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gay marriage and homosexuality

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President Barack Obama made history with his recent declaration, "It is important for me to go ahead and affirm that I think same-sex couples should be able to get married." His statement marks the first time a U.S. president has publicly endorsed gay marriage.

Mr. Obama's declaration followed Vice-President Joe Biden's comments that he was "absolutely comfortable" with same-sex marriages and was heartened by their growing acceptance across the country. The next day, Education Secretary Arne Duncan stated that he also supports same-sex marriage. He joined Housing Secretary Shaun Donovan, who spoke out in support of gay marriage last fall.

Same-sex marriage is one of the most divisive issues in American culture. Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Vermont, and Washington, D.C. grant gay marriage licenses. After North Carolina's recent vote, 12 states now prohibit same-sex marriage via statute and 30 via their state constitution.

Denominations have been debating the ordination of practicing homosexuals for years. The Episcopal Church and the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. have approved rules allowing such ordination, while United Methodists continue to discuss the issue.

What does the Bible say on the controversial and emotional issue of gay marriage and homosexuality?

Interpreting the Bible

My goal is to review the Scriptures on this issue as clearly, succinctly, and practically as possible. When I taught principles of biblical interpretation as a seminary professor, I often told my students, "The Bible can never mean what it never meant." We must seek the intended meaning of the text as understood in its original context. I also said often, "The only word God is obligated to bless is his word." What matters most is not my opinions or yours, but God's.

Such a position is not held universally on the subject of homosexuality. For instance, Dr. Walter Wink states in his thoughtful essay, *Homosexuality and the Bible*, "Where the bible [sic] mentions homosexual behavior at all, it clearly condemns it. I freely grant that. The issue is precisely whether that Biblical judgment is correct."¹ Dr. Wink then compares homosexuality to the issue of slavery: he argues that the Bible condones

¹ <http://www.bridges-across.org/ba/winkhombib.htm>, accessed 10 May 2012.

slavery, states that the Bible was wrong on that subject, and concludes that it is equally wrong on the issue before us.

I respect greatly Dr. Wink's contributions to New Testament studies, especially on the subjects of spiritual warfare and nonviolence. But I could not disagree more strongly with his assertion, "The issue is precisely whether that Biblical judgment is correct." Without digressing into an extended defense of biblical authority, I wish to state clearly that I believe every word of the Bible to be the word of God. I believe the Scriptures to possess the same authority for our lives today as they possessed for their first hearers and readers. For my purposes, the question we'll seek to answer is, What does the Bible intend to teach on this subject?

The sin of Sodom

The Supreme Court made history on June 27, 2003 when it struck down the "sodomy laws" of the state of Texas. In a 6-3 decision, the justices reversed course from a ruling 17 years ago that states could punish homosexuals for private consensual sex. Such activity is typically called "sodomy" because of an event found in Genesis 19.

In a biblical study of homosexuality, the sin of Sodom is usually discussed first. Lot entertained two angels who came to the city to investigate its sins. These angels appeared as men; before they went 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'" (vs. 4-5; all references are from the NIV84). For such sin, "the Lord rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah" (v. 24), destroying them.

Is this text a condemnation of homosexuality? Dr. Wink believes not: "That was a case of ostensibly heterosexual males intent on humiliating strangers by treating them 'like women,' thus demasculinizing them." However, Dr. Wink offers no textual evidence that the men were "ostensibly heterosexual"; his view is only conjectural and stands against the vast majority of interpreters across the centuries.

Dr. Peter Gomes, the late Plummer Professor of Christian Morals and Pusey Minister in the Memorial Church at Harvard University, offered a different approach. He wrote an extremely erudite introduction to the Bible and its message, titled *The Good Book*. Dr. Gomes, himself a homosexual,² treated this passage as an attempted homosexual rape and argued that it does not condemn homosexuality per se.³

² Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (New York, New York: Avon Books, 1996) 164.

³ *Ibid.*, 150-2.

A third approach is suggested by D. Sherwin Bailey in his influential *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*.⁴ Dr. Bailey argues that the Hebrew word for "know," translated "have sex" by the New International Version, relates not to sexual activity but to hospitality. The word appears more than 943 times in the Old Testament, only 12 times in the context of sexual activity.

However, 10 of these 12 occurrences are in the book of Genesis, the context for our text. Lot's response to the crowd, offering his daughters so they can "do what you like with them," makes clear that he interpreted their desires as sexual (Gen. 19:8). Everett Fox's excellent translation of Genesis includes the note, "the meaning is unmistakably sexual."⁵ And Jude 7 settles the question as to whether sexual activity is meant by our text: "Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion."

