

Sex and the Supremacy of Christ

Copyright © 2005 by Desiring God Ministries

Published by Crossway Books
a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided by USA copyright law.

Cover design: Jon McGrath

Cover photo: Getty Images

First printing 2005

Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*.® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

The “NIV” and “New International Version” trademarks are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by International Bible Society. Use of either trademark requires the permission of International Bible Society.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are from the *New American Standard Bible*® Copyright © The Lockman Foundation 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995. Used by permission.

Scripture references marked NLT are from the *Holy Bible, New Living Translation*, copyright © 1996. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Ill., 60189. All rights reserved.

All emphases within Scripture quotations have been added by the authors.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sex and the supremacy of Christ / edited by John Piper and Justin Taylor.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 13: 978-1-58134-697-8

ISBN 10: 1-58134-697-2 (tpb)

I. Sex—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Piper, John, 1946-

II. Taylor, Justin, 1976-

BT708.S474 2005

261.8'357—dc22

2005002312

ML	15	14	13	12	11	10	09	08	07	06		
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3

CHAPTER 5

Homosexual Marriage as a Challenge to the Church: Biblical and Cultural Reflections

R. ALBERT MOHLER, JR.

The question of homosexual marriage presents the church with a monumental challenge. Advocates for homosexual marriage are pressing their case and, even with significant legal and political barriers in place, have framed the issue so that those who hold to a biblical concept of marriage are put on the defensive, and advocates of same-sex relationships are portrayed as agents of liberty, progress, and inevitable cultural evolution.

For the church, the very concept of homosexual marriage strikes at the heart of our biblical and theological foundation. According to the Christian tradition, marriage is not merely a social arrangement between two persons but a God-ordained institution through which the Creator's glory is demonstrated to the cosmos. The covenant fidelity at the very center of marriage is a picture of God's purpose in the creation of the world and the redemption of the church.

In essence, the term "homosexual marriage" is a tragic oxymoron. In any previous era, those two words would be seen as mutually exclusive. The fact that homosexual marriage is even an issue for public debate demonstrates that we are a civilization in crisis, because a great many barriers must be breached in order to put this question on the cultural agenda. Firewalls, traditions, habits, and convictional practices must fall before marriage can be redefined and utterly transformed by the inclusion of same-sex relationships. At the root of this development

is an attitude of moral rebellion that reflects a suspicion of authority, a confusion about the order of creation, and a rebellion against God's design for human sexuality.

As Christians, we are charged with the difficult task of compassionate truth-telling. This has never been easy—just ask the apostles—but it is particularly difficult in a time of cultural ferment and sexual revolution. Compassionate truth-telling requires the church to speak from its deepest convictions while demonstrating the love of Christ—speaking truth that will be heard as a hard message while demonstrating the love of Christ through the very act of telling the truth. Compassionate truth-telling means, not only the accurate presentation of biblical truth, but the prayerful and urgent hope that the individuals to whom we speak will be transformed by that truth and respond to the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

The challenge of compassionate truth-telling means that we must think strategically and carefully about how these issues should be addressed, both in terms of individual conversations and in the larger context of public debate. We must ensure not only that we *think* rightly about these things as ordered by Scripture, but that we *speak* rightly about controversial issues as well. We cannot address homosexual marriage as an isolated issue but must place it in the larger context of the Christian worldview and of the great story of God's purpose in creation and redemption.

The Christian worldview affirms the unity of the good, the beautiful, and the true—known as the “transcendentals”—in the transcendent, self-revealing God. Thus, the Christian worldview understands the good, the beautiful, and the true as being established in the very character of God. At the same time, these transcendentals—the good, the beautiful, and the true—are, in reality, the same thing. Each is rooted in the beauty of God, in the reality of his character, and in the glory of his holiness.

In its confusion, the world wants to separate the good from the true, the true from the beautiful, and the beautiful from the good. In isolating and separating the transcendentals, the secular picture of the world becomes fractured and disoriented. Thus, this confusion can produce tragically problematic arguments for why the false may be beautiful, the ugly may be true, and evil may be good.

*Homosexual Marriage as a Challenge to the Church:
Biblical and Cultural Reflections*

109

We understand the source of this confusion, of course. The Christian doctrine of sin, rooted directly in the Genesis account of the Fall, explains that the consequences of sin lead directly to this kind of disorientation and confusion.

Christians must resist the temptation to speak the truth in a manner that falls short of the good, the beautiful, and the true. We betray the truth when we speak of it with an ugly spirit, or attach it to base arguments or mean-spirited impulses. We must reunite what the secular world has divided and present Christian truth in all of its power, its beauty, and its goodness.

With all that in mind, how shall we approach issues related to homosexual marriage? I have grown increasingly convinced that most of our approaches focus on what homosexuals would have to rethink in order to see this issue with clarity and understand the error of their lifestyle and social agenda. We often assume that the real issue is what kind of people homosexuals would have to be in order to hear our message and receive its truth. While this is an important consideration, I am convinced that the more urgent challenge for the church is to clarify our own self-identity and our understanding of the gospel. What kind of people must *we* be, if we are to address the challenge of homosexual marriage with faithfulness and Christian love?

