

## **God Affirms: LGBTQ+ Personhood is Not a Sin in the Bible**

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Gay marriage is the theological and moral issue of today within mainstream American Christianity. Those of us, such as me, pastoring churches in urban and progressive sociological contexts are losing attendees for moral reasons regardless of which side of this issue we come down on. Older conservative and Evangelical Christians have chosen affirmation of gay marriage and thus LGBTQ+ personhood as the litmus test for what they call “Bible-believing” churches and will flee any church that affirms either. Likewise, many young adults—including those that identify as Christian, seeing persecution of the gay community and rejection of gay marriage as morally wrong, will refuse to both attend or stay at a church that is not fully affirming of gay marriage and LGBTQ+ personhood. Silence for any individual church is not an option as the LGBTQ+ community has—correctly—recognized that silence has been used in recent decades by churches to hide their lack of acceptance of this community.

This is heartbreaking. A Gospel that was announced to a group of poor shepherds in a field as “good news” of “great joy” to “all people” (Luke 2:9) is correctly viewed as a gospel of bigotry and hate to both our LGBTQ+ siblings and those who ally with that beloved community. At the same time, many sincere Christians who love God and want to love their LGBTQ+ siblings well are struggling with one simple question— “What does the Bible say here? Can I affirm gay marriage? Or does the Bible condemn both gay marriage and the personhood of this community?”

A Pastor who has worked in Christian ministry for twenty-two years, I have sat with these questions within Evangelical Christianity for twenty-four years, since Bible College when I started working and living in one of the largest gay neighborhoods in the Midwest. During these years of young adult formation, Christianity was presenting LGBTQ+ individuals as “the other,” “godless,” while I was finding friends in the community that directly contradicted that flawed narrative.

It is not enough for me to say God Affirms LGBTQ+ personhood and marriage based on God’s character or the arc of human morality. For those of you within Evangelical Christianity (and many coming out of it), the Bible is our guidepost for life, and you need to see God’s affirmation in the text. I have beautiful news for you: the Bible does not condemn gay marriage at all and there is a strong Biblical case for the affirmation of LGBTQ+ personhood. This is a nuanced Biblical issue and there are no simple answers in the Biblical text. However, when we wade through the Bible on this difficult issue, a message becomes relatively clear: God affirms, both gay marriage and LGBTQ+ personhood. This gospel message of Jesus Christ is always good news of great joy to all people, and when it ceases to be that for an entire people group, it is fair to ask if what is preached is still the gospel of Jesus Christ.

### **Part I: Is it a sin?**

#### **1: The Historical Context:**

Is gay marriage and LGBTQ+ Personhood a “sin?” This has been the primary question of both

Christians and conservative theologians wrestling with gay marriage and LGBTQ+ personhood for the last thirty years. The question itself is the wrong question and demonstrates our lack of understanding of how the New Testament of the Bible approaches sin. As the respected Christian ethicist David Gushee has said,

“I now believe that the traditional interpretation of the most cited passages is questionable and that all that parsing of Greek verbs has distracted attention from the primary moral obligation taught by Jesus — to love our neighbors as ourselves, especially our most vulnerable neighbors.” (Gushee, Evangelical)

Gushee continues to say that “we need to reconsider the entire body of biblical interpretation and tradition related to this issue.” (Gushee, Evangelical) Gushee is correct. Our entire approach to Biblical interpretation on this topic is profoundly flawed, as we will discover here.

At core of this discussion is the historical context of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. When the New Testament of the Bible, particularly Romans 1, the seminal passage in this discussion, condemns some form of sex between men there is credible and intense debate among scholars what he is referring to. Does the Bible address “consensual adult sex? Man-boy sex/abuse? Prostitution? Rape? Abuse of slaves?” (Gushee, Changing Our Mind, 1212) As Gushee says: “in imperial Rome same-sex activity was ‘strongly associated with idolatry, slavery, and social dominance ... often the assertion of the strong over the bodies of the weak.’ Is that what we think today when we hear the term ‘homosexual’? If so, is that an accurate understanding?” (Gushee, Changing our Mind, 1212)

It is not at all clear what the New Testament is condemning, nor do I think that question “is it sin?” is the right way to frame this. That said, while I believe this is the wrong question, it is the question that modern Christian theology has been dominated by and so part one of this essay wrestles with that question. Part two will break down “why” this is the wrong question and then present a Biblical case for God’s affirmation of gay marriage and LGBTQ+ personhood, but for now, this is the seminal question that Christians are asking of the Biblical text.

One also cannot wrestle with the Biblical text without some basic knowledge of sexual expression within the Greco-Roman World of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE and an understanding of the current argument over this topic.

**The Argument:** Seven passages within the Bible reference same-sex relations, five of them appearing to condemn it. Three of these passages are in the New Testament, with Romans chapter one being the pinnacle text declaring something to do with “men with men” and “women” as unnatural and thus immoral (Romans 1:24-27). When scholarship first broke through on this issue, forty years ago, theologians like John Boswell and Robin Scoggs established what became widely accepted tenants that Paul was condemning Pederasty which involves men with pubescent boys, not two consenting adults. Boswell famously states this was a condemnation of abusive homosexual acts committed by heterosexual persons (Ruden 46). It followed that Paul would not have conceived of gay marriage because he only saw same-sex relations as something of profound abuse, thus the Bible was not condemning gay marriage or monogamous gay relationships today in any form.

This widely accepted view was probably an overstatement, and it shifted the goal post for conservative scholarship challenging these assumptions. Now conservative scholars believed they simply needed to establish that yes, in fact, adult same-sex unions did occur in the Greco-Roman world, men with men and women with women, with enough frequency that Paul was aware of it. Scholarship the last thirty-five years has established that, yes, adult same-sex unions did occur (Loader 33) including among women, with Scoggs research documenting countless examples of pictures on vases depicting female to female erotica (Smith 241). To most within conservative scholarship, this closed the case debunking the notion that Paul was only referencing pederasty. Paul and the early church were aware of adult same-sex relationships and thus in three places the New Testament calls same-sex relations in any form a sin.

While it is true that adult same sex relations occurred, sometimes in long-term monogamous relationships, across the Greco-Roman world, most conservative scholars vastly minimize the abusive nature of this context and make strong assumptions about what the New Testament writers did or did not know.

I am mainly focusing on the Greco Roman world near the 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE, but four of the Biblical passages we will look at here are written nearly a millennium before the 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE. In both contexts, but particularly the earlier one, people needed to take care not to contaminate others when performing sexual acts. Menstruation and infection were primary concerns. There was almost no contraception available (Loader 3). Sexual purity was not just a moral issue in the Bible, it was also an issue of immense practical concern. This is important as we look at Biblical passages such as in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, written three thousand years ago.

**Pederasty:** Contrary to the portrait that some scholars have painted, Pederasty was far more pervasive and damaging in the Greco-Roman world than most of us can conceive of and it certainly has bearing in this theological discussion. The modern expert on the subject Eva Cantarella defines Pederasty as “a cultural, educational, and sexual practice, in which men courted, guided, taught, and had (either anal or intercrural) sex with male *paides*. The *paides*, when they grew into young men, subsequently took on the active role with other boys until the former reached the usual age for marriage, or even later.” (Smith 229)

There is still a lot of debate here as to whether even the Greeks of their day, within whom this practice originated, considered this to be abusive or educational. However, Sarah Ruden, in “Paul Among the People,” using extensive original sources, outlines the pervasive sexual abuse Paul would have witnessed in this context.

Boys in the middle of adolescence were the ideal of beauty in ancient Greece. They were also the focus of pederasty, a practice used by pedophiles across Greece (Ruden 54). A poem of that day outlines the pedophiles enjoyment of twelve- to fifteen-year-old boys, considering sixteen to be the ideal age for sex, establishing that seventeen years is too old as the boy will look to “get some of what he gives.” (Ruden 54) They wanted passive boys with a child’s body, completely hairless, to commit anal rape on. Countless poems express disgust at any signs of sexual maturity (Ruden 45).