It seems clear that the "sin of Sodom" involved homosexual activity. However, it is equally clear that the crowd attempted to rape the two men (Gen. 19:5). As a result, I don't believe that we can build a biblical position regarding homosexuality on the basis of this event. The passage obviously condemns sexual assault. Whether it also condemns consensual same-sex relations is not as clear.

The Leviticus prohibitions

The next texts typically cited on our subject are far less ambiguous. Leviticus 18:22 states, "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable." Leviticus 20:13 adds, "If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads." The Hebrew is as clear as the English translation.

The obvious meaning of these commands seems to be that homosexual relations are forbidden by Scripture. This is the way the texts have typically been understood by Jewish and Christian interpreters across the centuries. It is the way most read the text today.

But those who advocate homosexuality as an acceptable biblical lifestyle have found ways to dissent. Dr. Wink admits that Leviticus 18:22 "unequivocally condemn[s] same-sex sexual behavior." But he theorizes that the ancient Hebrews saw any sexual activity which could not lead to the creation of life as a form of abortion or murder. He adds that the Jews would have seen homosexuality as "alien behavior, representing yet one more incursion of pagan civilization into Jewish life." While this is true, it does not make the biblical text less authoritative or normative.

⁴ Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (North Haven, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1975).

⁵ Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: A New Translation with Introductions, Commentary, and Notes* (New York, New York: Schocken Books, 1995 [1983] 80).

He then cites the penalty for homosexual behavior in Leviticus 20:13. In his reasoning, if we see capital punishment for homosexuality as obsolete today, we should see its prohibition of this behavior as equally outdated. He then cites a list of other biblical ethics he considers to be obsolete or in need of reinterpretation: intercourse during menstruation, polygamy, concubinage, and slavery among others.

Other critics see the levitical laws as expressive of worship codes, not universal moral standards. They argue that all such laws were intended only for their day and time, likening them to kosher dietary restrictions and harvest regulations.

Are there objective ways to respond to these assertions?

First, let's consider the claim that these Old Testament laws have no relevance for New Testament believers, but should be classified with kosher laws. A basic rule of biblical interpretation is that any Old Testament teaching which is repeated in the New Testament carries the weight of precept today.⁶ As we will see, the prohibition against homosexual activity is clearly repeated in the New Testament (Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; 1 Timothy 1:8-11). Even those Old Testament statements which are not repeated in the New Testament carry the force of principle; for instance, kosher laws teach us that God cares about our bodies and health.

Second, it is claimed that the Leviticus passages express worship code, not moral standard. The logic is that these texts were written for priests and their duties of worship preparation and leadership, and do not apply to the larger family of faith. However, the chapter in question begins, "The Lord said to Moses, 'Speak to the Israelites and say to them . . .'" (18:1). Nothing in the chapter limits its application or significance to the Levites. Rather, the chapter exhorts all Israel to "keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them" (v. 4).

Third, critics state that the punishment prescribed for homosexual activity (Lev. 20:13) makes the text obsolete today. We're told that unless we are willing to execute homosexuals, we must regard the text as irrelevant. Let's apply this logic to other sins for which execution was prescribed: child sacrifice (Lev. 20:2), adultery (v. 10), incest (vs. 11-12), and bestiality (vs. 15-16). Are we to consider these sins acceptable today? A reinterpretation of the penalty prescribed by a law does not justify the decision to ignore the law itself.

The levitical code was given to Israel at a crucial time in her early formation. The nation had no functional law process or court system. Her moral character was not yet formed. And so the Lord gave the nation clear and enforceable standards which would help solidify and preserve her spiritual future. The spirit of the levitical prohibition is clear: homosexuality is not to be practiced or accepted by the nation.

⁶ See Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) 153.

Fourth, some argue that the Leviticus prohibitions of homosexuality are to be classed with other biblical statements that can be considered obsolete, such as the apparent biblical endorsement of slavery. This claim is cited so frequently that we need to consider it next.

Slavery and the Scriptures

My move to Atlanta in 1994 provided my first exposure to the remarkable colonial history of the East Coast. We Texans think something is historical if it happened while Tom Landry was coach of the Dallas Cowboys. When people living in South Carolina speak of "the War," they could mean the Civil War (though they'll say "there was nothing civil about it") or the Revolutionary War. It is a fascinating region, with one exception.

While traveling in Charleston one day, my wife and I came upon the "slave trading warehouse." This was a place where slaves were brought to America on ships and sold at market. I can still remember the building and my revulsion upon seeing it. I believe that racism is the greatest sin in America, the failure which keeps us from addressing our other failures. Racism makes inner city crime a "black" problem and suburban drug abuse a "white" problem, when they're all our problems.