I would suggest seven principles that can serve as a framework for a Christian response to the challenge of homosexual marriage. Each of these is deeply rooted in biblical truth, and each is pointed to the challenge of addressing homosexuals with compassionate truth-telling.

1. *We, as Christians, must be the people who cannot start a conversation about homosexual marriage by talking about homosexual marriage.*

We simply cannot start with the issue of homosexual marriage. Instead, we must gain some conceptual altitude over this immediate question and understand the larger issues at stake. We must look at the big picture, and we must understand that starting with the issue of homosexual marriage will lead us nowhere, for we will have already surrendered the most critical issues at stake.

Working backwards from the immediate challenge of homosexual marriage, we have to ask some very basic questions, and we must find

those answers in the theological resources of the Christian worldview. We must consider the purpose for which God created the entire universe. The Bible answers this question with clarity: the entire cosmos was created for the glory of God. Thus, we must reconceive every single question in terms of how God's glory will be most clearly manifested in his creation. Any moral question, any issue dealing with the good, the beautiful, and the true, will come back to the question of how God's glory is made visible in his creation. The end for which all things were made is the glory of God, and every atom and molecule of the universe is directed to God's glory. Every single creature, every inanimate object, and, most importantly, every single human being, was made for the glory of God.

We must understand that the right ordering of all things will be the order that demonstrates God's glory most profoundly in his creation. With that established, we can then work backwards from creation and understand that human dignity and the purpose of human life are rooted in the fact that we are made in the image of God. Alone of all creation, human beings bear the *imago Dei*. Theologians through the centuries have debated exactly what this means, but at the very least it means that human beings are alone able consciously to know and to glorify God.

The rest of creation also exists for God's glory, but the animals are completely unaware that they are created for that purpose. Human beings stand in an entirely different relation to this question, for we understand that God, in making us in his image, has invited us to know him and has commanded us to seek his glory.

This understanding of humanity stands in direct opposition to the materialistic naturalism that prevails in the secular world. The evolutionary worldview conceives all of life as a product of an accidental meeting of space, time, and energy. According to this worldview, human beings are nothing more than chemical machines whose greatest purpose is the replication of genes and the reproduction of the species. If this portrait of humanity is accurate, morality is nothing more than an artifact of the evolutionary process—habits that may lead to more efficient reproduction. This is a tragically reduced and corrupted view of human nature, but it stands at the foundation of the sexual revolution and the culture of moral relativism.

Genesis 2 will help us understand how God's glory is displayed in creation. Significantly, Adam did not declare his need for a mate, nor did

*Homosexual Marriage as a Challenge to the Church:
Biblical and Cultural Reflections*

111

he even understand his masculinity prior to God's act in revelation. It was the Lord God who said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (Gen. 2:18). From this point, the text moves to the creation of woman—but not directly.

As Genesis 2 unfolds, the text moves from the Lord's declaration of Adam's need to a narrative about Adam's responsibility to name each of the creatures. Adam had the opportunity to review the animal kingdom in its entirety, "but for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him" (Gen. 2:20).

Only at this point are we told of the creation of the woman. The Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and in the midst of his sleep he removed one of Adam's ribs and closed up its place with flesh. With this rib, the Lord God made the woman and brought her to Adam. Adam immediately recognized that this indeed was the perfect complement for him. "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man" (Gen. 2:23).

Significantly, it was the Creator who declared Adam's need for a complement—a "helper suitable for him." This was not the result of Adam's self-recognition. This was no dawning consciousness that came upon Adam; it was his Creator's declaration.

With the creation of Eve, humanity was completed and perfected in the distinction between male and female. Gender is a part of the goodness of God's creation. The distinction between male and female is not a matter of evolutionary differentiation nor mere social convention, but an essential component of God's purpose in creation. The Lord God has shown his glory in making a distinction between man and woman. Human beings cry out for completion and companionship. It is not good that we should be alone. We may come to this self-awareness, but our need was first declared by God, who made provision for us, not only in the gift of gender but in the institution of marriage. In Genesis 2, we have the absolute declaration of God's glory in the rightness, the perfection, and the complementarity of man and woman, male and female.

Moving on from Genesis 2, the Bible reveals a comprehensive understanding of human gender and sexuality. The institution of marriage stands at the center of this picture, and the family unit becomes the arena for God's glory to be displayed in the receiving and raising of chil-

dren. The relationship between the man and the woman—even the authority of the husband in the institution of marriage—is affirmed throughout the text of Scripture. We are not self-defining creatures, nor are we autonomous moral agents. We are creatures who are fully accountable to our Creator. Our purpose is to display his glory, and we cannot discuss the issue of homosexual marriage without returning to this touchstone of creation, in order to be reminded about the very purpose of gender and the institution of marriage.

The perfect institution of marriage was revealed when the Lord God declared, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). This one-flesh relationship is physiological, anatomical, emotional, and absolutely glorious. In the covenant of marriage, the man and the woman are drawn together so that there is completion—a picture of God’s glory painted in miniature. This one-flesh relationship, solemnized and protected in the covenant of marriage, is the very foundation of human civilization. This is the nonnegotiable foundation of everything Christians understand about human life, sex, gender, and the entire complex of issues related to embodiment and sexuality. In reality, it’s all there in Genesis 2.

