporary perspective of homosexuality, which distinguishes between sexual orientation and sexual behavior, perhaps arises from a twentieth-century understanding that homosexuality may have biological components and/or that it may arise out of socialization beyond an individual's control. Such is the position of some gay, intersex, and transgender Christians who believe their gender/sexual variance is not a part of God's original design and that it will not be a part of the new age to come. These Christians therefore feel called to life-long celibacy. Many further believe that, in God's process of sanctification, their same-sex orientation can become an occasion for blessing.²⁰

A third view, a modification of the previous position, holds that while homosexuality was not part of God's original design, covenantal life-long same-sex unions may be accommodated as a "concession to brokenness" similar to the "redemptive accommodation" made for remarriage after divorce (see Smedes, 1999; Brownson, 2005). This position perhaps arises from an acknowledgment of the historic Church's egregious mistreatment of same-sex oriented persons and an understanding that mandatory celibacy may not be a reasonable or practical option for many (it may be better for them "to marry than to burn with passion," 1 Cor. 7:9). In his comparison of remarriage after divorce and same-sex unions, Lewis Smedes (1999) argued that "both divorced and remarried partners and homosexual partners are seeking to fulfill a fundamental, God-implanted human need for a shared life of intimate, committed and exclusive love with one other human being." He believed that this is "not what the Creator originally intended for his children," but is "the only way available to them" to fulfill a "God-given human need" while living as "followers of Christ within the supportive embrace of the Church" (Smedes, 1999). The original position of the CRC, based on Mark 10 and Matthew 19, that rejected

²⁰ Prominent gay spokespersons for this position include Eve Tushnet, Wesley Hill, and Ron Belgau, among others.

remarriage after divorce gradually shifted over several decades, and many who hold an accommodationist view on homosexuality believe that a similar concession may be a compassionate response to same-sex Christians who want to marry. We note that over time, neither of the primary spokespersons for this position—Lewis Smedes and James Brownson—continued to hold this position. They joined others who believe covenantal same-sex relationships can be fully acceptable and within the will of God.

An increasing number of Reformed Christians question the notion that gender variance constitutes a disorder resulting from the Fall; rather, they posit that gender variance may be part of the creation order. Many gay, intersex, and transgender Christians embrace their sexual/gender identity and do not believe it mandates celibacy or medical or psychological intervention of some kind. As committed Christians, they ask the church to hear their stories, consider their perspective, and look for evidence of the fruit of the Spirit in their lives.²¹ What might we learn from them? Could gender variance have been part of the created order? Those who believe so point to the presence of gender variance, including intersex conditions and homosexuality, in animals over the ages. Science tells us that variances in genetic development and biochemical processes commonly occur in nature, and the geologic record documents such genetic variances going back to eras before human life appeared.²² What light does this knowledge shed on the concept of “defects” or “disorders” that are a result of the Fall? How might this information fit within a theological paradigm?

Identifying something as a type of congenital “defect,” “malfunction,” or inherent disorder (as manifestations of a broken world) requires subjective reasoning around what constitutes the normal, particularly if the condition does not involve extraordinary physical pain or suffering. Because genetic variation is quite common throughout nature (e.g., green eyes result from a genetic “malfunction”), at what point may those variations be considered defects that will disappear in the new age? The case of intersex conditions provides a good example of the difficulty involved in such determinations. Biological sex exists on a spectrum (among humans and other animals), so identifying what constitutes a genetic defect along that spectrum is problematic. As mentioned in the discussion of scientific advancements, endocrinologists tell us that while some intersex conditions are obvious, many are difficult to identify: some people born and raised female may actually be chromosomally male and vice versa. In many (perhaps most) cases, intersexuality does not pose a health problem; a person’s suffering arises from social discrimination and abuse, not their physical condition. As such, can one effectively argue that differences in sexual development (DSDs) constitute postlapsarian disorders?

Might God have originally created more than (our understanding of) male and female? In her discussion of intersex persons, evangelical theologian Megan DeFranza argues that they may

²¹ Prominent gay spokespersons for this position include, among others, Matthew Vines, Justin Lee, and, recently, Julie Rodgers.

²² Loren and Deborah Haarsma (2011) note that historical sciences like astronomy and geology inform us about how the natural world behaved in the past, and these sciences tell us that the fundamental laws of nature did not radically change at some point. “Whatever effects of the Fall on humanity, the study of nature tells us that the Fall did not fundamentally alter how atoms and molecules and rocks and stars behave” (65-67). This suggests that biochemical processes which cause genetic variance—including genetic variances that cause or contribute to intersex or transgender conditions—follow natural laws which have not been altered since creation.

be considered part of the good creation. She contends that Genesis should not be read as an inclusive list of creation; many species (e.g., amphibians) and types of life (e.g., ethnic diversity) in our world are not mentioned in Genesis, and yet we know definitively that the latter will be part of the new age (Rev. 9). DeFranza continues, “We ask too much of Genesis 1, 2, and 3. Genesis is the beginning, not a repository of all creation” (2015a). Determining whether an aspect of a person’s biology, identity, and/or orientation constitutes a brokenness caused by original sin seems fraught with difficulties and contradictions; and such determinations can be devastating to those who fall outside the “normal.”

Theologians of disability offer helpful perspectives for this discussion. They caution against authoritative declarations of what constitutes birth defects or disorders resulting from the Fall, reminding us that disorders have historically been defined by those in the majority and comprise those attributes most people consider undesirable.²³ Many who fall into the “disabled” category embrace their difference and do not consider it a mistake or misfortune. They believe that in their diversity, they reflect to us different aspects of the image of God to which we are otherwise “blind” (Hull, 2001; Eisland, 1994; Yong, 2007 and 2011). Similarly, many Christian sexual minorities embrace those aspects of their identities that others consider a result of the Fall. The stigmatization experienced by those whom society has devalued, marginalized, and oppressed identifies them with the “despised and rejected” Christ who, on his resurrected body, carries the physical marks of that stigmatization: the *stigmata* by which we know our Savior (see Eisland, 1994, and Yong, 2007 & 2011, on resurrected bodies). How does the Church respond to persons who believe their sexual orientation, gender identity, intersex condition, or physical disability is central to their God-given identity rather than a disorder that will be corrected in heaven?

Homosexual, intersex, and transgender persons—in their very bodies, minds, and souls—call us to examine the most basic categories and definitions used by those who insist that marriage be restricted to male-female unions. The Synod 1973 report assumes only a male-female dichotomy among humans and does not consider those who fall outside this binary. Since 1973, the natural sciences have clarified much of what we now understand about the complexities of sex and gender identity, and this science should inform discussions of life-long covenantal unions. Persons who do not fit into neat categories of male and female, people Christ has remembered even when we fallen humans have not (Matt. 19:12), challenge us to question our assumptions and to consider how they are in a much better position to discern God’s work, calling, and gifts in their own lives. May we humbly acknowledge that their entering the conversation after having been shut out so often will result in more inclusive interpretations of our bodies and minds as well as a greater appreciation for how we have been fearfully and wonderfully made.

²³ Amos Yong (2007) notes that various church fathers have historically considered left-handedness, dark skin color, and other unusual physical characteristics a result of the Fall that will be “corrected” in the age to come.

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Section 4: Guidelines for Interpreting Scripture According to a Reformed Hermeneutic

As we seek to discern the Spirit's guidance on any topic, especially those that are controversial, we must always aim for the best understanding of Scripture, since it is the Word of God inspired by the Holy Spirit. Our committee maintains that a Reformed hermeneutic provides the reader with the best and most faithful understanding of Scripture. Therefore, we adhere to the interpretive principles articulated in the CRCNA Synod 1972 report on the Nature and Extent of Scriptural Authority (Supplement Report 44, hereafter referred to as "Synod 1972 report") and in other works identifying a Reformed hermeneutic of Scripture. While we do not wish to repeat all that is found in the Synod 1972 report, we believe that it will be helpful to provide a summary of the key principles. The next section summarizing current scholarship on the relevant biblical passages will describe interpretive approaches more specific to the topic and passages. This section offers a basic overview of general interpretive principles that Reformed Christians should use when interpreting Scripture or when evaluating interpretations of Scripture. While applying these principles will not guarantee immediate and uniform agreement, they at least provide us with a basis for better conversation and a way to reduce unhealthy or distorted uses of Scripture. Therefore, we identify the following guidelines as essential principles to interpreting Scripture.

1. **God reveals in two forms:** The Reformed tradition holds that God has given two forms of revelation: general and special (*Belgic Confession*, Art. II). Knowledge gained from the study of God's general revelation assists us in rightly interpreting Scripture. Taking Scripture seriously leads to recognizing the sciences as a form of revelation given by God and a legitimate expression of the cultural mandate (Synod 1972 report, 540). Findings of science may be the *occasion for reexamining a traditional interpretation*, but should not be allowed to "control the interpretation of Scripture" (Synod 1972 report, 515-516). God's special revelation must be taken as the highest authority, since it reveals God's saving work.
2. **The Bible is God's inspired and authoritative revelation:** The Bible is God's special revelation, inspired by the Holy Spirit. It therefore addresses the whole of humanity with divine authority. Scripture's authority is to be consistently applied and practiced in the ministry of the church and in every sphere of life and every human situation. This must be done in accordance with the purpose Scripture identifies for itself.
3. **Scripture's overall purpose is the redemptive revelation of God in Jesus Christ:** Jesus Christ is the center of Scripture, and the redemptive activity of God is the central theme of the whole of Scripture and every piece of Scripture. The key for the proper understanding of Scripture is acknowledging this purpose. Any interpretation must do justice to the intent of Scripture to point to Jesus Christ as its unifying theme (Synod 1972 report, 508-509). While Scripture touches every sphere of human life, it does so "in its own way and from its own perspective" (Synod 1972 report, 515). The Bible cannot simply be read as a book of rules or timeless statements, but rather as the story of redemption.
4. **Scripture is both unified and diverse:** The Bible has an *organic unity* which can be properly described as the covenant history of redemption summarized by the structure of Creation-Fall-Redemption-New Creation. This redemptive history, however, has been

progressively revealed over time using different languages, literary forms, and personalities in different historical, social, and cultural situations that addressed different topics at different stages in redemptive history. In addition, further revelation and greater clarity was given in the New Testament. Recognizing this *organic* nature of Scripture's inspiration acknowledges that God accommodated what he revealed to human limitations, cultural understandings, and the worldviews of the biblical writers in their historical settings.

5. **Scripture was originally addressed to people in specific cultural and historical contexts:** Since Bible passages were originally addressed to definite situations and to people living under particular circumstances (affecting *what* is said and *how* it was said), we must work to know as well as we can the original setting, using all the evidence the Bible itself provides and the knowledge provided by historical, geographical, linguistic, and archaeological research (Synod 1972 report, 510-511). The interpreter must grasp the situations and concepts that were well known to those originally addressed. While all passages still contain an authoritative message for us, the *form* of how particular passages are applied will differ based on the difference in circumstances. The Synod 1972 report offers the example that “the manner in which [Old Testament law] applies has drastically changed” not only because it has been fulfilled in Christ, but also because Christians no longer live under the same circumstances (511). A good interpretation of Scripture will identify the degree of continuity and discontinuity between the original context and today's context.
6. **The meaning of Scripture must be understood in its grammatical and literary context:** Interpreting Scripture requires the reader to draw out (“exegete”) as definitively as possible the biblical author's intended meaning from the words, sentences, grammar, and syntax in the context in which they were given by the divine author. This requires using documents contemporaneous with the biblical writings to shed light on meanings and usage of words and phrases. It also requires that one understands biblical passages in their literary forms (e.g. figures of speech, oracles, commands) and genres (e.g. letters, poetry, prophecy and law). This principle disallows one to read into (“eisegete”) Scripture whatever we want it to say. The Reformed tradition has insisted on the “plain” or “genuine” sense of the text as an essential way to combat allegorical or subjective readings of Scripture.
7. **Scripture interprets Scripture:** Any particular passage must be interpreted in light of the whole of Scripture. The reader must recognize how a given passage fits within the progressive unfolding revelation. Likewise, biblical texts that quote, echo, or allude to other biblical texts must be understood in light of those texts. Scripture itself interprets as it narrates and unfolds. Any interpretation (and reexamination of an interpretation) must be judged in terms of whether it agrees with Scripture's own interpretation of itself and its view of reality.
8. **More obscure passages of Scripture must be interpreted in light of clearer ones:** The Bible is clear on its most central matters related to the gospel of Jesus Christ. However, on other matters there are “things that are hard to understand” (2 Pet. 3:16). The *analogy of Scripture* teaches that the whole of Scripture is the framework for its parts, and the parts of Scripture illuminate the overall message. There must be coherence between the parts and the whole. The reader must consider the cumulative teaching on a particular issue and how it fits

with the whole of Scripture. A consistent and repeated perspective from a number of texts leads to a more definitive conclusion on a given topic (e.g. the resurrection of Jesus). On other topics, the cumulative force of the scope and teaching of Scripture as a whole may lead to the best interpretation, even if no specific part of Scripture explicitly states the teaching (e.g. slavery). The clarity on a specific matter is based on the number of passages addressing the issue, the distribution of those passages throughout Scripture, and the unanimity or correspondence among those passages.

9. **The Holy Spirit illuminates and guides the faithful reader of Scripture:** The Reformed tradition, following John Calvin and others, has insisted that the interpretation and application of Scripture is dependent upon the Holy Spirit (e.g., Belgic Confession, Art. V; Synod 1972 report, 504). The “inner testimony of the Spirit” enables the reader to receive God’s word as authoritative and to have a receptive attitude toward the message God wants to be heard and embraced. The same Spirit who inspired the biblical writers also “sheds light” on the texts as Spirit-dwelt Christians seek to live in light of Scripture’s teaching.

For other summaries of Reformed hermeneutical principles, see also John W. Cooper, *A Cause for Division? Women in Office and the Unity of the Church* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1991), 13-24 and the chapter entitled, “Interpreting the Bible in Times of Controversy,” in Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church* (Louisville: WJK, 2009, Rev., 52- 65).

For additional materials on the principles of interpreting Scripture, see

Barthomelew, C.G., and Goheen, M.W. (2014). *The Drama of Scripture*, 2nd Ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic

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Section 5: Interpretation of Biblical Passages Referring to Gender Differentiation and Same-sex Intercourse

Introduction

We surveyed a wide range of current biblical scholarship on three key biblical passages that address gender differentiation and seven passages that address same-sex intercourse. For each passage, we examined insights raised by scholars from a variety of viewpoints and noted the strongest and weakest points as well as the wide range of similarities and differences between current scholarship and the Synod 1973 report of the Committee to Study Homosexuality. (The biblical exegesis of the Synod 1973 report, affirmed in 1999, 2002, and 2013, is subsequently referred to as “Synod 1973” or “Synod” in this section.) What follows is a summary of key scholarly insights. In addition, we have compiled a selection of direct quotes from scholars and other authors representing a range of viewpoints on each passage so that readers can examine different perspectives in the authors’ own words. See these selected quotations in Section 6.

Note on Terminology

The following summary refers to “traditional” and “affirming” scholars. These are the *least inadequate* terms among those we considered. The terms “conservative” and “progressive” are politically charged. The terms “historical” and “contemporary” suggest that an author’s viewpoint is a function of when it was published, when in fact contemporary scholars continue to publish a variety of viewpoints (all of our selected sources here have been published since 1973, and most within the last decade or two). The term “revisionist” emphasizes that a previously accepted interpretation is being changed or challenged. We use the term “traditional” to indicate scholarship that supports an interpretation that Scripture does not permit same-sex marriage and intercourse. We use the term “affirming” to indicate scholarship that considers same-sex marriage and intercourse within that covenantal relationship to be compatible with Scripture. Not all scholars neatly or consistently fit these two labels. We trust that the viewpoints we present can be assessed not on the basis of labels but on our summary, selected quotations, and ultimately the full arguments these authors present themselves in their complete works.

We use the phrase “gender differentiation” in consideration of the significance of biological distinctions between male and female human beings. Although some social scientists distinguish between the word “sex” as a biological category and “gender” as a cultural one, we use the word “gender” for both to avoid confusion. We use “differentiation” instead of “complementarity” to reduce confusion with debates over “complementarian” and “egalitarian” views of gender hierarchy (which, although not entirely unrelated, are not central to the issues we are examining). We do not mean for this usage to diminish the traditional view that genders were created to be complementary. Again, we trust that viewpoints can be heard and considered based not on labels but on their merits.

Note on Points of Scholarly Agreement

Given the range of scholarly perspectives found, we were struck that nearly all scholars demonstrate agreement on crucial contextual factors regarding the passages under consideration. These points are:

1. The *biblical creation narrative portrays gender differentiation* at the establishment of marriage and sexuality.
2. Ancient cultures considered it a *shameful loss of masculine honor* for a male to take a passive or “feminine” role in sexual intercourse.
3. Ancient cultures and biblical authors generally assumed that those who experienced same-sex desire or participated in same-sex intercourse willfully departed from—or added to—*opposite-sex desire and intercourse that they also experienced* and participated in. (For more on ancient assumptions about same-sex attraction, see the below “Notes on Cultural Background.”)
4. The most *typical* and *characteristic* instances of same-sex intercourse in ancient cultures were marked by exploitation (such as pederasty and prostitution), inequality (of age, social status, or influence), or indulgence (such as promiscuity and orgies). (For same-sex practices that may have fallen outside these categories, see the below “Notes on Cultural Background.”)

Given that each of these points is mostly beyond scholarly dispute, the variation we found comes from the relative weight that scholars give each of these factors behind a particular passage. We often found scholars going to great lengths to establish one or more of these points individually, without addressing how each should be factored in to the author’s original writing and our current reading of the text, and without always engaging each other on different ways to do this. Of course, the difficulty is that these four factors were likely intermingled for biblical authors, as some of them may be for us today. Nonetheless, it can be helpful to clarify that a vital task that confronts contemporary readers is properly factoring these background considerations into our reading and interpretation.

Note on Interpretive Approaches

From these points of agreement, with the various weights that they give these contextual factors, scholars proceed to interpret the passages under examination in various ways, with various implications for the contemporary question of same-sex couples in the church. Excerpts of scholars’ various perspectives on contemporary application and implications of their work are included in Section 6 under “Implications for the Church Today.” While these approaches can be separated into the categories of “traditional” and “affirming,” there are distinctions among them that are notable (in fact, in some cases, scholars who otherwise share one of these two categories nonetheless oppose each other on their particular approaches within it). We summarize the range of interpretive approaches we found as follows.

Approaches by Traditional Scholars

- Some scholars believe that biblical condemnations of both same-sex attraction and intercourse apply to all contemporary readers and that such attractions and intercourse are *inherently morally corrupt*. As a result, they hold that believers who experience same-sex attraction should pursue *repentance and transformation* (for example, see Gagnon, as quoted in Section 6).
- Other scholars find biblical condemnations to reflect and reinforce a vision for marriage and sexuality in which gender differentiation is essential to the *design for marriage at creation*, and in which *same-sex attraction is a symptom of the disorder* introduced to creation by the Fall. As a result, in this view, individuals are not responsible for same-sex orientation, but individuals are responsible for *refraining from manifesting same-sex attractions* in same-sex intercourse or relationships (for example, see Hays and, to some extent, Kirk).

Approaches by Affirming Scholars

- Some scholars read Scripture as assuming gender differentiation is essential to the design for marriage at creation and assuming same-sex intercourse to be a departure from this design, but allow for a possibility that the *Holy Spirit is giving a new revelation* to the church, not previously available or recognized, that same-sex couples can join the church's mission (for example, see Kirk).
- Some scholars find biblical authors' views of same-sex attraction and intercourse to be constrained by ancient *cultural values of masculine honor and gender hierarchy*. These values are challenged by affirmations of *gender equality* in Scripture and by contemporary practices of egalitarian marriage. As a result, in this view, *gender differentiation is not essential* to marriage and intercourse (for example, see Nissinen and Brownson).
- Other scholars find biblical authors' views of same-sex attraction and intercourse to be constrained by a *lack of scientific understanding of sexual orientation* which calls into question Scripture's conflation of same-sex attraction and intercourse as equally willful and culpable. As a result, in this view, Scripture's *condemnation does not extend* to those whose same-sex attraction results from *biological orientation*. Instead, in this view, all readers should be held to common ethical biblical values and standards based on fidelity and commitment in partnerships that correspond to their sexual orientation (for example, see Loader and Nissinen).
- Many scholars find biblical authors' views of same-sex desire and intercourse to be significantly shaped, motivated, and constrained by the fact that the most *typical and characteristic* conditions for same-sex intercourse in the biblical world involved *exploitation, inequality or indulgence*. (See the below "Notes on Cultural Background.") As a result, in this view, biblical condemnations do not extend to those whose partnerships occur under conditions that are *morally distinct* from these conditions,

especially partnerships that are spiritually healthy and fruitful (for example, see Loader, Nissinen, and Brownson).

Notes on Cultural Background

Some traditional authors occasionally challenge affirming authors' claims about the most typical and characteristic conditions for same-sex intercourse in the ancient world, stating that a wide range of same-sex behavior is attested by historians. While this challenge is not central to traditional scholars' case for viewing gender differentiation as essential to marriage—they ultimately seek to compare cultural practices to the portrayal of gender differentiation at creation, not to compare different cultural eras with each other—nonetheless this challenge can be examined to shed further light on the cultural background of the biblical authors. Many historians, most notably Hubbard and Williams, gather references to a wide range of same-sex practices in the ancient world (including some differences between Greek and Roman culture that undermine certain generalizations about both). Many such practices were exploitative, unequal, or indulgent. Of those that were not, significant distinctions remain in comparison with same-sex marriages in contemporary society. Overall, historians find *no* substantial evidence that same-sex relationships in the ancient world were

- (a) *common* (references to same-sex partnerships are relatively sparse and often indirect),
- (b) *permanent* (references to same-sex partnerships do not always clearly distinguish between temporary sexual indulgences and lifelong commitments, but most are assumed to be temporary),
- (c) *legal* (no evidence exists that same-sex partners ever enjoyed comparable—or any—legal status or protection and social benefits to those of opposite-sex partners),
- (d) *equal* (in the case of male partnerships, one partner had to abdicate his social masculine role and become, at least socially, feminine),
- (e) *socially accepted* (such partnerships were usually condemned, often on the basis of one partner abdicating his masculine status),
- (f) a function of *sexual orientation* (partners were seldom assumed to be acting on innate same-sex desire and were generally assumed to be capable of conventional marital and sexual partnerships), or
- (g) an arrangement for *parenting* (no evidence exists of same-sex couples raising children in the ancient world).

These characteristics help define contemporary same-sex committed relationships and distinguish them from ancient same-sex practices. With this background it cannot be concluded that biblical authors had available to them a model for same-sex relationships that is comparable to contemporary society, or that biblical condemnations can be directly applied based on comparable cultural practices. However, the central debate among scholars is not over cultural comparisons, but over biblical passages that address the design for marriage at creation and passages that address same-sex intercourse. We now proceed to consider various interpretations of these passages.

Summary of Interpretation of Passages Addressing Gender Differentiation

Genesis 1 & 2

Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.' (Gen. 1:26-28, NIV)

Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, 'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man.' That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. (Gen. 2:22-24, NIV)

Perspectives from Traditional Scholarship

Some traditional scholars see the creation of male and female as linked to the creation of humanity in God's image, indicating that gender differentiation gives a complete picture of the image of God. (For example, see Gagnon on this passage in Section 6. All parenthetical references in this section refer to corresponding selected quotations in that section.) Some traditional scholars state that procreation is fundamental to the governance of creation to which humanity is called (for example, see Gagnon). Traditional scholars see the creation of the female body from the man's body as the basis for becoming "one flesh"; the complementary bodies are separated at creation and then reunited in sexual intercourse (for example, see Gagnon and Kirk).

Perspectives from Affirming Scholarship

Affirming scholars question whether gender differentiation can be considered necessary for the full bearing of God's image, especially for single persons in the church and in Scripture (including Christ, the perfect image of God), whose image-bearing is not incomplete despite the lack of a married partner (for example, see Brownson). Affirming scholars reject procreation as a requirement for fulfilling God's mandate to govern creation, since not all people who carry out this mandate reproduce (see Brownson). Affirming scholars state that the significance of the created "helper" is not the *difference* of the helper, but the *similarity* of the helper to the man, as a human companion who, unlike the animals, has the same flesh and bones (see Brownson). Affirming scholars trace the usage of words and phrases related to "my bones" and "my flesh" throughout the Old Testament and find that they signify not gender differentiation, but rather kinship bonds—as they do when used by, for instance, Laban and Jacob, and David and Amasa (see Brownson). Finally, affirming scholars question whether creation can be seen as static and fixed, to the extent that gender differentiation should be considered an inviolable natural law, and whether excessive reliance on what we perceive to be natural functions can lead to reductive ethical methods (see Nissinen).

Comparisons with Synod

Synod 1973 found significance in the necessity of gender differentiation for procreation in Genesis 1 and saw gender differentiation as necessary for companionship and wholeness in marriage based on Genesis 2. Synod concluded that gender differentiation was essential to the design for marriage at creation.

Mark 10:5-9

“It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,” Jesus replied. “But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” (Mark 10:5-9, NIV)

Perspectives from Traditional Scholarship

Traditional scholars see Jesus as re-establishing the necessity of gender differentiation for marriage. Traditional scholars see Jesus as adopting a stricter marital ethic than his hearers expected, not a less strict one (for example, see Gagnon and Kirk).

Perspectives from Affirming Scholarship

Affirming scholars state that Jesus’ focus in this passage is on divorce, and his concern is the destruction of a kinship bond that was designed to be permanent. They note that Jesus makes a direct quote of the creation story and makes no further comment on the necessity of gender differentiation for marriage (for example, see Brownson). Some affirming scholars also find precedent for reconsidering biblical teaching related to marriage in the way that this prohibition of divorce was subsequently qualified and reconsidered by biblical authors and by the church (see Brownson).

Comparisons with Synod

Synod did not examine this passage but did refer to it as reinforcing the necessity of gender differentiation for marriage.

Galatians 3:28

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal. 3:28, NIV)

Perspectives from Traditional Scholarship

Scholars do not find this passage to directly address marriage or the significance of gender differentiation for marriage. Some traditional scholars state that this passage is an example of how Scripture provides grounds for reconsidering traditional teaching on gender hierarchy, and find that Scripture provides no such passage for explicitly reconsidering the traditional teaching on the necessity of gender differentiation for marriage (for example, see Gagnon).

Perspectives from Affirming Scholarship

Affirming scholars do not find an explicit rejection in this passage of gender differentiation as essential to marriage, but they do find a declaration of new creation in which

conventional distinctions, including gender differentiation, are no longer fundamental to a person's identity in the body of Christ. They find the significance of such conventional distinctions to be partially tolerated by biblical authors for cultural reasons—not ratified as essential to creation—until the complete coming of Christ's kingdom (for example, see Brownson).

Comparisons with Synod

Synod mentioned this passage, stating that unity and equality in Christ does not negate the distinction between genders or the necessity of gender differentiation for marriage.

Summary of Interpretation of Passages Addressing Same-Sex Intercourse

Our summary of current biblical scholarship on the seven passages that mention same-sex intercourse follows the conventional arrangement of the passages by scholars: three pairs of parallel passages plus one additional passage.

Genesis 19 & Judges 19

Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old—surrounded the house. They called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them.” (Gen. 19:4-5, NIV)

While they were enjoying themselves, some of the wicked men of the city surrounded the house. Pounding on the door, they shouted to the old man who owned the house, “Bring out the man who came to your house so we can have sex with him.” (Judges 19:22, NIV)

Perspectives from Traditional Scholarship

Traditional scholars diverge on the question of whether these passages convey disapproval of same-sex intercourse in general or whether they are primarily or exclusively concerned with sexual violence. Some traditional scholars find significance in the fact that the proposed rape in each narrative is a same-sex act and that the counteroffer is an opposite-sex act. In their view, the narrator intends for this aspect of the narrative to indicate a distinct feature of the aggressors' moral corruption, and same-sex intercourse can thus be considered inherently morally corrupt (for example, see Gagnon). Other traditional scholars do not find significance in the fact the proposed gang rape was a same-sex act. They read these passages to condemn sexual violence and inhospitality primarily or exclusively, and do not rely on these passages to contribute to a biblical view of same-sex intercourse as inherently morally corrupt (for example, see Hays and Loader).

Perspectives from Affirming Scholarship

Affirming scholars join those traditional scholars who isolate the inhospitality and violence of the proposed same-sex gang rape as the focus of these passages. As a result, they do not find these narratives to address contemporary questions about same-sex intercourse that is consensual (for example, see Brownson and Nissinen).

Comparisons with Synod

Synod 1973 stated it could not conclude that these passages condemn same-sex intercourse generally. Yet it proceeded to state that it could infer that these narratives consider same-sex intercourse as one distinct indication of the moral corruption of the aggressors.

Leviticus 18:22 & 20:13

Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.
(Lev. 18:22, NIV)

If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads. (Lev. 20:13, NIV)

Perspectives from Traditional Scholarship

Traditional scholars diverge on the question of whether the direct application of these passages' condemnation is constrained by its status as a Levitical code. Some traditional scholars read these prohibitions, along with surrounding sexual prohibitions, as reinforcing a natural purity established by God at creation. In their view, male same-sex intercourse violates natural purity by rejecting the gender differentiation for which sexual intercourse was created, and by involving the use of an excretory organ that was not created to be used sexually (for example, see Gagnon and Loader). Other traditional scholars question whether Levitical codes by themselves are binding for the contemporary church, but proceed to find the prohibitions of these two verses to be reinforced in the New Testament. They make this connection via a similarity between the Greek words used in the Septuagint translation of these verses and a Greek word used in 1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Tim. 1:10 (for example, see Hays). This will be discussed further in the summary of those New Testament passages below.