There is no question that biblical passages were used to advance slavery in the South. Citing this tragic fact, critics claim that the Scriptures are as outdated on slavery as they are on homosexuality. If they can prove that the Bible was wrong on the former, they can assert more easily that it is wrong on the latter. As a result, while the issue of slavery in the Bible is a far larger subject than we have space to consider in full, it is important that we understand some essential facts on this difficult subject.

Slavery in the Old Testament

Let's begin by exploring slavery in the Hebrew Bible. Unfortunately, slavery was an accepted part of life in Old Testament times. Historians know of no culture or ancient literature that questioned its existence or necessity. Persons became slaves in a variety of ways: they were born to enslaved parents (Gen. 17:23), purchased (Gen. 37:28), or sold themselves to pay a debt (Lev. 25:39-55). Breaking into a home was punishable by enslavement (Exodus 22:3); prisoners of war were commonly enslaved (Joel 3:6). The children of Israel enslaved the Canaanites they conquered in the Promised Land (Judges 1:28).

Slaves in Israel were considered to be property, and could be bought and sold (Ex. 21:32). However, they were granted protection against murder, permanent injury, or undue physical labor (cf. Ex. 21:20, 26; 23:12). Hebrew household slaves were circumcised (Gen. 17:12) and included at religious meals (Ex. 12:44). But why did the Old Testament not decry this practice in general and move to free all those enslaved?

In many ways, it did. There were several ways a Hebrew slave could be freed (a process called "manumission"). An individual could be purchased and set free (Ex. 21:8). A

slave permanently injured by his master was to be freed (Ex. 21:26). Hebrews were to be held as slaves for no longer than six years (Deuteronomy 15:12). And the Jubilee Year, which occurred every 49 years, was to free all Israelite slaves (Lev. 25:50).

But still we ask, why did the Old Testament sanction this practice at all? In fact, it simply recognized a reality of all ancient civilizations. Its rules minimized this evil, protected its victims more fully than did any other society, and provided means for their eventual freedom. But the New Testament would bring God's word on the subject to much fuller expression.

Slavery in the New Testament

In the Old Testament era, the primary way persons were enslaved was through capture in war. But in the first century AD, the breeding of slaves swelled their numbers enormously. Also, large numbers of people sold themselves into slavery as a means of improving their quality of life. Owning and using people as slaves was so commonplace in the Roman Empire that not a single ancient writer is known to have condemned the practice. But all that would begin to change with the advent of the Christian movement.

What was the New Testament attitude toward this institution? And how does this stance affect our study of the issue of homosexuality?

Slavery in the Roman era was dramatically different from the despicable practice as we know it in American history. If you had been walking through any first-century Roman city, you would not have been able to distinguish between slaves and free. Patterns of work and relationships were no different between the two. Some slaves performed manual labor, but others worked as doctors, nurses, household managers, and teachers and scholars. They administered funds and cities. They were typically given an excellent education at the expense of their owners, with the result that many philosophers and tutors were slaves.

Even more amazing to us, it was common for people to sell themselves into slavery to secure such privileges. A person who desired citizenship in the Empire could achieve it by enslaving himself to a citizen and then purchasing his freedom. Slavery was more a process than a condition. While there is no doubt that many slaves were abused physically, sexually, and socially, it is also true that at least as many were part of the more privileged strata of society.

The total dependence of the Roman economy upon the labor of slaves made it impossible for the Empire to conceive of abolishing this institution. If an economist were to propose that we refuse all goods and services imported from outside America, we'd be equally surprised.

Does the New Testament argue for slavery? Absolutely not.

It is true that no writer attempted to lead his readers to end the institution per se, as this was not possible in the Roman Empire. Those initiating such an uprising would have been quickly annihilated as rebels and threats to Caesar. But several other facts should be noted as well.

First, Paul abolished even the possibility of racial or social discrimination for followers of Jesus: "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26-28). Every believer is our sister or brother. The ground is level at the foot of the cross.

Second, wherever the apostolic church spoke to this issue, it did so with a view to freedom and equality. Paul appealed to Philemon to see his slave, Onesimus, "no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother" (v. 16). Clement, a friend of Paul, wrote in his letter to the Corinthians (ca. AD 90), "We know many among ourselves who have given themselves up to bonds, in order that they might ransom others. Many, too, have surrendered themselves to slavery, that with the price which they received for themselves, they might provide food for others" (ch. 55). And Ignatius (died AD 107) wrote to Polycarp: "Do not despise either male or female slaves, yet neither let them be puffed up with conceit, but rather let them submit themselves the more, for the glory of God, that they may obtain from God a better liberty."