With all this in mind, we can see genuine grandeur in the gift of gender. This gift brings a necessary awareness of our humility as human beings. As men, we must admit our need for a wife—the gift God gives us in a woman. Similarly, women must admit their need for a husband, and the necessary completion of their sexuality in the man. Even for men and women given the gift of celibacy, and for those who by other circumstances are unmarried, marriage remains the defining institution for understanding masculinity and femininity and the arena of human sexuality.

With marriage come many goods, privileges, and responsibilities. Of course, these include pleasure, protection, intimacy, and procreation. Each of these falls into its proper place as God’s design for husband and wife comes together in covenantal fidelity. The female is drawn to the male, the man is drawn to the woman, and husband and wife are united in the holy covenant of marriage, living together and receiving all the goods of marriage even as they fulfill all of its responsibilities, until they are separated by death.

*Homosexual Marriage as a Challenge to the Church:
Biblical and Cultural Reflections*

113

This stands at the very center of creation. Armed with God's revelation in the Bible, we have no excuse for failing to know this truth. As a biblical people, we are entrusted with the stewardship of this truth. Even for those without God's written revelation, general revelation—found in the very structure of creation and accessible to all persons—tells the story of God's intention in gender. It is surely no accident that every civilization has found its way to marriage—*heterosexual* marriage—as basic to the social structure. In a very real sense, marriage is the foundation of civilization.

Pitirim Sorokin, founder of the department of sociology at Harvard University, made very clear that marriage stands at the center of civilization and is what he called the “civilizational essential.” Without marriage, no social structure larger than marriage can be sustained. There can be no community, no culture, no enduring patterns of human life. Even where there have been aberrations such as polygamy or other forms of wrongly construed marriage, these have been noteworthy precisely because they *are* aberrations, and because they have been culturally transient. None of these experiments has lasted through time. God's glory will be demonstrated one way or another, and the persistent and universal endurance of marriage has been a demonstration of God's glory throughout human experience.

2. *We must be the people who cannot ever talk about sex without talking about marriage.*

The moment Christians accept that we can talk about sex without talking about marriage, we abandon the high ground of the Christian worldview and surrender the question at stake. From the very beginning of every conversation about sex, we must emphasize that Christians cannot talk about sex without making clear its connection to marriage.

The moral credibility of the Christian church is very much at stake in the debate over homosexual marriage. If Christians allow a low estimation of marriage, and if we accept the breaking of marital vows and the violation of marital covenants, we destroy the very foundation of our moral capital in the debate over homosexual marriage.

We must hold to a culture of marriage because we know that God's glory is displayed in this institution and because we know the power of human sexuality. Sex is so powerful, and sexual desire is so easily cor-

rupted, that we must point to marriage as the institution God has designed in order for sexuality to be enjoyed, appreciated, and fulfilled.

According to the Christian worldview, sex makes sense only within the context of marriage. Sex outside of marriage is an insult to the Creator's design and a display of human arrogance. Unsatisfied with God's provision for us in marriage, human sinfulness is displayed in our demand for autonomy—for our "rights" as creatures—and in our rejection of the Creator's purpose.

Marriage becomes the touchstone for our understanding of why sexual sins are so inherently sinful. We understand that adultery is sinful precisely because it robs God of his glory by desecrating a covenant made in his name. Marriage is intended to be a display of covenant fidelity, which points to the faithfulness of the Creator and the character of the covenant-making God. The New Testament goes so far as to present the relationship between Christ and his church in the metaphor of the bride and the bridegroom. Adultery is so abhorrent precisely because it lies about what covenant faithfulness is supposed to be.

Similarly, fornication (premarital sex) is understood to be sin precisely because, in this practice, the creature is demanding *a part* of what marriage represents while rejecting the entirety of the marital covenant. But God will not allow his good gifts to be separated.

Throughout the Bible, sexual sins are revealed in their inherent sinfulness precisely because each of these sins—whether incest, or bestiality, or homosexuality, or lust—is a desire for something less than God's completion in the covenant of marriage, and for something less than purity in our reception of God's gift.

Christians simply cannot talk about sex without talking about marriage. We are the people who have to talk about covenant faithfulness because we serve the covenant-making God. We must talk about male and female with constant reference to marriage. We must talk about the relationship between Christ and his church, the gifts of intimacy and fidelity, and the reality of order within the institution of marriage, simply because the Bible so clearly puts marriage at the center of human existence. A genuinely Christian response to the challenge of homosexual marriage would go back to marriage itself and to the gift of gender, demonstrating the rightness and the perfection of marriage as a picture in miniature of the kingdom of God. Every marriage, every domestic

*Homosexual Marriage as a Challenge to the Church:
Biblical and Cultural Reflections*

115

household, is to be a little picture of the kingdom of God in the right ordering of all things and in the creatures' grateful reception of the Creator's gifts. This little picture—this little domestic portrait that centers in the covenant of marriage—presents a picture more powerful than anything the world can ever distort. The existence of *just one faithful marriage* demonstrates the fatal falsity of any other ordering for human sexuality.