The primary target of these advances was young male slaves and prostitutes, of which there were many in every city across the Greco-Roman world: freeborn, citizen-class boys were rarely

successfully bedded. Some slave boys were what was called the *deliciae* or “pet.” This slave boy’s main duty was passive anal sex with his master (Ruden 54).

**Rape:** The Greeks and Romans prized aggressive masculinity. Remember the history of this region . . . both Rome and Greece were cultures steeped in a tradition of war. There was a long tradition of conquerors raping male prisoners of war to show dominance. The most outrageous thing a man could do to humiliate and dominate another man was to treat him like a woman (Gushee 1022). Many considered homosexual rape to be divinely sanctioned. This had nothing to do with sexual preference, rather it had to do with power. The height of masculinity was to transform a potentially active and powerful creature into a weak one. Women were also anally penetrated, in an act of rape, by men, but less so as it was considered too easy (Ruden 50). This was violent, not erotic.

There was no shame against a man if he raped a slave boy or girl. There were protections against violating Greco-Roman citizens. Raping a woman who was not poor, or a slave was forbidden only because it violated another man’s property, either her father or husband. But men committing sexual violence was a sign of their masculinity and thus they were respected (Ruden 50). Slaves of any age were available to their owners for violation, the poor, without resources or standing, were fair game for anyone.

**Shame of the Abused:** Now this is critical when we look at Romans 1. Countless Greco-Roman writers decry the immorality of pederasty and passive-male sex (a man being penetrated in the anus)—but they were only condemning the immorality of the abused man and or passive man, not the perpetrator or active sexual partner. So what do I mean here? It was considered profoundly shameful in the Greco-Roman world for a male (man or boy) to allow himself to be penetrated in such a way. He was seen as being feminized and thus shamed for his whole life. It was the responsibility of an upstanding family to protect their son from being violated in such a way and if a boy in one of these families were to run away and become a prostitute it was of profound shame (Ruden 47, 48). Many Greco-Roman moralists complain about these practices, but it is the male victim of rape that is morally wrong, humiliated, not the perpetrator of the assault.

In this culture the active man violating the passive man or boy was thought to “draw their passive partners’ moral and physical integrity into themselves.” (Ruden 58) Penetration of another, particularly of someone of power in the anus, signaled the moral upstanding nature of the man. He had shown he was a man of power and so such men would sexually go from his wives, to his girlfriend, to female slaves and slave men and boys (Ruden 50). “Our word for virtue comes from the Latin *virtus*, literally ‘manliness.’ Courage, honesty, and responsibility were strongly linked to physical virility in the Greek and Roman minds.” (Ruden 50)

A man who had lost his manhood to violence to another man was considered weaker than a woman, thus the society pressured men into brutality towards other men and vulnerable young boys as this was a way to show that one had no sympathy with these passive men who were lower than a woman (Ruden 50).

Now all of this translates into issues of consensual relationships also. The passive male sexual partner in a same-sex relationship is reviled, less than a man, less than human, whereas the active partner that commits the penetration has done nothing wrong.

**Paul:** Theologian Mark Smith demonstrates that pederasty was fading by the 1<sup>st</sup> Century in the city of Rome as there is increasing concern about the feminization of these boys who would grow into men (Smith 238). Paul is from Tarsus, in what we now call Turkey, and while it is under Roman occupation and he is a Roman citizen, his hometown is far closer to Athens, Greece than Rome. As Ruden paints vividly (and I am paraphrasing here) as 1<sup>st</sup> a boy and then a young man growing up, Paul would have seen female prostitutes on the streets. In the doorways and windows of brothels would have been boys. Slave auctions would have occurred in the town square where Paul saw attractive young men—boys-- sold to local pimps as people made crude jokes about the playthings these boys would soon become. Paul would have been aware that slave boys and girls were used as sexual toys routinely by gentile adults (Ruden 46-47). Again, as Ruden says, Paul would have been warned that any even casual conversation with such a slave could ruin his reputation and have him marked as “soft” or “effeminate.” (Ruden 47)

**Consenting Adults:** One of the key arguments by conservative scholars has been, as we stated earlier, that consensual sex between two men and also between two women was more common than first thought. We do know of instances where men are said to be married to other men. In *Philippics* Cicero references a man’s former “stable and permanent marriage.” He also notes another man with a “boyfriend-wife.” (Smith 238) Xebophon, a follower of Socrates, references men using men (not boys) as women (Smith 237).

As mentioned earlier, we also have two vases of that time with pictures depicting women with other women in sexual erotica (Smith 241). Now Ruden’s research is skeptical of same-sex female relationships being widely known of. There was extensive erotic oppression of women. She is skeptical—and I am too—that Paul in *Romans 1* was making any reference to lesbianism. She guides us to Amy Richlin’s well known book, “*The Garden of Priapus*,” to look at the extensive systems of control and abuse in the Roman regime (Ruden 50). Smith does reference a discussion in the *Jerusalem Talmud* of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, CE, whether female homo-sexual intercourse invalidates a woman’s virginity (Smith 242).

Cantarella writes that pederasty was considered the “Greek vice” and as it became rare in the sources by the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, other forms of same-sex relations occur (Smith 233). Smith notes several Roman laws that seem to criminalize pederastic abuse, but that is incomplete. The laws criminalized boys of the citizenry being used in such a way, there appeared to be no protections of male slaves or foreign boys, who had long been the primary targets. Cantarella reiterates that in Greece, far closer to Paul’s experience than Rome would have been, same-sex relationships were expected to be pederastic. Adult men were not permitted to have continued sex with another adult man, unless it was violation to assert dominance, which would have been a one-time occurrence. A man who continued to be the “beloved” to another man when, because of his age he was supposed to be a “lover” to women, faced severe social consequences. Men were expected to be the aggressor with boys who were slaves, prostitutes or poor (Ruden 50).

It does appear clear that consenting adult same-sex relations, particularly among men were known of and relatively common in Rome, less so in Greek culture. There are even a few clear examples where male citizens of Rome were monogamous with each other, at least for a time. I personally admit, I find the conservative theological approach here, this need to confront the idea that Paul was only referencing pederasty by proving consenting same-sex relations, to be odd. Proving that same-sex relations among consenting adults in Rome by the 1<sup>st</sup> Century was relatively common, which reputable scholars have now done, is a long way from establishing that Paul, a Jewish Rabbi from Tarsis become Christian convert, knew about it, could comprehend it as consensual and was speaking about that in the New Testament, as we will talk about shortly. It's also not clear the nature of these same-sex relations. I have not read any account where this society had established long term monogamous same-sex partnership that is comparable to covenantal marriage that the New Testament advocates.

**Excess:** The last characteristic about the Greco-Roman world before we approach the Biblical texts is regarding sexual excess. Much like many social conservatives today, same-sex relations in the Greco-Roman world were seen as a potent symbol of sexual excess (Vines 106). The idea of being soft, being the passive, “weak” partner, meant a man was self-indulgent, a slave to his passions. The man has no mastery over himself (Vines 121).

Scholar William Loader echoes this indicating that Paul absolutely saw uncontrolled sexual passion as a major evil, a common moral view in that day (and again, to most Romans only the “soft” partner was guilty). Loader quotes Frederickson:

“Natural sex was understood in three distinct ways: sex for the sake of procreation (thus only male with female); sex which symbolizes and preserves male social superiority to the female (males penetrate/females are penetrated); and sex in which passion is absent or at least held to a minimum.’ He is able to demonstrate that this is the case in both Jewish and Graeco-Roman literature and.” (Loader, 26)

## **2: Is it a Sin? The Seven Biblical Texts Referencing Same-Sex:**

One of the long-time arguments within conservative Christianity is that a “plain sense” of scripture (Gushee, Changing 861) “clearly” condemns gay marriage and LGBTQ+ personhood. That is simply not true and to be blunt, it is time we recognize that such an approach is dangerous. Christians have used scripture to oppress humanity throughout our history, usually manipulating a “plain reading” of the Biblical text (Gushee, Changing 877).

Within the theological world, I have a high view of the Bible, in line with credible conservative theology. This views the Biblical text as inspired by God, to the writer, for the people of its day, with resonance to us now. God loves humanity and within the pages of the Bible we see lots of instructions that were specific to God’s concern for people then, for which God might have different instruction for us now. So, the “why” it was written to them really matters to us, because in the “why,” we can look at the message to the people of that day, why it was said to them, and then ask ourselves how that message applies to us.