Perspectives from Affirming Scholarship

Many affirming scholars see God's call to Israel to distinguish itself from neighboring nations as the basis for this and other Levitical proscriptions (for example, see Brownson). Many scholars also note the focus on male same-sex intercourse and absence of female same-sex intercourse—along with the phrase “as with a woman”—as enforcing social gender norms that held that sexual penetration brought shame to a man (for example, see Brownson and Nissinen). When examining linguistic comparisons to New Testament texts, affirming scholars find linguistic similarities to be speculative and inconclusive (for example, see Brownson and Nissinen). Finally, many affirming scholars join traditional scholars who question the place of Levitical codes in determining sexual ethics for the church today (for example, see Brownson).

Comparisons with Synod

Synod did not explicitly base its reading of these verses on the importance of gender differentiation portrayed at creation. Synod found significance in Israel's need to separate itself from other nations by following Levitical codes, but also found lasting relevance in Levitical prohibitions related to marriage and family relations, among which the prohibition of same-sex intercourse is found. In concluding its treatment of these verses, Synod asked whether contemporary understandings of same-sex attraction should change our moral considerations of Old Testament prohibitions, but it did not answer this question. Synod did not address linguistic

similarities with New Testament passages, nor whether linguistic similarities are adequate to reinforce or re-establish Levitical prohibitions.

1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10

Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men [malakoi oute arsenokoitai]. (1 Cor. 6:9, NIV)

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

Perspectives from Traditional Scholarship

All scholars recognize the difficulty in translating the Greek words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, given that *malakoi* vaguely means “soft ones” while *arsenokoitai* is a Greek word that occurs only in these two passages, and only in scripture among ancient Greek literature. Traditional scholars understand *malakoi* to refer to a passive partner in same-sex intercourse—that is, one who is penetrated by a partner—under any circumstance (for example, see Gagnon and Hays). Some scholars specify that *malakoi* are characterized by altering or “feminizing” their appearance especially for the purposes of same-sex prostitution or pederasty (see Gagnon). Traditional scholars take *arsenokoitai* to refer to the active partner in same-sex intercourse—that is, the one who penetrates the *malakos*—under any circumstance. In the absence of other Scriptural usage of this word, traditional scholars take the meaning of *arsenokoitai* from its component parts in Greek—*arsen* (“male”) and *koite* (“bed,” often used in a sexual sense). Traditional scholars also link this word linguistically to the Greek phrase used in Leviticus 20:13 in the Septuagint to translate “lies with a man,” *arsenos koiten*. In their view, this reinforces and re-establishes the Levitical prohibition (see Gagnon and Hays).

Perspectives from Affirming Scholarship

Affirming scholars emphasize that the vague nature of the word *malakoi* and the lack of other examples of usage of the word *arsenokoitai* constrain attempts to come to conclusions about their meanings generally and their use in these passages (for example, see Loader, Brownson, and Nissinen). They find the linguistic similarity between *arsenokoitai* and the Septuagint usage to be inconclusive. Many affirming scholars note later usage of the word *arsenokoitai* to be closely linked with exploitation, in some cases with exploitation that is not explicitly sexual. In any case, the use of these terms in “vice lists” of extreme cases of exploitation and spiritual rebellion leads affirming scholars to question their application to contemporary covenantal partnerships. Many affirming scholars critique the history of English translations of these words, particularly *arsenokoitai*—which at times has been rendered in major English translations as “abusers,” “sodomites,” and, more recently, “homosexuals” and then “practicing homosexuals”—as either mistranslations or overly general translations that do not reflect the uncertainty or possibly limited range of these words in Greek (for example, see Loader, Brownson, and Nissinen). Some affirming scholars find significance in the different sequence of words in which *arsenokoitai* falls in the 1 Timothy passage, suggesting a connection

with the adjacent words *andropodistai* and *pornoï* in which the three words together are references to sex trafficking (see Brownson).

Comparisons with Synod

Synod 1973 did not indicate any uncertainties regarding the etymology, definition, and use of the Greek words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, the related phrase in the Septuagint and the question of re-establishing the Levitical prohibition, the significance of their use in vice lists, or their possible connection to exploitation. Synod took English translations of these words as adequate and assumed they comprised a general condemnation of all same-sex intercourse. Synod did not separately examine the 1 Timothy passage or its different sequence of words surrounding *arsenokoitai* for further insight into its usage and meaning.

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 about 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 sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error. (Romans 1:24-27, NIV)

Perspectives from Traditional Scholarship

Traditional scholars diverge on the question of how to understand the “exchange” of desires that is described in this passage. For some traditional scholars, the exchange is understood as a conscious perversion of desire from opposite-sex to same-sex desire that is then made manifest in sexual intercourse. By this reading, since this exchange is described as willful rebellion, it can be reversed by spiritual repentance (for example, see Gagnon). A different reading among traditional scholars holds that the exchange of desires is not a conscious or contemporary change enacted by individuals, but rather describes a condition that is a symptom of humanity’s original fall into sin and the resulting disorder of the design for marriage and sexuality at creation. In this reading, individuals who experience same-sex desire are not necessarily culpable for the desire they experience nor assumed to be rebellious for experiencing it; rather, their desire is an involuntary condition that has resulted from humanity’s rebellion against God generally. While individuals should not be held responsible for experiencing this desire, they can, in this reading, be held responsible for participating in sexual intercourse. Since the desire is considered to be disordered and the act is described in this passage as the culmination of idolatry, individuals are prohibited from manifesting same-sex desires in sexual intercourse. In both traditional views, when same-sex desire is acted upon in the form of intercourse, the behavior is considered unnatural and shameful, and may lead to additional moral vices listed subsequently in verses 29-30 (for example, see Hays and, to some extent, Kirk.)

Perspectives from Affirming Scholarship

Affirming scholars challenge traditional readings of this passage on various grounds. They maintain that Paul considers the exchange of desires not as occurring earlier at the Fall and expressing itself later as an involuntary condition, but as a conscious choice made by individuals,

implicating desires and actions equally. In this view, the conflation of desires and intercourse constrains the passage's application to individuals who do not deliberately participate in such a conscious exchange of desires (for example, see Loader and Nissinen). Some scholars recognize that while Paul is not necessarily speaking here only of pederasty, prostitution, or purely exploitative conditions for same-sex intercourse, nonetheless the existence or prevalence of these conditions in the ancient world informed and motivated Paul's understanding of same-sex intercourse as inherently degrading (for example, see Loader and Nissinen). Some scholars state that Paul is conflating perceived social and physical norms in his use of the word "natural"—rather than re-establishing gender differentiation as essential to the design for marriage at creation—as he does in 1 Cor. 11:14 when he says that nature reveals it is a disgrace for a male to have long hair (for example, see Brownson). Additionally, some affirming scholars state that Paul condemns the lusts he describes because of their excesses—that is, when men or women who experience opposite-sex desire and participate in opposite-sex intercourse proceed to extend their sexual behavior to include same-sex intercourse for the purposes of recreation or a demonstration of power (for example, see Brownson). Some scholars also note that male same-sex intercourse is described as "shameful" while female same-sex intercourse is not, reflecting cultural norms that same-sex intercourse brings dishonor to a man by "feminizing" him (for example, see Brownson). In sum, affirming scholars question the applicability of the origin, nature, purpose, and understanding of the same-sex acts Paul is describing to contemporary questions about covenantal same-sex relationships.

Comparisons with Synod

Synod focused its examination of this passage on the claim that Paul is referring to temple prostitution, and found that Paul's condemnation applied to same-sex intercourse generally. However, Synod closed its treatment of this passage by raising questions about whether and how to apply Paul's condemnation to people for whom opposite-sex desire is not natural and for whom same-sex desire is not the result of a conscious exchange. Synod did not subsequently return to these questions specifically and did not resolve them exegetically in relation to this passage. Synod did not address whether the gender differentiation portrayed at creation is a primary factor in Paul's condemnation of same-sex intercourse, nor did it examine Paul's use of words such as "shameful," "lusts," and "unnatural."

Summary of Findings

Having examined current biblical scholarship on these passages, we offer the following observations and conclusions.

1. We found *reasonable dispute among scholars* over the interpretation of these contested passages. By *reasonable*, we mean that scholars demonstrate that they can legitimately reach multiple conclusions about these passages using sound methods, with healthy motives. This does not mean that scholars cannot be said to have reached an incorrect interpretation or conclusion. It does mean that scholars and authors of various viewpoints cannot be dismissed summarily on the basis of their methods and motives without engaging with the merits of their arguments. (We should clarify that not all scholars and authors we read or quoted necessarily self-identify as Reformed or would necessarily subscribe to each of the Reformed hermeneutical criteria laid out in the previous section, though at least some traditional and

some affirming scholars do. In any case, Reformed readers can and should subject any interpretation to those hermeneutical criteria, as we did.) This finding can help the church avoid any simplistic assumptions that different interpretations necessarily result from the rejection of biblical authority or clarity on the one hand, or a rejection of pastoral concern or compassion on the other. We did not find that scholars needed to abandon either biblical authority or pastoral concern in order to reach their conclusions. Accepting this framework for debate over different interpretations of these passages is the healthiest option for continued discussion within the church.

2. We found *dispute among traditional scholars with each other, and among affirming scholars with each other*. As stated in the introduction, we found not two but six distinct viewpoints. Although the six can be collapsed into two categories—traditional and affirming—this obscures disagreements on key points among scholars who otherwise share broader conclusions about the acceptability of same-sex marriage. This illustrates to us the complexity of the exegetical questions about these passages, and thus the complexity of discussing and debating them in the church—especially in supporting or disputing one “side” or the other. With which viewpoint on a particular side is one aligning? Which viewpoint is one challenging? These clarifications can help us avoid “straw person” arguments in which participants in a discussion and the points they are making are not directly engaged.
3. We found *critical comparisons and questions about the exegesis of the Synod 1973 report based on both traditional and affirming sources*. On some key exegetical points that are central to authors on various sides, Synod left some unaddressed and addressed others without resolving them. Some may assume that Synod 1973 represents an exhaustive exegetical treatment of these passages, while others may assume that scholarship since 1973 has mostly discarded its conclusions. We found a far more complex picture. We acknowledge the political tension that appointing a new synodical study committee would cause the denomination, and we do not presume that such a committee could easily reach consensus. But exegetically—if only exegetically—church members of various viewpoints can reasonably desire that Synod further substantiate its reading of these contested passages.
4. We found that *scholars’ interpretation of the passages addressing same-sex intercourse largely correlated with their interpretation of passages on gender and creation*. Scholars who find gender differentiation to be a necessary component of the design for marriage at creation tend to see subsequent prohibitions of same-sex intercourse as consciously reaffirming—or at least consistent with—this aspect of the creation of marriage. Scholars who do not see gender differentiation as essential to the design for marriage at creation tend to see condemnation of same-sex intercourse as grounded more in the cultural conditions in which biblical authors wrote, limiting their applications to same-sex marriage in the church today. We found this alignment to be reasonable and useful. We also found it beneficial to probe more deeply the relationship between gender and marriage, and the deepest purposes for which God created marriage.
5. We found that debate over these passages *did not concern or threaten any core creedal or confessional beliefs*. Scholars and all church members, of various viewpoints, can and do confess the sovereignty of God, salvation through Christ alone, the authority of Scripture,

and all of the major tenets of the Reformed creeds and confessions. Marital and sexual ethics are not insignificant, but are of secondary significance compared with the core beliefs that unify the church and all its confessing members.

6. Experiences of LGBT members in the church and the witness of same-sex couples to the fruit of the Spirit in their marriages may not be, by themselves, sufficient counterweight to traditional interpretations of these contested passages. Nor do exegetical arguments made by affirming scholars necessarily require appeals to experience in order to be valid. But we do find that, given the complexity of interpretations of these passages, *we can and must consult the experiences of LGBT members and the witness of same-sex couples as one contributing factor* to how we form ethical applications from these passages for the church today. Observing and discerning experience in the world and in the church is not a method of exegesis but is an essential component of hermeneutics. For that reason we consider the experiences of LGBT members and the witness of same-sex couples more carefully in the remainder of this report.

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Section 6: Quotations of Contemporary Authors on Biblical Passages Related to Gender Differentiation and Same-Sex Intercourse

For our own reference, and for the use of our audience, we compiled a collection of direct quotations from biblical scholars and other notable contemporary authors on contested passages of Scripture that address gender differentiation and same-sex intercourse. This supplements our summaries provided in Section 5. We find it important to let these authors be read in their own words so that we do not misconstrue or neglect their insights, and so that readers who may not otherwise encounter these sources can engage them directly for their own study and reflection. We also find it useful to read divergent viewpoints in conjunction with each other and with the Synod 1973 report. Of course, it does a disservice to reduce complex arguments into relatively brief selections. We trust that the benefits outweigh the drawbacks and that the most diligent readers will pursue these and other authors at greater length. For the sake of brevity, we attempted to choose one book- or chapter-length source by a biblical scholar that represents the best or most current articulation of that viewpoint. Then, because scholarly discussion and debate of these passages do not occur in a vacuum but connect with the life of the church, we also added selections from published authors within the church who do not work primarily in the field of biblical scholarship but whose expertise in other fields, or experience as Christians who are LGBT, offer insights that are beneficial and essential to the church. Bibliographical references are provided at the end.

Genesis 1 & 2

Perspectives from Biblical Scholars

Gagnon:

God's intent for human sexuality is imbedded in the material creation of gendered beings ... "Male and female he created them" probably intimates that the fullness of God's "image" comes together in the union of male and female in marriage (not, one could infer, from same-sex unions). ... First, for humans in general, a procreative purpose for marriage avoids a detachment of sexuality from stable family structures ... Second, for God's people in particular, procreation is vital because God's people play a special role in discerning God's will for the created order and for communicating that will to the next generation. ... Animals were formed for the express purpose of providing companionship and support for the 'adam [man], that he might have "a helper as his counterpart" ... for "it is not good for the 'adam to be alone." Yet they were found to be unsuited for that role (2:18-20). The solution that God arrived at was not the independent creation of another 'adam [man], a replica of the first, but rather to "build" a complementary being from a portion of 'adam's own self, a "rib" (2:21-22). ... Only a being made from 'adam can and ought to become someone with whom 'adam longs to reunite in sexual intercourse and marriage, a reunion that not only provides companionship but restores 'adam to his original wholeness. The woman is not just "like himself" but "from himself" and thereby a complementary fit to himself. She is a complementary sexual "other." This is the very point made by the narrator in the next verse: "Therefore a man ('is) shall leave his father and mother and become attached to his woman/wife ('issa) and the two will become one flesh" (2:24). The sexual union of man and woman in marriage, of two complementary beings, in effect makes possible a single, composite human being. ... [L]egitimation for homosexuality requires an entirely different kind of creation story. Only a being made

from a man can be a suitable and complementary counterpart for him. ... Male and female are “perfect fits” from the standpoint of divine design and blessing. Male and male, or female and female, are not (2001, 57-58, 60-62).

Kirk:

Sex is woven into the Bible’s story of humanity from the very beginning. In the creation narrative of Genesis 1, God creates male and female, blessing them with the command to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (v. 28). In the creation story of Genesis 2 the sexual overtones are even stronger. With the creation of the woman, Adam says, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” And the narrator comments that this arrival of the woman out of Adam’s flesh and bone indicates the goal of the man-woman relationship, to reunite in one flesh: “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24 NRSV). In the Genesis story, this is the resolution of creation’s first problem. God had created the man first and then observed, “It is not good for the man to be alone,” so that the creation of woman as helper and sexual partner stands as the Creator’s first intervention on behalf of the beloved human creature (2011, 161-162).

Brownson:

The creation of woman does not arise from the splitting of an original binary or sexually undifferentiated being. Sexual union is never portrayed in Scripture as the recovery of a primordial unity of the two genders. ... The Genesis text portrays marriage as a solution, not for “incompleteness,” but for *aloneness* (Gen 2:18). ... The narrator declares, “But for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.” In other words, the animals are not similar to the man—in the way that the woman will be. ... It is pursuing not differences but someone *similar* to the man, someone similar enough to be “his partner” (in contrast to the animals, who are not sufficiently similar), and someone strong enough to be his “helper.” This line of interpretation is confirmed by the response of the man when he meets the woman (2:23): “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” On the surface of it, this appears to be a discovery of sameness, not difference. Furthermore, if one looks elsewhere in Scripture for similar language, one discovers that this language is always used to express kinship (Gen. 29:14; Judg. 9:2; 2 Sam. 5:1; 19:12-13; 1 Chron. 11:1). In the other texts where this language occurs, there is not a hint of any notion of complementarity; the entire focus is that those who share flesh and bone share something important in common with each other. ... The primary movement in the text is not from unity to differentiation, but from the isolation of an individual to the deep blessing of shared kinship and community. ... So the focus in Genesis 2:24 is not on explaining the origin of “the extremely powerful drive of the sexes to each other,” as von Rad and many others argue (nowhere else in Scripture is this verse interpreted in this way). Rather, the focus is on the formation of the essential and foundational building blocks of human community—the ties of kinship. ... [A]ppeals to a doctrine of physical or biological gender complementarity grounded in the creation narratives do not illuminate the moral logic by which Pauline and other biblical texts condemn same-sex erotic relations. Despite the fact that such gender complementarity, allegedly taught in the creation narratives, is the most commonly cited reason why commentators believe Scripture teaches that same-sex erotic relations are wrong, the texts themselves do not support this claim (2013, 28-30, 32-33, 35).

Nissinen:

To consider creation or nature as a static condition or a series of events according to the absolute laws of nature would lead to naturalistic determinism. There is really no such single rule to which all phenomena and creatures could conform. To see “nature” as a machine in which each part serves its own function is reminiscent of the Enlightenment’s mechanistic notion of “nature” and easily leads to rigid functionalist definitions. The determinist or functionalist models do not seem appropriate to creation theology; it is not right to denounce all departures from the ideal as the results of corruption that came with the Fall. If creation is not a static condition but constantly being rejuvenated, we can understand that it looks different in different times, in the material world as well as in social communities (1998, 138).

Perspectives from Other Authors Within the Church

DeYoung:

If God wanted to establish a world in which the normative marital and sexual relationship is that between persons of the opposite sex, Genesis 1-2 fits perfectly. The narrative strongly suggests what the church has almost uniformly taught: “Marriage is to be between one man and one woman.” A different marital arrangement requires an entirely different creation account, one with two men or two women, or at least the absence of any hints of gender complementarity and procreation. It’s hard not to conclude from a straightforward reading of Genesis 1-2 that the divine design for sexual intimacy is not any combination of persons, or even any type of two persons coming together, but one man becoming one flesh with one woman. . . . Moreover, monogamy makes sense only within this Genesis understanding of marriage. Apart from the complementarity of the two sexes there is no moral logic which demands that marriage should be restricted to a twosome. I’m not arguing that the acceptance of same-sex marriage will lead inexorably to the acceptance of polygamy. But once you’ve accepted the former, you no longer have a consistent intellectual case to reject the latter. It is mere sentiment and lingering tradition which leads many progressives to insist that same-sex unions ought to involve the commitment of two persons and only two persons (2015, 22-23, 26-27).

Gushee:

The fact that it is a man and a woman, and only a man and a woman, referenced in the discussions of sex and marriage in Genesis 1-2 — and the fact that only a man and a woman have been able to procreate (until reproductive technology came along) — has been pivotal in shaping traditional Christian opinion on the LGBT issue. Christian tradition has taken these texts as prescriptive for all times and all peoples pertaining to the design and purpose of sex, marriage and family life. That has excluded those who are unable to fulfill that prescription due to their sexual orientation. But increasingly today it is noted that core practices noted in Genesis 1-2, including mutual care for children, helper-partner companionship (Gen. 2:18) and total self-giving, can and do occur among covenanted gay and lesbian couples (2014, 99).

Vines:

[U]ltimately, the phrase [“one flesh”] doesn’t depend on a particular sexual act, but on the deep, relational connection that sex can create. . . . Sexual mechanics for two men or two women vary from what transpires between a man and a woman, but the strength of the resulting bond can be the same. It’s precisely the strength of that bond that underlies the Bible’s restriction of sex to marriage. As the greatest form of bodily self-giving, sex

should be combined with the greatest form of emotional self-giving: a lifelong commitment to a single partner. ... Becoming “one flesh” encompasses much more than the act of sex. It includes the entire covenantal context in which God intends for sex to take place. ... What seems ... to be most important in marriage is not whether the partners are anatomically different from one another. It’s whether the inherently different people involved are willing to keep covenant with each other in a relationship of mutual self-giving (2014, 133-134, 147).

Perspectives from the Synodical Report

In the opening chapters of the Bible we have the account of the creation of the world and of man’s place in that world. Man is made male and female, a physical differentiation according to Genesis 1 by which man and woman are able to multiply and propagate the human race. But turning to Genesis 2 we learn that the male-female polarity is by no means only for the purpose of biological reproduction. The account stresses the role of sex differentiation for the purpose of fulfilling the individual man’s fundamental need for companionship and personal wholeness. Woman is created as a complement to help man so that the two cleave to each other in love and form a unity in marriage. This is the created order in which male and female polarity form an integral part of being human. In the light of the created order heterosexuality is the pattern of human existence. Homosexuality, therefore, must be seen as a disordered condition, in which the reproductive function of sex cannot be fulfilled and the companionship of sex cannot be properly achieved in the union in which a man cleaves to his wife (1973, 615).

Genesis 19 and Judges 19

Perspectives from Biblical Scholars

Gagnon:

[T]o the extent that the story does not deal directly with consensual homosexual relationships, it is not an “ideal” text to guide contemporary Christian sexual ethics. Nevertheless, many go too far when they argue that the story has little or nothing to do with homosexual practice; that, instead, the story is only about inhospitality or rape. ... [T]he inherently degrading quality of same-sex intercourse plays a key role in the narrator’s intent to elicit feelings of revulsion in the reader/hearer. ... [S]ome of the other applications of the Sodom story (arrogance, inhospitality, social injustice) were not necessarily made to the exclusion of a critique of homosexual intercourse. ... Rather than argue that the narrators of the twin stories of Sodom and Gibeah would have changed their perspective on homosexual intercourse had they only had a modern understanding of sexual orientation, it is more plausible to say that it probably would not have made any difference to them (2001, 71, 97).

Hays:

The notorious story of Sodom and Gomorrah—often cited in connection with homosexuality—is actually irrelevant to the topic. ... The gang-rape scenario exemplifies the wickedness of the city, but there is nothing in the passage pertinent to a judgment about the morality of consensual homosexual intercourse. Indeed, there is nothing in the rest of the biblical tradition ... to suggest that the sin of Sodom was particularly identified with sexual misconduct of any kind (1996, 381).

Loader:

Both stories assume male rape and reflect its widespread use in the ancient world (alas, still practised today) as a form of subjugation. It not only inflicted pain; it also inflicted disgrace and humiliation on a man by making a woman of him. Both are thus stories about inhospitality expressed through sexual violence. ... Of the two evils, violent inhospitality and violent male rape, the first is most prominent in early allusions to the story [elsewhere in the Old Testament], not the second, though presumably for those who knew the story the other was also assumed to be part of what made the inhospitality especially repugnant, but they can hardly be adduced as further evidence for condemnation of all same-sex relations (2012, 30).

Brownson:

Both the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 and the story of the Levite's concubine in Judges 19 show the same pattern. ... The Bible narration presents both stories as evidence of extreme degradation and corruption. Both stories regard a man being raped by other men as an expression of violence and extreme degradation; both assume that the rape of female members of the household would be preferable to the rape of the male visitors, which underscores the deep violation of male honor that is assumed in both stories to be attached to the rape of a male by another male. ... Christians should ... recognize that these stories are of no more value in assessing lifelong, loving, committed same-sex relationships than stories of heterosexual rape can be used to morally evaluate loving heterosexual relationships. The failure to distinguish between consensual, committed, and loving sexual relationships and violent, coercive relationships represents a serious case of moral myopia (2013, 268-269).

Nissinen:

The extent to which the Sodom narrative is relevant to the issue of "homosexuality" depends on the question whether same-sex rape should be seen as an aspect of it. This is a modern problem that is not inherent in the narrative itself. It is, therefore, misleading to speak of the "author's antagonism towards homosexuality" or claim that "he condemns homosexuality." Homoeroticism appears in the story of Sodom only as one aspect of hostile sexual aggression toward strangers. Other than that, the [author's] attitude towards same-sex interaction remains unknown (1998, 49).

Perspectives from Other Authors Within the Church

De Young:

To be sure, the scene in Genesis 19 looks very different from two men or two women entering into a consensual and committed sexual relationship. The case against same-sex intimacy is less obvious from the Sodom and Gomorrah account than from other passages we will consider. And yet, the destruction of these infamous cities is not irrelevant to the matter at hand. ... While the violence associated with homosexual behavior in Sodom certainly made the offense worse, the nature of the act itself contributed to the overwhelmingly negative assessment of the city. Sodom and Gomorrah were guilty of a great many sins; we don't have to prove that homosexual practice was the only sin to show that it was one of them (2015, 34).

Gushee:

The men of Sodom want gang rape. They are more interested in men than in Lot's daughters because ... in a patriarchal society men held greater honor, and thus their violation was viewed as a greater offense than violating a woman. I would also suggest

that the men wanted to dominate, humiliate and harm the male visitors precisely *by treating them like defenseless women*. In sexist social systems, the most outrageous thing you can do to a man is to treat him like a woman. The Sodom story is about the attempted gang rape of men, because they are strangers, because they are vulnerable and because they are a juicy target for humiliation and violation. It is about a town that had sunk to the level of the most depraved battlefield or prison. Genesis 19 and Judges 19 are narratives with huge implications for the ethics of war, prison, gender, violence and rape. But they have nothing to do with the morality of loving, covenantal same-sex relationships (2014, 20).

Vines:

Lot's action ... primarily indicates that defending his guests was more important to Lot than defending his flesh and blood. But it's also true that the gender of Lot's guests played a role—not because of Lot's concerns about the bodily “sameness” involved in same-sex behavior, but because of the greater honor men held in ancient times. ... [M]en in the ancient world were considered to be of greater value than women, which made raping a man a more serious violation. In that respect, the fact that the men of Sodom said they wanted to rape other men did make their threatened actions more reprehensible to Lot. It also helps explain why the old man in Gibeah offered his daughters and his visitor's concubine to the mob. The issue in both instances is patriarchy, not the anatomical complementarity of men and women (2014, 67).

Perspectives from the Synodical Report

From this story read as an isolated incident we cannot conclude however that homosexuality [i.e. same-sex intercourse] is here condemned. The evil that the men of Sodom were planning with Lot's guests was sexual assault and violence, which is always wrong, also in heterosexual contexts. From this account therefore it does not follow that homosexuality under other circumstances is wrong. ... In the light of the whole Old Testament view of homosexuality, however, it is reasonable to suppose that by the inclusion of this episode the writer of Genesis did wish to disclose the wickedness of the city by recording the double affront of homosexuality and sexual advances on unwilling guests (1973, 617).

Leviticus 18:22 & 20:13

Perspectives from Biblical Scholars

Gagnon:

[T]here are good grounds for asserting that the primary problem with male-male intercourse is the more general concern that it “mixes” two things that were never intended to be mixed. ... The refrain in 18:22 and 20:13, “as though lying with a woman,” is the best indication we have of what the primary concern was; namely, behaving toward another man as if he were a woman by making him the object of male sexual desires. That is an “abomination,” an abhorrent violation of divinely sanctioned boundaries—in this case, gender boundaries established at creation. ... All the laws in Lev 18:6-23; 20:2-21 legislate against forms of sexual behavior that disrupt the created order set into motion by the God of Israel. Each of the laws has as its intent the channeling of male sexual impulses into a particular pattern of behavior, a pattern conducive to the healthy functioning of a people set apart to serve God's holy purposes. ... Homosexual intercourse requires a radical “gender bending” of human sexuality by the very creatures

whom God placed in charge of the good, ordered creation. Such an act constitutes a conscious denial of the complementarity of male and female found not least in the fittedness (anatomical, physiological, and procreative) of the male penis and the female vaginal receptacle by attempting anal intercourse (or other forms of sexual intercourse) with another man (2001, 135-136, 138-139).

Hays:

Quoting a law from Leviticus, of course, does not settle the question for Christian ethics. The Old Testament contains many prohibitions and commandments that have, ever since the first century, generally been deemed obsolete by the church, most notably rules concerning circumcision and dietary practices. Some ethicists have argued that the prohibition of homosexuality is similarly superseded for Christians: it is merely part of the Old Testament's ritual "purity rules" and therefore morally irrelevant today. The Old Testament, however, makes no systematic distinction between ritual law and moral law. The same section of the Holiness Code also contains, for instance, the prohibition of incest (Lev. 18:6-18). Is that a purity law or moral law? Leviticus makes no distinction in principle. In each case, the church is faced with the task of discerning whether Israel's traditional norms remain in force for the new community of Jesus' followers. In order to see what decisions the early church made about this matter, we must turn to the New Testament (1996, 382).

Loader:

The language of purity suggests that what lies behind the prohibition is the sense of order, which pervades the laws concerning holiness, and is about community solidarity, not least in the face of the threat of surrounding cultures. Some things belong together and some things do not. The categories may appear quite diverse, from what one sows in a field or sews in a garment, to cross dressing, sex during menstruation, and bestiality. Bringing some forbidden things together is so serious that it warrants the death penalty. That includes the prohibitions of Leviticus 18.... Whether the authors of the early code had the creation stories in mind as the foundation of their prohibition primarily against same-sex anal intercourse among males or not, once the writings were seen as a whole, the possibility existed that a reading of the creation stories might inform the reading of the prohibitions (2012, 27).