3. *We must be the people who cannot talk about anything of significance without acknowledging our absolute dependence upon God's revelation—the Bible.*

We must admit this right at the outset: Christians do not claim to be smart enough to figure out everything on their own. Without the Bible, we would be as lost and blind as anyone else. Had God not given us his gift of revelation, we would be utterly confused about sexuality and every other important dimension of life. Put bluntly, everything we know about sex we know from the Bible. The order of creation does give us a basic knowledge about gender, as well as pointers toward the institution of marriage. Nevertheless, the authoritative and perfected knowledge of these things is revealed only in the Bible. We cannot compete with secular specialists in terms of sexology. We do not approach these questions as secular anthropologists, sociologists, physicians, or psychologists. Our expertise is a biblical expertise, because our knowledge is a biblical knowledge.

The gift of God's revelation explains why Christians have something distinctive to say. Our particular expertise is established solely in our knowledge of what God has revealed in the Bible. We do not speak with authority on issues related to human sexuality because of our personal experience; nor can we base our claims upon scientific expertise, popular opinion, or sociology. Everything we know about love and marriage is a *revealed* knowledge.

The Bible contains not only incredible portraits of marriage as God's institution, it also includes teaching passages that set down specific commands and instructions related to sex and marriage. In humility, we must confess that we are not able to come up with the idea of marriage on our own; we are entirely dependent upon revelation. As the apostle Paul explained, the law is our teacher.

The order our Creator has placed within the universe is not merely an observable structure, however; it is also a structure of order and command. The Bible does not present humanity with a multiplicity of optional sexual lifestyles. Marriage is not presented as a multiple-choice equation or a puzzle to be assembled in accordance with individual desire. Instead, the Bible presents a mandate. Receiving God's revelation about marriage also requires that we admit our obligation to *obey* God's command.

Human sinfulness requires that we be protected from ourselves. The Bible's commands limit and constrain our sinful predilections. As the Lord said to Israel, "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live" (Deut. 30:19).

In Scripture, we are given a clear understanding of how God's glory is to be displayed in creation. In particular, we are shown how marriage is to function in the coming together of the man and the woman in a holy covenant that protects our health, our holiness, and our wholeness, even as it displays God's glory. Thankfully, human beings are not left to devise our own sexual codes and relational structures. We have been addressed by our Creator in the Holy Scriptures, and, in the end, the only choice is between obedience and disobedience.

The Bible's verdict on homosexuality is clear and unequivocal. Though revisionist scholars have done their very best to turn the biblical text on its head and to undermine its authority, the Scripture resolutely resists such reductionism and rejection. Homosexual advocates have attempted various interpretive maneuvers in order to subvert the plain teaching of Scripture. Some have gone so far as to argue that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was not homosexuality but inhospitality (a claim effectively rejected in Jude 7). Others have argued that the apostle Paul's clear teaching about homosexuality in Romans chapter 1 has nothing to do with homosexuality as it is experienced today. They insist that Paul, who condemned homosexuality in no uncertain terms, simply had no conception of our modern "discovery" of sexual orientation and committed homosexual partnerships. Others have argued that Paul's warnings in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 related only to those who would commit homosexual rape or would force nonconsensual sexual acts.

Our task is simply to allow the text to speak. There can be no ques-

*Homosexual Marriage as a Challenge to the Church:
Biblical and Cultural Reflections*

117

tion that the Bible comprehensively and candidly identifies homosexual acts—and even homosexual desire—as sin. Put plainly, if the Bible does not speak clearly to the issue of homosexuality, it does not speak clearly to anything. Constrained by Scripture, Christians must be the people who speak this truth with compassionate honesty.

Like Paul, our concern must be to see all sinners—including homosexual sinners—come to terms with the awful reality of their sin, and then turn in repentance to embrace the grace of God through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Listen to the urgency of Paul's warning: "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 6:9-10). Could there be a more direct warning than this? Can we doubt Paul's urgent concern for those trapped in these sins? We must model his courage in declaring this truth without compromise or evasion.

Speaking about homosexuality, Paul was as candid as the language of his day would allow—even using the terms related to both the active and the passive participants in homosexual acts. Paul was not telling the Corinthians what they wanted to hear. His message was as politically incorrect in the context of first-century Graeco-Roman culture as our biblical worldview is politically incorrect today.

Paul's concern is a gospel concern, for he urgently desires to see sinners saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and transformed by the power of God. He warns that those who give themselves to such sins will not inherit the kingdom of God.

We must note that homosexuality is not the only sin identified in this text. As in Romans 1, Paul's point is the universality of human sinfulness. But we sin in the particular rather than in the general, and these catalogs of specific sins are necessary so that we would see ourselves and our sin in the mirror of God's Word.

Some Christians find homosexuality more *distasteful* than sinful. Too many Christians try to deal with the issue of homosexuality by dismissing it with disgust. Leon Kass, chairman of the President's Council on Bioethics, is a major moral philosopher of our times. He describes what he calls the "yuck factor" as an attitude of disgust that lacks any

substantial moral argument. The “yuck factor” is an interesting observation about the public mind, but it is implausible and unhelpful as a moral principle. Christians must go beyond mere disgust and point with gospel passion to the objective biblical truth about the sinfulness of homosexuality. We cannot trust the “yuck factor” because human beings have demonstrated time and again that we can overcome any amount of disgust if we are determined to rationalize misbehavior. The fallen human mind is a moral computer of infinite rationalization, a fact that underlines again why we are so utterly dependent upon the authority of Scripture.