Third, the New Testament church gave those who were enslaved a family and a home. This was one reason why so many of the earliest believers were slaves. Pastors and congregational leaders were drawn from the ranks both of slaves and free. Christians made no distinction between the two, for their Father welcomed all as his children.

Last, not a single New Testament leader owned slaves or condoned slavery, even though many had the means to purchase them (cf. Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, Barnabas). Their example inspired William Wilberforce and countless other Christians to do all they could to abolish slavery, and we thank God that they were successful.

It is an extremely unfair accusation to claim that the Bible was "wrong" or "outdated" on the issue of slavery, and thus on the subject of homosexuality.

New Testament teachings⁷

Turning to the New Testament, three passages relating to the issue of homosexuality are typically cited.

⁷ Surveys of the biblical materials relating to homosexuality often include Deuteronomy 23:17-18, which outlaws prostitution, whether male or female. But interpreters are divided as to whether this passage relates to homosexuality in general.

Romans 1

The first is Romans 1:26-27:

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

At first reading, Paul seems clearly to consider homosexual activity to be wrong. But there is another way to interpret the passage, one suggested by those who support homosexuality as a biblical lifestyle. In their reading, Paul is addressing the issue of heterosexual men and women who choose homosexual activity which is "unnatural" for them. If this is true, Paul's statement bears no relevance to those who consider themselves homosexual by innate or "natural" orientation.

Is such an interpretation the most objective way to read the text? No, for two reasons. First, Paul describes homosexual acts themselves as "shameful lusts" (v. 26), "indecent acts" and "perversion" (v. 27). To suggest that his descriptions relate only to the (supposed) decision to engage in such activity by heterosexuals is to strain the Greek syntax beyond its meaning.

Second, Paul states that men who engage in homosexual activity "abandoned natural relations with women," making clear the fact that he considers heterosexuality to be "natural." Likewise, he describes lesbian activity as "unnatural."

One can conclude that Paul was wrong, that homosexual orientation can be "natural" and its sexual expression therefore "natural relations." But one cannot argue on the basis of this text that homosexuality is biblical, for Paul's words clearly state the opposite.

1 Corinthians 6

The next New Testament text typically included in our topic is 1 Corinthians 6:9-10:

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

"Male prostitutes" could refer to men who sold themselves sexually, either in heterosexual or homosexual activity. As translated by the New International Version, the word would not necessarily speak to our subject, as prostitution of any kind is almost universally understood to be immoral.

But the Greek word so translated is more likely a technical term for the passive partner in homosexual activity.⁸ As a result, it may well refer to one who engages in homosexuality, without a necessary connection to prostitution. The activity it describes makes it harder to assert that Paul had no concept of homosexual orientation, but meant his words only for heterosexuals who practice (for unexplained reasons) homosexual behavior.

The other term germane to our discussion is translated by the NIV as "homosexual offenders." The Greek word is defined by Rienecker as "a male who has sexual relations with a male, homosexual."⁹ Here the word has no connection with prostitution. The text clearly prohibits homosexual activity in all its forms.

1 Timothy 1

The last passage for our survey is part of Paul's first letter to Timothy. Here is the paragraph in which our verse is found:

We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. We also know that 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 adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me (1 Timothy 1:8-11).

The phrase in question is found in verse 10, translated by the NIV as "adulterers and perverts." "Adulterers" renders the root Greek word *pornos*, from which we get "pornography," and means one who practices sexual immorality. When accented on the second syllable, it frequently refers to one who operates a brothel. When accented on the first syllable, as in our text, it can refer to homosexual activity.

"Perverts" renders the Greek word *arsenokoites*, typically translated as "homosexual." We met it at 1 Corinthians 6:9, where it is translated by the NIV as "homosexual offenders." The word means literally "one who has sexual relations with men." While some attempt to interpret the word as it is found in 1 Corinthians 6 with reference to prostitution, such a connection is even more difficult to maintain in the present text.

Jesus and homosexuality

Jesus never spoke to the issue of homosexuality. Nothing in the Gospels relates to the issue. Does this fact mean that our Lord considered the issue unimportant? Why did he not address it?

⁸ Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, trans. and rev. by Cleon L. Rogers, Jr. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980) 2:56.

⁹ *Ibid.*

The reason is simple: homosexual activity was forbidden in his culture. Jesus didn't need to speak to this issue since the prohibitions in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 were still normative in first-century Judaism.