Brownson:

The first thing to note is that the immediate contexts of both of these prohibitions against "lying with a male as with a woman" are closely linked to two other problems: injunctions against the practices of idolatry and the urgency of avoiding the practices of surrounding nations. ... [W]e can say with reasonable confidence that the activity envisioned in the Levitical prohibitions is assumed to be consensual, and that it is probably envisioned to take place in cultic contexts, with clear linkages to idolatry and other religious practices foreign to the nation of Israel. ... [M]any traditionalists have argued that Paul's use of the Greek word *arsenokoites* in reference to same-sex behavior in passages such as 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 is rooted in the language of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, thus confirming the cross-cultural relevance of the Levitical prohibitions for Christian ethics in a way that focuses specifically on the violation of biologically shaped gender roles. This attempt to link Paul's Greek vocabulary directly to the Levitical texts, however, is speculative and lacks external confirming evidence. ... [Also,] [i]f violations of biological gender roles constituted the primary moral logic underlying the prohibition,

one would expect the corresponding injunction against female same-sex eroticism as well. But it is absent. ... Finally, it is also worth noting ... the more general problem that Christians no longer regard much of the Levitical law as applying to the church today. The overall agenda established by the book of Leviticus concerning purity was radically transformed by the gospel of Christ. It is simply inadequate, from a Christian perspective, to attempt to build an ethic based on the prohibitions of Leviticus alone (2013, 271-273).

Nissinen:

The prohibition of sexual contact between males in the Holiness Code in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 is done in a context of a polemic against a non-Israelite cult. Because the records of cultic homoeroticism are scanty and not unequivocal, however, historical description of this context is difficult. The strategy of postexilic Israelites to maintain their distinct identity by, among other ways, separating from others strengthened the already existing taboos and social standards regarding sexual behavior and gender roles, banning, for instance, castration, cross-dressing, and male same-sex behavior; it was not simply the “objective” facts of physiology that established gender identity. Israel shared with its cultural environment an understanding of sexual life as an interaction between active masculine and passive feminine gender roles. This interaction was the cornerstone of gender identity, but the concept of sexual orientation was unknown. Sexual contact between two men was prohibited because the passive party assumed the role of a woman and his manly honor was thus disgraced (1998, 44).

Perspectives from Other Authors Within the Church

De Young:

Apart from the question of sex during menstruation, the sexual ethic in Leviticus 18 and 20 is squarely reaffirmed in the New Testament. Adultery is still a sin (Matt. 5:27-30). Incest is still a sin (1 Cor. 5:1-13). Even polygamy is more clearly rejected (1 Cor. 7:2; 1 Tim. 3:2). It would be strange for the prohibition against homosexual practice to be set aside when the rest of the sexual ethic is not, especially considering how the rejection of same-sex behavior is rooted in the created order. ... Leviticus was part of the Bible Jesus read, the Bible Jesus believed, and the Bible Jesus did not want to abolish. We ought to take seriously how the Holiness Code reveals to us the holy character of God and the holy people we are supposed to be. Even on this side of the cross the commands in Leviticus still matter (2015, 41-43).

Gushee:

I ... ask Christians who quote selectively from such materials to *describe and defend their principle of selection, interpretation and application*. In other words, unless one accepts every Old Testament legal text as authoritative for Christians today in the exact manner in which it is written, what alternative hermeneutical principle is to be employed? The issue is actually quite complex, and has challenged serious readers of the Bible for all of Christian history. ... It is a fair summary to say that once Jesus comes along, and the church is founded, neither 2,000 years ago nor today has it been as simple as just quoting a passage from Leviticus to settle a matter of Christian morality. So: the two sentences in Leviticus (18:22/20:13) are duly noted. They rightly figure in the church’s moral deliberation. But they do not resolve the LGBT issue (2014, 87-88).

Vines:

This boundary-marking nature of the term [translated “detestable”] helps explain why a number of practices Christians widely accept also are called abominations. Here are a

few: sexual relations during a woman's menstrual period (see Leviticus 18:19); charging interest on loans (see Ezekiel 18:13); and burning incense (see Isaiah 1:13). Deuteronomy 14:3-21 contains an extensive list of abominations, including the eating of pork, rabbit, shellfish, and animals that are already dead. So while *abomination* [or "detestable"] is a negative word, it doesn't necessarily correspond to Christian views of sin (2014, 85).

Perspectives from the Synodical Report

The difficulty that confronts us with these texts is the question in what distinguishable respects they are normative for us. ... We are not persuaded however by the argumentation that 18:22 is merely a cultic prohibition. The text appears in the context of laws regulating marriage, family, chastity, incest, etc. which certainly involve ethical demands, as for example 18:20 which forbids adultery with a neighbor's wife. The supposition that 18:23 is cultic in orientation is admittedly speculative. ... In conclusion, while we grant that a cultic interpretation may be given to 18:21-23, to do so to the exclusion of the ethical aspects of the prohibitions appears to us unwarranted, and we therefore hold that 18:21 forbids homosexuality [i.e. same-sex intercourse] and the same is true of 20:13. On the other hand we must recognize the temporary character of much of the Old Testament legislation. ... [W]e conclude that homosexuality is forbidden in the Old Testament. ... But ... we cannot simply apply the Old Testament prohibition without considering whether our knowledge of homosexuality may not modify to some degree our moral judgment about the homosexual practices of such persons (1973, 617-619).

Mark 10: 1-12

Perspectives from Biblical Scholars

Gagnon:

Jesus accepted the model for marriage and sexual union presented in Genesis 1-2. Jesus, then, understood that marriage was ordained by God "from the beginning of creation" (10:6) as the union of a man and a woman, not of a man and another man, or a female and another female. ... The whole point of Jesus' stance in Mark 10:1-12 is not to broaden the Torah's openness to alternative forms of sexuality but rather to narrow or constrain the Torah's sexual ethic to disallow any sexual union other than a monogamous, lifelong marriage to a person of the opposite sex. ... Jesus accepted the authority of Genesis 1-2 and its sanction of one particular model of marriage: heterosexual monogamous unions. ... Jesus did not overturn any prohibitions against immoral sexual behavior in Leviticus or anywhere else in the Mosaic law. He did not regard sexual ethics as having diminished importance in relation to other demands of the kingdom. It is highly unlikely that he would have held some sort of secret acceptance of homosexuality in the face of uniform opposition within the Judaism of his day. ... He would have understood the tension between his affirmation of the model of male-female union in Genesis 1-2 and the alternative model presented by same-sex unions. Consequently, the idea that Jesus was, or might have been, personally neutral or even affirming of homosexual conduct is revisionist history at its worst (2001, 193-194, 227-228).

Kirk:

Jesus's answer, affirming the permanence of marriage, may in part be addressing the fact that the legal debate is wholly centered on the man's freedom to do as he wishes with his wife with little concern for the life the woman would be left with. ... Jesus cites Genesis

2:24, which is the first “command” concerning marriage, a comment by the narrator on the story of Eve’s creation: “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh” (cited in Mark 10:8). Jesus draws the conclusion that this oneness is not merely a physical happening but an act of God: “What God has joined together let no human being separate” (Mark 10:9). In this interchange we see three strands of sexual expression woven together: sex, marriage, and lifelong fidelity. This is the most basic framework of sex within the Christian story. The idea that humanity is somehow fulfilling its physical destiny through sexual union underlies the Genesis narrative: the woman came out of Adam’s flesh, and the man and woman become one flesh again through sex. ... Though ideas about marriage and weddings have varied culture by culture over the millennia, the creation narrative contains the comment that the act of sexual oneness comes with the establishment of a new house, a new family, to become husband and wife. ... In the joining of two people sexually, God unites them as one flesh, not to be separated (2011, 163-164).

Brownson:

Both Mark 10:8 and Matthew 19:5-6 portray Jesus as citing Genesis 2:24 in the context of a question about divorce. According to Jesus, as recounted in Mark, the fact that “the two shall become one flesh” means that divorce—the negation of the essential mutual obligations of kinship—is unacceptable and contrary to the will of God. ... The fact that Jesus makes the “one-flesh” reference to Genesis 2:24 in the context of a discussion about divorce is noteworthy. Divorce is essentially the severing of kinship ties and obligations. The use of this text in the Jesus tradition thus confirms my argument that the language of “one flesh” has kinship in view. ... Jesus’ central concern here is with the bond of marriage, and his conclusion, in addressing that bond, is to declare, “What God has joined together, let no one separate” (Mark 10:9, Matt. 19:6). ... [I]t may well be that [the] Old Testament analogies between God’s covenant with Israel and marriage led Jesus to see in Genesis 2:24 a vision for the permanence of marriage. God had not sent Israel away forever, despite Israel’s adulterous pursuit of other gods. The faithfulness God expects of marriage thus finds its ultimate grounding in God’s own character. God’s faithfulness to Israel is the norm and ground of all relational bonds that give structure and meaning to human existence. And just as God’s faithfulness knows no limits, so Jesus insists that marriage—the foundational kinship bond—must be marked by similar faithfulness that knows no limits. Thus the one-flesh union intended by God must not be sundered by human unfaithfulness (2013, 34, 91, 96).

Perspectives from Other Authors Within the Church

De Young:

When asked to weigh in on the Jewish divorce debate ... Jesus sides with the more conservative Shammai school and disallows divorce for any cause except sexual immorality. To make his point, Jesus first reminds his audience that God “from the beginning made them male and female” and then quotes directly from Genesis 2:24 (Matt. 19:4-6; Mark 10:6-9). There is no indication that Jesus references Genesis for mere illustrative purposes. In Jesus’s mind, to answer the divorce question necessitates a right understanding of marriage, and to get at the nature of marriage one must go back to the beginning, where we see God instituting marriage as the lifelong union of a man and woman (2015, 26).

Gushee:

The goal of this teaching-then-text was not to address what we now call the LGBT issue, though it is sometimes cited in that debate because Jesus references Genesis 1-2. The text itself intends a stern attack on the growing tendency toward permissiveness in first-century Jewish practice, allowing men to initiate divorce from their wives for trivial reasons, leaving families shattered and women disgraced and destitute. So the purpose of his teaching was to call listeners to a much stricter understanding of the permanence of marriage, which God intended to be a lifelong one-flesh relationship for the good of adults, children and community. That teaching definitely needs to be heard in our churches today. The text's relevance to the LGBT issue is more debated (2014, 100-101).

Wilson:

[W]hen Jesus is asked a question about the proper grounds for divorce, he answers by saying something about the permanence or indissolubility of marriage. Is marriage permanent or temporary? When we divorce, is it dissolved in God's eyes, or are we still married to the original spouse no matter what the divorce courts say? ... Jesus defined marriage as a lifelong union that cannot be dissolved (or at most, can only be dissolved in one particular situation). For centuries, the church turned this definition into a rule: no remarriage after divorce. ... We've made so many pastoral accommodations in the matter of remarriage (in many cases, correctly, I think) that we've lost a sense for the strictness of this teaching. ... Life is messy and marriage is in the middle of the mess, where pastors also do their best work. We can try to construct a mental map that eliminates the messiness. But these mental maps never account fully for the complexities of real life. ... So we find our way forward, trusting in the kindness, goodness, and mercy of God, just as much as divorced people facing remarriage must (2014, 141-142, 149).

Romans 1:24-27

Perspectives from Biblical Scholars

Gagnon:

For Paul, both idolatry and same-sex intercourse reject God's verdict that what was made and arranged was "very good" ([Gen.] 1:31). Instead of recognizing their indebtedness to the one God in whose image and likeness they were made, humans worshiped statues made in their own image and likeness. Instead of exercising dominion over the animal kingdom, they bowed down not only to images of themselves but also to images of animals. Instead of acknowledging that God had made them "male and female" and had called on them to copulate and procreate, they denied the transparent complementarity of their sexuality and engaged in sex with the same sex, indulging themselves in irresponsible passion on which stable and productive family structures could not be built. As with Jesus, so with Paul: the creation story in Genesis does not leave room for a legitimate expression of same-sex intercourse. Even though Rom 1:18-32 speaks of events after the Fall, for Paul all human rebellions are in one way or another rebellions against God's will for humankind set in motion at creation (2001, 291).

Hays:

Repeated again and again in recent debate is the claim that Paul condemns only homosexual acts committed promiscuously by heterosexual persons—because they "exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural." Paul's negative judgment, so the argument goes, does not apply to persons who are "naturally" of homosexual orientation. This

interpretation, however, is untenable. The “exchange” is not a matter of individual life-decisions; rather, it is Paul’s characterization of the fallen condition of the pagan world. In any case, neither Paul nor anyone else in antiquity had a concept of “sexual orientation.” To introduce this concept into the passage (by suggesting that Paul disapproves only of those who act contrary to their individual sexual orientations) is to lapse into an anachronism. The fact is that Paul treats all homosexual activity as *prima facie* evidence of humanity’s tragic confusion and alienation from God the Creator (1996, 388-389).

Kirk:

While the rhetoric minimizes the leverage one can find in Romans 1:26-27 for a holier-than-thou sense of moral superiority, it does so not by exonerating homosexual activity as not really sinful after all but by claiming that all are guilty of such sins and therefore in need of God’s grace and forgiveness. . . . All sin and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23; compare Rom. 1:21, 23). All are alike in the dock of anticreation, failing to glorify God and give thanks—a situation that all need rectified by the new creation inaugurated in the death and resurrection of Jesus. In such a narrative of God’s creation-restoring work through Christ, homosexuality sits as one element to the larger canvas of the disordered world that needs to be set to rights. The picture of Genesis 2 is not restored merely when people preserve their sexual activity for the one person they will be faithful to for life; it is restored when a man leaves his house to be joined to a woman as his wife (2011, 178).

Loader:

In Romans 1, therefore, the most likely explanation is that Paul assumes that people were created male and female with heterosexual orientation of their natural sexual emotions. Those who denied God’s reality had perverted minds and engaged in perverted acts: they worshipped idols. As punishment God gave them over to perverted minds with perverted passions and desires whose intensity they followed by engaging in perverted acts, females with females, males with males, and both for their mindset and their actions they stand condemned. Paul does not differentiate between people of different sexual orientation, either to exempt homosexual persons, or to make sure both are condemned. He may have known that some made such differentiation, but he would not have believed it. Nor does he focus only on pederastic relations. Without differentiation he condemns all with such sexual attitudes and desires and all acts which give expression to them. He does so within the context of deliberately highlighting what he assumes his hearers will agree is outrageous sin, in order then to bring them to see that in fact all are under sin and in need of the gospel, including those so willing to condemn (2012, 326).

Brownson:

[T]he same-sex eroticism Paul derides in Romans 1 reflects an expression of excessive and self-centered desire—and is thus *lustful*. For Paul, lust is determined not so much by the object of desire but by the excess of desire. When Paul describes this behavior as *impurity*, he is speaking not so much about the violation of boundaries but about an inward problem—a heart that seeks its own benefit and power. When Paul says that this behavior is *shameful*, he focuses attention on the violation of male honor specifically, as well as gender roles more generally. Finally, when Paul speaks of this behavior as *unnatural*, he focuses attention not on the violation of gender complementarity but on the ways in which this violates assumptions taken for granted throughout the culture of that

day regarding what is natural for men and women as individuals, as members of society, and as part of the physical world. For Paul, all of these dispositions are expressive of a fundamentally disordered state arising from humanity's proclivity to idolatry and its failure to worship the one true God. I argue that, at the same time, we cannot assume that all committed same-sex relationships are *necessarily* prone to the errors and problems that Paul narrates in Romans 1. There is thus room to evaluate these relationships using broader biblical understandings of sexuality and intimate faithfulness, quite apart from a doctrinal commitment to "gender complementarity" (2013, 261).

Nissinen:

Paul's arguments should not be overgeneralized. Paul argues on the basis of his experience and the Hellenistic Jewish tradition. There is no reason to assume that he would speak of a "generic homosexuality" on a theoretical level beyond his experience and without a cultural context. Paul, like his contemporaries, could not possibly take into consideration homosexual orientation or identity. He only knew people who "change the order of their nature." Whatever he knew about the slave pederasty and boy-prostitution of the Romans he utilized to confirm his views about the nature of homoerotic relations. ... In line with Jewish teaching, Paul labeled homoerotic behavior as a whole as debauchery, lustful deeds, and abnormal transgressions of gender boundaries, that is, "unnatural" acts performed by "normal" people. Already John Chrysostom in his commentary on the Romans remarks that Paul speaks here not of love but lust. ... Paul is likely to have been familiar with some forms of homosexual behavior, although he does not disclose exactly what kind of homoeroticism he has in mind. His mention of women shows that his arguments are not limited to pederasty. His references to "homosexuality," however, do not come from outside his experience and world. Therefore, his statements cannot be understood as if they deal with "homosexuality" theoretically and generally (1998, 111-113).

Perspectives from Other Authors Within the Church

De Young:

No doubt, much of homosexual practice in the ancient world was by men who also had sex with women, but this does not mean Paul had no concept of orientation or that the category would have altered his final conclusion. Even if Paul did not use our modern vocabulary, his judgment is still the same. Homosexual behavior is a sin, not according to who practices it or by what motivation they seek it, but because that act itself, as a truth-suppressing exchange, is contrary to God's good design. Every passion directed toward illegitimate ends was considered excessive and lacking in self-control (Titus 1:12). ... The problem with the consuming passion in verse 27 was not its intensity but that it corresponded to the giving up of man's natural sexual complementarity with women and committing shameless acts with other men (2015, 47).

Gushee:

A gently revisionist conclusion would be to suggest that Paul's theological purpose in Romans 1, and the religious and cultural context that he swam in when he wrote it, precluded him from speaking sympathetically about any kind of same-sex relationships. The "subject" may seem to be the same, but many have argued that the context is so different that Paul's words are of little relevance to the question of covenanted same-sex relations among devoted Christians. This would not be the only subject on which the contemporary application of Paul's statements have been reevaluated in this way, leading

to the setting aside of his implied or explicit directives (head-coverings, hair, women keeping silent in church, instructions to slaves to obey their masters). Such a conclusion is not compelling to traditionalists, who link Paul's teaching here to the other texts in the canon that we have explored, notably the creation/design theme, thus decontextualizing Paul's teaching considerably and viewing it as part of a coherent overall biblical sexual ethic. Still, stepping back, it is appropriate to wonder whether what Paul is so harshly condemning in Romans 1 has much if anything to do with that devout, loving lesbian couple who have been together 20 years and sit on the third row at church. Their lives do not at all look like the overall picture of depravity offered in Romans 1:18-32. You certainly wonder about this when you know that couple—or when you are that couple (2014, 89-90).

Wilson:

It is reasonable to think that the original recipients of Paul's letter, all too familiar with the widespread practices of temple prostitution, would have viewed this first and foremost as a condemnation of such practices. That's not to say other same-sex practices would have been excluded, necessarily, just that this would have been front and center in the minds of the original hearers. ... Is the text a sweeping condemnation of all same-sex practice or does it speak to the *predominant* practices of the time, especially temple prostitution, ... pederasty, and the sexual services required of slaves? ... [H]ow would we modern readers understand Paul's condemnation of same-sex practice if widespread and widely accepted institutions like temple prostitution, pederasty, and slavery had shaped our view of it? When reading Romans 1, would we think of two men or two women who have formed their own family unit, having made commitments to each other, and are now raising children together? Arguably not. ... [I]t's much more likely that Paul's argument ... is offered in a shared context dominated by same-sex acts characteristic of pederasty, temple prostitution, and slave sex, which were grossly perverse, demeaning, and exploitative (2014, 63-66, 68).

Vines:

With each vice Paul listed in Romans 1:18-32, humans are capable of making the opposite, virtuous choice. Instead of worshipping idols, we can choose to worship God. Rather than succumbing to greed, we can choose to give generously. Instead of hating, we can choose to love. For Paul, same-sex relations fit into that same pattern: Rather than following same-sex attractions, we can follow opposite-sex attractions. ... In other words, men who engage in same-sex behavior *could* be satisfied with sex with women, but their rampant lust leads them beyond it. ... We have to remember: *what Paul was describing is fundamentally different from what we are discussing*. ... [There are] reasons for Paul's negative statements about same-sex behavior. ... The key point to note ... is that *none of those reasons extends to the loving, committed relationships of gay Christians today*. The main argument for why Romans 1 should extend to gay Christians—*anatomical complementarity*—is not supported by the text itself. ... For Paul, same-sex desire did not characterize a small minority of people who were subject to special classification—and condemnation—on that basis. Rather, it represented an innate potential for excess within *all* of fallen humanity. When that potential was acted upon, it became “unnatural” in the sense that it subverted conventional, patriarchal gender norms. ... From the church's early centuries through the nineteenth century, commentators consistently identified the moral problem in Romans 1:26-27 as “unbridled passions,” not the expression of a same-

sex orientation. Furthermore, no biblical interpreter prior to the twentieth century even hinted that Paul's statements were intended to consign a whole group of people to lifelong celibacy (2014, 103, 113-115).

Perspectives from the Synodical Report

It has often been noted that Paul moves directly from idolatry to homosexuality [i.e. same-sex intercourse] which suggests that he may have had in mind the depraved cultic practices of the pagan world. This may be true, but we may not restrict Paul's judgment against homosexuality to cultic instances of it any more than we may restrict his condemnation of prostitution to its occurrences within pagan cultic practice. ... We conclude that the New Testament passages which make reference to homosexual behavior are in harmony with the judgment of the Old Testament: homosexual acts are sinful. But again we need to ask whether the judgment of Paul applies to those who are homosexuals as we have defined them, i.e. those who are constitutionally homosexual in their sex orientation. Does the exchange from the natural to the unnatural which Paul deems dishonorable apply to such persons? A person who is homosexual, we have seen, has a disordered sex condition, so that what is "natural" to him is to have sex relations with a member of his own sex, and what is "unnatural" for him would be to have heterosexual relations. Is Paul not speaking of those who willfully exchange sex relationships and willfully give up their natural relations? What then of those for whom it is not a case of willful exchange or willful giving up of the natural? The male homosexual does not exchange his passion for a woman for passion for a man, nor gives up the natural attraction for a woman, for he does not have such passions, such are not "natural" to him. How then ought we to regard the acts of those who engage in what according to the creation order is judged "unnatural," but is in fact "natural" for them in their disordered condition? We face the seriousness of our problem at this point (1973, 621).

1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Tim. 1:10

Perspectives from Biblical Scholars

Gagnon:

In my own reading, the meaning of *malakoi* in 1 Cor 6:9 probably lies somewhere in between "only prostituting passive homosexuals" and "effeminate heterosexual and homosexual men." [I]n 1 Cor 6:9, *malakoi* should be understood as the passive partners in homosexual intercourse, the most egregious case of which are those who also intentionally engage in a process of feminization to erase further their masculine appearance and manner. The second disputed word, *arsenokoitai* ([singular] *arsenokoites* literally means "bedders of male, those [men] who take [other] males to bed," "men who sleep or lie with males." It is a neologism, occurring for the first time in extant literature here in 1 Cor 6:9 and later in 1 Tim 1:10. ... It is self-evident ... that the combination of the terms, *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, are correctly understood in our contemporary context whenever they are applied to every conceivable type of same-sex intercourse (2011, 308, 312, 330).

Hays:

The word *malakoi* is not a technical term meaning "homosexuals" (no such term existed either in Greek or in Hebrew), but it appears often in Hellenistic Greek as pejorative slang to describe the "passive" partners—often young boys—in homosexual activity. The

other word, *arsenokoitai*, is ... derived directly from Lev. 18:22 and 20:13 and used in rabbinic texts to refer to homosexual intercourse. The Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) of Lev 20.13 ... is almost certainly the idiom from which the noun *arsenikoitai* was coined. Thus, Paul's use of the term presupposes and reaffirms the Holiness Code's condemnation of homosexual acts (1996, 382).

Kirk:

If I may venture a vulgar comparison, it seems that the range of meanings for *arsenikoites* is roughly equivalent to our phrase "someone who screws someone else." The word carries sexual connotations, likely a homosexual connotation in Greek, but also a range of meanings for those who wrong others in various ways. ... The first word, *malakos*, is sometimes translated "effeminate" ... The depictions of homosexuality that fall under such headings as "effeminate" derive from a general disregard of women, such that calling someone effeminate is an insult. Such sexism ... should not be the basis of our own ethical assessments. ... The story, however, is larger than the historical derivations of a couple of Greek words. In Paul's understanding of the narrative that arcs from first creation to new creation, the primal story of male-female marriage is an inseparable part of the framework of God's provision for human sexual expression (2011, 179).

Loader:

The combined evidence suggests that *arsenokoitai* might refer to men who exploit other men for sex, including male prostitutes, but also through male rape and pederasty, and certainly not limited to the latter. Exploitation was a common feature in most same-sex encounters, but not all. Thus it is better to take the word as closely cohering with what Paul condemns in Romans 1 and reflecting the prohibitions of Lev. 18:22 and 20:13 on which it appears to be built. If we return to *malakoi* in the light of this understanding of *arsenokoitai*, then the former are mostly likely to be those who willingly engaged in the transgression, including male prostitutes, but also other consenting males. ... On balance, then, Paul probably uses the two terms with reference to men who engaged in same-sex behavior, with the first referring to the willing passive partner, whether by private consent or as a male prostitute., "those who submit to sexual penetration by other men," and the second referring to "those who engage in sexual penetration of other men," which would have a broader reference and include, but not limited to, exploitation, also by force. ... It is certainly inappropriate to translate either word by the modern term, "homosexual," because the common understanding was that men engaging in such activity were just as likely also to be engaging in sex with women, both licit and illicit (2012, 328, 331).

Brownson:

Most scholars recognize that the presence of these two words reflects widespread assumptions throughout the ancient world about male-male homosexual activity: almost all the documents discussing male same-sex eroticism assume a distinction between active older men ... and passive younger males ... in other words, the practice of pederasty. The *malakoi* ("softies") are the younger, passive [participants], and the *arsenokoitai* ("man-bedders") are the older, active [ones]. The vice list in 1 Timothy 1:10 includes three interrelated terms in reference to male-male erotic activity: *pornoi* (translated by the NRSV as "fornicators," but can also mean "male prostitutes"), *arsenokoitai* ("man-bedders," the same term that appears in 1 Cor. 6:9), and *andropodistai* ("slave-dealers," or "kidnappers"). Many scholars believe that the three terms belong together in this list: that is, we see kidnappers or slave dealers

(*andropodistai*) acting as “pimps” for their captured and castrated boys (the *pornoï*, or male prostitutes), servicing the *arsenokoitai*, the men who make use of these boy prostitutes (2013, 274).

Nissinen:

Not everyone who used the term *arsenikoites* ... have necessarily taken into consideration the Septuagint or the etymology of the word in general. The “etymology of a word is its history, not its meaning.” It is possible that determining the meaning of the word by combining the meanings of its component parts is semantically misleading. All in all it seems that the word *malakos* stresses femininity. ... The homosexual connotation may come from effeminacy, because the man who submits to the passive sexual role takes the position of a woman and represents moral values associated with women—mostly in a negative sense. ... The question of the exact meaning of the juxtaposition *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* ... remains obscure. The evidence is too meager to allow for much more than an educated guess; this is especially the case regarding the word *arsenokoitai*. Appearing one after the other, they *can* be interpreted in terms of a pederastic relationship but they *need* not be so interpreted. ... The modern concept of homosexuality should by no means be read into Paul’s text, nor can we assume that Paul’s words in 1 Cor. 6:9 “condemn all homosexual relations” in all times and places and ways. The meanings of the words are too vague to justify this claim, and Paul’s words should not be used for generalizations that go beyond his experience and world. Regardless of the kind of sexuality meant in 1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10 in their current contexts they are examples of the exploitation of persons. This is the hermeneutical horizon for understanding the individual components of the lists of vices. What Paul primarily opposes is the wrong that people do to others (1998, 117-118).

Perspectives from Other Authors Within the Church

De Young:

If he wanted to shock Timothy and upset his fellow Jews and blow up the prevailing ethos in the early church by allowing for committed same-sex relationships, Paul picked an impossibly obscure way of introducing such a radical change. Why not use the word *paiderastes* (pederasts, adult males who have sex with boys) if that’s all Paul had in mind? Likewise, if Paul wanted his readers to know he was referring only to exploitative forms of homosexuality, he wouldn’t have coined a term from a portion of the Mosaic law where all sex involving a man with a man is forbidden. Was Paul opposed only to exploitative forms of adultery, fornication, and prostitution in the second half of 1 Corinthians 6? Are we really to suppose that Paul—just after urging excommunication for sexual sin (5:4-5, 13), and just as he references the Mosaic law (6:9), and just before he anchors his sexual ethic in the Genesis creation story (6:16)—meant to say, “Obviously, I’m not talking about two adult men in a long-term relationship”? And if he had meant to communicate such a message to the Corinthians or to Timothy, how would that have been obvious to any of them? ... This [traditional] understanding of *malakoi* and *arsenokotai* ... fits with the consensus of modern English translations, fits with the ethics of the Old Testament, fits with the training Paul would have received as a Jewish scholar, and, most importantly, fits within the context of Paul’s argument (2015, 59-63).