I was thirteen years old when I first heard the word *homosexual*. I heard it on the radio during a lunchtime news report while staying at my grandparents' home. Paul Harvey simply used the word in the course of his reporting. As a thirteen-year-old boy, I didn't know what a homosexual was, and my curiosity was immediately aroused.

After lunch, I asked my grandfather, a kind and generous-hearted man—but a man of few words—to tell me what a homosexual was. He responded, “Boy, if you ever use that word again, you won't sit down for a week—you understand me?”

Well, I understood that I had asked the wrong person to answer that question! But of course, his non-answer simply increased my curiosity. Thankfully, my father, a wonderful Christian man who took it as his responsibility to speak plainly and succinctly to a thirteen-year-old, described to me in simple terms what homosexuality was all about. My father based his argument and explanation on the Bible. I trusted my father, but I trusted his trust in the Bible even more.

Where would we be if we did not have the Bible? As Paul tells us in Romans 2, we cannot trust our conscience. Corrupted by sin, the conscience arbitrarily excuses and condemns us in a continuous cycle of rationalization and self-deception. Even though the law of God is written in the structure of the universe, we have corrupted that knowledge and we no longer see what was so evident in Eden.

We cannot say anything of significance about homosexual marriage or anything else without absolute dependence on the Bible. Do we acknowledge legal, sociological, anthropological, cultural, political, and various other dimensions to this issue? Of course we do. Nevertheless, everything we understand about human sexuality is directly derived

*Homosexual Marriage as a Challenge to the Church:
Biblical and Cultural Reflections*

119

from the knowledge God has given us in the Bible. The Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura* applies even to sex.

4. *We must be the people with a theology adequate to explain the deadly deception of sexual sin.*

The church of the Lord Jesus Christ, standing on the authority of Scripture, must have a theology adequate to explain how God's glory can be so pervasively denied and how God's design can be so utterly corrupted as it is in the advocacy of homosexual marriage. How is it that humans miss this point so entirely?

In reality, there is only one sufficient explanation for sexual brokenness, and this is the very essence of sin. In Genesis 3, the Bible presents the truth of the Fall and its consequences. Sin is the one category indispensable to our explanation of the human problem. We cannot possibly reach a correct diagnosis of the human condition without getting to the very heart of what sin is and what sin means.

In Romans 1, Paul describes human sinfulness as an effort to suppress the truth in unrighteousness (v. 18). Thus, at the center of human sinfulness is an ambition to rob God of his glory and to hide the truth from ourselves, even as we give ourselves to lawlessness and moral anarchy.

As Paul sees it, the human race is involved in a massive exercise of self-deception, suppressing the truth and hiding it even from ourselves. We are all without excuse in this, says Paul, because God has revealed his laws even in the very structure of the universe (vv. 19-21). Nevertheless, "Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles" (Rom. 1:22-23). Rather than accept the truth, we have exchanged the glory of God for various forms of idolatry.

As Paul makes clear, God's verdict is devastating:

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women

exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. (Rom. 1:24-27)

Can there be any doubt that this text speaks precisely about homosexuality? As a matter of fact, this important text speaks not only about the sinfulness of homosexual acts, but about the corrupted nature of homosexual desire. The language about women who “exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature” and “men likewise,” who “gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another,” indicates that homosexual desire is itself a perversion of the divine intention.

The devastating nature of God’s righteous verdict on human sinfulness is made clear with specific reference to the sexual sins detailed in this text. The formula repeated three times in this text (plus v. 28), “God gave them up,” is one of the most chilling words of judgment anywhere in the Bible. The utter finality of this formula stands as an irrefutable verdict on the nature of homosexuality.

This text should not function as an intellectual “trump card” for Christians to use in argument, but rather as a foundation for revealing the universal and pervasive sinfulness of humanity. Paul’s purpose is to show that our human rebellion against God is the very essence of sin, and according to Romans 1, homosexuality is the chief illustration of that truth. Rebelling against God’s design for sexuality is the primary exhibit of human sinfulness in action.

Again, we must acknowledge that homosexuality is not the only sin listed by Paul in this important chapter. As a matter of fact, Paul follows with a catalog of human sinfulness that encompasses all of us. By the time he mentions gossips, slanderers, haters of God, the insolent, the haughty, and the boastful, much less those disobedient to parents (vv. 29-30), he has included every single human being who ever lived. When speaking to homosexuals about the truth of God revealed in this passage, we must make clear that it not only indicts homosexuals for the sin of homosexuality, but every other sinner for every sin ever committed. Nevertheless, the specific reference to homosexuality here helps us

*Homosexual Marriage as a Challenge to the Church:
Biblical and Cultural Reflections*

121

understand the depth of sexual brokenness and sexual sin. We dare not miss this point or ignore Paul's message.

An important dimension of Paul's argument deals with the issue of idolatry. It is worth noting that the specific forms of idolatry common to the Graeco-Roman world, and to other ancient cultures, centered in exaggerations of human sexuality and fertility. A quick look at most museums of antiquity will reveal cases filled with figurines characterized by exaggerated genitalia. Many are explicitly pornographic, as the power of sex has been transformed into an idol and object of worship. This is an insight of inestimable theological significance.