Only when Christianity spread into the larger Greco-Roman world did the issue gain relevance. Paul had to address it in writing to Romans, Corinthians and Ephesians (1 Timothy), because homosexuality was a problem in their cultures. Letters written primarily to Jewish Christians (such as Hebrews and James) didn't discuss the issue since it was not an option for them.

Summarizing the data

I am not gay, have no family members who are, and have no experience with this lifestyle. So who am I to judge? Why don't we just let consenting adults do what they want, so long as no one else is hurt? Many in our society take this approach to the subject, whatever their own sexual preferences might be. To do otherwise seems to be intolerant and judgmental, two words our postmodern, relativistic society condemns.

On the other hand, believers and those interested in the Christian faith do well to ask what God's word says on every subject present in our culture. An objective reading of history and Scripture will inform our faith and make it more relevant to our problems and issues. Now that we have completed such a survey regarding homosexuality, let's summarize what we've found and ask how it applies to our lives and relationships.

We have surveyed the six passages typically cited with regard to this issue. We considered the attempt by men in Sodom to "have sex" with Lot's angelic visitors (Gen. 19:5), and God's consequent punishment against the city. While homosexual practice is clearly part of the text, the passage is less clear as to whether God's judgment was against homosexuality itself or the crowd's abusive attempt to commit homosexual rape.

Next we explored Leviticus 18:22, with its clear prohibition against homosexual activity, and Leviticus 20:13, with its prescription of the death penalty for such activity. Since some consider these passages as "outdated" as the Bible's (supposed) endorsement of slavery, we discussed the latter issue briefly. After noting the biblical abolition of social and racial discrimination (Galatians 3:26-28) and the fact that followers of Jesus were the leaders in abolishing the institution of slavery, we concluded that the Bible is being unfairly interpreted by its critics on this issue.

Then we focused on Romans 1:26-27, with its description of homosexual acts as "unnatural" and "indecent." We closed our survey with brief studies of 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:8-11, passages which are considered by some to refer to homosexual prostitution but which seem more objectively to forbid homosexual practice in any context.

As we have seen, proponents of homosexuality as a biblical lifestyle attempt to reinterpret these passages. Note, however, that no biblical passage can be cited with

confidence as an endorsement of this activity. No biblical leader or ethical model taught by the Scriptures can be construed effectively as practicing this lifestyle.

The Old Testament prohibitions we have discussed in our survey are unambiguous, and are renewed in the New Testament. In completing our brief biblical survey of this issue, it seems clear that Scripture intends us to see homosexual practice as unbiblical.

Practical questions

What about the argument that homosexuality is inherited? If this is true, at least for some, how can such activity be wrong?

Some homosexuals claim that "God made me this way." However, the connection between genetics and homosexuality is tenuous at best. Where research has seemed to indicate some physical propensity toward homosexual orientation, others in the field have refuted such a conclusion. It is widely believed that alcoholism can be an inherited genetic propensity, but no one would therefore endorse its practice. While this is an unfortunate analogy regarding homosexuals, it illustrates the fact that not every genetic tendency should be endorsed (if homosexuality is in fact such).

What about environmental conditions? Studies have been conducted of identical twins who were separated at birth, where one developed a homosexual lifestyle but the other did not. Particular family or circumstantial patterns are sometimes seen in these cases to contribute to sexual orientation, but other interpreters disagree with such conclusions.

Those who practice homosexuality seem to fall into two categories. Some can remember decisions, choices, and circumstances by which they moved into this lifestyle. Others believe this lifestyle to be a sexual orientation which, for them, existed from birth or prior to conscious choice and intention. It is obviously both impossible and wrong for us to say which category is appropriate to a specific individual.

At the same time, it is clear that homosexuality is an unbiblical lifestyle. So, what practical conclusions can guide those who seek to relate biblically and positively to homosexuals?

First, a homosexual person deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. He or she is acting out a lifestyle which many of us understand to be unbiblical; but so are any of us who practice slander, gossip, heterosexual lust, or egotistical pride. So-called "gay bashing" is always wrong. Any action or attitude which demeans a person or makes them less valuable is the opposite of the grace and unconditional love of Christ.

Second, homosexuality is not the "unpardonable sin" (cf. Mark 3:29). The only sin God cannot forgive is that sin which rejects his forgiveness. To be more specific, the Holy Spirit works to convict us of our need for salvation through Christ. If we refuse this offer of saving grace, God cannot forgive us since we have rejected the only means by which his forgiveness can be given.