Hill:

I have found two biblical images to be especially apt descriptions of my life as a homosexual Christian. Both are from Paul’s letters. The first is found in 1 Corinthians

6:9-11. “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?” [The other is from Romans 8:23-25.] Paul asks and then gives a list of habitual sins that are evidence that God’s reign has not yet conquered the rebellion in all human hearts.” “Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.” Paul paints a bleak picture, not least for those who feel a stinging indictment at his mention of homosexuality. But the picture is not finished. “And such were some of you,” Paul says, with an emphasis on how things have changed: “such *were* some of you—*formerly—in the past.*” “You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” There were some of you in the Corinthian church, Paul says, who were stained by the sin of homosexual practice. But you have been made clean, he continues, probably referring to the Corinthians’ water baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. ... I know that whatever the complex origins of my own homosexuality are, there *have* been conscious choices I’ve made to indulge—and therefore to intensify, probably—my homoerotic inclinations. As I look back over the course of my life, I regret the nights I have given in to temptations to lust that pulsed like hot, itching sores in my mind. And so I cling to this image—washed. I am washed, sanctified, justified through the work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Whenever I look back on my baptism, I can remember that God has cleansed the stains of homosexual sin from the crevasses of my mind, heart, and body and included me in his family, the church, where I can find support, comfort, and provocation toward Christian maturity (2010, 48-49).

Gushee:

In the Septuagint, both Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 contain the terms *arsenos* and *koiten*; Leviticus 20:13 is more important here because it puts the terms directly together. Many scholars find that linguistic parallel or connection conclusive evidence as to Paul’s source and meaning, even though there is no evidence it had ever been done before. ... Most English-speaking Christians would have no idea that the Greek word being translated [as “homosexual”] was a new word that Paul coined whose meaning and translation are contested. They would not know of the intense debate among classics scholars and New Testament interpreters as to what Paul was thinking about when he was (apparently or clearly) talking about same-sex activity in the Greco-Roman world. Consensual adult sex? Man-boy sex/abuse? Prostitution? Rape? Abuse of slaves? ... How might the history of Christian treatment of gays and lesbians have been different if *arsenokoitai* had been translated “sex traffickers” or “sexual exploiters” or “rapists” or “sexual predators” or “pimps”? Such translations are plausible, even if not the majority scholarly reconstruction at this time. And they are at least as adequate, or inadequate, as “homosexual,” a term from *our* culture with a range of meanings including sexual orientation, identity, and activity, and not a word from Paul’s world. But alas—most of the translations we got read as if every “homosexual” person was being condemned—to eternal fire. This overly confident translation decision then shadowed the lives of all LGBT people, most sadly gay and lesbian adolescents rejected by their mothers and fathers (and pastors and youth ministers) as hell-bound perverts. Very high-level scholarly uncertainty about the meaning and translation of these two Greek words, exacerbated by profound cultural and linguistic differences between what we (think we) know about Paul’s world and what we do know about our own, undermines claims to the conclusiveness of *malakoi* and

arsenokoitai for resolving the LGBT issue. I deeply lament the damage done by certain questionable and sometimes crudely derogatory Bible translations in the lives of vulnerable people made in God's image (2014, 77-79).

Vines:

[It has been] argued that *malakoi* in 1 Corinthians 6:9 be translated as "those who lack self-control." Based on the evidence, that translation stands on firmer footing than any interpretation that defines the word as a specific reference to same-sex behavior. As we've seen, *malakoi* doesn't refer to merely a single act. It encompasses an entire disposition toward immoderation. ... Some non-affirming Christians seek to ... connect ... *arsenokotai* to the prohibition of male same-sex intercourse found in Leviticus 20:13. In the earliest Greek translation of that verse, the words *arsenos koiten* appear next to one another. So it's possible that Paul coined the term *arsenokoitai* based on his familiarity with the Greek translation of Leviticus 20. If so, he likely was using the word to condemn some form of same-sex behavior. ... [But] even if the compound *arsenokoitai* did originate from Leviticus, that still wouldn't tell us what it means in 1 Corinthians 6. ... [G]iven the scarcity of the word in ancient literature, the most we can say with confidence is that it may refer to some kind of economic exploitation involving sexual behavior. While that might have included same-sex behavior, it would likely have been exploitative forms of it (2014, 122-126).

Perspectives from the Synodical Report

The Revised Standard Version translates two Greek words denoting homosexual practices into the one word "homosexuals," the word *malakoi* referring to passive male partners and the word *arsenokoitai* indicating the active partners in such acts. It has been suggested that the use of these words stresses the activity rather than the condition of homosexuality. But Paul does not make the kind of distinction we have made earlier between homosexuality and homosexualism [i.e. same-sex intercourse]. He speaks only of those who practice homosexual acts. From this text it is clear that Paul considered homosexualism as seriously wicked, though no more sinful than the others mentioned in his list (1973, 619-620).

Galatians 3:28

Perspectives from Biblical Scholars

Gagnon:

As for women's roles in the church and in the home [as precedent for rethinking traditional biblical teaching], the contemporary church does take, on the whole, a more enlightened perspective than can generally be found in the Bible. However, there are so many positive examples of women in leadership positions in the Old Testament... of women involved in the ministry of Jesus, and of women serving as co-workers with Paul in the proclamation of the gospel (Romans 16 among other texts), that the Bible contains within its own canonical context the seeds for liberating women from oppressive male structures (cf. Gal. 3:28 "there is no male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus"). On this point the Bible is often its own critic and inspiration for change (2011, 443).

Brownson:

It is this eschatological existence—an existence that already begins to embrace the life of the world to come—that Paul speaks about here. In this new life, old distinctions of Jew

and Gentile no longer have any ultimate meaning. The same is true for slave and free, and for male and female. But why these last two in particular? Why does the life to come exclude the differentiations of slave and free and the coupling of male and female? ... Here we discover substantial emphases within the New Testament witness that sweep away, in categorical terms, those basic distinctions between insider and outsider, between powerful and powerless, as well as the distinctive pairing (male and female) devoted to procreation—all the distinctions that form the basis for the structures of society as it was known in the ancient world (2013, 65-67).

Perspectives from the Synodical Report

Sex, nonetheless, has not been negated as a way of life as is abundantly evident from the New Testament. The unity and equality of the sexes in Christ may not be understood as doing away with the distinction between male and female. As Karl Barth has said in commenting on Galatians 3:28: “If they are one in him standing upon an equal footing, this means that they are what they are for themselves as they are ordered, related and directed to each other” (1973, 625).

Implications for the Church Today

Gagnon:

[I]t needs to be emphatically stated that to feel homosexual impulses does not make one a bad person. I deplore attempts to demean the humanity of homosexuals. Whatever one thinks about the immorality of homosexual behavior, or about the obnoxiousness of elements within the homosexual lobby, homosexual impulses share with all other sinful impulses the feature of being an attack on the “I” or inner self experiencing the impulses (Rom. 7:14-25). The person beset with homosexual temptation should evoke our concern, sympathy, help, and understanding, not scorn or enmity. Even more, such a person should kindle a feeling of solidarity in the hearts of all Christians, since we all struggle to properly manage our erotic passions. A homosexual impulse, while sinful, cannot take shape as accountable sin in a person’s life unless one acquiesces to it. ... For homosexuals a denunciation of homosexuality may *feel* like an indictment of homosexuals. Regrettably, some of this pain may be unavoidable in the hope of doing away with the greater pain of living outside of God’s redemptive plan. There can be no healthy transformation so long as homosexuals live in a world of unreality, including the unreality of false notions about Scripture’s view of homosexuality. ... Nothing less than intellectual integrity, free speech, and a potentially irreversible change in the morality of mainline denominations are at stake in this vital area of sexual ethics. ... For me, [stories of same-sex Christians] put a human face on the debate about homosexuality and serve as a reminder to me both of the intractable character of sexual desire and the possibility for change. ... The real difficulty for the church lies not in assessing whether the Bible’s stance toward same-sex intercourse is unremittingly negative, nor even (as is increasingly being suggested) in assessing whether the hermeneutical appropriation of the Bible’s stance for our contemporary context sustains that witness. No, the real difficulty for the church lies in the pastoral dimension: the “nuts-and-bolts,” day-to-day compassionate response to people whose sexual actions are recognized to be sinful and harmful to themselves, to the church, and to society at large (2001, 31, 493).

Hays:

In view of the considerable uncertainty surrounding the scientific and experiential evidence [about sexual orientation], in view of our culture's present swirling confusion about gender roles, in view of our propensity for self-deception, I think it prudent and necessary to let the univocal testimony of Scripture and the Christian tradition order the life of the church on this painfully controversial matter. We must affirm that the New Testament tells us the truth about ourselves as sinners and as God's sexual creatures: Marriage between a man and a woman is the normative form for human sexual fulfillment, and homosexuality is one among many tragic signs that we are a broken people, alienated from God's loving purpose (1996, 399-400).

Kirk:

The direct biblical evidence is not well poised to support the argument that practicing homosexuals should be affirmed in their lifestyle as living in a manner congruous with the Christian story. The Bible's counter-cultural voice seems well disposed to play the same role in our world as it did in the ancient: articulating a vision for sexual expression that calls all of us to die to what we may prefer to do, believing that, in such obedient death to instant gratification, wandering hearts, and desires for partners that are embraced to our own harm, God offers us new life. Is there, then, no argument to be made in affirmation of homosexual practice? For all that the biblical evidence weighs against it, I do believe that a case can be made. ... [A]dvocates of Christian homosexual practice will have to find more compelling ways to plot homosexual partnerships within the narrative of God's story. One such avenue might be to take into consideration some of the narrative dynamics by which the new creation is impinging on the old. I will often describe the Christian life as a matter of grabbing hold of the future and bringing it to bear on the present. But if this is the case, then the hints that the coming kingdom of God will not be a matter of marrying and giving in marriage (Mark 12:25), that in this new world order there is no longer, as in the first, "male and female" (Gal. 3:28), may provide an avenue for reconsidering the finality of the biblical depiction of heterosexual marriage as the only viable Christian option. But if one were to articulate a position of homosexual practice within a more generally acceptable framework of sexuality, and if one were to cultivate a nuanced theology that gave weight to the overarching biblical narrative while arguing against the particular structures we encounter there, how would we finally be able to determine that this was a viable Christian depiction of God's intentions for sexual expression? It would, in the end, require the church as a whole to experience and/or recognize the inclusion of practicing homosexuals within its number to be an affirming work of the Spirit of God. There is precedent for the church's overturning of the biblical requirements for full inclusion and affirmation within God's people: the idea that Gentiles did not have to be circumcised to become part of the people of God flies in the face of a huge swath of Old Testament teaching. But the Spirit of God gave divine testimony to God's approval of these Gentiles without their becoming circumcised Jews—testimony that had to be given time and again, and even then was not received without a fight (see Acts 10-11, 15, and all of Galatians). Indeed, if there is anything genuinely new about our situation in the twenty-first century when it comes to the question of homosexuality, it is not that our culture has more of a place for it than the prejudiced ancients, and it is not even that recent science suggests that we are predisposed to certain sexual preferences. The real difference is that there are Christians

who are both striving to faithfully follow God and simultaneously living within committed homosexual relationships. This is part of the current-day experience of the church, and one that must be carefully weighed when we consider whether homosexuality is, as Scripture seems to indicate, a deviation from what is acceptable before God or whether it is, as its advocates would claim, a new work of the Spirit in a surprising extension of the mission of God (2011, 184-186).

Loader:

I am ... convinced that Paul's anthropology in relation to sexual orientation needs supplementing with the reality that not all who engage in sexual intimacy with those of their own kind are engaging in perversion. Those who are not should not then stand under the same judgement, but like all, be challenged to exercise the expression of their humanity in a way which is conformed to and informed by the generosity and goodness of God who confronts our reality and challenges us to authentic fulfillment (2012, 499).

Brownson:

Should the moral logic that informs the condemnation of same-sex erotic activity in the "seven passages" apply categorically to all committed same-sex relationships today? The evidence suggests that there are no forms of moral logic underpinning these passages that clearly and unequivocally forbid all contemporary forms of committed same-sex intimate relationships. This is particularly clear when these contemporary relationships are not lustful or dishonoring to one's partner, are marked positively by moderated and disciplined desire, and when intimacy in these relationships contributes to the establishment of lifelong bonds of kinship, care, and mutual concern. Such same-sex intimate relationships were never considered by the biblical writers, which leaves us with the need to discern more clearly how the church should respond to these relationships today (2013, 277-278).

Nissinen:

No single passage in the Bible actually offers a specifically formulated statement about same-sex eroticism. The topic appears as a secondary theme in a variety of contexts, with different texts answering different questions. When the subject emerges, arguments arise spontaneously on the basis of the writer's own tradition and already developed views. ... Quite possibly no biblical author approved of homoeroticism in any form they knew. To understand this attitude rightly, it is necessary to examine the way they understood same-sex interaction. The perspective of the biblical texts is clearly centered around physical sexual contacts, the background of which is seen in idolatry or moral corruption and the motivation for which is attributed to excessive lust or xenophobia. Love and positive feelings are not mentioned; responsible homosexual partnerships based on love seem to be completely inconceivable. ... Paul, for instance, has only negative things to say about same-sex conduct in the way he perceived it. This fact cannot be speculated away. Yet, it would be hazardous to make Paul's text deal with something it does not address. It would not be fair to claim that Paul would condemn all homosexuality everywhere, always, and in every form. ... Paul cannot be held responsible for things he does not appear to know about—such as sexual orientation, which is not a voluntary perversion but an aspect of gender identity that manifests itself in different ways, including love. ... Questions about same-sex relationships are asked very differently today compared with the world in which the Bible was written, and the correlation of these two contexts is often superficial at best. It may well be that unless we totally oppose homosexuality we have to diverge

from the “clear word” of the Bible. But this is also true when one professes that the earth is round and revolves around the sun. Changes in worldview have forced people to adjust even to things and views that appear contrary to the Bible, because all biblical interpretation happens in concrete circumstances. All this forms a hermeneutical circle (1998, 123-125).

Perspectives from Other Authors Within the Church

De Young:

We will guard the truth of God’s Word, protect God’s people from error, and confront the world when it tries to press us into its mold. . . . We will treat all Christians as new creations in Christ, reminding each other that our true identity is not based on sexuality or self-expression but on our union with Christ. We will extend God’s forgiveness to all those who come in brokenhearted repentance, everyone from homosexual sinners to heterosexual sinners, from the proud to the greedy, from the people pleaser to the self-righteous. We will ask for forgiveness when we are rude or thoughtless or joke about those who experience same-sex attractions. We will strive to be a community that welcomes all those who hate their sin and struggle against it, even when that struggle involves failures and setbacks. We will seek to love all in our midst, regardless of their particular vices or virtues, by preaching the Bible, recognizing evidences of God’s grace, pointing out behaviors that dishonor the Lord, taking church membership seriously, exercising church discipline, announcing the free offer of the gospel, striving for holiness together, practicing the “one anothers” of Christian discipleship, and exulting in Christ above all things (2015, 140).

Gushee:

Dealing seriously with the LGBT issue requires (a) biblical [study], and (b) willingness to make the move from exegesis to hermeneutics, understood as interpretation of the biblical text in service to the Church today, then (c) Christian ethical consideration of this scriptural work, other major biblical texts and themes, and relevant extra-biblical sources of insight for thinking about this issue, which includes (d) attentiveness to the real struggling, suffering human beings whose lives and well-being are at stake in these moral deliberations. And then, of course (e), all moral discernment requires the mysterious and unverifiable guidance of the Holy Spirit. Some are unwilling to acknowledge seriously steps (b) through (e). If they have worked out their exegesis on the six big passages, they have their answer to what the Church should do today. They do not attend seriously to suffering human beings. They do not acknowledge a pastoral task other than to report exegetical results. Often they scorn those who attempt to integrate real human suffering, and pastoral concern, into their response to the LGBT issue. They call it emotionalizing the issue. I think paying attention to neighbors bleeding by the side of the road is exactly what the love Jesus commanded looks like (Lk. 10:25-37) (2014, 118).

Wilson:

I’m not just a member of my congregation. I’m a *pastor* who has the responsibility to advise two women who are committed to each other and their children on whether the Bible condemns the sexual dimension of their relationship. I don’t find [traditional scholarly arguments] convincing. And I cannot outsource my pastoral responsibility to [scholars]. In a situation like this, a pastor is left to make the call. Am I to use this text [Romans 1:24-27] to guide my care of the people I know who are in what appear to be loving, caring relationships involving same-sex intimacy? The text, in my view, is

certainly not *aimed* at them. I feel confident to say that this text is speaking to the kind of wicked behavior—to speak of “relationships” would be completely inapt—to which an idolatrous society is given over as sign that it has fallen under the judgment of God. This, in my judgment, fits the sexual practices that characterize awful institutions like pederasty, or temple prostitution, or the horrible way slave masters use the bodies of people they think they *own*. It does *not* fit the relationships of the same-sex couples I know. . . . As a pastor, I didn’t need help to discern how to respond to temple prostitution, pederasty, and slave sex. I was dealing with gay people who had strong same-sex attraction from childhood—some from devout Christian homes—who endured a period of deep anguish about their sexuality, perhaps sought healing to no avail, and were tempted to suicide. After much soul searching, some had come to believe that they were called to a faithful covenantal relationship with a same-sex partner. Others came to the church with pre-existing commitments of this sort, and some were parents with kids in tow. . . . When I consulted more conservative or traditional sources—highly regarded sources—I found them unconvincing. And this, in particular, was telling: *they simply weren’t dealing with the questions that I faced as a pastor* (2014, 70-71).

Vines:

The bottom line is this: The Bible doesn’t directly address the issue of same-sex orientation—or the expression of that orientation. While its six references to same-sex behavior are negative, the concept of same-sex behavior in the Bible is sexual excess, not sexual orientation. What’s more, the main reason that non-affirming Christians believe the Bible’s statements should apply to all same-sex relationships—men and women’s anatomical complementarity—is not mentioned in any of the texts. . . . It makes sense that, if marriage is a reflection of Christ and the church, it should require some kind of difference between the partners. Christ and the church are not the same, after all. But neither are any two people the same. The Bible gives us no reason to think *gender* difference is the specific difference that’s necessary to illustrate Christ’s covenantal love for the church. . . . Differences in personality, passions, careers, goals, and needs are the differences that require each partner’s self-sacrifice, which reflects Christ’s sacrificial love for us. Those kinds of differences, when valued and sacrificed for, bring the Bible’s basis for marriage to life. Same-sex couples can and do live out that deepest sense of difference (2014, 122, 146-147).

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Section 7: Historical, Biblical, and Theological Foundations for Marriage

Introduction

The institution of marriage has been transformed over the centuries. Biblical and secular history reveal significant changes in who married, who decided who would marry (e.g., parents, monarchs, bishops, power brokers, male dominators, etc.), the basis of the marriage relationship (e.g., producing heirs, politics, labor force, wealth, property, romantic love, lust, power, etc.), and even the number and marriageable age of a man's wives. To contend that traditional marriage is defined as "one man and one woman" ignores thousands of years of history. We briefly review how marriage has changed over millennia and in particular in the last seventy-five years. We also examine theological issues particularly relevant to same-sex marriage in the church.

Secular History

During the Greek and Roman empires, marriage typically was an arranged contract. The woman had no say in the decision as the man worked out an arrangement with the female's father (recall Jacob negotiating for Rachel with his Uncle Laban in Genesis) as an avenue to pass property to offspring. The wife had no right to expect faithfulness from her new husband as mistresses were commonplace and homosexual dalliances (especially with young boys) were culturally accepted (see Coontz, 2006).

Several hundred years later, around the midpoint of the Byzantine Empire begun by Constantine, the Catholic Church exerted influence over marriage making it a sacred covenant. The church insisted on marriage being restricted to one man and one woman. By the 1200s, marriage had become a sacrament in the Catholic Church, pushing marriage toward a religious institution and not just a civil contract (Fiorenza & Galvin, 1991). But the reasons for men to marry continued to be determined by social factors: preservation of power and transfer of wealth as well as finding someone to help with the work of survival. Arranged marriages still predominated, with women having no say about the arrangement.

During the 1500s the focus of marriage began to change to raising and training the children in a family setting, and by the 1700s arranged marriages began to be replaced by independent adults making marriage decisions. Practicality, politics, and wealth management were gradually replaced in many cultures by mutual affection, or romantic love, as the reason to marry. By the 1800s this new idea of romantic love being the primal force behind marriage was firmly entrenched in Western society. This would lead to the U.S. women's rights movements as up until this time, women were discounted, disparaged, and dominated by men culturally and often privately.

The struggle for female equality and opportunity continues in the present day, at different stages in different cultures. But even with the advent of marriage based on individual choice and romantic love, until recently men still ruled and exercised complete control, legally and traditionally, over women within the marriage bond. The church reinforced this power status for men, especially within Christian subcultures where "male headship" was taught as God's

creation order. While male headship is still taught today, its practical implications are considerably different from just a few decades ago.

Race also played a role in who could marry in the United States. Interracial marriage was once forbidden by law and by most Christian churches until state laws, once strongly supported by many Christian churches, were declared unconstitutional. It was the state that forced the Church to reexamine its beliefs and theological stands regarding African Americans, slavery, and interracial marriage. Bible passages had to be interpreted differently. Through the Holy Spirit's guidance, culture influenced theology.

Since the 1940s, fewer and fewer Americans are choosing to marry. Many are living together without marriage and are having children outside of marriage. The marriage rate today is only 50% of what it was in 1940s, and the divorce rate has climbed to 40-50% for first marriages, around 60% for second marriages, and about 70% for third marriages (Banschick, 2011).

In this brief review, we can see that the institution of marriage in secular culture has changed dramatically over the last 2,000 years, and change continues over the last 75 years. Most Christians today would agree that many of these changes, though not all, were for the better. The legalization of gay marriage is just the latest in a long line of historical transformations for marriage and the family unit in secular culture. The question remains as to whether the evangelical Christian church will welcome married, gay Christians into full participation in the church or whether it will continue to hold to those biblical interpretations that result in discriminatory exclusion.

The Changing Biblical Landscape for Marriage

In the Old Testament, marriage was clearly not restricted to a single man and woman; polygamy flourished and has been interpreted in various ways by Christians over the centuries. Who can forget Solomon and his 700 wives plus 300 concubines? We also remember Jacob and his marriage to Leah and then Rachel along with fathering children by their handmaidens, Bilhah and Zilpah. The revered psalmist, King David, had at least eighteen wives and twenty concubines. One could add Abraham, Hosea, Moses, Saul, Manasseh, and the passionate Rehoboam. Some argue that this "multiplying" of wives by Solomon was in violation of God's Law (see Deuteronomy 17:14, 17), but the "adding" of wives to David and Abraham (and many others) seems to have been acceptable to God. Others view these polygamists as following their own urges while God allowed them to reap the pain and suffering that resulted from spousal competition and deception. However, others maintain that this view is taken from circumstantial inference and not from direct textual condemnation. Either way, God did not turn his back on these men. What seems clear from the Old Testament tradition is that, like the patriarchal cultures of Israel and the surrounding nations, wives were considered possessions of men, culturally and legally, and as property, wives reflected both the wealth and power of their husband owners.

In the New Testament, marriage begins to look different, particularly in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus puts far more restrictions on marriage while at the same time seems to minimize its

spiritual significance. Jesus endorsed marriage when he attended a wedding reception and performed a miracle of turning water into fine wine (John 2). Jesus also spoke of marriage and divorce (Matthew 19) referring back to the creation account and telling his audience that divorce for trivial reasons (as some practiced at the time, and tried to justify from the Law of Moses) was against God's will. Jesus even said that a man who divorces his wife for any reason other than a wife's unfaithfulness and then remarries commits adultery. (The Christian Reformed Church reinterpreted this divorce and remarriage prohibition passage in 1956, and in 1980 reinforced the new position, citing a "lack of scriptural evidence to support the thesis regarding continual adultery of remarried couples.")

Jesus also reduced somewhat the spiritual significance of marriage compared to the Old Testament, where marriage and procreation were seen as fundamental to perpetuating God's people from generation to generation. By contrast, when speaking about the kingdom of heaven, Jesus said those who follow him must be prepared to leave their spouse, or parents, or children (Luke 14:26). He speaks of marriage as belonging to this life, not the life to come (Luke 20:34, 35). St. Paul also diminished the significance of marriage and encouraged singleness, a lifestyle held in high esteem by monastics and by priests in the Catholic tradition. Paul spoke of marriage as a concession for those who might otherwise "burn with passion" (1 Cor. 7:9). He also warned Christians that those who marry "will have troubles, and I am trying to spare you those problems" (1 Cor. 7:28).

The History of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) and Marriage

The CRC's official position is that "[m]arriage is an institution created by God. It is a covenant relationship established by mutual vows between a man and a woman united by God. Permanent unity in marriage is possible in Christ and is demanded of Christ's disciples who are married" (CRC Position Statement). Until recently, most of the debate about marriage in the CRC has centered on biblical grounds for divorce and whether remarriage after divorce is adulterous. Synods debated this issue seven times from 1947-1980. The outcome after several decades of intermittent debate was the reversal of its 1908 position, which condemned those who remarried after "an unbiblical divorce." Although the words of Christ (Matt. 19:9) seemed to many Christians to clearly condemn remarriage after divorce (except if the spouse was unfaithful), others (eventually a majority of CRC members) felt these words of condemnation must be understood and interpreted in the larger cultural and biblical context. Thus for the last thirty-five years, the CRC has a revised interpretation of the Scripture verses that deal with divorce and remarriage.

The CRC has also indirectly studied women's role in marriage in its debate over the question of whether women may hold office in the church. Those who oppose women as office-holders in the church reference "the headship principle," which asserts that men are commissioned by God to rule over women within marriage (and, for many, within the church). Many evangelicals believe that beginning with Adam, God designated males to make decisions and provide leadership. This began with Adam naming the animals and then naming Eve as "woman" (Gen. 2:19-24). Man bears the primary responsibility to lead the marital partnership, and the woman is the God-appointed "helper." Many believed that this principle applies to roles in both marriage and the church, so for hundreds of years women have largely been excluded

from leadership and decision-making roles in the church, as this was believed to be the clear teaching of Scripture. The CRC debate on headship has occurred primarily in the context of whether women can be accepted into ecclesiastical office (deacon, elder, minister) since women would be in a position of leadership and control with equal rights and power as men.

Starting with Synod 1970, the issue of the role of women was studied, debated, voted on, deferred, and restudied repeatedly until 2008. More than twenty separate Synods voted on issues related to women in office over those thirty-eight years, reaching no clear consensus. The denomination finally “agreed to disagree,” allowing each of the forty-seven classes of the CRC to determine, based on how they interpret the scriptural passages related to this issue, if they would allow women in their classis to hold ecclesiastical office and be delegates to classis and synod. In spite of this attempt to appease both sides of the biblical interpretation debate regarding headship and the role of women in ecclesiastical office, a split occurred in the CRC with this issue being one of the central points of contention and conflict. The United Reformed Church was born out of this disagreement in 1996, and as of 2014, it has 112 churches with 23,000 members in the USA and Canada.

The CRC has now reversed its position on both divorce/remarriage and the role of women in the church. Neither change came about easily, and each required many years of debate and repeated votes taken. The pendulum swung significantly from retaining traditional views that had been held for hundreds of years in the church at large, and throughout the history of the CRC, to significant modifications of the traditional interpretation of the relevant biblical passages.

A similar process of change in interpretation of Scripture occurred on other issues in church history, such as the greater Christian church’s acceptance of slavery, contempt for contemporary Jews for the crucifixion of Jesus, approval of apartheid, and prohibition of interracial marriage (see Section 1 for a fuller treatment of these cases). These reinterpretations were influenced in part by changes in the larger culture, and a typical criticism against such reinterpretations involved questioning whether those pressing for change in the church were succumbing to cultural pressure and abandoning church doctrine firmly based on the infallible, inerrant Word of God.

Social psychologist David Myers has commented on the church’s reinterpretation of Scripture regarding marriage:

Across history, people of faith have likewise repeatedly changed their minds regarding marriage,

- from favoring arranged marriages to expecting romantic choice;
- from assuming polygamy to mandating monogamy;
- from viewing marriage as inferior to celibacy (though “better to marry than to be aflame with passion”) to seeing it as an equal calling;
- from assuming male headship to welcoming marital mutuality;
- from shunning interracial marriage to accepting it; and
- from disciplining divorced people in faith communities to embracing them.

In each case, our Christian ancestors had found proof texts to support their assumptions. (Myers, 2012, 10)

In 2013, Synod appointed a study committee to report in 2016 to provide pastoral guidance on same-sex marriage in light of a majority of states and provinces legalizing same-sex marriage and, as of the June 2015 Supreme Court decision, now the U.S. This synodical committee was instructed to focus on pastoral matters, and instructed *not* to examine the biblical grounds for the Synod 1973 report on homosexuality, which precludes the possibility of same-sex marriage.

Looking to the future, because of the changing modern cultural context, it seems likely that the CRC will have another decades-long debate, this time on the issue of same-sex marriage. Within recent years an increasing number of CRC members argue in favor of another historic change in denominational policy on marriage and hope for a day in the future that LGBT Christians will be able to marry in the CRC just as heterosexuals do. For this change to occur, Scripture must be interpreted in light of re-examining God's purposes for the creation of marriage, the cultural conditions in which biblical condemnations were made, and Christ's compassion for individuals.

Some of the Issues That Frame the Debate about (Same-Sex) Marriage

Theological Definitions of marriage

The formal definition of marriage has been debated repeatedly and fervently for many years in a variety of mainline and evangelical churches. The most significant change to the definition of marriage in a protestant church has been in the Presbyterian Church (USA), which very recently approved an amendment to their Book of Order allowing for same-sex marriage. Listed below are the positions on marriage of some of the churches in our country.