This high view of the Bible is a contrast to the literal or plain reading of the text approach used by much of conservative Christianity. An approach that takes context and history into account

recognizes, for example, that when Exodus 31 says that anyone who works on Saturday should be put to death, this is not a literal message to us today. This was a message from a loving God to a broken culture that had a history of people being worked to death, demanding that they rest. The verbal commands of the ancient near east were harsh and thus either God used harsh language, or the people interpreted God's words with the harshness they expected. This was not about God's anger and wrath, but rather God speaking to a people who were used to wrath in their own direct language about the importance of rest. Clearly, we are not to kill Christ followers (or anyone) who work on the sabbath now, but the text still has meaning to us, which is that we should take our need to rest seriously. Well, we just took that text seriously, but not did not literally transcribe its words to today, because to do so would be incredibly violent, violating the compassionate and non-violent teachings of Jesus.

We also do not believe in "auto-writing." While we believe the Bible is inspired by God, God did not take possession of the writer and make them write out the words. Nor do we believe God gave supernatural knowledge about science and culture that no one of that day understood. For example, 2600 years ago when the writer of Psalms 22 references the four corners of the earth, we recognize that it is not just metaphorical language, the writer was inspired by God to describe the whole world remembering the Lord and used his knowledge of creation incorrectly to describe the earth as flat, when it is in fact round. You could say this is an "error" in the Bible . . . though I would not see it as such. God inspired the writer to convey what God wanted to convey, that the whole earth will remember and return to the Lord. Pastors who throw out words like infallibility and inerrancy, stating that every word applies to us exactly now as it did then are not credible teachers of this book. As a person of faith, I believe the Bible is true and inspired by God . . . but the "why God" communicated something to an ancient culture matters. This is important when we look at the seven passages that appear to reference same-sex relations.

So, while this work is not written toward the Vineyard USA specifically, as a Pastor in that movement, I take their opinion, an opinion this work disagrees with, seriously. In the Vineyard position paper on gay marriage (Pastoring LGBTQ+ Persons), they make repeated criticisms of affirming scholars that they "interpret texts through revisionist methods of irrelevance, isolation, modernist distance, and postmodernist relativism, (such that) the authority of Scripture has little meaning." (Vineyard 53) They continue to lament that Affirming scholars find a myriad of ways to dismiss the seven texts below (Vineyard 48). I will be guilty of some—though not all—of their accusations above. I do take the authority of scripture seriously, but as we will see, the "plain reading" of these texts is simply not so plain. There are over 31,000 verses in the Bible; seven make a reference to sexual relations between people of the same sex. We will handle some of the passages quickly as they are simply not relevant to this discussion, though we will spend an inordinate amount of time on Romans 1.

**Genesis 19:** The first passage that arguably references same-sex relations simply does not reference mutual sex between two consenting partners at all. It is an insult to include this passage in this discussion, but as conservative scholarship, including my own Vineyard movement does, we must refute it. Later references to Sodom in the New Testament books Jude 6-8 and 2 Peter 2:6-7 appear to reinforce a condemnation of same-sex, but they do not, rather they are discussing sex with angels (Gushee 1013-1019).

Two angels arrive in the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah to see Lot, Abraham's nephew and traveling companion. Lot recognizes the angels as such immediately and so presumed, being consistent with other Biblical passages, these angels are bathed in white and quite beautiful. All the men of the town surround the house and demand Lot send the Angels-- who these men call men-- out so that they might rape them. The angels are aghast and tell Lot to flee with his family as they are going to destroy the town, which they do.

Likely the men of Sodom are heterosexual men who assert their dominance through rape. Now a plain reading of Ezekiel 16:49 states that the sin of Sodom was being "overfed, unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy." Several first and second centuries BCE books give other reasons for Sodom's destruction, The Sirach 16:8 and 3 Maccabees 2:5 state its due to arrogance, Wisdom 19:15 indicates that it was due to lack of hospitality. Jewish understanding before the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE simply did not connect their sins to same-sex behavior (Vines, 64-65). It seems very clear that the sin of Sodom is that of exploitation and not monogamous consensual sexual relationship.

**Leviticus 18:22:** So Leviticus 18:22 states that "Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable." Yes, the plain reading of this would indicate that a man having sex with a man, is detestable to God. Again, there are issue of culture here. Just because God said this to the Israelites while they wandered in the desert, roughly thirty-two hundred years ago, does not mean that God intended this for us now.

Obviously, there is also the issue of this being under the Old Testament covenant and not the New. Now, we do not disregard the Old Testament, but we do generally reassess Old Testament laws in light of revelation of Jesus Christ.

But there are major issues with this passage within the chapter. So, it is fairly accepted that in Biblical interpretation that, while we do accept the applicability of some Biblical passages and dismiss others as impractical or irrelevant to our culture, if we accept as relevant one passage of the Bible, we have to accept as also relevant the other passages within the same portion of text. Specifically, we can question the authority of all of Leviticus 18 for us now interpreting it as God's instructions to a radically different cultural context . . . but if we accept as binding parts of the holiness code in Leviticus 18, then we accept as binding all of the text surrounding this Leviticus 18:22 verse. The Vineyard Position also argues that Affirming scholars do not read the Biblical text in context, but rather isolation (Vineyard 16). .well reading this passage in its context becomes problematic for those who use this passage for today.

So Leviticus 18 is part of what gets referred to as the holiness code and 18 is so divided because it is specific to sexual sins. We get lots of instruction such as *do not dishonor your father by having sex with your mother. Do not have sex with your sister, your father's wife, your father's daughter. . . do not have sex with your son's daughter, or your daughter's daughter as that would dishonor you.* All sorts of family relations are mentioned such as your aunt, your daughter in law, your brother's wife. (18:7-16) Please note that many of these are forbidden due to an issue of honor. It continues with passages such as *do not have sexual relations with both a woman and her daughter. Do not have sexual relations with either her son's daughter or her daughter's daughter.* (18:17) *Do not take your wife's sister as a rival wife and have sexual relations with her*



*while your wife is still living. (18:18). Do not have sexual relations with your neighbor's wife and defile yourself with her. (18:20)*

So, please notice what is being talked about here. *Do not have sex with neighbor's wife, a woman and her granddaughter, your son's wife . . .* this chapter is speaking to and allowing essentially a polyamorous and even further sexually hedonistic culture. It is the presumption of the text that the reader, probably a married man, is having extensive sex with any number of women he chooses, not in the bounds of marriage, and thus the text is giving these men basic guidance/ rules that his own relatives and his friends wives are out of bounds. It also fully accepts polygamy (18:18) but demands you don't marry two sisters.

Leviticus 18 goes on to prohibit approaching a woman for sex during her monthly period and prohibits sacrificing one's own child to Molek in an act of child sacrifice. So in one chapter, child sacrifice, having sex with a woman (presumably including one's spouse) during her period and same-sex is prohibited while polygamy, polyamory and wanton sex with multiple partners is allowed. The moral ethics described in this chapter simply has no bearing on a covenantal marital ethic for today: this is not a people at this time honoring a monogamous commitment.

**Leviticus 20:13** is equally difficult. Also in the holiness code a plain reading states: "If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads." (Leviticus 20:13)

This is the famous chapter that declares *anyone who curses their father or mother shall be put to death (20:9). If a man commits adultery with another man's wife, they are both to be put to death (20:10)*. If a man has sex with a woman during her period, they are both to be exiled. The chapter goes on and again discusses sexual relations that a man cannot have, once again becoming a tacit endorsement of multiple sex partners, polygamy and the like.

It is difficult to take either chapter seriously as guidance against gay marriage. It is also not at all clear in what manner the sex between men is that is referenced here as detestable. It's not marriage, both because it would have been unheard of but also as this long passage only has one reference to taking a spouse. It is certainly not related to monogamy based on the overall discussion and it may in fact relate to violating another man, aggressive sex in the anus not necessarily with consent.