As a result, whether homosexuality is a person's choice or orientation, that person does not stand outside the grace and love of God. All sex outside marriage is wrong, whether homosexual or heterosexual. Which has divided more churches: homosexual or heterosexual sin? Homosexual activity is no more unbiblical than many other sins listed in Scripture, including hatred, slander, gossip, and gluttony. We are wrong to reject the person because he or she is practicing a lifestyle which we consider unbiblical. In other ways, so are we.

Third, and in contrast to my previous statements, we do others no good if we endorse that which is unbiblical or hurtful to them. There are twin temptations here. One is to refuse any assertion that might appear judgmental with regard to homosexuality, lest we appear to be rejecting the individual. The other is to condemn the person rather than the behavior. Our Father never commits either mistake. He always exposes that which hurts his children, all the while loving them as his children.

Fourth, the biblical prohibitions of homosexual activity are intended for our benefit. Studies indicate that homosexuals live as much as 20 years less than the general population.¹⁰ Surveys demonstrate that the average male homosexual has hundreds of sex partners in his lifetime. Monogamous homosexual relationships typically last between two and three years.

Homosexuals are at much higher risk for HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, Human Papillomavirus, gonorrhea, and syphilis. Domestic violence, depression, and suicide rates are also much higher in the gay population. One study of twins found that homosexuals with same-sex partners were 6.5 times more likely than their twins to have attempted suicide. The higher rate was not attributable to substance abuse or mental health disorders.¹¹ God's word warns us against homosexual activity because our Creator knows what is best for his creation.

Fifth, there is a distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual activity. Scripture consistently and unambiguously teaches that homosexual acts are wrong. However, it does not speak to those whose sexual preference is homosexual but who do not act on their orientation.

I believe homosexual orientation to be one result of the Fall. There is no reference to homosexuality before the sin of Eden. God instructed Adam and Eve to "be fruitful and increase in number" (Gen. 1:28). But when the first humans fell, all of humanity was affected by sin: "the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (Romans 8:22). We must deal with physical, psychological, and emotional difficulties that were not part of God's intention for us.

¹⁰ <http://www.lifesitenews.com/news/archive/ldn/2005/jun/05060606>, accessed 10 May 2012.

¹¹ For further data on health and homosexuality see <http://www.frc.org/get.cfm?i=Is01B1>, accessed 10 May 2012.

I understand homosexual orientation to be one example of our fallen nature and world. As with other challenges, those who face this temptation deserve our intercession and support.

Sixth, those whose sexual orientation is homosexual should practice celibacy. I know that this statement will engender resistance from the gay community. Many will counter that I have no idea how difficult such a lifestyle decision would be, and they're right. But given that I understand the Bible clearly to teach that homosexuality is an unbiblical lifestyle, the only conclusion I can draw is that the practice of this lifestyle will lead the person out of the will of God and into harmful behavior. Abstinence is, by this logic, the option which is in that person's best personal interest.

Last, we should pray for those in the homosexual lifestyle to come to repentance and transformation. While we wish to offer the dignity and respect of Christian grace to all persons, we cannot truly love them while endorsing that which is unbiblical in their lives.

After including homosexuality in his list of sins (1 Cor. 6:9), Paul next told the Corinthians: "And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (v. 11). I recognize that some will read this paragraph as bigoted prejudice. However, any of us would want to help those we care about to practice a biblical lifestyle which leads to the fullest abundance of Christ's joy (John 10:10). This is the honest motivation behind my suggestion that intercession is appropriate for the gay people we know and love.

Scripture calls us to maintain that difficult balance which loves the person while opposing that which is unbiblical in his or her life. We want others to do the same for us, don't we?

Gay marriage: pros and cons

The most heated discussions about homosexuality in recent years relate to gay marriage. Commenting on the recent North Carolina vote that barred same-sex marriage and civil unions, Billy Graham said, "At 93, I never thought we would have to debate the definition of marriage."¹² What issues are at stake in this debate? What does Scripture say on this divisive issue?¹³

¹² <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2113890,00.html>, accessed 10 May 2012.

¹³ For a good overview of the issues involved in gay marriage, see "Should same-sex marriages be legalized?" http://www.balancedpolitics.org/same_sex_marriages.htm, accessed 6 March 2012.

Church and state

Advocates of same-sex marriage (SSM) claim that to deny this right is a violation of the separation of church and state. Their arguments: marriage is a civil activity recognized and regulated by the state. Just because a religion thinks same-sex couples should not marry is not sufficient grounds for the state to refuse the same.