Roman Catholic Church: Marriage is the intimate union and equal partnership of a man and a woman. It comes to us from the hand of God, who created male and female in his image, so that they might become one body and might be fertile and multiply (US Conference of Catholic Bishops).

Christian Reformed Church: Marriage is an institution created by God. It is a covenant relationship established by mutual vows between a man and a woman united by God. Permanent unity in marriage is possible in Christ and is demanded of Christ's disciples who are married (CRCNA Position Statement, Marriage).

Presbyterian Church in America (PCA): From creation, God ordained the marriage covenant to be a bond between one man and one woman and that the divinely sanctioned standard for sexual activity is fidelity within a marriage between one man and one woman or chastity outside of such a marriage (L. Roy Taylor, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the PCA).

The Presbyterian Church (USA): As of March 17, 2015, after the 87th presbytery voted in favor of the amendment to the Book of Order, the definition of marriage has been officially changed

from “between a man and a woman” to “between two people, traditionally between a man and a woman” (The Layman Online, 2015). This will result in same-sex marriage ceremonies being conducted by some pastors of the PCUSA and full inclusion of LGBT Christians into all aspects of the church community, including ordained leadership and ministerial positions.

While much debate focuses on the definition of marriage, a deeper question lies with God’s purpose for the marriage bond. Historically, cultures have viewed marriage as a stabilizing institution in society. It secures wealth, facilitates procreation, and provides family structure that ensures the training of children as members of society. Catholic doctrine has held that the primary purpose of marriage is procreation, but Protestants have traditionally held a broader view of the purpose of marriage that includes the flourishing of each marriage partner.

The Creation Order, Genesis 1-2, and Marriage

Christian understandings of marriage draw important insights from Genesis 1-2. As church history shows, it is easy for Christians to “read into” these ancient texts modern concepts and modern controversies which were alien to the original ancient authors and audiences. For example, scientific categories and scientific ways of thinking are prevalent in modern society. If we ignore the cautions of our biblical scholars, it is easy for us to approach Genesis 1-2 with modern scientific categories in mind. When God blesses humanity to “Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (1:28), a modern mindset might be tempted to think of those as scientific classification categories into which every type of creature must be sorted. What, then, do we do with amphibians or insects, which do not fit neatly into one of those three categories? We instead should recognize that scientific classification was not a concern of the author or the text; instead, in this text we encounter a culturally idiomatic and poetic way of referring to *all* living creatures. Likewise, when the text says, “Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array” (2:1), this does not contradict the modern scientific discoveries that new stars, new glacial valleys and lakes, new islands, and new species of animals are continually emerging today through natural processes under God’s providential control.

The purpose of Genesis 1-2 is not to teach a scientific lesson about when each star or each island, or each creature on land or sea, was made. Rather, its purpose was to make a theological point about God’s governance over creation. The author, in seeking to reinforce faith in the Creator, would have spoken from within the common understanding of that time: the creation of the universe (i.e., the heavens and the earth) was completed to fulfill God’s purposes for it.

These inspired texts have important things to teach us today, but we must avoid interpreting them in ways they were never intended. As the CRCNA Synod 1972 Statement on Biblical Authority says,

All Scripture as Word of God is redemptive in nature. It is addressed to us as fallen men to redirect our lives in faith to God our Creator and Redeemer, and thus to restore us to our God-given place and task in creation. . . . Accordingly, the divine authority of Scripture can be faithfully understood only by listening

attentively to its redemptive message. In bowing to the authority of Scripture as the Word of God we must open our minds concretely to what God says, to whom he originally spoke, the historical-redemptive context in which he spoke time and again, the cultural conditions under which he spoke, and thus to discern what God is saying to us in the Scriptures today Although we must maintain that the biblical message is rooted in the historical reality of the events recorded in Scripture, we must also recognize that these historical narratives are not purely objective, factual accounts. They are not mere chronicles. Scripture interprets as it narrates. It is prophetic history with a redemptive focus and purpose. In its witness to events, it also proclaims the meaning of these events. Recognizing this leads us to a clearer understanding of what kind of book that Bible is. The historical setting and cultural context of biblical revelation are therefore important for a right understanding of biblical authority within the framework of an organic view of inspiration, and also interpreting Scripture in keeping with its own claim to full authority. We must therefore seek to discover how a given episode is woven into the total fabric of biblical revelation.

Contemporary theologians and scholars such as Walter Brueggemann, James Brownson, and Matthew Vines follow this hermeneutical approach as they examine concepts such as complementarity and fruitfulness in Genesis 1 and 2. They see these passages as formative to the entire flow of gospel meaning, and as such they need a careful interpretation of the purposes that lie within the words which make up these passages.

Brueggemann (2010) does not dismiss the concept of history from interpretations of these passages but sees history as shaped by deeper concerns than relating either how or when things came to be. Ultimately these Genesis passages are pointing toward a greater fulfillment that will be controlled by the Creator in the coming resurrection of Christ. (Brueggemann points several times to Paul's pivotal words of fulfillment in Ephesians 1:9-10). The purpose of the creation account is to present the call of the persistently faithful God to the world to exist in fellowship and in the good beauty which God himself created. Brueggemann writes, "The claim made is not a historical claim but a theological one about the character of God who is bound to his world and about the world which is bound to God." He continues, "The poem does not narrate 'how it happened' as though Israel were interested in the *method* of how the world became God's world. Such a way of treating the grand theme of creation is like reducing the marvel of any moving artistic experience to explorations in technique. Israel is concerned with *God's lordly intent*, not his *technique*." The theme of gracious commitment is seen as pivotal to the Genesis message:

The news is that God and God's creation are bound in a relation that is assured but at the same time is delicate and precarious. . . . The relationship is bound in a mystery of faithful commitment. Everything else depends on that commitment. This affirmation requires the abandonment of two false assumptions which are alive in the church. First the relation of creator and creation is often understood in terms of coercion and necessity because of the power of mechanistic models of reality and tyrannical notions of God. But the relations of creator and creation-creature in Gen.1:1-2:4 is not one of coercion. It is, rather, one of free gracious commitment and invitation. The linkage is one of full trust rather than of

requirement or obligation. Second, there is a common inclination to confine the matter of God's grace to individual guilt related issues of morality. But this text affirms graciousness on the part of God as his transforming disposition toward his whole world. Creation faith is the church's confession that all of life is characterized by graciousness. Well-being is the gift which forms the context for our life of obedience and thanksgiving. (Brueggemann, 2010, 27)

When it comes to the uniqueness of human creatures, commentators speak of the profound dialectic of closeness and distance, which are created by the Creator in bringing humans to life. God is linked in delight and gracious care to all of creation, yet separated from creation uniquely as Creator and Lord. Human creatures are one with the rest of creation and yet unique in being the only part of creation with whom God speaks directly. Humans bear the singularly differentiating mark of the "image of God," the meaning of which is notoriously problematic to isolate. Yet for modern commentators, this mark must be associated with the qualities of grace and fellowship in simultaneous closeness and uniqueness. With these themes in mind, the reference to humans being created "male and female" is not seen as one of scientific classification into which every individual must be sorted, but rather as a chief example of human awareness that we exist needing others who are like us and yet unique in vital and grace filled ways.

Matthew Vines' exploration of the *relational* aspect of the image of God is particularly helpful here. He points out that the author of Genesis seeks to show a clear differentiation of all humans from the rest of creation and does so by use of the image of God concept. However, as Vines notes, the biologic and reproductive differences and "complementarity" of human males and females do not fulfill this differentiation from the rest of creation, nor by themselves do they achieve this close intended kinship to the creator. It is the ability to live in, and with an awareness of, a deep need for relationship that particularly marks humans. "God's creation of each one of us reflects his triune relational nature. So, it shouldn't surprise us that the need for relationship is deeply imprinted in human beings. We see that need recognized as early as Genesis 2:18, when God declares 'It is not good for the man to be alone.' And while human relationship can take many forms—community, friends, family, romantic love—it's difficult to imagine human life without it" (Vines, 2014, 155).

The Synod 1973 report of the Committee to Study Homosexuality interpreted references to "male and female" in Genesis 1 and "man and woman" in Genesis 2 as prescriptive, in a more literalistic, biologic sense:

In the opening chapters of the Bible we have the account of God's creation of the world and of Man's place in that world. Man is made male and female, a physical differentiation according to Genesis 1 by which man and woman are able to multiply and propagate the human race. But turning to Genesis 2 we learn that the male female polarity is by no means only for the purpose of biological reproduction. The account stresses the role of sex differentiation for the purpose of fulfilling the individual man's fundamental need for companionship and personal wholeness. Woman is created as a complement to help man so that the two cleave to each other in love and form a unity in marriage. This is the created

order in which male and female polarity form an integral part of being human. In the light of the created order heterosexuality is the pattern of human existence. Homosexuality, therefore, must be seen as a disordered condition, in which the reproductive function of sex cannot be fulfilled and the companionship of sex cannot be properly achieved in the union in which a man cleaves to his wife. (CRCNA, 1973, 625-626)

In contrast, current commentators hear descriptions of a man's becoming "one flesh" with his wife as pointing, not to biologic obligations of supposed male-female complementarity, but to the essential nature of "kinship relations" (e.g., Brownson, 2014). Deep companionships not restricted to male-female are fully in line with this interpretation, which stresses a grace-filled relationship of closeness with a unique other. Vines is also helpful in approaching the romantic and sexual aspects of this passage.

But as humans our sexuality is a core part of who we are. It's part of what it means to be a relational person. Whether we ever pursue romantic relationships, our awareness of ourselves as sexual beings and our longing for intimacy profoundly influence how we relate to others.

Of course, the desire for sex isn't unique to humans. But our sexual drive does point us to what *is* unique about human sexuality: our potential to discipline and sanctify our sexual desires through a covenantal bond. What we could experience as more of an animalistic drive for self-gratification can instead be transformed into a powerful bonding agent in the context of marriage. Through the covenantal potential of our sexuality, we can reflect the image of our relational covenant-keeping God. (Vines, 2014, 155)

This reading of the creation account emphasizes God's love for and grace-filled commitment to all of creation. Instead of reading "male and female" in biological terms as complementary categories, it reads "male and female" as a common way of referring to all humans and pointing to the call of the creator for all humans to live in grace filled fellowship (or "kinship") in all relationships. With this reading of the text, with covenantal kinship relationships emphasized as central to our humanity, heterosexual marriage is seen as the most common expression of this kind of relationship, but not the only possible expression.

These affirming commentators acknowledge that the references in Genesis 2 to woman being made from man, and to their becoming one flesh, give substantive background for the importance of marriage and family formation. But they wish us to see that the core of these references is meant to emphasize mutuality and grace as the heart of human fellowship. They see attempts to use this passage to restrict grace-filled marriage relationships only to heterosexual couples as going beyond the intent of the passage. Of course the Genesis author would use man-woman language, as that would be the language with which his audience would most clearly identify. Such commentators call on us to see Genesis 2 first and foremost as a deepening vision for God's commitment to meaningful fellowship for the part of creation he made to purposefully live as a reflector of his own grace and fellowship. Nothing in this passage is then seen as an impediment to a marriage commitment between same-sex couples.

Many Christians today are distressed because they have been convinced that the only interpretation of Scripture that makes sense is that gay and lesbian sexual behavior is always wrong (sinful) because it goes against the pattern God made for human relations. There is a (usually unstated) fear that if some kinds of homosexual behavior are *not* wrong, then Scripture *as a totality* is false. But these inclusive commentators assure us that we are not throwing out Scripture if we say LGBT sexual behavior is not wrong in every context. With their approach to these passages, strongly affirming the inspiration and authority of Scripture, they argue that by allowing same-sex marriage, we will actually be honoring the true purposes of Scripture. We will be honoring God's purposes of grace and fellowship in love, which find their fulfillment and realization in and through God's Son.

Wendy VanderWal-Gritter (2014) offers a useful summary of two different approaches to interpretation of Genesis 1-2 and subsequent passages dealing with gay and lesbian same-sex behavior. Traditional perspectives, which she labels "Creation Order Priority," hold to (1) an emphasis on biologic complementarity reflected in the "God created them male and female" passage of the Genesis text; (2) the plainest interpretation and universal application of the relevant gender and same-sex behavior passages; (3) the fact that there are no passages which directly support same-sex relationships. Same-sex marriage affirming perspectives, which she labels "Kinship Priority," hold to (1) an emphasis on the relational aspect of the "it is not good for the man to be alone" passage of the Genesis text; (2) an interpretation which takes into account the historical-cultural factors of ancient views on gender and patriarchy; (3) a view of the passages referring to same-sex behavior as being primarily about idolatry, excess, and abusive power relationships. In regard to the Genesis passages, this summary highlights the differences between the relational understanding advocated by Brueggemann (2010), Brownson (2013), and Vines (2014) and the more biologic complementarity view advocated by Gagnon (2001) and the Synod 1973 report on homosexuality.

Gender Complementarity and Marriage

As alluded to in the above discussion of Genesis 1 and 2, one of the issues that frames the debate about marriage is complementarity. Dr. Amy Plantinga Pauw, a Reformed scholar at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, has said, "Appeals to creation in traditional marriage theologies typically yield two principles: complementarity and fruitfulness, and these two principles reinforce each other. Marriage is founded on the sexual complementarity of a man and a woman, and has as its highest purpose biological procreation" (Pauw 2013). Regarding complementarity, Pauw points out that some theologians have gone so far as to conclude that "only male and female together are in the image of God. Man without woman or woman without man are incomplete images of God." Even apart from this extreme view, many traditionalists believe that "God has given men and women not only complementary reproductive organs, but also strictly-defined complementary roles in family and society: God has ordained the fixity of these roles based on essential created differences between men and women" (Pauw, 2013).

This line of biblical interpretation often undergirds the headship principle, referred to earlier in this document, whereby "God gives men the authority to lead and make decisions both at home and in the church. God's created design for women is to submit to this male leadership

and to please God by accepting their subordinate role” (Pauw, 2013). But we all know of marriages that do not follow this prescribed role model; instead, spouses negotiate their respective roles based on their respective gifts, personality, and behavioral patterns brought into the marriage from each partner’s background experiences and family of origin. In some very healthy marriages, the woman takes on more of a leadership role than the husband. In other marriages, leadership roles are shared and fluctuate depending what area of decision-making is in the forefront at the time. Pauw says, “What if a Christian marriage is defined not by one spouse ruling over another, but by the peace of Christ ruling in both their hearts, as Paul says in Col. 3:15? What if there are many faithful ways for spouses to complement each other?” This view of complementarity does not dictate that a woman has one prescribed role and the husband another. When Pauw applies this view to gender issues, she states, “The more mutual, the more egalitarian, the more flexible one’s view of what it means for marriage partners to be complementary, the more room one has to embrace same-sex marriage” (Pauw, 2013).

Dr. James Brownson also addresses the Genesis complementarity issue at some length in his recent book, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality* (2013). He argues that the one-flesh bond is “essentially a lifelong *kinship* bond.” He sees “no reference to a physical or biological understanding of gender complementarity either in the Genesis account or in any of the other ‘one-flesh’ passages” (106). Brownson concludes, “there is reason to doubt that gender complementarity, construed in the sense of either biological differences, procreation, or patriarchy, represents an essential characteristic of one-flesh unions that would necessarily exclude same-sex unions” (106).

Brownson emphasizes the role of “bonding” in becoming one flesh. This kinship bonding is compared to God’s faithfulness to Israel and is, for Brownson, the essence of marriage. Even in unions where procreation cannot be realized (whether this be a heterosexual couple who are infertile or beyond child-bearing age or a same-sex monogamous, committed, Christian couple) this lifelong kinship bond is the blessing that can be attained. When the Bible condemns sexual promiscuity or sex born only in lust or unbridled passion (whether it is heterosexual or same-sex oriented), the condemnation is based on the lack of loving commitment on the part of the participants to become one flesh or establish a lifelong kinship bond.

Fruitfulness

The subject of fruitfulness or procreation within marriage is another of the central issues of debate. Traditionally, to be fruitful has meant to multiply biologically, and the Catholic Church has long held that bearing and raising children is the most important reason to marry. Recently some evangelicals have cited this reason to marry as critical, and since same-sex couples cannot fulfill this biblical “requirement” for the essence of marriage, then God would not approve of their union. Pauw (2013) summarizes these views: “Marriage, by definition for them, requires the sexual complementarity and generativity of a heterosexual union. Same-sex couples need not apply.” But, of course, this restrictive definition of acceptable marriage as a union that can procreate disregards couples who are childless due to infertility, disability, choice, or age of the partners. Being fruitful and multiplying must have a broader meaning than procreating. Pauw points to a quote from a childless female theologian, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, for enlightenment on the meaning of fruitfulness:

Increase in humanity. Multiply the likeness to God for which you have the potential. Multiply the fullness of humanity that is found in Christ. Fill the earth with the glory of God. Increase in creativity. Bring into being that which God can look upon and pronounce “good,” even “very good.”

Pauw concludes, “Here is a vision of fruitfulness that all marriages can aspire to. Indeed, it is a vision of fruitfulness that all Christians can aim for, regardless of their marital status.” Surely, this fruitfulness is a legitimate goal of both heterosexual and same-sex Christian marriages. Pauw states,

The complementarity of gifts and temperaments and interests of the partners in a healthy marriage continues to yield fruit for the duration of their lives together. Marriage provides a sounding board, a staging area, an anchor, that allows both people in it to venture out, to take risks, to reach out, to nurture the lives of others. Their love creates space for more love to flourish. As Oduyoye says, a fruitful relationship is a way of multiplying the fullness of humanity that is found in Christ. How silly to think that this multiplying is somehow the preserve of straight Christians. (Pauw, 2013)

Brownson also sees a broader purpose for marriage beyond procreation. Protestant churches have traditionally emphasized the unity and faithfulness of the love bond (as Christ loves his bride, the church) as essential to Christian marriage. Catholic teaching argues that homosexual marriages are opposed by the church because of the inability to procreate inherent in these same-sex relationships. But most Protestant believers “recognize sexual relations exercise a power and important role in bonding people to each other quite apart from their reproductive function, and that this unitive meaning of sexuality is not ‘self-indulgent’; rather, it is an entirely appropriate and God-given aspect of human sexuality. If this is true for heterosexual couples, it raises the question of whether it should also be true for same-sex couples” (Brownson, 2013, 121).

Celibacy

The Bible teaches that celibacy is a gift from God for those few who have been called and, presumably, equipped for its demands (Matt. 19:11-12). What psychologists tell us about the human need for intimacy reinforces our understanding of the purpose of marriage and the exceptional nature of a calling to celibacy. Psychologists note the universal human need for intimacy, touch, affirmation, affection, and a sense of belonging (see Section 9 on the impact of imposed same-sex celibacy). The need to belong and be loved is one of Abraham Maslow’s five basic human needs that form the basis of human motivation (see Kune, 2011). A sermon delivered by Nick Baas in 2015 contained this psychologically astute analysis of the human condition: “Ask yourself, ‘what are my deepest, darkest fears?’ When you boil your fears down to the root, to their essence, what remains? At the bottom of my fears I find the desire to be loved and to love. For what is life without community and meaning? You and I, we were made to love. We were made to love God, to love one another, to share in abundant life. And in our darkest

moments and fears, we wonder if anyone loves us, or if there is anyone for us to love” (Baas, 2015). In our heart of hearts we all know this is true.

Is it possible that God insists that all LGBT individuals live a life of celibacy? Is it possible that God calls every LGBT individual to forego satisfying the universal, deep human need for affection, affirmation, intimacy, and touch? Might LGBT persons long to be cherished in a committed relationship just as heterosexuals are? Research has found that the factors that influence relationship satisfaction, commitment and stability are remarkably similar for both same-sex couples and heterosexual couples. Like heterosexual couples, same-sex couples form deep emotional attachments and commitments. Same-sex and heterosexual couples alike face similar issues concerning intimacy, love, loyalty and stability, and they go through similar processes to address those issues (APA). These benefits help us understand why the Bible is clear in its message from Paul (1 Cor. 7) and Jesus (Matt. 19) that only some are called to live a life of celibacy. Brownson (2013) points out, “Jesus, in his commendation of those who have ‘made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven’ (Matt. 19:12), recognized that God calls some, but not all, to a single life” (146). Celibacy is a calling from God, and because each of us is responsible before God for our individual calling, LGBT Christians are rightfully skeptical when those who enjoy the benefits of marriage mandate life-long celibacy for LGBT individuals.

To impose celibacy on all LGBT individuals blocks their opportunity to forge a deep emotional attachment in a trusted and faithful relationship of sharing and bonded kinship. A review of suicide research from 1966 to 2005 has shown twice the rate of suicide attempts among lesbian, gay and bisexual people compared to heterosexuals. The risks of depression and anxiety disorders were at least one and a half times higher, as was alcohol and other substance abuse (King et al., 2008). A U.S. government study, titled Report of the Secretary’s Task Force on Youth Suicide (1989), found that LGBT youth are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than other young people. Another study found that gay, lesbian, or bisexual youths were 3.88 times more likely to report a suicide attempt than heterosexual youths (Garofalo et al., 1999). The Christian church is mandated to reflect God’s loving kindness. But the way that the Church and society as a whole has treated LGBT individuals is clearly a tree that has born bad fruit (Matt. 7:17-18; Matt. 12:33; Luke 6:43).

Marriage Definition

Some of God’s image bearers who are LGBT also wish to live in a committed, affirming, and bonded kinship relationship of the sort that heterosexuals treasure. They challenge the CRC with the following questions: So what is a biblically based view of marriage? Should the church now hold firm to the proposition that marriage is exclusively reserved for “one man and one woman” even though it was not such in the times of the Old and New Testament? Is this what is required of us by the passages in Genesis, Leviticus, Matthew, Mark, Romans, 1 Corinthians, and Ephesians? Or are there other acceptable interpretations of these passages that respect the authority of Scripture and are consistent with the central message of salvation through grace alone by faith alone? Can the CRC accept alternate interpretations that would allow the Christian church to joyfully enfold married, Christian gays and lesbians into the full life and all offices of the church? Can the definition of marriage within the CRC be enlarged to include any two people

who love each other and have made a legal, monogamous commitment to each other? Is the church ready to revise its understanding of Scripture as it has done historically with slavery, anti-Semitism, segregation, interracial marriage, divorce and adultery, and women's equality? Can fellow Christians disagree on the issue of same-sex marriage and still live in unity under the banner of devotion to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?

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Section 8: Social and Psychological Goods Typically Enabled by Marriage

The modern world's first legal gay marriage ceremony took place in the Netherlands on April 1, 2001, just after midnight. The four couples, one female and three male, were married in a televised ceremony officiated by the mayor of Amsterdam. That was the beginning of the legal recognition of marriage for same-sex oriented people. As this report was being written, the Supreme Court of the United States issued a ruling on June 26, 2015, holding that marriage equality is protected by the 14th Amendment's Equal Protection and Due Process clauses in the constitution, giving same-sex couples the right to marry across the country. All of the rights, privileges, and benefits previously extended exclusively to heterosexual couples must now be granted equally to gay and lesbian couples. In his opinion for the majority, Justice Kennedy wrote:

No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family. In forming a marital union, two people become something greater than once they were. As some of the petitioners in these cases demonstrate, marriage embodies a love that may endure even past death. It would misunderstand these men and women to say they disrespect the idea of marriage. Their plea is that they do respect it, respect it so deeply that they seek to find its fulfillment for themselves. Their hope is not to be condemned to live in loneliness, excluded from one of civilization's oldest institutions. They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right. The judgment of the Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit is reversed.
(*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015)

Kennedy's comments suggest why same-sex couples are so interested in getting married. Evan Wolfson, founder of the gay marriage advocacy group Freedom to Marry, points out, "Most couples marry for love and the desire to reinforce the personal commitment they have made to each other. Most also want the public statement of commitment and support that marriage offers. The intangible benefits that marriage offers many families include clarity, security, structure, dignity, spiritual significance, and an expectation of permanence, dedication, and stability. Like most non-gay couples, most same-sex couples share these aspirations and needs" (Wolfson, 2005).

Along with these social and psychological intangibles, marriage also brings many health and legal benefits. It is important to consider some of these benefits of marriage that are denied to gays and lesbians when they are refused entrance into the institution of marriage by Christians who accept the traditional condemning interpretation of biblical references to homosexual relationships. Getting married introduces a level of faith, trust, and stability into a relationship. There is a public acknowledgement of commitment and a sense of accountability that accompanies taking marriage vows that are reinforced by the state (and ideally by a faith community). Married partners feel more secure than those who merely live together. Rates of depression and suicide are lower for married persons than among singles (Kim & McKenry, 2002; Marks & Lambert, 1998; Simon, 2002). Married partners help each other in coping with the stresses of life. Spouses in healthy relationships affirm each other and help balance responses

to stressors. When one partner is more reactive to something, the other partner may be calmer, and this balance contributes to stability, happiness, and spiritual wellbeing. Single parents (which includes many gay and lesbian individuals) often feel terribly alone when dealing with the stresses associated with raising children. There is no one immediately available with whom to process problems and make decisions. A good marriage is a safe, sheltering place from the storm of life. How many times have you heard a long married spouse say, “My wife (husband) is my best friend whom I could not live without?” To deny same-sex attracted individuals the possibility of marriage is to prevent them from being cherished in the intimate ways that only marriage was created to provide.

Psychologists Baumeister and Leary (1995) have reviewed the research on the need to belong and find it to be universal among humans. They state that “human beings are fundamentally and pervasively motivated by a need to belong, that is, by a strong desire to form and maintain enduring interpersonal attachments.” They also find serious negative consequences of being deprived of intimate attachments: married individuals are healthier, less stressed, and live longer on average than single individuals. They found that attaining a strong sense of belonging also has physiological benefits by boosting immune systems. Sociologists Umberson and Karas Montez (2010) reviewed the impact of social relationships on health and found that, among many other effects, social isolation is a powerful state that has a strong negative impact on mortality: “Individuals with the lowest level of involvement in social relationships are more likely to die than those with greater involvement (House, Landis, & Umberson 1988). When the church prohibits gays and lesbians from marriage, it contributes to their isolation.

The importance of marriage and relationships with children may foster a greater sense of responsibility to stay healthy, thus promoting healthier lifestyles (Nock, 1998; Waite, 1995). Many studies establish that social support benefits mental and physical health (Cohen, 2004; Uchino, 2004). Other recent work shows that marital history affects health outcomes related to cardiovascular disease, chronic conditions, mobility limitations, and depressive symptoms, among others (Hughes & Waite, 2009; Zhang & Hayward, 2006). Marriage is important for the “flourishing of creaturely life” (Calvin, 1995).

The CRC, along with other protestant churches, holds that an important purpose of marriage is to “advance the kingdom of God and to enrich the lives of those entering this state” (CRCNA, 1912). The CRC Form for the Solemnization of Marriage suggests this sentence as part of the vow repeated by both parties: “I will serve you with tenderness and respect, and encourage you to develop God’s gifts in you” (CRCNA, 1979). Spouses dedicated to each other in mutual love and sacrifice can enjoy working together in God’s kingdom and affirming each other with kinship and companionship. Spouses can encourage each other in the faith and in developing their spiritual gifts. Spouses pray for each other, have devotions together, sing praises to God together in worship, and attend church functions together. Most do not like attending church services and programs alone. Singles often complain that church, which is most welcoming to couples and families, is the loneliest place they know. The spiritual benefits of marriage are no less real in same-sex marriage than they are in heterosexual marriage.

Beyond these psychological, physical health, and spiritual benefits, there are 1,138 benefits, rights, and protections available to married couples in federal law alone, according to a

U.S. General Accounting Office assessment (2004). Benefits only available to married couples include hospital visitation during an illness, the option of filing a joint tax return to reduce a tax burden, access to family health coverage, U.S. residency and family unification for partners from another country, and bereavement leave and inheritance rights if a partner dies. Married couples also have access to protections if the relationship ends, such as child custody, spousal or child support, and an equitable division of property. Married couples in the U.S. armed forces are offered health insurance and other benefits unavailable to domestic partners. The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and the U.S. Department of Labor recognize married couples for the purpose of granting tax, retirement, and health insurance benefits. The U.S. federal government does not grant equivalent benefits to gay couples in civil unions or domestic partnerships. An October 2, 2009, analysis by *The New York Times* estimated that same-sex couples denied marriage benefits incur an additional \$41,196 to \$467,562 in expenses over their lifetimes compared with married heterosexual couples. A January 2014 analysis published by the *Atlantic* concluded that unmarried women pay up to one million dollars more over their lifetimes than married women for healthcare, taxes, and other expenses (ProCon.org). See the end of this section for a more complete listing of some of these medical, tax, family, estate, consumer, and employment benefits. With the Supreme Court decision of June 2015, gay and lesbian married couples can now benefit from the federal rights and protections referred to above and cited below. Is it fair, compassionate, or evidence of Christian love when heterosexuals want to deny the numerous benefits of marriage to monogamous, same-sex couples who want to marry? Is this denial in accord with a theology of justice and compassion taught to us by Christ?

Heterosexual married couples know the value of a partner warmly welcoming him or her home with a hug, sincerely offering a listening ear to a sharing of a day full of challenges and stresses or even successes and joys, eagerly eating a thoughtfully prepared favorite meal together, entertaining good friends together in a fun social evening, expectantly attending a great concert or movie together, sympathetically helping a partner recover from illness, caringly ministering to a spouse when he or she is seriously ill and hospitalized, excitedly building a dream house together, or tenderly embracing each other in bed at the end of a long day. These are everyday, universal benefits of marriage that are often taken for granted but are priceless. Gay and lesbian individuals, created by God in His image with same-sex attraction, want to marry and delight in these simple interpersonal pleasures just as heterosexuals do. Do we honestly believe it is consistent with God's loving character, as we have come to know it through Scripture, that the One who created all of humankind would say to this one group of His image bearers who also love and seek to serve Him, "You must live alone. It is sin for you to live with a loving partner?" How we answer that question is of crucial importance.