When Christians address homosexuals and homosexual advocates with the reality that the Bible clearly condemns homosexual behavior as sin, we must acknowledge that we are sexual sinners speaking to other sexual sinners. Armed with the Bible's profound understanding of human sinfulness, we understand that sin corrupts every dimension of human existence. The doctrine of total depravity affirms that the entire human being—including sexual desire and the emotions—is utterly corrupted and disoriented by sin and its consequences.

Christians have often sinned against homosexuals by arguing that homosexuality is simply a "chosen" form of behavior and lifestyle. Clearly, participation in homosexual behavior is a matter of choice, but the underlying desire is often not experienced by homosexuals as a matter of choice at all.

The biblical understanding of sin helps us to understand that every human being is a sexual sinner and every profile of individual desire is corrupted by sin's effects. Even as our bodies show the effects of sin as we age, decay, and die, our affections show the corruption of sin because we desire what should not be desired. The church of the Lord Jesus Christ must stand before the world and acknowledge that we often do not even understand our own desires and inclinations.

When speaking of homosexuality, we must acknowledge that the pattern of male and female homosexuality is often different. We must understand that female homosexuality is often directly traceable to the misbehavior of men. Males have often acted toward women with such violence, anger, and rejection that they can no longer trust men to meet their needs for intimacy.

Is a woman who resorts to lesbianism for such reasons responsible

for her sin? Of course she is, but we must understand that all of us are inclined to lie to ourselves as we rationalize our misbehavior. This is true not only for homosexuals but for all human beings. As a matter of fact, sin is so deceptive that we no longer even understand *why* we desire *what* we desire. The Scripture clearly identifies lesbianism as sin, but we must understand that this pattern of sin often follows an experience of sin at the hands of others. This does not excuse the sinner, but it helps us to understand why this sin can become such a deeply rooted part of an individual's self-understanding.

Male homosexuality is usually a very different reality. The male sex drive—more essentially physical and genital—can be corrupted in so many different ways. There is no man who will be able to stand before God on the Day of Judgment and say, “I was only interested and aroused by righteous and holy desire.” Each of us is a sexual sinner, and the male pattern of sexual sin includes corrupted desire, confusing arousal, and perverse thoughts.

No man, not even the most committed heterosexual husband, will be able to say on the Day of Judgment, “My sexual affections, my sexual arousal, was always, from the very beginning, only directly toward that which was holy—the covenant of marriage and the wife that I was given.” Every man struggles with a corrupted affection, and that corrupted affection, given the reality of the male sex drive, is often directed toward a desire for fulfillment entirely at odds with the glory of God. Every man bears a different sexual struggle, but every man is engaged in a sexual struggle, and this should give us an attitude of sympathy as we address homosexuals with the truth.

When homosexuals say, “I did not choose this,” they are often speaking the only truth they know. The homosexual movement tells homosexuals that their arousal is their destiny. This is a slander against God. We must learn not to trust our sinful affections and erotic interests, but to submit all of this to the objective authority of God's Word. By God's grace, we must all come before the throne of Christ and pray that God will order our affections, our passions, and our erotic interests to his glory. We must say that to ourselves, even as we say it to the homosexual. All of us stand under the same need for forgiveness and with the same accountability before our Creator. We must not sin against our homosexual neighbors by describing their pattern of sin as something

*Homosexual Marriage as a Challenge to the Church:
Biblical and Cultural Reflections*

123

they have arbitrarily chosen in terms of desire. We must declare God's verdict that every single homosexual act is sin and that homosexual desire is itself sinful, but we must speak with compassionate honesty even as we seek to understand this reality.

5. We must be the people with a theology adequate to explain Christ's victory over sin.

If we must begin with a theology adequate to explain the deadly deception of sin, we must also present a theology adequate to explain Christ's victory over sin. By the grace of God, we are not left where Romans 1 ends. The Bible presents the transforming grace of God as demonstrated, accomplished, and applied through the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

After Paul had reviewed his catalog of sin and warned that those who give themselves to such sins will not inherit the kingdom of God, he turned to the church and reminded Christians, "Such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11).

This text declares that Christians, saved by the grace of God, are those who have come out of these patterns of sin, who have been justified, and whom the Holy Spirit progressively conforms to the image of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This message of transformation by the grace of God—the presentation of atonement and redemption in full biblical glory—stands in stark contrast to the message homosexuals are given by the secular world. Therapists, sexologists, physiologists, and sociologists say to homosexuals, "This is who you are. Just claim your identity as a homosexual man or woman and press for full rights in the normalization of your lifestyle." Psychologists and psychiatrists have removed homosexuality from lists of mental disorders, effectively normalizing homosexuality in the human experience.

Christians have no right to excise homosexuality from the Bible, but our ultimate purpose is to move from the diagnosis of sin to the power of the gospel. We are the people who know that Christ has won the victory. The church is the redeemed people of God who understand that God's redeeming love, made manifest in the cross of Jesus Christ, offers genuine transformation, reconciliation, and the forgiveness of sins. The

substitutionary nature of Christ's atonement affirms that Christ has paid the penalty for sin in full, suffering and dying in the place of sinners, and his accomplished work is the very foundation for our confidence as we promise salvation and healing to those who will call on Christ's name.