Now, conservative scholarship on this topic does use one argument to insist the destruction of Sodom was due to same-sex relations based on these two Leviticus passages. A group of Southern Baptist theologians, responding to Matthew Vines seminal "God and the Gay Christian," argue that Ezekiel 16:50, continuing the discussion about Sodom, references the people of Sodom doing something "detestable" or "abominable" using the singular form of the term *toevah* (Hamilton 288). They note that the term is used twice in the book of Leviticus to reference same-sex relations—the two passages above.

Their argument is fascinating. They seem think they have a "gotcha" to say that Sodom was destroyed because of same-sex relations, that this is detestable to God in general (Hamilton). But an alternative could also be postulated based on their logic. We know that the men of Sodom wanted to gang rape the angels. We do not know the manner of "sex with men" that Leviticus is referencing, but the same Hebrew word is used in Leviticus as in Ezekiel about Sodom. Is it

possible that what is detestable to the Lord about Sodom and in Leviticus is the violation of a man by another man, the humiliation and violence that was threatened in Sodom? Just a thought.

Conservative theology has a myriad of ways to try and defend the absolute authority of these Leviticus passages condemning sex among men but ignoring, for example, the direction that anyone eating shellfish or pork should be put to death. It is commonly argued that the moral laws are valid today but not the ceremonial, cultic, dietary or civil laws—no, the Old Testament simply did not categorize these directives differently.

Another argument used, predominantly in Baptist circles, is that these laws only apply if reiterated by Jesus in the New Testament. In that argument, because Jesus does give a blanket condemnation of “sexual immorality,” (Matthew 19:9) the passages related to sex apply, but not the ones related to, for example, eating shellfish. Again, that is flimsy. Jesus does not elaborate and these two passages in Leviticus provide a tacit endorsement of polyamory among other hedonistic behaviors. If one is going to say that Jesus reference to sexual immorality invokes the sexuality of Leviticus, then presumedly it invokes *all* of the sexuality of Leviticus.

Some conservatives defend the validity of these passages but not others by saying that the laws of the Old Testament can be disregarded, but Christians must practice the principles behind them—well, maybe, but that leads to a much more nuanced debate about the principles at play here (Gushee 1116). There is simply no easy way for conservative scholars to credibly defend the validity of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 while dismissing the other passages around it and its context.

Most scholars agree that Leviticus 18 & 20 is based on both fertility concerns, hygiene issues as well as general guidance for a culture that had long ago embraced rampant polyamory and child sacrifice. The Israelites are a nomadic people attempting to establish a nation for whom childbirth and protection from disease is crucial—these are the concerns of the text.

In conclusion, it is not a credible interpretive process to use these two individual verses while ignoring the entire passages they reside in. What we glean from these passages are not nuggets of specific, strict moral guidance, but rather the broader meaning. One can see in these passages God moving a polygamous and sexually hedonistic society towards safer boundaries, starting to move away from violation, honoring the marriage of a neighbor or family member, recognizing that sex with family members is morally wrong. It is obviously incomplete. This text provides a tacit endorsement of abhorrent behavior, far out of step with the New Testament. A plain reading of this chapter and transcribing it to today is an endorsement of polygamy, polyamory, sexually hedonism. Yes, Jesus gives later instructions that would put an end to such lifestyles, but I highlight this only to note the danger of such a “plain reading.”

It is simply not tenable to argue a simple prohibition of same-sex union from these passages. The only way to do so is to read two verses in isolation of their broader passages without any real understanding what the verses themselves were condemning, though it was probably a man violating another man to assert his dominance. These two passages certainly make no reference to a loving union between two people of the same sex.

**Judges 19:20-23** is eerily similar to Sodom in Genesis 19. Travelers are welcomed into an old man’s home at night. Wicked men of the city surround the home and demand the traveler come out so that they can have sex with him. As with Sodom, this has nothing to do with consenting

same-sex adults. This is an attempted gang rape that ends with the violent rape and murder of a woman. Using this passage to condemn gay marriage is offensive on many levels.

### **Paul in the New Testament:**

Now, the Vineyard Church argues convincingly in their theological statement that the traditional Jewish religious approach in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century would be to prohibit and condemn same-sex relations. 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism saw same-sex relations not as a gender preference or an attraction one was born with but as an abuse of men that came out of overwhelming sexual lust. There does not appear in the parallel literature of the time to be any room for same-sex unions among men (Vineyard), though among women, it is more nuanced (Smith). The Vineyard argues fairly that Paul would have had the traditional Jewish view of condemning same-sex unions (Vineyard). No, Paul, based on his Jewish heritage, probably would not have approved of same-sex relations; it is a safe argument that Paul would have viewed such relations as a sin. A projection of what Paul's views were is helpful in assessing the meaning of his writings, but it is the words Paul put to paper in his letters that we as Christians view as inspired, not Paul's personal views. His views have value in attempting to interpret the text, but we need to give primacy to what he actually said in the text, not what we surmise he would have thought.

Also, Paul himself expresses concerns with his own cultural bias influencing his instructions at the time (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 7:12). On a basic level, this once Jewish scholar would have seen same-sex relations as sinful, but what if Paul encountered and saw long-term monogamous relationship among two men or two women? Would Paul's understanding of God's redemption of humanity lead him to make room for God's affirmation of such a couple? As I will discuss later, I absolutely believe the answer is yes.

At issue is what Paul was aware of and what he wrote, under the inspiration of God, when he made negative references to same-sex relations. Paul may have assumed any same-sex sexual contact was a sin in all cases, but did he, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, write it into the letters that we now consider Biblical text? So, there are three negative references to same-sex relations in the New Testament: a long dissertation in Romans 1 & 2, 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 6:9 and 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 1:10. We will look at 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians and then 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy, approaching Romans 1 & 2 last as it is by far the most complicated of these passages. At the end we will also look at Matthew 19:3-6 and its relevance here.

The passages in Romans and 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians are undisputed as written by Paul. 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy is widely believed to be written not by Paul, but by a later Christian in Paul's name. Regardless, Paul's understanding of same-sex relations is key here, and on that question, as we have discussed, we do not know what Paul knew of same-sex relations. Once again, consensual relationships between adult men were known of in Rome by the first century. We do also have some references to relationships among men that appear to be long term, and thus presumed, but not definitively, monogamous. Even in these contexts, such consensual relationships in the Greco Roman world still involved one passive and one aggressive man. However, as stated before, we have no idea if, or how much, Paul was aware of this.

Paul was a Jewish scholar from Tarsus, in Turkey. He would have seen the horrors of pederasty up close. As a boy in Tarsus his family would have trained him to be safe from the pedophiles who longed for a boy such as him. His strict Jewish upbringing would have properly trained him

to recognize the abhorrent abuse of humanity, not just in pederasty, but also in adult men who had been deeply shamed by sexual violence committed against them—after their violation these men lost all sense of pride or personhood in this culture, often the only job left being a cheap prostitute providing oral sex on demand (Ruden 47).

As an adult Paul spends an inordinate amount of time in Israel before finally traveling the Roman empire as a missionary, however we know that he always started in the conservative Jewish synagogue when he arrived at a new town. Paul only visits Rome twice, where it appears consensual same sex was more common, and both times he was in chains.

Was Paul just referencing pederasty in Romans 1 & 2, and then 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 6, and by extension, 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 1 written in his name? Probably not exclusively. Paul was probably talking about far more than pederasty, but conservative scholars are a long way from establishing that Paul was aware of consensual, monogamous partnership, equivalent to Jewish marriages, among two men or two women in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Sexual abuse and promiscuity, not just involving children but also adults, was rampant in the world Paul saw every day, thus a “plain reading of these texts” fails to understand what he is bothered by in the culture around him.