It should also be noted that many of these personal benefits are matched by benefits to society and community function and well-being. The stability and nurture found in committed married couples offers a stabilizing and a nurturing atmosphere into a community as a whole. The ability of a community to rely upon partnered committed caregivers in times of stress and crisis forms the backbone of a community's ability to withstand crisis. Society's reliance upon partnered, committed caregivers to accurately locate and communicate with its members is significantly augmented by the existence of mutually responsible members of families who are in regular trusting contact with one another. The lessening of depression and suicidal tendencies is, of course, not just beneficial to the individuals involved, but also to the community of which they

are members. Societal clarification of who is, and who is not, available for relationship helps society withstand stress from within and from outside the community. While standards for such clarification may change with place and time, the existence of such standards is a formalized practice in nearly every culture. Society relies upon marriage commitment as a beneficial structure in many ways.

Marriage Rights and Benefits

As mentioned above, following is a list of some of the most important benefits of the 1,138 statutory provisions and rights in which marital status is a factor (see Nolo.com).

Tax Benefits

- Filing joint income tax returns with the IRS and state taxing authorities.
- Creating a “family partnership” under federal tax laws, which allows the division of a business income among family members.

Estate Planning Benefits

- Inheriting a share of a spouse’s estate in the absence of a will.
- Receiving exemptions from estate and gift taxes for property left to a spouse.
- Creating various life estate trusts, including marital deduction trusts.
- Obtaining priority if a conservator needs to be appointed for a spouse—that is, someone to make financial and/or medical decisions on a spouse’s behalf.

Government Benefits

- Receiving Social Security, Medicare, and disability benefits for spouses.
- Receiving veterans’ and military benefits for spouses, such as those for education, medical care, or special loans.
- Receiving public assistance benefits.

Employment Benefits

- Obtaining insurance benefits through a spouse’s employer.
- Taking family leave to care for a spouse during an illness.
- Receiving wages, workers’ compensation, and retirement plan benefits for a deceased spouse.
- Taking bereavement leave if a spouse or a spouse’s close relatives dies.

Medical Benefits

- Visiting a spouse in a hospital intensive care unit or during restricted visiting hours in other parts of a medical facility.
- Making medical decisions for a spouse if he or she becomes incapacitated and unable to express wishes for treatment.

Death Benefits

- Consenting to after-death examinations and procedures.
- Making burial or other final arrangements.

Family Benefits

- Filing for stepparent or joint adoption.
- Applying for joint foster care rights.
- Qualifying for domestic violence intervention
- Receiving equitable division of property in a divorce.
- Obtaining custodial rights to children after divorce

- Receiving spousal or child support, joint child custody, and visitation if you divorce.

Housing Benefits

- Living in neighborhoods zoned for “families only.”
- Qualifying for lending preferences (two spouses with a combined income and a legal reason to stay together are preferred by mortgage lenders).
- Automatically renewing leases signed by a spouse.

Consumer Benefits

- Receiving family rates for health, homeowner, auto, and other types of insurance.
- Receiving tuition discounts and permission to use school facilities.
- Receiving other consumer discounts and incentives offered to married couples or families.
- Claiming marital communications privileges (no forced disclosure of confidential communications in marriage).
- Receiving crime victims’ recovery benefits for spouses.
- Obtaining immigration and residency benefits for a noncitizen spouse.
- Maintaining visiting rights in jails, hospitals, and other places where visitors are restricted to immediate family.

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Section 9: Psychological Issues Involved in Considering Full Inclusion Versus Non-inclusion

Introduction

There are serious issues of scriptural interpretation that shape the position of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) toward Christians who are partners in committed, monogamous, same-sex relationships, and this study committee has given thorough attention to the relevant Bible passages in preceding sections of this report. In addition to that analysis of Scripture, there are also many psychological issues that must be considered as the CRC's position on homosexuality is reviewed. Although these issues are not directly theological in nature, they do bear directly on Christian ethics and the mission of the church as it is represented by each one of us as ambassadors of Christ in a broken world. Beyond studying the interpretation of the few directly relevant passages, we must remember that the central command of the Bible is to love God above all and our neighbor as ourselves. We must confess that we are all sinners saved by God's grace through Christ's atoning death on the cross. God's mercy is beyond our comprehension. In light of God's mercy, it can be more egregious to label a particular behavior as sin when it is not sin (and thereby to place a heavy burden of guilt and shame on some individuals) than to fail to label a questionable behavior as sin and to leave the judgment to God. We must not debate non-acceptance of LGBT Christians in committed relationships purely as an abstract theological matter without soberly considering the severe ramifications of that position on real individuals, God's image bearers, who did not choose their sexual orientation or gender identity.

This section of our report will review issues that deal with the role of emotion versus reason in attempting to understand the will of God, the role of choice in sexual orientation, whether change in sexual orientation is possible, psychological similarities between heterosexual and homosexual individuals, the forced dichotomy of sexual orientation and sexual practice, the dangerousness and unkindness of the imposition of celibacy, and the real life consequences of holding to a traditional biblical interpretation that condemns committed, Christian homosexual relationships.

Reason Is Not the Sole Basis for Moral Decision-Making

We must examine the role of emotion and empathy in the debate over the full inclusion into the church of LGBT Christians who are partners in covenantal, monogamous relationships (marriage). Is our only task as Christian seekers of the truth to use our intellect to wrestle with God's Word to find its true meaning? Does God lead us to truth exclusively through reason? Does the Holy Spirit guide only our mind? Does not the Spirit also guide our heart, our moral compass, our conscience, our sense of Good Samaritan-like compassion? Certainly we should not make moral decisions based solely on emotion; reason is critically important in seeking to understand the will of God. But we are surely to be Christian vessels of compassion, kindness, love and empathy when we consider how a loving God would have us to live (Colossians 3:12). As much as logic and intellect are uniquely human, so too is our ability to empathize and our mandate to love one another. There must be a healthy balance in what guides our ethical interpretations and deliberations. Any biblical interpretive conclusion must be congruent with God's justice *and* mercy. When rigorous intellectual and theological reasoning leads to a biblical

interpretation that lacks evidence of compassion so central to the nature of our heavenly Father (1 John 4:8), that interpretation should be seriously questioned.

When someone has been moved by compassion, love, or justice to accept a formerly condemned behavior, they are moved toward reviewing their intellectual position. Perhaps a son or daughter, a friend or relative, who confesses Christ as Savior and Lord comes out of the closet and acknowledges that he or she is gay or lesbian. Perhaps you hear of the painful struggle of a gay or lesbian person who strongly desires to be loved and affirmed by a partner but fears offending God. Perhaps you become aware of a suicide attempt by a valued LGBT Christian who felt rejected by God, the church, family, and friends. Any one of these incidents could trigger a sense of compassion, a desire to be supportive. But this sense of emotion can trigger conflict (just as that felt by the LGBT Christian) with the traditional understanding of Scripture. It can serve to urge a fresh examination of Scripture to try to reduce the inner tension between reason and affect. The heart is influencing the mind. The question becomes, can the Spirit use this compassionate caring to stimulate a renewed and more accurate intellectual understanding of God's will as it applies to Christian LGBT relationships? Or is it always true that our emotions merely manipulate our reason, leading us to reach incorrect intellectual positions that reduce inner conflict? Is it ever true that reason alone reigns supreme when examining the meaning of Scripture? Remember, reason is never completely free of influence by emotions and beliefs.

Scientists have acknowledged the important role emotion plays in reasoning (Damasio, 1994; Lowenstein & Lerner, 2003), and Christian social psychologist Dr. David Myers argues that our emotions often influence our reasoning on the issue of homosexuality (Myers & Scanzoni, 2006). Even when we claim to be completely objective in coming to what seems to be a purely intellectual position, further examination discovers the role that feelings played in coloring our interpretation of "the cold, hard facts." We are apt to use reason to justify our feelings, making us appear to be solidly rational people. Remember the old adage that we "see what we want to see and hear what we want to hear." Myers has postulated that some heterosexual Christian theologians (primarily males) experience emotional revulsion when they reflect on homosexual practice and that this strong emotional response influences some people in their intellectual interpretation of key Bible verses dealing with gay and lesbian sexual intercourse. When the emotional response to these acts is so negative, it seems only "natural" to interpret the Bible as being very clear in its condemnation of any and all same-sex behavior. From this perspective, it is difficult to consider an interpretation of God's Word that would affirm God's acceptance of a covenantal relationship between two Christians who were created gay or lesbian. To allow for God's acceptance would conflict with the interpreter's negative emotional response to same-sex acts. To be clear, not everyone who follows a traditional view of Scripture and same-sex marriage holds that view primarily out of discomfort with gay physical intimacy. It is clearly a factor, however, in how some Christians interpret Scripture and consider same-sex marriage a threat to social stability.

Dr. Leon Festinger (1962), a cognitive psychologist, developed the theory of cognitive dissonance, which holds that we do our best to reduce any conflict between our feelings and beliefs. If we are repulsed by a behavior, we develop a belief that the behavior is wrong, evil, and unacceptable. If we are attracted to or enjoy a behavior, we develop a belief that it is acceptable, good, right, and justified. So each Christian must consider whether, after a long period of

condemning relationships of LGBT Christians as sinful in the eyes of God, we resist change and refuse to see that behavior as acceptable because of the guilt and shame we will feel over our prior actions.

We may also resist changing our mind about God's acceptance of gay relationships because of fear that the new interpretation could be wrong. Wendy VanderWal-Gritter addresses this fear barrier in her book *Generous Spaciousness: Responding to Gay Christians in the Church*. She suggests we may fear God's judgment on us for not calling a sinner to repentance as we are commanded to do (Acts 20:21). Emotions can influence our moral decision-making on many different levels.

Many who have changed their minds about God's acceptance of lesbian and gay Christians in covenantal relationships have expressed guilt over their previous belief and actions. They have apologized publicly for how they treated Christian brothers and sisters, for how they preached, argued, or spoke against homosexual relationships. Evangelical Christian ethics professor Dr. David Gushee (2014) is one such example of a contrite, repentant scholar, who states in a public apology, "I will henceforth oppose any form of discrimination against you. I will seek to stand in solidarity with you who have suffered the lash of countless Christian rejections. ... I will view what got us here as one of those tragic situations in Church history in which well-intentioned Christians, just trying to follow Jesus—including myself, for a long time—misread sacred Scripture and caused great harm to oppressed people, in what turned out to be a violation of the character, teaching, and example of Jesus Christ." To avoid this uncomfortable emotion, it is easier not to entertain the notion that one could have been wrong in interpreting God's will: "I was right before, and I am right now! It was sin before and it is sin now! I am not going to be influenced by my heart, compassion, emotions or secular culture!" These same emotions, in fact, motivated many opponents of the historical reinterpretations on Scripture discussed in Section 1.

In summary, there is no avoiding the role of emotions in our moral reasoning. Emotions like love, compassion, and empathy can influence how we intellectually reason about our interpretation of Scripture. Likewise, emotions like revulsion, fear of disapproval, and guilt can influence how we intellectually reason about our interpretation of Scripture. It is most important that we become aware of and acknowledge our feelings as we approach the Bible in our attempt to comprehend the mind and heart of our loving and holy God. God would insist that we approach Scripture with heartfelt compassion for fellow image bearers. As David Gushee (2014) writes, "Often [traditionalists] scorn those who attempt to integrate real human suffering, and pastoral concern, into their response to the LGBT issue. They call it emotionalizing the issue. I think paying attention to neighbors bleeding by the side of the road is exactly what the love Jesus commanded looks like (Lk. 10:25-37)" (118).

Sexual Orientation Is Not Chosen

An individual's sexual orientation is differentiated from their biological sex (the anatomical, physiological, and genetic characteristics associated with being male or female), their gender identity (the psychological sense of being male or female), and their social gender role (the cultural norms that define feminine and masculine behavior). One's sexual orientation

defines the group of people in which one is likely to find the satisfying and fulfilling romantic relationships that are an essential component of personal identity for many people. No findings have emerged that permit scientists to conclude that sexual orientation is determined by any particular factor or factors. Many think that nature (including prenatal hormone exposure as well as genetics) and nurture both play complex roles in determining sexual orientation. Most people experience little or no sense of choice about their sexual orientation as it gradually evolves into awareness through childhood and adolescence (APA, 2008). The Synod 1973 report on homosexuality concludes that sexual orientation is not chosen, but the report also concludes that same-sex orientation is a result of sin and brokenness in the world after the Fall. Science today, however, points to sexual orientation—and biological sex, and gender identity—as existing on spectrums, with a large number of genetic and environmental factors contributing, arising naturally from the ordinary operation of genetic variation and other biological processes. The science related to this topic is also addressed in previous sections of this report.

Sexual Orientation Cannot Be Changed

Empirical evidence indicates that there are no interventions (e.g., prayer, laying on of hands, exorcism, Bible reading, negative reinforcement or punishment of same-sex arousal, joining the marines, and other such measures) that are consistently effective in changing an unwanted same-sex orientation to a desired heterosexual orientation (Stein, 1996). The American Psychological Association's (APA, 2009) summary of research in this area points out that sexual orientation (i.e., erotic attractions and sexual arousal oriented to one sex or the other, or both) is unlikely to change due to efforts designed for this purpose. (e.g., James, 1978; McConaghy, 1976; Tanner, 1974, 1975). Although sound data on the safety of sexual orientation change efforts are extremely limited, many individuals report that their distress and depression were exacerbated. Belief in the hope of sexual orientation change followed by the failure of the treatment was identified as a significant cause of distress and negative self-image (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Shidlo & Schroeder, 2002).

A myriad of professional scientific associations have taken public stands against the use of reparative or conversion therapies as they are seen to be ineffective and can be harmful. These associations include the

- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry,
- American Academy of Pediatrics,
- American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy,
- American College of Physicians,
- American Counseling Association,
- American Medical Association,
- American Psychiatric Association,
- American Psychoanalytic Association,
- American Psychological Association,
- American School Counselor Association,
- American School Health Association,
- National Association of Social Workers, and the
- Pan American Health Organization: Regional Office of the World Health Organization.

Position statements such as these are common:

Clinicians should be aware that there is no evidence that sexual orientation can be altered through therapy, and that attempts to do so may be harmful. There is no empirical evidence adult homosexuality can be prevented if gender nonconforming children are influenced to be more gender conforming. Indeed, there is no medically valid basis for attempting to prevent homosexuality, which is not an illness. On the contrary, such efforts may encourage family rejection and undermine self-esteem, connectedness and caring, important protective factors against suicidal ideation and attempts. Given that there is no evidence that efforts to alter sexual orientation are effective, beneficial or necessary, and the possibility that they carry the risk of significant harm, such interventions are contraindicated.” (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, *Practice Parameter on Gay, Lesbian, or Bisexual Orientation, Gender Nonconformity, and Gender Discordance in Children and Adolescents*)

Specifically, transformational ministries are fueled by stigmatization of lesbians and gay men, which in turn produces the social climate that pressures some people to seek change in sexual orientation. No data demonstrate that reparative or conversion therapies are effective, and in fact they may be harmful. (National Association of Social Workers, *Position Statement, “Reparative” and “Conversion” Therapies*)

As discussed in Section 2, it appears that females are more fluid in their sexual orientation than males. Some females can, at times, move between satisfactions with same-sex relationships and then male relationships, and then, in some cases, back to female relationship exclusivity. This bisexuality is more predominant in females but is also present with males to a lesser degree. Among scientists and psychologists, the concept of a binary male-female sexual orientation is being replaced with an understanding that all sexuality is on a continuum, a broad spectrum from strongly opposite sex, to bisexual, to strongly same-sex attraction. Similarly, this is true biologically: there is a greater understanding of biologically intersexed individuals which may be in conflict with anatomical sex. Also, it should be noted that it is common for some confusion or exploration of sexual orientation to occur in childhood and adolescence. The vast majority of such exploration and confusion will pass with increased maturity, but when this confusion is punished or coerced in a particular direction, the punishment and coercion can be harmful (see Section 2).

Psychological Similarities between LGBT and Heterosexual Persons

Scientific research demonstrates that sexual orientation and gender identity are influenced by genetic and prenatal hormonal factors in addition to some possible complex of environmental factors that differentiate LGBT from heterosexual persons (see Section 3). Clearly, all of these factors are out of an individual’s control and contribute to the feeling of “being born this way.” Despite these differences, several unifying psychological factors are shared by LGBT and heterosexual persons. The need to belong, to be affirmed, to be touched, and to be cherished by a

special partner is common to the human condition. We were created as social creatures after God's image: God is a trinitary unity in perfect harmony, and we seek to be in harmony with one another in our own limited way. We naturally long for relationships that increase our joy, build our self-esteem, and provide us with a "sheltering tree" (Coleridge, 2010) from the "troubles of the world." Gay and straight persons alike seek out and need this relational satisfaction. Christians have a relationship with Christ that is enduring, but that does not mean Christian heterosexual or homosexual persons do not need an intimate human relationship to cherish. Consider the fact that the great percentage of Christians do marry (some of them repeatedly) as they seek someone on a horizontal level with whom to share the joys and burdens of life along with their vertical relationship with Jesus.

When we enter heaven, marriage may not exist (Matt. 22:29-30); but before we are transformed, we long for human contact. Would God desire his children who are born gay to live a life of frustration, loneliness, and imposed celibacy when they have the same needs as heterosexuals who enjoy their intimate relationships? Is this relationship fulfillment an exclusive right of heterosexuals?

Distinguishing Between Sexual Orientation and Sexual Practice

Some distinctions are helpful conceptually but they may not be helpful when applied to real life circumstances. The distinction between sexual orientation and sexual practice is useful in some circumstances, especially when evaluating one's own motives and behaviors. But many Christian gays and lesbians report that it becomes harmful when it is a dichotomy imposed on them, which they themselves do not feel called by God to recognize, but which their fellow Christians tell them they must live out every day of their lives. As mentioned, Christian gays and lesbians have the same relational needs as heterosexuals. To partition their identity and personhood into a dichotomy that insists they not live out the identity which is as natural to them as opposite sex attraction is to heterosexuals is as destructive to them as it would be to heterosexual individuals in a similar situation. When we describe ourselves as Christian heterosexuals, we do not separate this identity in some way from our actual or potential sexual practice within the monogamous committed relationship we call marriage. Heterosexual orientation leads naturally to heterosexual behavior, which is not limited solely or even primarily to sexual intercourse. In like manner, homosexual orientation leads naturally to homosexual behavior—which also is not limited solely or even primarily to sexual intercourse.

Thus, to declare that same-sex desire is not sinful but that any possible homosexual practice during a person's life is sinful, as asserted in the Synod 1973 report on homosexuality, splits the individual into pieces that—for most individuals—do not and cannot exist separately while maintaining emotional health and personal integrity. These aspects of a person naturally coexist as an integrated whole and seek satisfaction together. Indeed, many individuals who have attempted to isolate their orientation from the rest of their lives (as modeled by the ex-gay movement and various "reparative therapies") found themselves expending great emotional energy in order to live in this dichotomy. As a result, these individuals have experienced spiritual and psychological harm, particularly if they have tried to maintain this situation for extended periods of time (ISPN, 2008). Such painful lives cannot be described as joyful and flourishing.

To be told in strong terms that God does not approve of you acting out a primary drive that comes naturally is devastating. Gay persons look at the predominantly heterosexual world that surrounds them and see most heterosexuals seeking out and enjoying the satisfaction, affirmation, and intimacy that accompany a physical relationship. Some heterosexuals choose to remain single and celibate, but they are free to change that status at any time if an opportunity for a committed relationship presents itself. Some heterosexuals experience seasons of celibacy within marriage, but they have had past and look forward to possible future sexual relations, and in the meantime, may enjoy other forms of intimacy with their spouse. For the gay or lesbian, this permanent restriction imposed from the outside—and to which they themselves do not feel led by God—leads to frustration, anger, and depression. Is it any wonder that many gays and lesbians leave the church, abandon their faith, and have a high suicide rate?

God does design that sexual practice be limited to committed, monogamous relationships, but God clearly provides a blessed outlet for this innate sexual drive with which we were created: marriage. This allows individuals to live emotionally and spiritually healthy, integrated lives in partnerships that increase the human potential to flourish. The apostle Paul recognized the intensity of our sexual drives when he admonished the early Christians that it was better to marry than to burn with lust. Could such sound advice be reserved for heterosexuals only?

The Impact of Imposed Same-Sex Celibacy

As discussed in Section 7, celibacy is a gift of the spirit of God given to some, but not all (1 Cor. 7:7). Paul cautions that to deny the need of some for sexual satisfaction is to invite sexual immorality. (It is important to keep in mind that celibacy as it is used in this context is not the same thing as the call to single persons to live chaste lives prior to a marriage commitment. A long-term commitment to celibacy in the context of the Christian tradition has long been associated with a spiritual and vocational calling, not simply a time of sexual abstinence.) For heterosexuals to impose a celibacy requirement on all gays and lesbians, when they do not experience it as a gift given by the spirit of God, is to impose on them the problems that Paul cautioned against. When individuals accept celibacy for themselves for a time as a spiritual calling, it is self-imposed. They can change their celibate status and pursue a relationship if they experience a change in that calling. Some persons of same-sex orientation may also receive a call to celibacy—see especially Wesley Hill’s writings (Hill, 2010; Hill, 2015)—but not all or even most gays or lesbians have been given the gift of celibacy. For the church to impose a celibacy requirement on homosexual Christians who have not been equipped by the Spirit with the gifts for life-long celibacy, and who yearn for the same intimacy that heterosexuals are encouraged to pursue, runs contrary to God’s desire for human flourishing and contrary to Paul’s advice to prevent sexual immorality.

Some argue that the church’s call to life-long celibacy should not be seen as an undue or unusual burden for same-sex attracted individuals because some heterosexual individuals are also forced by circumstances into extended periods of celibacy. For example, some heterosexual individuals long to find a spouse but over a lifetime of searching, never find a suitable partner. For many of these people there remains a remnant of hope and the possibility of a spouse entering their life. Indeed, some people marry for the first time very late in life as that partner is

finally found. Others are married but must live celibate for decades because of a spouse's health problems. These situations are indeed difficult for those involved and call for great pastoral care. And while there are some similarities between these cases and same-sex attracted individuals, it should be acknowledged that the situations are not exactly the same. Those differences are important and are sources of additional suffering for same-sex attracted individuals:

(1) For the heterosexual individual, the circumstances leading to the necessity of celibacy are external to the individual; for the homosexual individual, the circumstances leading to the necessity of celibacy (as demanded by the church's traditional teaching) are internal to the individual, that is, his or her innate same-sex attraction.

(2) For many celibate heterosexuals, it is reasonable to believe those external circumstances leading to the need for celibacy might eventually change; for the majority of homosexual persons, there is scientifically no significant chance of change in sexual orientation over their entire lives, and the church's imposed celibacy requirement is life-long.

(3) Perhaps most significantly, for homosexual Christians, the very condition that leads the church to call them to celibacy is one of powerful, deep-seated longings for love, touch, and affirmation, which are fundamental to their identity and to their lived experience as God's children. Moreover, they see around them opportunities for these longings to be satisfied in life-long partnerships of mutual love and service.

The difference between the heterosexual and homosexual "calls" to celibacy becomes more severe when we consider the gift of a God-given partner—or the longing for this gift. For the heterosexual whose celibacy is a burden, it is lifted in this circumstance or it is alleviated by the hope of being lifted (or, in the case of a married heterosexual, it was alleviated for a season before a partner's infirmity). For the homosexual, the minute they were born, celibacy was mandated for them until death, not because of circumstance but because of who they were born to be.

What is the psychological impact of church-imposed celibacy? Anger at the church is common as the universal need for affection, belonging, and intimacy is denied to the LGBT Christian. Many LGBT Christians flee the church to avoid its unrealistic constraints. A second result of forced celibacy is a strong wish to be like all the heterosexuals who are free to do what comes naturally to them—seek, find, court, and marry an intimate partner with whom all of life's challenges and joys can be shared. Many gay persons cry out to God to be changed and "be like everyone else." Another effect of imposed celibacy is secretly "seeking love in all the wrong places." We come back to Paul's warning about denying sexual pleasure as a universal constraint. As Paul warned, immorality is a high risk when celibacy is imposed. Additionally, single individuals lose the legal and tax benefits, plus the improved health benefits of being married. (These marriage benefits are cited in more detail in Section 8 of this report.) And what about the negative impact that accompanies being forcibly single in the church culture? Church programs, in particular, cater to couples and families; singles are often left out even if they are heterosexual and especially if they are homosexual. Again, we lament how single persons are often marginalized in church fellowship, and we call the church to better enfold and support those who are celibate. But this cannot be the church's only response to all LGBT members. Finally, all of

these negative effects culminate in pervasive loneliness, low self-esteem, depression, and increased frequency of suicide that accompany living alone and not having opportunity for intimate affirmation. A review of suicide research from 1966 to 2005 shows twice the rate of suicide attempts among lesbian, gay and bisexual people. The risks of depression and anxiety disorders were at least one and a half times higher, as was alcohol and other substance abuse (King et al., 2008).

The Consequences of a Traditional View of Condemning All Homosexual Practice as Sin

Debates within the church about how to interpret certain passages of Scripture are necessary, but the debates can become so intellectualized that they ignore the real impact interpretations hold on the lives of God's children. One of the ways that the Holy Spirit leads us into right interpretations is by looking at the real-life consequences of those interpretations.

What effect has the traditional interpretation of passages like Romans 1:26-32 had on gay and lesbian Christians created in God's image? Dr. Lewis Smedes, in his discussion of these verses, points out that Paul describes the "depraved" people in this passage as "filled with all injustice, wicked behavior, greed, and evil behavior. They are full of jealousy, murder, fighting, deception, and malice. They are gossips, they slander people, and they hate God. They are rude and proud, and they brag. They invent ways to be evil, and they are disobedient to their parents. They are without understanding, disloyal, without affection, and without mercy." But Smedes asks, is this how you would describe your Christ-confessing son or daughter, friend, colleague, nephew, or niece who happens to a gay or lesbian in a relationship? When the church labels all practicing homosexual persons as sinners in a camp with these God-hating, greedy, murdering, evildoers, it is a blow not easily set aside by anyone. No one would argue against such people being condemned, homosexual or not. But as Smedes emphasizes, these are not the homosexual people we know and love.

Both Jesus and Paul spoke often about the fruit of the Christian life. Good trees do not produce bad fruit, and bad trees do not produce good fruit (Luke. 6:43). Good trees bear good fruit, and bad trees bear bad fruit. Furthermore, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). So what is the fruit borne of the tree that denies acceptance to Christ-confessing homosexual individuals who live in covenantal relationships? Is there any evidence of the nine fruits of the Spirit that Paul proclaims? Has the church been kind, gentle, and good toward gay and lesbian Christians? What has the church wrought from its hard stance of calling all homosexual practice sin, even in the context of a monogamous, committed relationship (marriage)? The fruit of the position taken by the CRC against Christian gays and lesbians in relationships is tragically evident: intrapersonal conflict, depression, anger, frustration, broken families, broken marriages, false marriages, lost faith, substance abuse, and suicide. These results cannot be what God intends and desires for God's children.

When gay or lesbian Christians in a committed relationship are not welcome in the church, one of the results is that families are put at odds with the church. Some Christians say that a gay or lesbian Christian in a committed relationship is a sinner who must repent or is headed for hell. For those who hold such a position, the lack of repentance by homosexual

persons makes their relational behavior a salvation-denying issue. For people who have gay or lesbian Christians in their family, this position would force a choice between standing firm with God and the church or supporting one's child, sister, brother, friend, or other family member. No wonder Christians forced to choose between church and family experience devastating pain. This is tragic.

Families of a LGBT family member suffer from a church's judgment toward the gay or lesbian family member. Parents mourn over their gay children being condemned and ostracized by the church. But mom and dad often do not grieve in harmony with each other. Marital stress results from differing spousal patterns of grieving. Another consequence of the CRC's stand is that spouses often battle with each other over how to react to their gay child. One parent may stand firm with the church in condemning the married gay or lesbian child while the other parent may be more compassionate and less apt to chase a child away by reciting the church's harsh judgment. The parent who upholds the church's stand may declare the child is going to hell if he or she does not repent and become heterosexual or at least become celibate. Because this parent is espousing the church's teaching, he or she feels faithful to God's will by telling the son or daughter that perdition is the consequence of their life of sin. The other parent may try to preserve the relationship with the child and even, at times, accept the child's partner who cherishes the son or daughter. The siblings of the gay child face their own difficult decisions, whether to align themselves with the church, condemning their gay brother or sister, or to accept and encourage the sibling. Furthermore, if the parents are reacting differently from one another toward the LGBT child, the siblings are caught in a conflict over allegiance to one parent or the other. One sibling may align with the father while another sibling aligns with the mother causing serious dysfunction within the family unit. Thus, another consequence of the CRC's policies is the stress on the entire family and the marriage of the parents of a gay child of the church. Spouses are alienated from each other as they face unimaginably heart-wrenching decisions about how to react to their family members. This, too, is tragic.