The God of the Bible is not only clear in judgment, but powerful to save. The church must declare without reservation the Bible's doctrine of regeneration. This is not a self-help program or a mere sexual recovery program—it is a comprehensive program of transformation as the dead are made alive. The old things have passed away even as all things become new. Christians alone have a theology adequate to explain this.

While we proclaim the gospel's saving and transforming power, of course, we must also acknowledge that sin has enduring consequences, even in this life. An analogy might be useful at this point. Consider a man who has sinned by driving under the influence of alcohol. One night, sinfully drunk and recklessly irresponsible, this man drives right into a wall at high speed. His body is broken, but his life is saved as he is taken to the hospital and receives emergency treatment. He recovers from the accident, but he will forever walk with a limp.

Let us follow this man as he comes to faith in Christ. The grace of God transforms him, reordering his affections as he gains victory over alcoholism. Regeneration has produced a new man. "The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17)—but he still walks with a limp.

That limp does not disqualify him from displaying the glory of God. As a matter of fact, he may see his limp as an opportunity for witness: "I want to tell you who I was in order to tell you who I now am by the grace of God. You see, this limp is a part of my story. It's an important part of how I came to know the Lord Jesus Christ and how he changed my life."

In reality, every one of us limps. Throughout our lives, until the day of our glorification, every one of us will limp. We must look to the moment of our future glorification (Rom. 8:30) as the moment of our release from every limp. On that day, every tear will be wiped away, every injury will be fully restored, everything will be made right, and everything will be made whole. Everything and every redeemed person will then perfectly display the glory of God. We are the people with a

*Homosexual Marriage as a Challenge to the Church:
Biblical and Cultural Reflections*

125

theology adequate to explain this, and thus we can offer a sin-sick world the only genuine means of personal transformation.

We know better than to say that people cannot change. We also know better than to believe that people can change themselves. As Jonathan Edwards made clear, we sin in our affections, and we do not even understand why we love the things we love and desire the things we desire. This is why we are so dependent on the work of Christ in our lives and the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in reordering our affections. This is no easy process, but it is real and it is enduring.

Is our purpose to make homosexuals into heterosexuals? The answer to that question must be both yes and no. We must urge all sinners to repent and abandon their sin, but convincing homosexuals to think of themselves as heterosexuals is not the same thing as salvation. We must show homosexuals their need for salvation and transformation. We can promise that this power of transformation will, by God's grace, lead to a reordering of their lives, and we must also explain that it will require a turning away from the sins of their past.

I want to speak honestly to those who are struggling with homosexual affection. You must know that this is sin, and you must recognize that your affections are corrupted by sin. Like all of us, you are a sinner in the midst of a sinful world, but don't let anyone tell you that you can't change. Becoming heterosexual is not salvation, but the miracle of regeneration and sanctification will produce, by God's grace, the right affections in your heart. Knowing what God has declared to be objectively right and objectively wrong, we must direct ourselves—whether our sinful sexual profile be heterosexual or homosexual—toward the objective glory of God as revealed in his Word. We must claim the promises of God and seek God's glory in every dimension of our being.

Do we want homosexuals to find heterosexuality? Yes, as much as we want liars to become tellers of the truth and adulterers to be faithful; as much as we want the disobedient to become obedient and the proud to be humble. Thankfully, God provides for us even what he requires of us. The grace to be humble is given to the proud, *if* the proud heart leans only on Christ. Similarly, the grace to fulfill God's purposes for human sexuality will be given even to those who find their hearts full of sinful sexual desires. By the grace of Christ, homosexuals and het-

erosexuals alike can be transformed so that we actually begin to desire what God wills for us to desire.

This is what the church is all about. We are the people who gather together to exult in the grace of God and to proclaim the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ as the answer to human sinfulness. We come together to hold each other accountable to the Word of God and to rejoice in what God is doing in us until the very day that we die. We come together in the assurance of the resurrection and glorification that is to come. Like the apostle Paul, we are convinced that “he who began a good work in [us] will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6).

6. We must be the people who love homosexuals more than homosexuals love homosexuality.

This is a tough challenge. We have to be the people who, because we are possessed by a passion to see God’s glory in his creation, love homosexuals more than they love their sin. This means that our love has to be tenacious. This will also require that we come to know and establish relationships with those struggling with homosexuality. Armed with an awareness of both the problem and God’s provision, we have no right to believe that homosexuals are beyond the grace of God or that any individual is beyond the hope of redemption and transformation.

Every sinner loves his sin, but the church must love sinners more than sinners love their sinfulness. This is precisely how Christ has loved us, and we must love other sinners even as Christ has loved us.

We cannot allow a homosexual to reduce his identity to being a homosexual. We live in an age of identity politics when people say, “What I do in my sex life is who I am—period!” We are the people who know that this is nonsense. Sex is a part of who we are—a vitally important and powerful part—but it is only a part of the total human being. Our sexual desires and sexual practices are genuine pointers to our inner reality and our relationship to God, but sexuality is not the end of the story.