**1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 6:9 & the Greek language Paul Uses:** In 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 6 Paul decries lawsuits among fellow Christians and then launches off in verse 8:

*“<sup>8</sup> Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers and sisters. <sup>9</sup> Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men<sup>10</sup> nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. <sup>11</sup> 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.*

*<sup>12</sup> “I have the right to do anything,” you say—but not everything is beneficial. “I have the right to do anything”—but I will not be mastered by anything. <sup>13</sup> You say, “Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both.” The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. <sup>14</sup> By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. <sup>15</sup> Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! <sup>16</sup> Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, “The two will become one flesh.”<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>17</sup> But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit.*

*<sup>18</sup> Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. <sup>19</sup> Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; <sup>20</sup> you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies.” (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 6:8-20)*

So just a note that the Greek language used here indicates “men with men” in this passage using two relatively obscure Greek words: *malakoi*, which references the effeminate or passive man in a sexual relationship and *arsenokoitai*, which references the aggressive or penetrating man. These two words are important for this discussion, though their meaning is only part of this argument. Extensive scholarship and debate exist over the correct interpretation of these words. *Malakoi* literally means “soft” and is used elsewhere in the New Testament to describe clothing fabric that is soft to the touch, worn by affluent people (Gushee, 1175). Translations of *malakoi* vary from “debauchers” to “effeminate” to “weakling” to “male prostitute” (Gushee, 1175). Loader admits that the word means soft and would be an attack on a man’s masculinity (Gushee, 1175). Others interpret the word as strictly the passive male partner, “the one who is penetrated,” but Paul had other words to use to describe that and he chooses not to (Gushee, 1182).

*Arsenokoitai* is an obscure word in Greek. Paul’s use in the New Testament is the 1<sup>st</sup> known use of it and only a few other uses are found. It is widely theorized that Paul invented the word as a composite from the words *arsenos* and *koiten* used in the Septuagint of Leviticus 18:22 (a 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE Greek translation of what we call the Old Testament used by the early church) that roughly translates man (*arsenos*) sexual intercourse with (*koiten*). In the reference to Leviticus 18:22 and the simple combination of words, Conservative scholars see this as fairly clear: Paul in this passage condemns “man sleeping with man.” Affirming scholarship points out that Paul essentially created a new word, and we cannot fully discern his meaning.

As a reminder, Leviticus 18 was full of sexual violation: a man with his neighbor’s wife, a man with an animal, a man with his son’s wife. Leviticus 18 is speaking to men engaging in behavior we would consider predatory and thus taken with *malakoi*, it seems fair to ask if the terms *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* refer to a masculine man aggressively violating a soft feminine man. Nothing in the Greek here seems to condemn mutuality or partnership, but a fair argument could be made that this is once again condemning one man aggressively violating another, who also is considered wrong in growing to accept and even prefer being penetrated.

Another interesting note is that this entire passage is talking to Christians about the behavior of Christians, verse 8: “you yourselves cheat and *do wrong*, and you do this *to your brothers and sisters*.” It goes on in verse 12 to discuss the idea among Christians at the time, “I have the right to do anything.” The teachings of Paul and other early Christians leaders that Christians are free from the rigid tenants of the law are being taken as liberty by early Christians that anything is permissible. This will cause Paul to say that “not everything is beneficial (6:12) and will reference our “not being mastered by anything” (6:12). See in this once again shades of the notion that “men with men,” as with all sexual immorality here, is rooted in an excess of lust. Such men do not have “mastery” of their own passions but have been consumed by them. This is the root of the concern here and Paul sees it in a variety of issues including adultery, swindling, bribery, drunkenness, gossip. For Paul, this is not about the sex of the men in question (though I am not claiming he is ignoring that), rather it is about consuming lust. I cannot help but wonder if in making this passage about sexual relations between people of the same sex, rather than consuming lust, Evangelical Christianity gets to push this moral teaching onto “the other” rather than ourselves.

After this discussion and the list of issues that are being condemned by Paul, he launches off on the denigration that is prostitution: that it is a sin against one’s own body and God, that in being

with a prostitute, a man has entered into union with her (6:16) and we need to be in union with God alone (6:15-20). Now, Paul's harsh condemnation of prostitution shortly after this indictment of men having sexual relations is interesting. It is hard not to wonder if this was Paul's primary paradigm for such sexual unions: male prostitution.

This is a pastoral instruction challenging Christian not to be consumed by their most basic nature, but rather in submission to God they are purified. It certainly contains within it a statement that men aggressively penetrating other men do not have mastery over themselves in Jesus Christ, but that is a pretty fair statement when considering the Greco-Roman world we have discussed and the reference to prostitution in this passage. This also does not at all reference two women in a monogamous marriage and it is doubtful that this can be used to speak about two men in a monogamous marriage.

So if we strip away our conservative cultural assumptions, what is a plain reading of the text on this topic? *While everything is permissible, Christians cannot be given to their base passions, but in God's transformation of us rather have mastery over them, as there is no place in the Kingdom of God for gossip, theft, greed, adultery, the aggressive penetration of men, swindling and lying. Sexual immorality, specifically prostitution with men or women, dishonors and degrades your own body and soul which belongs to God, flee from it.*

Now this passage is the clearest Biblical condemnation of men having sex with other men, but it is rooted in a condemnation of lust, excess and violation. This is simply not a passage rooted in mutuality between same sex partners.

**1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 1:10:** This passage feels like it could be written about the American pastorate today. The author instructs his protégé, Timothy, how to conduct himself as a Christian leader.

*"<sup>3</sup> As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer <sup>4</sup> or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God's work—which is by faith. <sup>5</sup> The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. <sup>6</sup> Some have departed from these and have turned to meaningless talk. <sup>7</sup> They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm.*

*<sup>8</sup>We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. <sup>9</sup> We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, <sup>10</sup> for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine <sup>11</sup> that conforms to the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me."* (1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 1:3-11)

Timothy is urged to stay in Ephesus and ensure that some Christians there do not continue to give irrelevant and misleading instructions. The condemnation of these "wannabe" teachers of the law is brutal—they are obsessed with lineage and conspiracies and engage in meaningless

talk. God's work is about love. This is the core of faith in God. The passage then goes on to talk about the worthlessness of the teachings of the law if it is not rooted in love.

The author states that the law has not been created for the righteous but rather for those who do not obey it. Then the author goes off, reciting a litany of offenses: some very generic such as "lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly, sinful, the unholy, and the irreligious" and then some very specific such as those who kill their father or mothers, slave traders, liars, perjurers, the sexually immoral and then those practicing homosexuality.

Once again, we look at the Greek here and this time there is only one word, the same as in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians and its singular use here is interesting: *arsenokoitais*, the aggressive or penetrating or possibly violating man between two male lovers. This is the same word used for a pederast, the man who violates boys. It's singular use here, without tying it to the word *malokai* as 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians does, is a little bit radical for the Greco-Roman world. In this context, it is only the aggressive, penetrating man who is condemned, which is an inversion of the values of Rome. Once again, only the passive man or boy is considered immoral in Rome, the aggressive man who violates the other man, in Greco-Roman culture, is not morally wrong, he is strong and upright, inherently moral due to his power. No, here the aggressive man is morally wrong.

So once again, the plain reading here is that *the aggressive penetrating man, along with slavers, murderers, and many others, is under the law because he has not responded to the greater law, faith fueled by love.* Once again, I am skeptical that this has anything to do with consenting, monogamous adults. The fact that this Biblical text itself condemns the "teachers of the law" as not being rooted in love, rather being overcome by pointless arguments, and not knowing what they are talking about is a profound irony.

### **Romans 1 & 2: A: What is the Abomination here?**

Now the crown jewel passage on this topic is found in Romans 1 & 2. Romans 1 & 2 is a complex passage, but verse 26-27 contain the only clear references to same-sex relations within it. Before we get into the entire passage, let's just look at the Greek language of these two verses.

*"<sup>26</sup> Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. <sup>27</sup> In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error." (Romans 1:26-27)*

So it is important to note that we read the phrase "natural sexual relations for unnatural ones," in a discussion like this and we presuppose it is a reference to women having sexual relations with each other in part because of centuries of Pastors using that phrase, taken from here, to denigrate lesbian sex. That is not necessarily what the text says. This is a pretty accurate translation; the Greek literally would mean women exchanged the natural sex for that which is contrary to nature. This may refer to women having sex with women. However, a fair argument, advanced by Ruden, is made that Paul is speaking about women agreeing to be aggressively penetrated in the anus by men, these women essentially selling themselves to be violated in a

violent and degrading manner (Ruden, 50). This would have been a far more common concern for the church than women having consensual sex with each other.