And how must gay Christians respond to this hard stand? They are told by church policy that they must repent, leave their loving partners behind, and live lives of celibacy; but could the heterosexuals in the church swallow such a bitter pill imposed on them by other believers? As a result, many homosexual Christians walk away from the church and often away from their faith because they cannot stand the harsh judgment. They do not walk away emotionally unscathed. Self-esteem is compromised. Loneliness accompanies the loss of the community of faith that has rejected them. They pray over and over again with tears that God will deliver them from the homosexual orientation that is so natural to them. Depression is a frequent companion. Substance abuse is often a temptation to offset the pain of rejection from the church, family, and society in general. The higher suicide rate in the LGBT population is even higher among youth: LGBT youth are *four times* more likely to attempt suicide than other young people (CDC, 2011); LGBT youth who come from highly rejecting families are *8.4 times* more likely to have attempted suicide as LGBT peers who reported no or low levels of family rejection (Family Acceptance Project, 2009); substance abuse is *twice* as prevalent in LGBT youths compared with their peers (Marshal et al., 2009). Again, this is tragic.

Another consequence of condemnation is that some gay people try to cope with the church's harsh judgment by "escaping" into a heterosexual marriage. In their attempt to be

acceptable to God, the church, and society, they form an opposite-sex relationship that can be legitimately loving but often not passionate as the true attraction is for a same-sex partner. Secret fantasies and dreams about a same-sex partner are common. Most often this marriage is a disaster waiting to happen—a time bomb that can explode at any moment. Perhaps children enter the picture and then they also may become victims of the tragedy. Published accounts (see the stories and references in Section 10) are replete with sad narratives like these, which come from real CRC families: one man waited until he was seventy to leave his wife and children and live with a same-sex partner. The family was shattered. Another gay man was married, had children, and was in his sixties when he gave up the struggle against his natural inclination to be with a same-sex partner. Many such marriages break up when the children are still young. The wife is left with a heavy heart, low self-esteem, and severe responsibilities of parenting alone. This too is tragic.

Consider the circumstances of five gay and lesbian members of our wider CRC community:

- A middle-aged gay Christian schoolteacher was loved and respected for his competence in the classroom. He was married and had several children. He sat in the pew in a CRC church every Sunday praising the God he loved and a God whose love he desperately wanted. To the congregation all appeared to be just fine—he was a well dressed, respected professional, a good husband with good kids. But, of course, things were far from fine. The gentleman sat in a therapist’s office one appointment after another crying his heart out in shame, guilt, remorse, frustration, and envy of heterosexuals. He was sneaking off to be with other men for immoral rendezvous. (Recall Paul’s warning that denying sexual pleasure can result in immorality.) His same-sex orientation was driving him crazy. He longed to be changed into a heterosexual. He believed that being a heterosexual was the only way God and the church would accept him. He was keeping his pseudo-marriage together just for appearances and acceptance. He hated himself.
- A single woman, a saint of the CRC, was active in service to the Lord through her church and community all of her long life. But then one day when she was eighty years old, she broke down sobbing in her physician’s office where she went seeking relief from stress headaches. She confessed to her doctor that she was a lesbian and had active fantasies of encounters with women ever since puberty. She sought out relationships with women with whom she secretly desired intimacy. She was a broken and depressed woman who was convinced God would bar her from heaven and assign her to hell. This is a secret this saintly CRC woman kept in her heart for almost eighty years.
- A teenage CRC girl announced to her Christian high school classmates that she was lesbian. The school administration, the church, and the parents all expressed disapproval. The young Christian was cut off from virtually all support systems. Many months later the mother was in tears when she told an acquaintance that their life had been a struggle. She expressed appreciation for the prayers of those who cared for them and their daughter. She believed that God was with them (in spite of the church’s position of condemnation) and that they were not alone.
- A gay man who had grown up in the CRC stayed away from a large, family celebration because “he knows people will talk about him” if he attends with his loving partner. He

avoids church too because of the stigma the church attaches to his gay identity. He has fled the flock of God's children to feel safe.

- An older couple recently shared that their son is gay. It is a secret not talked about in the CRC. The husband and wife have very different views about and feelings for their son, and this has led to many unhappy encounters between them over the years. The husband stands firm with the church in condemning his son and the son's partner. They are not welcome in the father's home, and he disapproves of his wife's attending a Christian support group that believes the Bible does not condemn his Christ-confessing son and his partner. The mother is torn over where her allegiance should fall.

These are five heartbreaking stories of real CRC people with real lives, in real pain. No amount of intellectual theologizing can change that. Considering our denomination has 250,000 members and the rate of gay and lesbian sexual orientation is about three to seven percent of the population, we can multiply these five tragic stories conservatively by 2,000. Imagine the enormous level of pain and suffering endured by over 10,000 CRC members (not counting those who have left the church) who are personally affected by being created gay or lesbian or having a family member who is gay or lesbian. Every CRC church has similar people with similarly painful stories in the pews every Sunday. It is indeed tragic.

In light of these consequences of the CRC's behavior toward gay and lesbian Christians, again, this question must be confronted in all seriousness: could it be that these fruits are the unavoidable result of the CRC's position regardless of how loving we intended to be?

A Spiritually and Psychologically Healthy Alternative

It is important that we not end this review of the psychological considerations of the church's current position on homosexuality without briefly looking at the lives of gay and lesbian Christians who have not accepted the church's condemnation and who have, instead, entered into committed same-sex unions (or marriages, where that has been legal in recent years). We have seen evidence of the damage caused by condemnation and rejection; but what of those who refused to accept the church's position and who have embraced their homosexual orientation in the context of their Christian faith?

We need not search long (see Section 10 stories and references) to find increasing evidence of abundant, fruitful lives of gay and lesbian Christians bearing much good fruit. We find some gay and lesbian couples who have left the church but continue to practice their faith privately. We find some bearing witness to their faith and sexual orientation, remaining a presence in churches that do not accept them as full members. We find many more active and deeply involved in affirming churches outside the CRC denomination that have accepted them. We find many rearing adopted or foster children—often special needs children that others did not want to adopt. We find these couples giving mutual support, helping to care for aging “in-laws,” or supporting each other through job loss and illness.

The desire of same-sex couples not simply to live together, but to commit to marriage is not new. Long before there was any realistic expectation of legal recognition, same-sex couples were holding their own commitment ceremonies and “marrying” one another in the only ways

open to them. They were building emotionally healthy lives together in spite of intense opposition and with no formal social support structures to help sustain them. How do we account for this? It runs counter to the common assumption that all homosexual persons simply burn with lust and are obsessed with sex. As we meet the people and read their stories in our next section, consider with us whether this may be evidence that the Spirit of God is at work blessing the lives of lesbian and gay Christians who want to bear good fruit, evidencing their faith, and the unique ways that they bear the image of God? How do we account for such flourishing and depth of faith apart from the work of God's spirit in the lives of these lesbian and gay couples? Such evidence runs counter to what we would expect in the lives of unrepentant sinners. These are not the people Paul is describing in Romans 1.

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Section 10: Personal Stories of LGBT Christians

When *homosexuality* is written or talked about as an issue, it is easy to keep the topic at arm's length. It is easy to assume that one is remaining objective in looking at Scripture, at the related scholarship, at the current scientific and psychological data—and to develop and hold strong opinions about *the topic*. We must recognize, however, that *homosexuality* is not simply an abstract topic; nor is *bi-*, *trans-*, *inter-*, or any other *sexuality*. Ultimately, the conversation has to be about people—people who are, and always have been, right in the midst of the church, even though they have been largely invisible.

The church has long been a difficult place for LGBT persons to find a home. Condemnation and rejection have been the norm. LGBT young people learned early that if they wanted to remain in the church, they needed to hide their sexual identity. Many who failed to do so quickly found themselves shown to the exit—some quietly and “politely,” some with very public condemnation. Others left of their own volition feeling that neither God nor the CRC had any use for them. They felt they had no place in the Kingdom of God, at least not as the CRC understood it.

While many LGBT people left the church, often leaving the faith of their childhood behind them because of the treatment they received from fellow Christians, many others have stayed. Most who remained did so, living quietly below the radar, using their gifts where they could, often at great emotional and spiritual cost. In recent years, more and more of those who remained have recognized the need to “come out” at church, to identify themselves as LGBT, and to challenge the church to become a place of welcome for them, their partners (increasingly, their legally married same-sex spouses), and to become a place where they can use their gifts for the church's greater ministry.

This study committee believes it is important to include in this report the voices of a few LGBT individuals who grew up in the church, have embraced their sexual orientation, and who are willing to share brief stories about their journey. Neither the space of this report nor the time allotted to the committee for its work allows for a wide survey or representative sample of voices. The bibliography at the end of this report will offer the reader broad access to the lives and stories of a great many more LGBT people of faith. What we present here are a few stories of pain and persistent faith that challenge the church to do better, to do more to ensure that sexual minorities, be they lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersexed, or questioning, will have a spiritually and emotionally safe space in which to listen to God's call on their lives, to discern and use their gifts, and to live the abundant, fruitful lives to which God calls them.

We note that several contributors asked to remain anonymous. We respect that request and their need to protect themselves or their families. For that reason, we have decided to keep all of these personal stories anonymous. We lament the fact that many LGBT persons continue to feel this need for anonymity, and we believe that this is a strong indicator of the intense effort the church must make to create safe spaces.



Personal Story #1

I grew up in a traditional Christian Reformed family. We attended church twice every Sunday; watching television, riding bikes, swimming, and shopping on Sunday were strictly forbidden. Dad worked hard running a small business and Mom stayed home to raise the kids.

I was always drawn to church. I began singing in youth choir as a very young child, which eventually led to an advanced degree in music. I attended a Christian grade school, a Christian high school, and Calvin College. While at Calvin, I met fellow students who were gay, and when they described their feelings about same-sex attraction, my feelings began to make sense. As it turned out, I was gay, too.

I didn't really have a long, drawn out struggle with sexuality. My first relationship was during my sophomore year at Calvin and it made me very happy—that is, until the pressures of being gay in a CRC environment began to destroy our happiness. Close friends turned cold when they learned of our relationship. Opportunities at school seemed to evaporate, and our families were horrified.

When straight people we knew fell in love with each other, everyone rejoiced. Their partnership was celebrated and encouraged. When they decided to get married, everyone bought presents and came to the wedding. When we shared our joy, everyone recoiled. Our partnership was scorned and discouraged. Instead of small appliances, people bought us books about reparative therapy to help us “overcome” the happiness we enjoyed. Inevitably, the relationship failed. I was devastated but couldn't share my pain with anyone. It was a forbidden topic, which made the pain almost unbearable. I began changing my routes on campus to avoid seeing him walk around campus with his new girlfriend.

I graduated from Calvin College and went to graduate school at a large public university. It was like being born again! People didn't care that I was gay. Almost everyone I met thought of my CRC heritage as a quaint little cult-like cultural anomaly. My friends were baffled by my hesitation to find another life partner.

After graduate school, I returned to my hometown to work in the family business. Several decades of life as a second-class citizen followed. I was very talented and worked hard at everything I tried, but I was repeatedly denied access to success. I learned that “we don't think you have what it takes...” is code in the CRC for “you are gay and we don't want you in a position of power or leadership.”

I do not present as a gay man on first impression. My mannerisms are generally masculine, and my social skills make me indistinguishable from a straight man (so long as we don't talk about my personal family life). To function in professional circles, I learned how to avoid using gender specific terms when discussing my relationships. This was successful. I was able to achieve great things in my professional and business activities right up to the point where it was discovered that I was gay. It seemed to me that people responded more negatively to learning that someone they thought was straight was in fact gay than they did to someone who was more obviously gay. It was as though they felt betrayed. They had grown to like and respect

me, but once they learned of my sexual identity, they completely reoriented their approach to our relationship. On multiple occasions, successful professional and business relationships were interrupted once my status as a gay man was discovered. I was fired from multiple high ranking jobs in organizations owned or controlled by CRC members. Multiple times, years of hard work were demolished and my life was completely destroyed. Time and time again, my professional goals were stymied by prejudice.

With continued hard work, I've built a new and successful business, but to do so I've avoided engaging with CRC people. I have a business rule: never enter into any business relationship with a CRC person or organization if they will have any power over my eventual success. This rule is serving me well.

I am also now living in a happy relationship. My life partner also grew up in a CRC family, so there is much we have in common. When we decided to commit ourselves to each other, we wanted to find a church where we could worship together. The CRC was not an option. We will not join a church that believes our relationship is somehow "sinful." After visiting a handful of affirming churches, we joined an Episcopal Church. For the first time in my life, I feel comfortable and at peace while sitting in a church pew. We are not treated any differently than straight couples. We are just members, and our gay relationship is unremarkable. The feeling of liberation leads to overwhelming joy.

Our "gay lifestyle" fits every definition of a strong family. We both work and have productive careers. We pay taxes. We mow the lawn and take care of the house. We care for our aging parents and siblings who have special needs. We host family Christmas and Thanksgiving celebrations. We enjoy having dinners with friends (straight and gay). We attend church services on Sundays. We sing in the choir and donate time and money to church and other charities. Our relationship is affirming and has a positive impact on the other people we encounter.

I recently had a conversation with some CRC members who believe the church's current position is correct. They admit that our relationship is good and life affirming. They said that this is not a question of salvation. It is merely about hermeneutics. For them to change their view would mean changing how they understand Scripture on this particular issue. I was told that while they love me as a friend, they will not change their views. In other words, they love me but I'm not welcome to join them at a CRC communion table. According to them, and others in the CRC, no matter how happy and productive it is, our relationship should be terminated, and we should live our lives alone and separate from each other. In the name of consistent hermeneutics, the CRC would destroy everything that is good and life affirming. My response to this invitation is a simple: "No."



Personal Story #2

I'm sometimes asked why I remain in the CRC when my personal position on my sexual orientation is at odds with the denomination's position. I have certainly struggled with this question for many years. I came to accept my sexual orientation as a gay man more than twenty

years ago and began the endless process of coming out. Over the years, many gay and lesbian friends have encouraged me to “shake the dust off my sandals” and walk away. Many of them have done just that, and I’ve often been tempted to follow suit.

One Sunday morning during coffee hour many years ago, I overheard one elder telling another a joke about the “homos.” That callous and inappropriate humor nearly sent me out of the door for good. But where was I to go? The CRC was my home. I believed—and still do—that I had and have a right to be here. I believe that this is the place where God called me to be, and I’ve never felt that I had a call to go elsewhere. It’s been my hope and prayer that I would be a role model of faith for LGBT young people in the church who would recognize that keeping their faith and their position in the church was possible—if costly. And it’s been my hope and prayer that I would eventually be the proverbial “pebble in the shoe” that forced a few folk in my congregation to rethink the 1973 report, its poor psychology and dreadful theological conclusions. I’m still waiting and praying for that to happen. Perhaps your committee’s work will also be such a catalyst.



Personal Story #3

When I finally started to come to terms with the fact that I was gay during and after college, the church increasingly became a source of discomfort and an occasion for my own hypocrisy. I still attended regularly and was even involved in church leadership for a while, but more and more it became a place where I was careful to put on a false front of having it all together, while also knowing that if others knew the “real me,” they would likely reject me. This arrangement worked for a while, but it required a lot of energy and led to confusion and self-hatred. Rather than being a place where my soul was fed and nourished, church instead became a soul-depleting place. Homosexuality was rarely mentioned, and when it was, it was surrounded by shame, condemnation, and a sense of tragedy. The church offered no resources for trying to figure out how I might live as a gay person who was also a Christian. I knew no openly gay Christians and certainly no gay couples. Even though I had good friends in the church, I didn’t think I could confide in them, and I felt less comfortable around them and, simultaneously, more comfortable around my non-Christian friends.

As my twenties came to a close, it felt more and more like I was faced with a stark choice: try to remain a Christian, but one who was also lonely, depressed, consumed with self-hatred, and a hypocrite; or abandon my faith, come out of the closet, and seek to live a less lonely and more honest and integrated life. It felt like a no-win situation, since my faith was important to me and I felt strong ties to the church, but this same church and the version of Christianity it preached was also contributing to my pain and despair.

Fortunately, I eventually had a chance to move to a different city for a job, and I decided to make a clean start by leaving the Christian Reformed Church and instead attending a church that was openly welcoming of gays and lesbians, even though I was still in the closet. This was the first time I was able to see gay individuals and couples, some of whom had been together for decades, be open about their identity in a church setting without having to apologize or without

being ashamed. It was a revelation to me, and it gave me hope that there might be a way forward in my own life where I was not forced to choose between faith and being myself. At this time I also started seeing a psychologist, one who had grown up in our tradition but who no longer identified with it. With his help, I was able to become more honest with and accepting of myself, and together we mapped out a plan for coming out to my friends and family.

Coming out was difficult but also the best thing I've ever done. I was amazed at what having open and honest relationships with friends and family members was like, and for the first time I felt some of the tension between my identity and my faith begin to ease. I eventually started dating, and a few years later met my partner. We've been together for eight years now and are actively involved in a local welcoming congregation. I never dreamed that I could live a life in which I could be in a deeply committed, loving relationship, maintain an active faith and congregational life, and also be surrounded by family and friends who love me as I am rather than some projected version of myself.



Personal Story #4

I can't really remember how I first came to realize that being attracted to other guys was "wrong" and something I needed to change. I don't remember any sermons from the pulpit on the topic, but I felt a lot of guilt as a teenager and young adult. I convinced myself for a while that my attraction was a phase I would outgrow. I prayed for God to change me. In my twenties, I dated a woman for several years, hoping I would find myself attracted to her. She fell in love with me, but the most I ever felt for her was friendship. Eventually we broke off the relationship, leaving her in great pain and giving me great relief. I made one more half-hearted attempt to date another woman before I finally came to the realization that God was not going to change me, that I was not going to outgrow this "phase," and that my conversation with God needed to change.

At that point, I took a few words from Ezekiel out of context and began asking God, "Ok, if you're not going to change my attraction to men, 'how should I then live?'" In a very short amount of time, God began to answer that new prayer, while my previous prayers all seemed to have gone unheard. I soon discovered a community of gay and lesbian Christians in my city whose fellowship was instrumental in helping me integrate my faith and my sexuality. What a blessing! What a discovery that I'd been praying the wrong prayer for so many years! What a release from a heavy burden that had hindered my spiritual growth and my emotional health!

God did eventually change my sexual orientation—but not in the way I had hoped he would. Instead, he changed it from being a burden and a shame to being a gift. It is part of who God made me to be. I no longer believe it's an accident or a mistake. I believe it's an essential part of who I am and how I experience the world. It has given me a perspective on life and faith and service that I would not have as a straight man. It's given me much that I can contribute to the world, and especially to other Christians. So now I can pray that God will change the sexual orientation of others just like he changed mine: from shame and guilt to joyful gift.



Personal Story #5

I have lived all my life in my hometown and am a lifelong member of the CRC. I am pretty sure it would be safe to say that I am the only middle-aged, lesbian, lifelong member of my congregation. My mom was loving and nurturing. My father was conservative and traditional. I was expected to do well in (Christian) school, graduate from Calvin College, find a suitable (CRC) spouse, work hard, and raise a family. I set out to follow this path as best I could.

I found a CRC guy to date in high school. We dated all through college and got married the fall after we graduated. When I married, just short of my twenty-second birthday, I had no idea I was a lesbian. Marriage was okay for a couple of years, but my husband started lying about some small things, and increasingly I was less attracted to him as a husband and as a friend. At the same time, I was beginning to realize I was indeed a lesbian. I always had close female friends, but due to my upbringing, I never thought of them as sexual. I had a married friend at work who was the only person I could confide in at the time. In talking to her, I decided I couldn't stay in my marriage anymore. By the time I told my husband I wanted a divorce, our relationship had been dead for a couple of years, and he was seeing another woman. I still couldn't confide in anyone else that I was a lesbian, including him, but I knew I needed out of the marriage, and his cheating made it easy.

It was a huge emotional relief to be out of the marriage, but I had wasted almost an entire decade of my life pretending to be straight. Now I was twenty-six years old, on my own for the first time and the giant question was "what now?" All the expectations for my life were out the window. I had no idea what direction to take next. I needed the love of my family, so I didn't dare let them know who I really was. Also churning around in my brain was the experience of a dear friend of mine from school. He tried to live as a straight person, but after college, he couldn't keep living a lie. He came from a conservative evangelical family who immediately disowned him when he came out. He was deeply hurt by this and went out to find love where he could. Unfortunately he also took on the loathing of his family and didn't take care of himself. Almost immediately, and I am quite sure intentionally, he contracted HIV. By this time, drugs were available to manage HIV, but he refused to take them, and in record time he had full blown AIDS. His new "friends" abandoned him. When he was too sick to care for himself, he asked his folks if he could come home to die. They said he could return home on one condition: he had to admit the error of his ways and repent. He only repented so that he didn't have to die alone. His homecoming was the prodigal son's worse nightmare. At his funeral, his family and his church rejoiced that he had "repented" before his death, but in a very real sense, he still died alone and unaccepted.

Caught between not knowing where I should go in life and not being able to share my real self with my family and my friends, I started to drink heavily. A profound depression and loneliness set in. The only thing that kept me from putting the barrel of the gun, which I kept in my closet, in my mouth and pulling the trigger was the thought of the pain I would cause my mother, so most nights I would drink so much and be so inebriated I physically couldn't get to the closet. This went on for a couple of years. I dropped out of all activities at church as well. To my surprise, no one ever called to ask why.

In spite of the heavy drinking, I managed to keep working, but a couple of years after I realized I was a lesbian, I left my job at Calvin College to escape the oppression I felt going to work every day in a CRC environment. After quitting, the depression began to lift a bit and I was able to quit drinking, but I still lacked purpose in my life and longed for someone to love me for who I am. I prayed fervently that God would help me meet that person.

Eventually I came out to my mom, quite by accident. Her response was simply to say she loved me. Over the years she has come to be thoroughly supportive. Shortly after coming out to her, I talked to one of the pastors at my church. It was not a positive encounter. He was completely unprepared for the conversation, and his response to my news was to start telling me about the last time he had to deal with this type of “problem” in the congregation. Luckily he stopped shortly after he began. I hope it was because he realized this was not a proper pastoral response. We spent the rest of our time together talking about his kids and their work. He was completely unable even to have a discussion with me. After that, I realized the church was not going to embrace me, but I continued to go to worship with my mom. It was and continues to be very hard to feel part of a church community when the church’s official stance at best is “love the sinner, hate the sin.” This isn’t some sinful lifestyle I decided to engage in. It is an integral fiber intertwined in the fabric of who I am. There is no way to hate that aspect of my life without hating me as a person.

Somehow I was able to separate the church’s disdain from the still small whisper of Jesus saying to me that I am his child and he loves me. I have often repeated the first Q and A of the Heidelberg catechism to myself (memorized in Sunday Catechism class). “What is my only comfort in life and death? I am not my own, but belong body and soul, in life and death to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my heavenly Father.” My heavenly Father was faithful to me, his child, and even though there were many dark days, I still felt the love of God in my life. I am incredibly thankful for this, as I know way too many LGBT people who have thrown away their Christian beliefs in the face of rejection by church or family.

I started working on a new path for myself by attending meetings of a supportive group led by former CRC pastor, Rev. Jim Lucas, called GIFT, Gays in Faith Together. It was here, for the first time, I began to hear similar stories as heartbreaking as my own. Also for the first time, I met others who were enduring the same struggle. It felt so good to be with a group who felt as strongly about their faith as I did, and for the first time I didn’t feel so alone. Shortly thereafter, I had the wonderful good fortune of meeting a woman who quickly became a dear friend and then a partner. She was the person I had prayed so earnestly for in the previous few years. I finally felt I had purpose in my life. I was able to provide love and support to this wonderful woman, and she in turn found what she had searched for as well. We became soul mates.

The next year, I finally decided, no matter the fallout, to come out to my siblings. I had already come out to a couple of my friends. I sent my brothers and sister a letter because I didn’t think I could express my thoughts as well in person. My sister and one brother called to tell me they still loved me, but as expected, my more conservative brother and sister-in-law couldn’t accept me or my partner. For the past ten years, we have been excluded from family gatherings

at their house. I am grateful to the rest of my family for the support they have shown me. I am most grateful to my wonderful partner. Our love for each other grows deeper every day, and I thank the Lord every day we are together. I only began to really experience Shalom in my life after I came out to my family and was enfolded in the mutual love and respect of my partner. We were finally able to marry in 2015.

Some twenty long years have passed since my marriage ended. I am finally out to my immediate family, my friends, and to the pastor at my church. What a long, painful journey. If any parents are reading this, I would make a request of you. In your relationship with your children, make a space for them to tell you whatever they need to about themselves without fear of rejection. Find ways again and again to make clear your willingness to love and support your children regardless of what they need to tell you. In the video adaptation of the play *Seven Passages*, I found myself most envious of the people who told stories about how their parents made that safe space for them. One of the fathers said, “You will always be my son, and I will always be your father; and this will always be your home, and you will always be welcome.”

When Christians have tried to use the Bible as a guidebook to astronomy, racial policy, or human sexuality, a sea of pain, bloodshed, and isolation from the church has been the result. Over the last three centuries, we have worked out issues about how the earth moves in relation to the sun, slavery, inter-racial marriage, divorce, and women in office in spite of “what the Bible says.” Now it is time to examine more carefully, and in a loving way, how to include God’s LGBT children fully into the church and how to support them in loving, monogamous relationships. This is not a mundane discussion of hermeneutics either. People are in terrible pain caused by their separation from the church and from their God.

You have read my story including the much more tragic story of my friend who died of AIDS. Ours are not isolated stories. I have met countless others who are wondering what to do with all this pain in their lives. Often they long for a church home, but the church they grew up in has rejected them.

I do not think everyone in the CRC needs to share my viewpoint exactly, but this denomination needs to do a much better job welcoming all of God’s children to full inclusion into the life of the church. Not one person of any age should ever sit in the pew of a Christian Reformed Church and feel the people of the church and denomination rejecting him or her for how God created them.



Personal Story #6

The Exodus network was a national umbrella organization for a diverse group of local ministries that loosely held the belief that people could change their orientation through various methods (including reparative therapy) and the power of Jesus Christ. Much debate centered on the meaning of change, how long it would last, and what methods were most successful. In telling my story, my hope is to help people understand my experience of Exodus in general. It is not meant to slight others or their theological beliefs.

When I first came out as gay in a Christian setting, it was to an Exodus International ministry leader. Although we have continued to remain friends over the years (and I greatly appreciate the help he has been to my journey), I chose not to follow the ex-gay reparative therapy path for myself. I did a great deal of research before I made that decision, and in doing my research, I began to notice two things about many on the ex-gay journey. I noticed that some of these people—people I knew personally—were leaving the church and even their Christian faith in response to the hypocrisy they saw in the Exodus movement. They had encountered others who claimed to have changed their orientation when, in fact, it was clear that they had not changed at all.

Even though I did not pursue change therapy personally, I did continue to investigate reparative methods over a period of years, looking especially to see what I might be convinced of. Although I never found the notion of changing one's orientation to be particularly offensive, I don't think it's at all helpful to the conversation. Indeed, what I found very troublesome was the profoundly negative effect change therapy had on the people I was meeting. I saw problems arise in families as a result of false understandings of the causality of sexuality. I saw families alienate young people at the most vulnerable times in their lives—even in their attempts to express disapproval “with love.” I saw the image of the straight Christian elevated and nearly idolized. I saw the idea of heterosexual marriage promoted as “ultimate healing.” In the end, I learned that people in this movement were motivated by things other than Christ and his love. It was not so easy to see on the surface, but it became much clearer as I got to know people.

I specifically remember one conversation with a guy that was “delivered from homosexuality in 1982.” I was really intrigued by his story and wanted to discover what this deliverance looked like. In the end, it looked like a man with persistent and enduring attraction to men, who had made a commitment to abstain from sexual interaction. This was not at all what I would consider healing, change, or deliverance. It left me, as a person in my early twenties, very confused about what was going on and what I should do about myself. As I investigated further, I found that “change” and “deliverance” were not honest representations of reality. Ultimately, many other men also told me that they still experienced persistent attraction to men but decided not to act on that attraction. They might have called this “change,” or “healing”—but I still saw someone who is gay or bisexual.

I understand the delicate nature of fighting fleshly desire and the importance of taking up Christ's call for your life. But what I saw looked very, very different. It looked sad, draining, and full of despair and death instead of life. I decided that I did not want to erode my faith and create obstacles and difficulty in my relationships. Even as I steered clear of change therapy, however, I continued to journey with people that were pursuing change. I saw much negativity unfold in their lives. Bitterness and resentment grew toward God and toward the church. This bitterness was the source of their loss of faith, and with that loss, their bitterness extended even toward the people they were attracted to and toward the larger LGBT community as a whole.

There is no test to determine an individual's sexual orientation, and it is very difficult to tell someone what orientation they are—or should be. For a long time, I felt very conflicted over my experience with all this. I realized that we speak different languages with regard to

sexuality and orientation, with regard to the directedness of attractions versus behavior. Eventually, I began to talk with people about being honest and authentic in what they were experiencing. I have tried to help them understand what that means and what they can do to help themselves understand these things. It sounds complicated, but it really isn't—it's just being honest.

As I continue my journey, I find it less important that I have the right theological perspective and more important that I deepen my relationship with God and work to understand myself and how I make meaning of the things in my life with respect to sexuality. I did not find that this philosophy was encouraged in the Exodus movement, and I found much discouragement in pursuing these things within that context. Thankfully, Exodus has closed its doors, and many prominent leaders have arrived at conclusions similar to my own. Today, I am grateful that I did not pursue change therapy and create more problems for myself. I feel grateful that God has continued to walk with me on my faith journey.