Christians must be the people who refuse to put the period at the end of the sexual sentence. We cannot allow homosexuals to be isolated as a class of persons who are beyond the grace of God and exist in some special category of human sinfulness. We must be the people who say to homosexuals, “I am going to love you even more than you love your sin,

*Homosexual Marriage as a Challenge to the Church:
Biblical and Cultural Reflections*

127

because in this same way I was loved until I came to know the Lord Jesus Christ. Someone loved me more than I loved my sin, and this is how I came to know my Savior.”

Our doctrine of salvation must be accompanied by a strong doctrine of the church. The *ecclesia*—the purchased people of God—are a covenanted community gathered in mutual accountability to the Word of God. In the bonds of Christ, we are to love each other even more than we love ourselves. Even in the process of church discipline, our purpose is not only to protect the integrity of the people of God but to love persons into obedience and conformity with the Word of God. The common life of the church is really all about this mutual accountability, mutual encouragement, and exhorting each other to faithfulness to the authority of God’s Word. The church sins when we deal with these issues wrongly, unscripturally, and superficially.

It is easy to detect a sense of fatigue setting in among Christians in America who are tired of arguing, debating, and speaking the truth about homosexuality in the midst of a fallen and rebellious culture. This may be an understandable response to the difficulty of our task, but it is also evidence of sin. We are now coming to a point of cultural crisis, and the church is called to faithfulness as we declare God’s truth with a boldness never summoned before. The church must demonstrate even *more candor, more courage, and more truth-telling*. We must demonstrate more genuine compassion as we reach out to a civilization that is literally falling from within. Even as civilization falls, the church of the Lord Jesus Christ must stand as the people of God, determined to keep its wits as it shows the love of God and seeks the glory of Jesus Christ, in season and out of season.

7. We must be the people who tell the truth about homosexual marriage and thus refuse to accept even its possibility because we love and seek the glory of God for all.

We must love homosexuals so much that we refuse to accept the very concept of homosexual marriage. The normalizing of homosexual behavior through the radical reformulation of marriage will take the sinfulness of homosexuality to a new level of moral rebellion. God’s glory demonstrated through marriage and the covenant that he created will

be corrupted so utterly that idolatry will be institutionalized and the truth will be suppressed in radical unrighteousness.

Why is the issue of marriage so preeminent in the biblical worldview? Why is marriage an issue of such urgent attention? It is so preeminent and so urgent simply because marriage as God intended and established it is a norm that declares to all creation that *everything* else falls short of God's intention. Compared to the divine standard of marriage, every disordered sexual passion is revealed to be disordered. Therefore, if your ambition is to normalize sexual misbehavior, you must "denormalize" marriage. So long as it remains the norm, the institution of marriage represents the repudiation of every sinful sexual lifestyle. It stands as a monument to the only right ordering of human sexuality and relatedness.

For the Christian church, marriage is far more than a legal contract, a matter of constitutional interpretation, or a political or sociological issue of debate. It is a deeply *theological* matter.

We have no guarantee that this culture will not crumble or that this society will somehow find a way to apply brakes to our headlong rush into moral rebellion. Nevertheless, our love of neighbor as commanded by Christ must compel us to do all within our power to assure that marriage is recognized in this culture as God intended and designed it to be.

In the end, the church may be the last people on earth who really know what marriage is. This knowledge of marriage may in fact become one of the missiological manifestations of the church in this fallen world.

Should we have political, cultural, legal, sociological, and constitutional concerns about the concept of homosexual marriage? Of course we should, and we should engage these issues in public debate in a way that demonstrates Christian candor and genuine understanding. But we can win the political and constitutional battles and still lose the war. Our greatest concern must be spiritual and theological, not political and procedural.

The church must gather its wits, summon its convictions, and speak the truth about marriage before a fallen world. We must exult in marriage, even as we winsomely, happily, humbly, and honestly point to marriage as the metaphor of Christ's relationship to his church. We must bear witness to God's love in the right ordering of marriage as husbands

*Homosexual Marriage as a Challenge to the Church:
Biblical and Cultural Reflections*

129

and wives come together in purity, giving themselves devotedly to each other and lovingly receiving all the gifts God intended in marriage.

Christian couples must also recognize that our marriages are crucial tests of Christian discipleship, even as others denigrate marriage as a mere cultural contrivance. We must demonstrate God's glory as we raise our children to admire marriage and to aim themselves for sexual purity and the eager embrace of marriage as God's gift. The happiest people on earth should be Christians, who find their happiness in receiving God's gifts, and who can point to marriage as a paramount display of the glory of God. As the bride of Christ, the church cannot fail to speak courageously and eagerly about marriage without forfeiting our own identity and insulting our Savior. We must be the people who by God's grace know what marriage is and why it matters.

We must be the people who cannot talk about homosexual marriage simply by talking about homosexual marriage. We must be the people who cannot talk about sex without talking about marriage, and the people who cannot talk about anything of substance or significance without dependence on the Bible. We must be the people who have a theology adequate to explain the deadly deception of sin, as well as a theology adequate to explain Christ's victory over sin. We must be honest about sin as the denial of God's glory, even as we point to redemption as the glory of God restored. We must be the people who love homosexuals more than homosexuals love homosexuality, and we must be the people who tell the truth about homosexual marriage and refuse to accept even its conceptual possibility, because we know what is at stake.

May the church of the Lord Jesus Christ be led by our Savior to be faithful in the face of this great challenge.