Ruden sees Paul's writings in Romans 1 as an indictment of the entire broken cultural milieu around sexuality. She argues that in a world that only identifies the passive partner as morally wrong do to their male "weakness" Paul is folding everyone into a condemnation of sexuality that is not rooted in the values of covenant and fidelity that God desires for humanity (Ruden, 58). Paul may be making a profound point here, not about gay men as we consider them, but about the entirety of not just pederasty, but aggressive, violent men subduing and forcing the submission of other men (and maybe women). In this world such violation is morally right, but in Paul (and God's) view it is unnatural.

Is Paul perhaps speaking to something we are only just starting to face two thousand years later in the advent of the #metoo movement (Ruden, 58). This is not just revisionism from the eyes and values of today. As Jesus followers, we believe that there is a creator God with universal values intended for all people (which Paul himself states in Romans 1). Is it possible that Paul, in the inspiration of God, recognized the abuse that was rampant across the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, not just of pederasty that was far easier to condemn, but of older men using money, social status, and violence to violate younger, weaker, poorer men and women for their gratification? Paul's strict Jewish background may have helped him see the wickedness of the entire system, that even men and women who "consent," but from a position of weakness and need, have not consented, but are being preyed upon to the degradation of their own soul.

Liberal scholarship was correct that Paul was condemning pederasty here. Conservative scholarship was also correct that Paul was not just condemning pederasty here, but also adult relations that maybe the law in that day would consider "consensual." (Smith 232) However moral humanity, I believe in the view of Paul then and us now (though perhaps only in the last five years or so), recognize this not as consensual but as violation based on a significant power imbalance. Across the Greco-Roman world, aggressive, heterosexual men raped younger men, the poor, slaves, and young women in the anus to show their power, also forcing or paying for oral sex. These men were usually married to women, often fathers, and "respected" citizens. As these were adults being violated, this is not pederasty. It also has nothing to do with mutuality and monogamy among consenting, equal adults and is a violation of all forms of marital covenant. It is no wonder that Paul, inspired by God, considered this to be an abomination.

### **Romans 1 & 2: B: What is the text saying?**

So here is the fun part . . . the purpose of Romans 1 & 2, even while it acknowledges the heinousness that was Greco Roman sexual violence, is not to condemn sin, any sin, but rather to confront Christians who are condemning such sin. Romans 1 & 2, the crown jewel in the Biblical text condemning same-sex relations, was intended to prevent such condemnation and turn that judgment back onto Christians who are consumed by it. Yes, the pinnacle "anti-affirming text" was essentially intended to do the opposite. For this we look at the flow of the argument in Romans 1 & 2.

So Paul is writing to Christians in the church in Rome. These are not Christians Paul has met before, he writes such a robust letter here because he does not know them and wants to instruct them (and wants their financial support for his trip to Spain). Now, this church in Rome, made up



of Jewish converts, is on the front steps of Greco Roman brokenness. This is Rome, post-Caesar Augustine, with a parade of vile Caesar's, at the height of Rome's power and violence over the known world. This church feels like they are far from the center of either Jewish or Christian morality; they reside at the center of what they would consider to be the devil's kingdom. We could equate this to a church maybe in the Red-Light district in Amsterdam or witnessing the prostitution in Bangkok. As this letter will reveal, these are sincere Christians, but the church is struggling to love the broken context in front of them.

So let us look at the flow of the argument here starting in chapter 1 verse 16:

*“<sup>16</sup> For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. <sup>17</sup> For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last,<sup>[e]</sup> just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”” (Romans 1:16-17)*

The text continues and speaks to the universal nature of God's presence in this world which would also speak to the universal confrontation of sin that Paul is offering (and that we referenced above):

*“<sup>18</sup> The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, <sup>19</sup> since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. <sup>20</sup> For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.” (Romans 1:18-20)*

*“<sup>21</sup> For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. <sup>22</sup> Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools <sup>23</sup> and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.” (Romans 1:21-23)*

So note the flow of argument here. Paul is not ashamed of the Gospel (good news of Jesus) because it is the power of God that brings salvation to all people. And what is this power? A righteousness that is by faith not adherence to strict religious rules. This is a constant theme of Paul—our goodness and right standing with God comes from faith in God, not our white knuckled striving to do good. God has revealed God's self through God's love within all of creation.

However, Paul says that because humanity did not respond to the revelation, God gave all people over to their sin, which is essentially idolatry, darkness, evil, whatever one wants to call it. This included people being given over to lust, such as the sexual violations we talked about above.

*“<sup>24</sup> Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. <sup>25</sup> They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.*

*<sup>26</sup> Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. <sup>27</sup> In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error. (Romans 1:24-27)*

Now, Paul makes an interesting statement here: these men have “received in themselves the due penalty for their error.” That is not just a throwaway line, it is a statement from Paul to the church that punishing other people for their sin is not their role, but rather is to be left up to God. And as to their heinous sins (which again we talked about in the section above), <sup>28</sup> *Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. <sup>29</sup> They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. (Romans 1:28-29)*

Now please note what is happening here in this Roman passage. Paul would have expected this letter to be read at the church gathering the next Sunday. As his words are read, one can hear the church cheering along with it. The church in Rome would have had people that were rescued from the slave trade, men and women who would have been used sexually, maybe willingly (though as I stated, not consensually). Much like alcoholics who come to Christ in our time and embrace complete abstinence, they would have identified such sexual sins as the worst of all sins. “Sin” often becomes their personal sin exclusively. So many of in the church would have been joyful to hear this.

Paul continues: *These men received in themselves the due penalty for their error. Just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind.* These people are responsible for their sin; they rejected God and God has rejected them. Paul is burnishing his credentials as one who takes sin seriously.

As Paul says <sup>29</sup> *They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity,* one can hear the church in Rome excitedly agree. Wickedness. Evil. Now, the word greed might have caught some of the parishioners a little bit.

Paul continues: *They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice.* Now one can hear the cheers slowing down just a little on strife and deceit. We know the church in Rome had severe divisions like we all do. As Paul continues many (though not all) in the church go silent: *They are gossips, <sup>30</sup> slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents.* As Paul’s words are spoken, there are none in the church, any church, any group of people, anywhere who are aware of themselves that do not know their own guilt here. Insolence. Arrogance. Boastfulness. Slanderers. They disobey their parents. We are all guilty now. Paul knows this. Many in the church in Rome know this too. Paul is indicting all of us now.

*<sup>31</sup> they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. <sup>32</sup> Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.* (Romans 1:31-32) It is core Pauline theology. Paul will directly state it two chapters later in this letter "all have sinned have fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Paul knows we all continue to sin and fall short. We all deserve death, only the grace of God, found in faith in God, has the power to forgive and transform us.

Now, verses and chapter breaks were placed into the Bible roughly 1300 years later. They are not inspired, divine, nor necessarily correct. There is not a more heartbreaking error in the Bible than the chapter break placed between Romans one & two by men of power in the western church as it has been used to persecute a group of people for hundreds of years. The words written into the Bible are inspired by God: chapter breaks are not. Paul has not yet gotten to his point. He has issued condemnation after condemnation, moving from an indictment of men who have sex with men and woman who have unnatural sex into indicting gossipers, those who boast, those who slander—all of humanity . . .and it is all leading to his main point which starts in chapter two, verse one.

Writing to Christians in the church in Rome, most of whom Paul has never met, he says: "*2 You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.*" (Romans 2:2)

Hear the condemnation in Paul's words . . .and this is not condemnation of "the world" or "Rome" but the elect "Christians" in Rome. This is Paul's "he who is without sin cast the first stone" moment. As the church judges the people of Rome-- women who submit to anal penetration, young slave men who are taken aggressively, violent men who force submission-- these Christians have condemned themselves. They assumed that these greedy, evil Romans are completely outside God's love, but no we have all committed sins. None of us are righteous.

*<sup>2</sup> Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. <sup>3</sup> So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? <sup>4</sup> Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?* (Romans 2:2-4)

This is a seminal passage of the New Testament. It is the pinnacle of Paul's opening in the book of Romans, which in and of itself is the center of Paul's theological thought. Pauline theology is the center of American Evangelicalism and these passages—Romans 2:1-5, are where Paul tells us to look. He says you, Christians, will be judged because you are passing judgment on "them" and you do the same.