If we begin legislating religious morality, where do we stop? Jesus said that lust is wrong (Matt 5:28); Scripture permits divorce only for those who have been abandoned by an unbelieving spouse (1 Cor. 7:15) or in the case of adultery (Matt. 5:32). Orthodox Judaism and Islam both require specific dietary codes to be followed; are we to require all restaurants and grocery stores to comply? What do we do when religions disagree?

Opponents of SSM counter that such legislation could force religious leaders to accept or even perform marriages with which they disagree theologically. Their arguments: nearly all religions believe homosexuality to be wrong. This is not simply an evangelical group seeking to force its beliefs on others.

If the state legitimizes SSMs, will faith-based organizations be required to extend spousal benefits to same-sex families? One might claim that churches are unlikely to hire gay employees, but will they now need to check sexual orientation more thoroughly before hiring? What of faith-based university and hospitals with thousands of employees? It is likely that some SSM partners will receive spousal benefits from organizations that would not willingly grant them. Will churches be required to perform gay marriages? Will ministers be able to decline such services?

Marriage benefits

Advocates of SSM claim that all couples deserve marriage benefits, whatever their sexual orientation. Their arguments: marriage affects tax status, insurance benefits, and joint ownership of property. Medical decisions are often affected by spousal relationships. For instance, if a person becomes critically ill, visitation may be refused to any but immediate family. Without SSM, the partner could not visit the loved one, much less oversee medical care.

Economic burdens such as home ownership, joint checking accounts, medical bills, and school tuition are more easily borne by couples. Without SSM it is more difficult for gay couples to share these responsibilities. Some research indicates that the gay population in states banning SSM experience a doubling of anxiety disorders. Bans on SSM have been tied to an increase in the rates of HIV infections.

Opponents counter that civil contracts can extend the economic and legal benefits of marriage to gay couples without SSM. And they point to studies indicating that gay marriage does not lessen the occurrence of sexually-transmitted diseases.

Minority rights

Advocates of SSM claim that gay people are a minority whose rights must be protected by the law. They are being discriminated against by marriage laws that offer benefits only to the majority. We would never think of disallowing marriage for African-Americans or Hispanics. It is the same with gay couples.

Opponents counter that the state has no obligation to protect the rights of all minorities. This logic would require the state to endorse polygamy, adult-child and direct-family marriages. Racial status is clearly not a choice and does not inherently convey negative consequences. Many scientists believe that homosexuality is not genetically conditioned; much evidence indicates that some homosexuals can leave this orientation; there are many negative consequences associated with the homosexual lifestyle.

The "full faith and credit" clause of the Constitution (Article IV Section 1) means that states have to respect the "public acts, records, and judicial proceedings of every other state." Could this clause be interpreted to mandate that states accept SSMs performed in other states, in the same way a driver's license issued in Texas is valid in Georgia?

Legislating personal morality

Advocates of SSM claim that the state has no right to legislate personal morality. They argue that SSM involves no one but the couple and their families. If they choose to marry, the state should not forbid them this choice. Others may disagree, as is their right, but they should not be able to prevent gay couples from marrying.

If the state could only marry couples where there are no objections to the marriage, the number of marriages in America would decline considerably. Many parents do not feel their children are ready emotionally or financially to take this step. Some parents object strongly to their child's choice of spouse. Some religions reject marriage outside their traditions. Yet the State does not forbid such marriages, leaving these decisions to the family. It should be the same with SSM.

Opponents counter that the state legislates personal morality with every law it enacts. Laws are typically created to protect citizens from each other and from themselves. The erosion of family and marriage is a compelling reason for the state to protect heterosexual marriage. They also claim that the negative consequences of homosexual activity should be considered. And they warn that if SSM is legalized, public schools could be required to teach that SSM is equivalent to heterosexual marriage, despite the beliefs of many parents.

Adoptions

Advocates of SSM suggest that adoptions would likely increase, offering great benefit to children without families. Gay couples cannot procreate naturally, so many will likely adopt children. Since a large percentage of same-sex couples are in higher-income

demographics, they will be able to provide more effectively for children. And studies indicate that a parent's sexual orientation is unrelated to his or her ability to provide a nurturing, healthy environment for children.

Where advocates see positives in SSM adoptions, opponents see negatives. They state that same-sex adoptions have been so infrequent that we do not yet know their long-term consequences for children. However, a child's greatest single influence is the behavior of his or her parents. Recent studies indicate that children raised by gay parents are more likely to become gay themselves.¹⁴

Family values

While opponents argue that SSM would erode family values, advocates claim that the opposite is true. SSM would encourage gay couples to make a lasting commitment to each other, refusing sexual relations with others and engaging in long-term monogamy. Such commitments would lessen sexually-transmitted diseases and invest in the social network of our society.