Personal Story #7

At five years old I knew two things with a Kindergarten level of certainty—I wanted to be a pastor when I grew up and I knew that something about my gender seemed off. Though I did not have words for it at the time, I can look back now and say that I knew I was transgender. As I grew up with these two trains of thought in my head, a third certainty came from the conservative Christianity I was being raised in: the certainty that I had to choose between the two desires. God surely did not want me to be transgender, so if I were going to be a pastor, I would have to give up on embracing or sharing any of my feelings about my gender.

So that is what I did. I prayed for it to go away, and headed down a path towards ministry. I excelled in Bible classes at my Christian school. I helped out at church. But deep down I was struggling. I became very jaded about Christian belief. But I could not let that feeling show either. I joined my fellow students in believing about the dangers of the gay agenda. I could not let a crack show in my facade. I had to pretend to be the perfect Christian.

I did become less jaded as I encountered denominations different from my Pentecostal and Baptist upbringing. I ended up joining the Christian Reformed Church, because it was a denomination that seemed to care more about the history of Christianity, and it had a well-developed theology for me to dive into and become passionate about. I suddenly had pastors taking me under their wing, and trying to mentor me towards becoming a Pastor myself. Under their encouragement I applied for admission to Kuyper College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. When I was accepted, I also received a scholarship that would cover tuition, as long as I planned to go to Calvin Seminary and hopefully become a Christian Reformed Church Pastor. Since that was my plan at the time, I ran with it and accepted the scholarship.

Repression for the sake of a divine calling seemed to make sense. But being on my own at college, I eventually let a few people know about the real me. I let them into the truth that despite 18 years of appearing to be male, I had a female gender identity. To my shock, they

stayed my friends, and some even encouraged me to explore and understand this part of me. Yet what did I do instead? I made a last ditch effort for repression by joining the Catholic Church. Surely the rich devotional life and rigorous discipline of Catholicism would stop me from truly coming out.

Strangely enough, that did not work. Instead, by the end of my sophomore year of college, I began to truly come out: to a therapist, to my family, to my significant other, to the college community. Here I was, a transgender Catholic at a college steeped in the conservative Reformed tradition of Christianity. What could possibly go wrong? I knew I still wanted to pursue ministry, but I also knew I had to come out and start to figure out what it meant for me to be authentic.

So I began what, in retrospect, is perhaps my most important and formative experience: coming out as a transgender woman at both Kuyper College and Calvin Theological Seminary. This was a process that started in 2008, and really in many ways still continues on today. Even though I was coming out, and embracing my truth, I found myself more confused. What did it mean for me to be transgender? And what sort of ministry was God calling me to, exactly? I struggled with both of these questions regularly in my life. Once I was in seminary, my wife and I left the Catholic Church we attended to join a Lutheran church, where I could more openly work out these issues in my life. While at Calvin Seminary, I pursued a more generic Masters in Bible and Theology instead of seeking ordination. And at the same time I refused to let myself push boundaries in terms of fully expressing my gender. I could be open about it, but I did not want to scare people away, or get myself in trouble. I was decisively not doing anything.

Towards the end of my time in seminary I began to once again feel that God was specifically calling me towards ordained ministry, but came up against some issues in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I was also worried that I had not truly figured out my own identity either, so I let the idea go to the back burner. However, I knew God was calling me to church ministry, and so I began applying all over the country at any Church that was open to a transgender staff member. This process lasted for years. In the meanwhile I worked in retail, bought a house, and welcomed my son into our family.

By the time 2014 rolled around, I promised myself that it would be a year where I worked out those two truths in my life- that I was called to be a Pastor, and that I am a transgender woman. I finally began to confront my own gender dysphoria, and to begin the steps to transition to living authentically as female. At the same time I also began looking at seminaries, and at the possibility of getting ordained. I had connections in the United Church of Christ, so I began to consider pursuing ordination within that denomination. A Congregational Church where I had helped recently in their vote to become open and affirming, had a position open for a Youth Director. I took that position, and finally truly came out of the closet and began living authentically. So 2015 has meant a ministry position, and finally embracing the truth of my identity as female. I am now also pursuing an MDiv at Chicago Theological Seminary with hopes of becoming a Pastor in the UCC.

It has been a difficult journey to find a path that works well for living my truth while also living my faith, but I believe I have finally gotten there. I have no doubt that God loves me as I am, and that God has called me to help others and to pursue ministry.



Personal Story #8

I was baptized in a Christian Reformed Church when my father was a student at what was then Reformed Bible Institute. When I was three, he began work as a lay missionary and he then groomed me to become a missionary. On the train traveling to our new home, I passed out gospel tracts. I witnessed to my playmates. At twelve, I began teaching Sunday school. At thirteen, I made profession of faith, an unusually young age for such a commitment at that time. At sixteen I taught religious instruction in a large school, and I presented gospel messages in the jail and rescue mission in our city. I loved my church, although I was also aware, as teenagers so often are, of some hypocrisy, of things I believed needed changing in the CRC.

A watershed event also occurred when I was sixteen. We were driving home from an afternoon church service when my mother vehemently pronounced, regarding two women who worked at the mission, “They’re living in sin. They should see a doctor.” Because of the terror I felt, I failed at the time to see the humor in the juxtaposition of those two sentences at the time. The year before I had been involved with my first lesbian girlfriend, but I had been attracted to other girls as long as I could remember. I began, on some level, to leave the CRC in the moment of my mother’s verdict, although the actual leaving would take nine more years of deep and prayerful struggle and two attempts to kill myself.

In 1973 I fell in love with a female Hope graduate who was living at the mission. I loved and was loved. That year, Acts of Synod of 1973 came out. Peppered with words about “disorder,” “behavior,” and “sin,” the synodical report made it abundantly clear that I would have to choose between a committed, loving, lesbian relationship and continuing in the CRC. I made the choice, and it seemed as though everything spiritual and religious poured out of me. At the time I didn’t feel I had lost anything but that I had gained my freedom. The song “Out of My Bondage” was turned upside down, as was so much of my life.

I did feel loss when it came to my family because spirituality was how we did intimacy, and I could no longer participate. Largely because of them, but also because my spiritual and religious training runs so deep, I continued to read Christian writers and theologians. I wanted to make sense of my earlier life; I wanted to reconcile what had been the core of my existence with who I really was.

After seven years, I once again claimed the spiritual in me. I learned from other spiritual traditions, among them Judaism and Buddhism. Periodically I tried out a church, but the longest I managed to stay was eight weeks. Many of my spiritual beliefs had changed, not just my beliefs about my sexuality. A twelve-step program gave God back to me, and I was grateful. Around that time, I changed my name—not to hide, but because I felt like I was a different person. Gradually, I came to recognize my loss of spiritual community as the greatest loss of my life. Forty years after my mother spoke those words, I decided to conduct a deliberate experiment. I wanted to know if I could belong to a Christian community just as I was—a lesbian who wanted to do spiritual justice for spiritual reasons. I wanted to know if I could be part of a community if

I were honest about doubting much of what I'd been taught. Could I be part of such a communion if I could only say that I was committed to following Jesus' teachings and way of life to the best of my ability?

Over a year ago, I became a member of a Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) in the city where I live. It is an open, affirming church that since 2011 has allowed ordained ministers to be in committed same-sex relationships. The church is actively pledged to diversity and social justice. Most important, it is a genuinely warm communion of saints, saints with doubts, saints with all the traits of being human. It is a church that has a place for me, as the CRC did not. This church is my spiritual home. The CRC did not excommunicate me. It did not order me to leave, as it did the two women who indirectly started my own leave-taking. But it was clear that if I would fully live as the person God made me to be, there was no place for me in the church that had once nurtured me. There is a tie that still binds me to the CRC; it is sometimes, but not always, a tie of love. The CRC has changed a great deal since 1973. It is my hope that it will become a fully inclusive church.

I believe that inclusiveness, more than anything else, set Jesus and his amazing ministry apart from what had gone before. Inclusiveness caused people to drop everything they were doing and follow him. It still does.



Personal Story #9

A lifetime spent in the CRC was not unhappy. The church was a place where many warm and supportive people dwelled, as long as one fit the category of straight and married. Lots of fun, parties, laughs. Elders actually visit families; that is good. Church property is well-maintained. The historical riches of traditional hymnody and classical worship music are cherished, at least in the church I attended. All of this is good. But a growing sense of my bisexuality gradually increased my angst, especially as the homophobic rulings of the denomination seemed impervious to change. Nothing was said to me that was particularly hurtful, but I hadn't confided in anyone either.

At the time of my departure, I did speak privately with a minister, but I did not come out to him as a bisexual person. One develops a sixth sense about people's attitudes; one is wary unless there is a positive sign of inclusive thinking on sexuality. It is like "walking on eggs," which any LGBT person experiences—often on a daily basis. The minister was a traditional man in a traditional church, hence, no candor from me.

Upon leaving I did feel some pangs of regret—leaving a lot of nice folks—but I joined an inclusive church and soon became involved in my new life. By that time I had a same-sex partner who has brought much happiness to me. I do not think that anything could now cause me to return to the CRC, although obviously I would welcome the denomination becoming an open and affirming church. Maybe such a shift will come eventually, in a generation, as young people increasingly cast off the old restrictions and grant freedom to marry the person you love!

Leaving the CRC has had minimal impact on my extended family, some who have given inclusive signals and some who are harder to read. But those “clobber verses” in the Bible still loom as formidable barriers to inclusion for many church folk. Many of these believers cling to the stance that one “chooses” sexual orientation—and therefore can be called to account for this “sin.” But if one is simply born with a certain orientation, the person cannot be blamed; it’s like being left-handed or colorblind. It is simply how one was created. I do think that, if by some miracle, the CRC would become open and welcoming to LGBT people, with no more hiding needed, young people who struggle with their sexual orientation would tend to stay.



Personal Story #10

As I came to terms with myself as a gay man and started to accept that part of myself, I experienced a feeling of distance from the CRC—both my local congregation and the denomination as a whole. What caused me to leave the CRC was a gradual recognition that I needed to be part of a different Christian faith community for my spiritual and psychological health.

I came out to our senior pastor in the mid-1990s. He was surprisingly accepting in our personal conversation. I had never heard him say anything positive about a gay person in public or from the pulpit prior to that. I wrote an anonymous article for our church newsletter describing how it felt to grow up gay in that community. He was very supportive in publishing my very candid letter. I was already planning to leave at the time of writing the letter and, in fact, I left within the year. I heard from friends in that congregation that “the word was out” as to who had written the letter. I was fine with that, but what I did find hurtful was that no one ever reached out to me after having spent thirty years of life in that church. The only feedback I ever heard was that some felt it was “inappropriate” to include a letter about a gay person in the church newsletter.

After leaving the CRC, I needed a faith community that would and could embrace all of me, including my sexual orientation. I needed to know I was accepted and affirmed as I was. I needed a community that also believed people cannot change their sexual orientation. I had attempted so-called “conversion” therapy for six months, and I now firmly believe that it is not only impossible, but it is also very dangerous to the person—both spiritually and psychologically. I needed to be a part of a community where I could focus on my relationship with God and the rest of the community without feeling I was “less than” or flawed in a unique way. I needed to be in a place where I could be open about that part of me without being ill-treated or shunned.

In spite of all my needs that the CRC was not meeting, it was still a difficult decision to leave. I was thirty years old when I started to come to terms with my sexual orientation. The CRC was a part of who I was and will always be a part of who I am. I came from generations who were members of the CRC. My family is important to me, and the CRC was important to my family. It was also a part of my Dutch heritage. Over time I was able to see that those issues were very secondary and what really mattered was my relationship with God. I needed to be in a place where that was going to grow and I would be fed. I thought deeply about leaving the

church entirely, which is pretty common for many gay folks I know. I came to the firm realization that I needed community in order to be grounded and grow spiritually. I worshiped in two churches simultaneously, attending my PCUSA congregation in the mornings and my CRC congregation in the evenings, for a year before I knew for sure that moving was the right decision for me.

When I am asked what the CRC needs to do to keep people from leaving the denomination because of their sexual orientation, my response is that open and honest dialogue would be a good start. The silence that has been the primary response both individually and corporately is felt very powerfully and in a very toxic way by any gay person. I believe the CRC needs to support and honor gay committed relationships. I believe the CRC needs to oppose conversion therapy and to speak out boldly against homophobia. I believe the CRC needs to talk *with* gay folks and not *about* gay folks. They are present with you yet today. I was very disappointed the CRC Synod decided a few years back not to revisit and revise the 1973 decision about homosexuality. That definitely sent a negative message.

In closing, let me also say I do deeply care for those in the CRC and in particular those young people who are struggling with issues of sexual orientation. In many ways I believe their struggle today is as difficult as it was for those of us coming out in the 1970 and 1980s. For those and others, I pray that my thoughts and reflections may be helpful. I have chosen to write anonymously, not because I am ashamed of who I am, but on the advice of dear friends who are still in the CRC. I believe they are trying to protect me from any hostile feedback and I appreciate that.



Personal Story #11 (A Pastor's Story)

“Pastor, we’re afraid our son is going to hell.” I will always remember the phone call. Steve and Lois were active members in their Christian Reformed congregation in a mid-sized Michigan city, and Steve was a teacher at the local Christian school. Their second son, Jeff, had recently graduated from Calvin College, and he had taken a job in California. Two nights earlier he had called his parents to tell them he is gay. They were shocked and distressed, and literally worried about his eternal destiny.

That was a few years ago, but some parents are still facing similar news and responding with similar concerns. Since the early 1990s, I have provided pastoral care for hundreds of gay people and dozens of their family members, including many parents. I’ve observed and learned a great deal. Perhaps the most important thing I’ve learned is that love almost always wins out.

I say “almost always” because I have heard some horror stories of parents totally rejecting a gay son or daughter. I know one young woman whose father responded to her coming out by declaring, “Then it’s my Christian duty to disown you.” Fortunately, such stories are rare. Most of the time parents respond by saying something more like this: “It’s not easy for me to get this news, but the bottom line is that I love you. I will always love you. You’re my daughter.”

Sometimes parents respond in this way immediately; at other times it takes them a while to get there. But the deep bond of affection between parents and children usually overcomes any other reactions. The “other reactions” can take many forms.

As I have listened to parents of gay sons or daughters (or the gay sons or daughters who are reporting the responses of their parents), I have found it helpful to understand these responses as part of a grieving process. Grief is a natural response to loss, and many parents experience the news that their child is gay as a profound loss—a loss of expectations. They imagined their son or daughter dating someone of the opposite sex, having a traditional wedding, forming a traditional family, and giving them biological grandchildren. When they find out that a son or daughter is gay, they feel deeply disappointed and sad. They realize that what they looked forward to is not going to happen.

This is often much more than sadness, however. It typically includes some or all of the steps typical of the grieving process. And as with any form of grief, people can get stuck on any one of the steps or bounce around among them. Here are a few quotes from parents or their gay sons or daughters that exemplify the steps of grief that I’ve witnessed.

- **Denial**
 - “It’s just a phase.”
 - “You will grow out of it.”
 - “Don’t tell your grandparents. You know how conservative they are. It would kill them.”
 - “I came out to my parents a year ago, and they don’t want to talk about it. In fact, they act as if we never had the conversation.”
- **Bargaining**
 - “My parents responded by saying, ‘We will help you find a good counselor to help you change. We will pay for it.’”
 - “My parents keep pointing out the cute guys. They say that if I just find the right guy, I will find out that I’m not lesbian.”
- **Anger**
 - “Why have you done this to us?”
 - “My parents tell me that they would love to see me at the family Thanksgiving dinner, but they also said that my partner Jen is not welcome.”
 - “My parents are refusing to show up for our wedding.”
- **Depression**
 - “Every time my mom looks at me, she starts crying.”
 - “For a while after our son came out, I became very withdrawn. I had to ‘lick my wounds.’”
- **Acceptance**
 - “It’s not what we expected, and it’s not what we would have chosen. But he’s our son, and we love him. We just want him to be happy. And he’s obviously happy with John. Actually, we have grown to love John too. He’s part of the family now.”

The grieving model, although very helpful, does not explain all the reactions of parents. Grief is often complicated by additional factors. This can certainly be true when parents realize that a son or daughter is gay. Here are some of the additional responses I have seen and heard from parents.

- **Perplexity** – A young gay man recently told me that his mom keeps asking, “Why don’t you like girls?” The young man said he responded, “I don’t know. I just don’t.” The parents of gay sons or daughters are most often not gay themselves, and they genuinely do not understand what their child is experiencing. It’s baffling to them. It’s hard for them to understand and empathize.
- **Shame** – Many times I have heard parents say, “When our gay son (or daughter) came out of the closet, we went into the closet.” Historically, our society has taught that it is shameful to be gay. People have called gay people disgusting, repulsive, gross, sick, or perverse. Most people simply learned or “absorbed” these reactions from their family, friends, classmates, church, or others in society. Parents often feel ashamed of having a gay son or daughter, and so they don’t want others to know.
- **Isolation** – “We haven’t told anyone in church about Kate.” Why? “It’s like the subject is taboo for discussion in our church. No one talks about any gay family members.” Of course, there is also the shame mentioned above, and the fear of what people in church will think.
- **Guilt** – “What did we do wrong?” Historically, our society has communicated the belief that people are gay because of parental neglect, abuse, or other failure. Was mom too overbearing? Was dad too distant? Were they not good role models? Parents often wonder and worry about this.
- **Sadness** – “I’m sad that you suffered alone so long.” And, “I’m disappointed that you didn’t feel safe enough to tell us any sooner.”
- **Worry** – “We’re worried about your future. We’re afraid you are going to experience loneliness and rejection.”
- **Theological struggles** – “But the Bible says it’s a sin.” And, “We’re afraid we won’t see you in heaven.”

Happily, my experience working with the families of LGBT individuals has also included acceptance and support from parents who took the news of a son or daughter being gay rather well from the very start. Others go through a process that eventually leads toward genuine acceptance, support, and even advocacy. Here are some of the responses that I have heard.

- “We knew you were gay since you were a child—we were just waiting for you to tell us.” Some parents start wondering if their child is gay already early in the child’s life. So they have had a long time to come to acceptance, and they are not shocked by the news later.
- “Some of our church friends back home said, ‘How can you attend your son’s gay wedding?’ I responded, ‘How could I not attend? He’s my son, and I love him!’”
- “When David told me that he is gay, I cried for weeks. I prayed, ‘God, how am I supposed to understand this? How am I supposed to respond?’ Then one day I opened my Bible to Psalm 139, and I read that God knit us together in our mother’s womb. I knew that was God’s answer to me. God knit David together in my womb, and so he is just the way God

intended him to be. After that day I have been at peace. And now I love David's partner, Joe, as my son as well. I call them 'my boys.'"

- "I love our church, but now it's hard to worship here. It's hard to go to a church where my gay son would not be welcome."

Maybe you wondered whether there is more to the story about Steve and Lois, the parents mentioned at the very beginning of this article. In fact, there is. They began with shock, dismay, and a genuine worry that their gay son would go to hell. But this experience propelled them to do extensive study. They read dozens of books and talked with many people (including me). They had further conversations with their son and learned that he had seriously considered suicide during the time he attended the Christian high school where his dad taught. They thought, "The church's traditional position on gay people could have led to our son's death. This can't be right!"

Eventually Steve and Lois came to see that many devout Christian scholars and pastors now believe that the church has historically misinterpreted the Bible in regard to gay people and the marriage of gay couples. They became convinced that they could be faithful Christians and fully affirm their gay son. Eventually their son married a man, and they joyfully attended the wedding.

Well, those are some observations from my twenty-plus years of ministry with gay people and their parents. Now how has this ministry affected me personally?

As any pastor would do, I have been listening carefully, feeling compassionately, and walking closely with gay people and their parents. And I have been transformed. I have shared in the pain that gay people and their parents have experienced—their shame, guilt, depression, fear of what God will think, feeling hated by God, fear of what family and friends will think, tension within families, alienation of family members from each other, and rejection by churches. And yes, even a gay child's death by suicide and death by AIDS complications.

All of this pain has led me to ask questions. Where does this pain come from? Certainly it is not an inherent part of being gay or having a gay child. So the obvious answer is that it comes from a perspective that says being gay is a sickness and that marriage for gay couples is a sin. For many people this view is rooted in their interpretation of the Bible. Then I wondered how it could be that something which is supposedly from God could bring so much suffering. After all, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, and other life-giving experiences.

I have also shared in the joy that gay people and their parents have felt—the joy of coming to peace with oneself and God, the joy of becoming emotionally healthy after years of depression and struggle, the joy of reconciliation among family members, the joy of knowing God's unconditional love and acceptance, the joy of celebrating love and commitment, the joy of being part of a church community that celebrates the marriages of gay couples. Lately, I have led a number of weddings for gay couples, and at each one I have marveled at the joy I observed. I thought, "I wish everyone could see what I'm seeing. It's so beautiful—so filled with love, devotion, and commitment. How could anyone be against something that is so manifestly good?"

All of this vibrant life has led me to ask questions, too. Where does this life come from? It bears all the marks of Holy Spirit. And so then I have wondered how something that is supposedly condemned by God, namely the marriages of gay couples, could bear such good fruit. Could it be that the church has misinterpreted the Bible? We as a Christian community have done so before. Doesn't Christian humility compel us to face the possibility that we have done so again? Doesn't Christian humility lead us to admit our error and embark on a new path?

I know it can be frightening to admit we have been wrong, but to me the evidence is abundantly clear. Doesn't the Bible teach us to choose the path of life? So, yes, I choose life!



In Summary

As noted earlier, these stories are not a wide survey or representative sample of voices. They are merely a few pages among thousands that have been published and continue to be published as more and more LGBT Christians tell their stories and challenge the church to become a safe space for them and for the LGBT children yet to discover their own sexual identities.

Regardless of the place you find yourself in response to the church's official stance, whether you agree with the 1973 report, disagree with it, or are uncertain, we invite you, we encourage you, when next you meet a fellow Christian who is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersexed, or questioning, before you share your position, have the courage and grace to say to that person, "Tell me your story. I'd really like to hear it and learn who you are." Share the love of Christ by walking alongside this LGBT person of faith. They don't need to hear another sermon—they know the church's position. Instead, offer them an ear, a hug, and an empathetic response. Build a bridge, open a door, and share the love of Christ.

Postscript

In addition to the stories included here, we encourage you to read additional blog posts in which other LGBT Christians share portions of their stories:

- "On Being Jewish, Christian and Gay"
<https://jewishchristiangay.wordpress.com/about/>
- "The Silver Cup: My Journey from Loss of Faith, Through Exile and Beyond"
<http://www.annaredsand.com/blog.htm?post=1007974>
- "How I experience being gay as a gift."
<http://www.evangelicalsforsocialaction.org/oriented-to-love-sexual-justice/how-i-experience-being-gay-as-a-gift/>

- “Just Because He Breathes: Learning to Truly Love Our Gay Son”
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/linda-robertson/just-because-he-breathes-learning-to-truly-love-our-gay-son_b_3478971.html

Section 11: Additional Pastoral Advice on Maintaining Unity

The mandate of this committee was to examine and summarize the biblical/theological support currently offered by Christian proponents of same-sex marriage as well as to summarize where this agrees with and differs from the Synod 1973 report. We were also asked to summarize recent scientific literature on sexual orientation, and to recommend pastoral approaches and resources for dealing with same-sex unions within our congregations and communities.

This report comes as a result of much study, dialogue, and writing. Study committee members came to the same-sex marriage issue from several perspectives. Some believe that marriage is ordained by God to be between one man and one woman. Others desire to see our LGBT sisters and brothers have the opportunity to experience committed marital relationships. Still others support some portions of each of the above perspectives.²⁴ All views arise out of sincere prayer, study of God's word, and review of the writings of current authors, heart perspectives, and meaningful life experiences. The variations in perspective reside in people who are committed to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the Bible as God's Word to God's people. Our discussions have, through prayer and God's mercy, been open, respectful, and grace-filled. It has been a difficult and ever-challenging blessing to work together on this task and mandate.

You have had the opportunity to read and study based on our work and on the bibliographic material that has been presented. We are aware that there will be different perspectives and different responses to these words, just as the authors on our committee and the various writers whom we have cited have differing perspectives and beliefs and commitments. Concern and love for the CRC run deep in many of us, and none of us wants this debate to create differences such that we cannot listen to and dialogue with one another with the care and respect that is due to members of the body of Christ. This is true for both those who have more traditional views and those with more affirming views as well as our LGBT members, who also have differing views and care deeply about being accepted (with their partners) by the church that nurtured them in their faith.

We are aware that many churches and denominations have split on this issue, but we do not believe that has to be our story. How can we avoid division? It has helped us in our work to recognize that this is not a "culture wars" issue in which all sexual ethics are being attacked or defended; rather, this committee focused specifically on the question of covenantal same-sex unions. As we believe our report demonstrates, dialogue on this issue can and should uphold biblical authority and seek to discern the best interpretation of Scripture. Discerning truth surrounding same-sex marriage is not an issue of opposing versus embracing change. The various perspectives presented are those of Christians who seek to discern God's will for individuals with same-sex attraction, affirming that obedience to God's will ultimately leads to flourishing. This is not an issue in which one member of a congregation continually acts in a way in which everyone, including that member, agrees is sinful; such situations call for a certain kind

²⁴ Rev. David Beelen and Dr. Jeff Fisher hold to the traditional teaching of the church with regard to same-sex marriage, but recognize that respectful dialogue in the church needs to happen and hope that this report can contribute to that dialogue.

of pastoral response. This is an issue on which a significant number of brothers and sisters in Christ, in individual congregations and the denomination as a whole, disagree with each other about God's will for a certain kind of behavior. We have faced similar situations in the past, and we are confident that God can move us forward in unity.

We do not want to forget that the issues presented are of utmost importance to our LGBT brothers and sisters. They impact the very core of their being and all of their relationships. They impact our families as members of Christ's body struggle with loved ones who experience same-sex attraction. They impact our congregations as we seek out how God would have us receive, integrate, and show God's grace to LGBT seekers and members. And these issues also impact our denomination as we seek in classrooms, consistory rooms, classis meetings, and synod to determine how God would have us be faithful servants and bearers of God's grace and truth into the twenty-first century.

We know that many of our LGBT members and seekers have experienced and continue to experience deep pain and searching hearts as they work to find their place in God's church and among God's people. Depression, isolation, alienation, and fear of judgment have been the daily companions of many. Their gifts, knowledge, insights, and faith-filled and/or questioning lives have not, most often, been shared openly with God's people. God's gift of sexuality to all people has often not been able to be fully understood or expressed through either strong friendships or marriage. The church needs to do a better job of listening to stories, learning from these people of God, and dialoguing about the responsibilities and privileges of LGBT persons as members of the body of Christ in the Christian Reformed Church.

Family members who experience a "coming out" of one of their beloved spouses, parents, siblings or children are often deeply shaken and frightened. They wonder how they will handle this, what others will think, if their loved one is a Christian and if s/he is going to be allowed into heaven one day. They wonder if others will find out and how others will respond to them and to their loved one. They wonder how to relate to a loved one who plans to enter a lifelong same-sex marriage relationship. These families need a supportive community in order to walk through this most difficult time. The perspective of the family members on the possibility of someone being both gay and Christian as well as God's acceptance of homosexual orientation and committed same-sex relationships makes a significant difference on the path to accept, embrace, and love without reservation. No matter what the perspective, our God of grace calls on God's people to show love and respect to all people, for all are image-bearers of God. The process needed to accept, resolve, and even embrace the loved one may take many years of prayer, loving, listening, and leaving this with God; but the journey must occur in families who love Jesus and are called to show his grace and mercy to each other. We hope that some of the words of this document will assist with the many variations of that journey that are experienced by families within the church.

Congregations need, also, to struggle honestly with a response to life-long same-sex relationships. In the congregation there will be families at many different places on the path of seeking God's will relative to their loved ones, and many members may have personal struggles or family members struggling who are unknown to the congregation. There will be perspectives on LGBT persons and same-sex relationships that differ widely, as wide as the continuum of

possibilities. The arrival at unity may well need to arise from much prayer, listening, storytelling, and study, all in the context of extreme grace, mercy, and respect.

For some, this document may be a step on that journey and may direct God's people in a congregation to other resources that may be helpful. The outcome of such dialogue may not be a baseline level of agreement, but rather a broader perspective and understanding that relates to the image of God, God's grace and mercy, the complexity of Scripture, genuine pastoral care, acceptance and embracing of differences. This may be a situation where all continue to grow and learn, but where full agreement at a foundational level will not be achieved this side of heaven. And we trust that our loving God, who knows we do not know all things (1 Cor. 13:12), will extend grace to us in our finite knowledge of God's will in this matter.

Finally, the report to Synod 1973 of the Committee to Study Homosexuality was written by caring, wise, knowledgeable leaders. It was written by scholars of the Bible who lived and studied in the world of forty-two years ago. "To be reformed means to be constantly reforming," and yet, we must always be true to God's word, which never changes. Ah, such a seeming paradox! The section on how the Holy Spirit creates change in the church may be particularly helpful to all of us.

Denominational leaders and others will study reports; review books and articles from knowledgeable scholars; embrace the call to deep and genuine pastoral care for LGBT members, families, and congregations; and assess wisdom from other denominations. Again, much time and study, listening and story-telling will be necessary. And God's church that is Christian Reformed may need to conclude, with an ever-reforming perspective, thinking yet more broadly, that we need to encourage wisdom, mercy, grace and love toward LGBT individuals, families, and congregations as we all continue to seek God's leading relative to God's people in an uncertain but God-created, loved and directed world.

May you be blessed as you prayerfully study, discern and discuss the content of this report, so that "speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (Eph. 4:15-16).