This passage is quite clear, passing hypocritical judgment on others is showing contempt for the mercy God has shown you. This is especially damaging because it is God's kindness-- God's mercy-- that leads us to repentance. According to Paul, it is never judgment that leads humanity to repent and be transformed by God.

Then Paul completes the hammer that he has been dropping, not onto Jewish religious leaders (a frequent New Testament target), but onto the Christian church in Rome. *“<sup>5</sup> But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.”* (Romans 2:5)

So the Christian church in Rome has decided that the whole milieu of Greco-Roman lifestyles, particularly their sexuality (which admittedly is steeped in violence and oppression) is an abomination and therefore their neighbors in Rome are essentially reprobate—and Paul is having none of it. Paul knows all have sinned. He is open about his own background, a religious man so steeped in judgment and hatred that he helped stir up mobs to kill innocent Christians. The profound grace of God permeates all of his letters. In Paul, our behavior is never a barrier to God’s love; the gospel of Jesus Christ is not centered on our sin, but rather only our acceptance of God’s love—and even that agency within us to accept God’s love comes from God. There is no place in Paul’s view of Christianity for any person who desires God, found in Jesus Christ, to be excluded from God’s kingdom for any reason.

So the pinnacle text used by Conservative theology to exclude LGBTQ+ individuals from the Kingdom of God was written to warn Christians of the condemnation they bring upon themselves by excluding people from Christian faith. Yes, Paul does appear in Romans 1 to indicate some form of same-sex relations among men as a sin, along with a whole host of other sins . . . but Paul is not trying to make a list of sins. Rather he is using a rhetorical technique to confront our judgment and hypocrisy. Does Paul think the issues he listed in Romans 1 are sins? Probably yes, but it is unclear. What is important for Paul is that the Christian church in Rome thinks these are the worst sins so that Paul can confront them on their bigotry. Paul’s concern is eliciting mercy and forgiveness for these people that the Christians consider sinful.

So what would be a plain reading of this long passage in our modern world? Please be warned I am using triggering language here to mimic Paul’s technique.

*Yeah Christians, those gay people, young men who sell themselves on skid row, men f—ing other men on bourbon street, women selling their bodies, allowing themselves to be f-ed in the a-, the people who have casual sex and then abort children . . . disgusting. God has given them over to their vile ways . . . they are filled with every kind of evil—murder, deception. They are like greedy affluent people who would raise rent during a pandemic, business owners who would refuse to pay the working poor a livable wage, like those televangelists preying on people for money, preachers who would stir up Christians with lies to attack healthcare workers and teachers, people who gossip, chase money and judge others . . . there is no honesty, no compassion, no mercy, no love in them.*

*See Christians? You have no right to judge others as you yourselves are full of sin, and the way you judge others, is the way God will judge you. With your culture war, you are spitting on God’s mercy, unable to recognize that God’s compassion and mercy is what leads all of us, you and the people you think are “ungodly,” to repentance with God. In your hatred you will one day stand before God condemned for how you treated “non-Christians.”* (Romans 1:21- 2:5, paraphrase & modern)

The Bible is very clear where our judgment against LGBTQ+ persons will take us. Thank God that mercy is God’s heart.

**Matthew 19:3-6:** Perhaps, the strongest case against gay marriage in the Bible is probably found in Jesus, though it is an argument in absentia, essentially reading a condemnation out of what Jesus approves of, without any explicit condemnation. In Matthew 19:3-6 we get a discussion between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day:

*<sup>3</sup> Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"*

*<sup>4</sup> "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,'<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>5</sup> and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'<sup>[b]</sup>? <sup>6</sup> So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." (Matthew 19:3-6)*

Jesus gives a strong statement about monogamy and in doing so references one man and one woman coming together to become one flesh. Some non-affirming scholars argue that this is a strong statement from Jesus of what marriage is. Their assertion is fair, this is a far stronger statement about marriage being between two people of different genders than Romans 1, 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 1 and 1 Corinthians 6.

However, there are problems with this interpretation; we will also revisit this passage in the next section. First, this is an argument from a negative. Gay marriage is not referenced here. The argument is that because Jesus only references one man and one woman, no other option can exist. However, Jesus' statement does not occur in a vacuum. He is being asked specifically about the conditions for divorce, where a man in Jewish society divorces a woman, which, in this culture, is essentially abandoning her to poverty. These were the conditions that were presented to Jesus and Jesus is responding appropriately within the confines of the cultural Jewish milieu of that day, which would have not conceived of a same-sex marriage. It would have been absurd for Jesus to bring same-sex marriage into this, it is a specific discussion about the oppression of women by men through the manipulation of the tenants of marriage. His assertion that a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and become one flesh is to directly confront this abuse and establish the sanctity of this bond as the Jewish culture knew it to be. It is a stretch to then use this to argue for the heterosexual exclusivity of marriage: Jesus is simply instructing-- powerfully-- based on the cultural situation in front of him.

### **So is it a sin?**

So is "being gay" a sin. This was always an easy answer: absolutely not. The Bible confronts behavior, not sexual identity, even the conservative Vineyard paper acknowledges this when it indicates that a celibate individual identifying as LGBTQ+ could be ordained. What that question is really asking is, are two men or two women, married and monogamous, "sinful?" It is doubtful, the text is simply not as clear as Conservative scholarship indicates.

The four passages in the Old Testament that reference same-sex acts have no relevance in this discussion: two are clearly about rape and the other two accepted a world that allowed polygamy & polyamory, any Christians using the Leviticus passages are opening themselves up to an untenable ethical position regarding Biblical sexuality (and young adults are now starting to use these passages, in line with their conservative training, to support polyamory).

Now, the three New Testament passages that reference this cannot be completely dismissed. The purpose of all three was not to condemn same-sex relations, but to make broader points about hypocrisy and God's compassion. That said, they do contain clear assumption and condemnation by Paul and the church that men aggressively (with or without verbal consent) penetrating another man, or even a woman, with anal sex, thus dehumanizing them, is morally wrong.

1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 1 only references the aggressive, penetrating man, so if we are operating in a "plain reading" it is certainly not speaking to monogamous mutual love between two men or two women. Now, could Romans 1 and 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 6 contain a broader condemnation of consensual sex between two people of the same sex, even in a covenantal marriage? Maybe. It is possible. Jewish religious thought of that time would have condemned all sexual relations between two men (Vineyard 73), though within a few centuries it moderates its views on two women (Smith 242). But Christianity does not root its ethics on what we think a Jewish religious person would have thought, Christianity looks to the words of the Biblical text and no credible wrestling with these passages knows what these passages were condemning as morally wrong. This was a world where heterosexual men used sex to assert dominance over men, women, boys and girls. Pederasty may have been on the way out in Rome among the citizenry, but dominance of conquered people, slaves and the poor was still a way of life in the time of the New Testament. We also know that condemnation of gay marriage was not the point of these passages.

So is gay marriage condemned as a sin by the Bible? Doubtful. But possible. However, that was always the wrong question.

## **Part II: God Affirms**

### **1: Marriage is a Covenant of Monogamy and Mutuality:**

#### **Our broken understanding of Sin:**

Evangelical Christianity made "is it a sin?" the seminal question of this discussion because Evangelicalism in America is deeply rooted in a judgmental approach to holiness that is inherently not in line with the New Testament of the Bible. American Evangelicalism is deeply rooted in Puritanism. After the 2<sup>nd</sup> Great Awakening, there was a renewed interest in "holiness" that was tied to a desire for another revival ushering in Jesus return to Earth. Before the emergence of the modern charismatic strain of Christianity at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century at Azusa Street, the "second work of grace" after salvation, sought across American Christianity in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, was sanctification. It was believed one could attain the perfection of holiness, ostensibly through God's grace, but practically this was achieved through diligent prayer and striving to be good. "Eliminating sin" from our lives, something the New Testament is very clear cannot happen, has been the primary ethic of American conservative Christianity for the past one hundred and eighty years. Slavery and exploitation of the poor were not considered sins (though Jesus certainly would disagree), rather sin was deeply tied to sexual behavior and a few other issues such as lying and drunkenness. Sexual purity and temperance (anti-alcohol) were the hallmarks of Puritanism and the holiness movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

All of this to say that our understanding of “sin” within American Evangelicalism, specifically in relation to our sexuality, is deeply flawed. As we saw examining all three of the New Testament passages, 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthian 6, Timothy 1 and Romans 1 and 2, these passages were deeply against hypocritical judgment leveled by Christians. It is not that holiness, and our conduct does not matter, but what Paul and those writing in his name understood about Christianity was that it was always centered not on what we do not do, but rather our acceptance of God’s grace toward us and then our love for God that followed from that (Romans 2:4).