Opponents counter that SSM would not necessarily strengthen the commitments of gay couples or reduce sexually-transmitted disease. Rather, it would redefine marriage in such a way as to make the institution less meaningful or healthy.

Heterosexual marriage is no guarantee of long-term commitment, as the current divorce rate indicates. Marriage is also no guarantee of fidelity. STDs are unfortunately found in heterosexual partners as well as singles. If SSM were legal, more gay couples would marry for financial reasons, not out of monogamous commitment. In addition, SSMs confuse children as regards gender roles and may lead more children into homosexual lifestyles.

The right to marriage

Advocates state that same-sex couples deserve the right to celebrate their love and commitment in marriage. Some opponents of SSM suggest that "civil unions" or other

¹⁴ In one study, 27% of lesbian parents' children identified themselves as homosexual, and 19% of the children of gay men. By contrast, 5 to 10 percent of the children of heterosexual parents self-identify as homosexual (<http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/researcher-children-of-same-sex-couples-more-likely-to-be-homosexual/>, accessed 8 March 2012). Other studies place the number even higher—children of homosexual couples are four to ten times more likely to develop a "non-heterosexual preference" than other children. Between 8% and 21% of homosexually parented children ultimately identify as non-heterosexual; approximately 2% of the general population is non-heterosexual (http://www.drtraycehansen.com/Pages/writings_prohomo.html, accessed 8 March 2012).

legal contracts are sufficient. However, if these are enough for couples in love, why do heterosexual couples insist on marriage?

Opponents ask: if any couples who wish to marry are given this right, what would stop polygamous unions or marriages between adults and children or immediate relatives? Proponents counter that a federal law could be crafted that permits marriage only between two adults over the age of 18 who are not immediate relatives.

President Obama's position

The gay marriage debate escalated greatly with President Obama's statement endorsing same-sex marriage. What were his reasons? The president cited aides "who are in incredibly committed monogamous same-sex relationships who are raising kids together." He thought about members of our military "who are out there fighting on my behalf, and yet feel constrained . . . because they're not able to commit themselves in a marriage." And he believes that the Golden Rule requires him to support what he calls "same sex equality."¹⁵

My purpose in responding is not to criticize Mr. Obama personally. God's word calls us to support our elected leaders: "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established" (Rom. 13:1).

At the same time, early Christians make clear the fact that Scripture must be our highest authority. When Peter was ordered by the rulers of his nation to stop preaching the gospel, he responded: "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19-20).

Taking Scripture as my highest authority, I must respectfully disagree with the president's position and logic regarding gay marriage. The Bible intends marriage to be between a man and a woman (Genesis 2:24). Undoubtedly there are people in "committed monogamous same-sex relationships," as Mr. Obama observed. But should we build our moral positions on unchanging truth or personal experience? Would his logic endorse committed polygamous relationships? What about adult-child or inter-family relationships? Once we change our laws on the basis of personal experience or preferences, where do we stop?

I am as grateful as the president for our military, but question whether unbiblical activity is more legitimate because it is practiced by soldiers or any other subset of our population. And given Paul's opposition to homosexual activity, I wonder if the apostle would feel that the Golden Rule sanctions such behavior. If you were engaged in harmful behavior, would it be better for me to affirm you or warn you?

¹⁵ <http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5goGPLj8MXXOz-7YfouKFjpHzW1zA?docId=94086fed3c1c44b794b801660865ee07>, accessed 10 May 2012.

These remarks are not intended to endorse any political candidate. But I am convinced that a nation which wants to experience God's best must live biblically. As I continue to intercede daily for our president (1 Timothy 2:1-4), I will pray for him to lead our nation according to God's standards. And I will pray that I live the same way.

Conclusion

I have written this essay with several personal friends in mind: a mother of a gay son, a brother of a gay sister, a son whose father is divorcing his wife and announcing his homosexuality, and a close college friend who several years ago declared his homosexuality and is no longer in vocational Christian ministry.

I want to assure them that God loves each of us. He is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance and faith in his Son (2 Peter 3:9). He so loved the world that he gave his Son for us all (John 3:16). Nothing we do, no matter how unbiblical, can separate us from his love for us. Your son, sister, father, or friend is loved by our Father in heaven.

In examining gay marriage and homosexuality in light of Scripture, my desire is not to condemn but to offer biblical truth. This survey is written with the prayer that the Lord of Scripture will use his word to bring healing, hope, and help to hearts and homes troubled by these issues. To the degree that these thoughts have shed more light than heat, my prayer will be answered.