The portrayal of God in these passages and throughout the New Testament is not of a deity that is obsessed about our sin, but rather one that is deeply concerned about our love for other people. Yes, our behavior does matter, but the Bible as represented in the New Testament is far less concerned with what we have done wrong and far more concerned with what we are doing right. Look at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, what we call “The Beatitudes.” “Blessed are the following: poor in spirit, those who mourn, the merciful, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, pure in heart, the peacemakers, those persecuted for righteousness,” Matthew 5:3-10.

Even reading these words, some Christians will immediately see phrases like “pure in heart” and “righteousness” and they will go to a rolodex of their sins that they need to eradicate. That was not the point. Yes, we are all broken and yes, God wants us continually gain freedom from such sins, but our focus on what we thought was “sin” was never the answer. The Beatitudes were given by Jesus to affirm the goodness that was the Kingdom of God dwelling in our lives. Jesus is saying “this is what God’s kingdom looks like in your life, this is what your life, transformed by God’s love will look like.” It is not a striving. It is not a ruthless elimination of sin from our lives. Jesus, and then later Paul and the other New Testament writers, are aware that we cannot eliminate sin from our lives (Romans 3:23). We are all broken. We all sin. We sin now. We will sin in the future (1<sup>st</sup> John 1:8). Now the good news of the gospel absolutely contains freedom from the bondage of sin, but that freedom is found in the infilling and experience of Jesus Christ in our lives.

Paul understands implicitly what we become when we ruthlessly, on our power, seek and eliminate all sin from our lives; he understands because he had done it, before his encounter with Christ. We become what the Pharisees were. We become rigid and religious, judgmental and without love. This is exactly what Romans 2:5 warned us about.

The ending of the book of Philippians, written by Paul, is a masterful dissertation on the limits of religion eliminating sin and what is important. When Paul writes “watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh” he is talking to religious people who believe they can conquer sin through right action. No, Paul says, I was more righteous than anyone, born into a staunch religious family, persecuting the Christian church, as far righteousness, flawless (Philippians 3:1-6).

Paul considers all of his striving for purity garbage compared to having a relationship with Christ that is rooted in faith (Philippians 3:7-11). He gives his gorgeous dissertation about striving, not against sin, but to know Jesus the incarnation of God, the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings (Philippians 3:11).

Biblical holiness is not about what we eliminate from our lives (though American Evangelicalism’s view of it is obsessed with eliminating sin from our lives). Rather Biblical true

Biblical holiness is deeply concerned with the positive we put into our lives: God's love, compassion for other people, mercy (Philippians 4:8-9). Now implicit in this infilling is a belief that the love of God, radiating from our lives, will eliminate behavior in us that violates and wrongs people, including ourselves. But again, it is the positive infilling that transforms us, not the absence of negative behavior.

This is what the famous "fruit of the Spirit" passage of Galatians 5 was trying to tell us: *"<sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law"* (Galatians 5:22-23). Against such things there is no law. See love, joy peace, forbearance . . . these are the aspects of God. When our lives are filled with these attributes by the Holy Spirit there is no law needed to hold us accountable. A person filled with these attributes would not be given to sin. What sin could we commit when love and kindness for all people permeates our lives? This is not to say that we will never sin, of course we will, but filled with the Spirit—and these attributes—we become a law unto ourselves. Our own conscience, under the Holy Spirit, convicts us. Daily. Hourly. Moment by moment. Not in a white-knuckle burdensome way, but as the natural outflow of brokenness and humility before God our creator, our true father and mother.

We—humanity—are not "good." But God is good by God's very nature, and we were created in God's image. There is goodness in us—all of us: it is what we were created for. The goodness of God is the light of all humanity (John 1:5). We love because God gave us the capacity to love and God loves us (1 John 1). That ability to love is not restricted to those who claim to be Christians, rather it is part of the gospel message which was always meant to be good news of great joy for all people (Matthew 2). This goodness of God, this love for all people, that is the holiness God seeks (Micah 6:8).

American Evangelicalism is obsessed with categories of sin, particularly related to sexuality. It is simply not what the "good news" of Jesus was ever about. Of course, our behavior matters, but the Gospel of Jesus understood that our behavior would be deeply rooted in our experience with God's love. Loving well, both God and other people, was the foundation of the Old Testament law (Matthew 22:37, Luke 10:27). Evangelical theology treats these sayings like trite bumper stickers rather than wrestling with their implications.

So what negative behavior is the New Testament concerned with? Oppression of others is at the top of the list of concerns. The violation of children (Matthew 18:6, Luke 17:2), financial preying upon those most vulnerable (Matthew 21:12-17, John 2:13-22), preventing people from worshiping God (John 2), greed (Mark 10:17-27, Matthew 19:16-22), unforgiveness (Peter how many times) and religious judgment (Matthew 23). And yes, Jesus appears to be deeply concerned about lust (pluck out eye) and the violation of the covenant of marriage (Matthew 19). These are deeply concerning to Jesus, but again, the antidote to all these issues is a transformative experience with Christ.

In asking about LGBTQ+ personhood and specifically gay marriage, "is it sin?" we betray the core problem that we do not really understand sin nor the message of the Bible. God is not obsessed with our sin, nor does the Bible say we should be either. Both continually point us to making the main thing, the main thing: receiving God's profound love for us (John 3:17) and then recognizing God's deep love for all people (John 3:16). It is not that sin does not matter, but rather that we are not arbiters of sin, God alone is, and what is far more important is our



encouraging all of humanity to receive God's love with a recognition that receiving God's love will spark one's own conscience to behave in a manner that honors God.

"Is it sin?" was always the wrong question. "Can a Gay Marriage honor God?" is the correct question and the answer to that, Biblically, is absolutely yes.

### **Humanity Needs Connection:**

The Vineyard USA makes an argument in their theological paper that Affirming scholars have taken the Bible out of context, that we have confronted the seven passages I broke down above while failing to see the heart of the Bible, which they assert is man and woman. In doing so they go back to Genesis 2:18 and reference woman being conceived of by God as a "helper" suitable for man (Genesis 2:18). This is where they start in painting a narrative for the entire Bible that is non-affirming and deeply tied to gender (vineyard). They discuss the husband-and-wife role as part of the central covenant of God with mankind (Vineyard). The Vineyard gets very close to a full-throated endorsement of patriarchy and complementarianism, interesting for an egalitarian movement. In doing so they are quick to dismiss (and maybe mock) affirming theologians as wishful and unbelievable.

The Vineyard also fails to see the purpose of the text in Genesis 2:18. By this point of Genesis narrative, God had already carefully constructed this earth: light to shine into the darkness. God separated the waters in the heaven from the oceans with this "sky." God gathered up the waters of the earth into locations thus creating land. On the land, vegetation of all kinds started to grow. God created a sun to guide by day, a moon and countless stars at night, great creatures of the sea, living creatures on land. Consistently, as God looks down upon this creation, God says that it was "good" (Genesis 1).

Then God creates humanity in God's own image, the image of the Trinity that has resided in harmony with each other for eternity. At the end of chapter 1, before the more detailed Adam and Eve parable, the text says that God created them both, humanity, male and female and gives them every seed-bearing plant and tree, beast of the earth, birds in the sky and creatures to cultivate and steward in this paradise. On that last day of creation, after creating humanity, God looks down at all God had made and sees that "it was very good" (Genesis 1:31).

Then we get this detailed account, essentially a second creation story of humanity, where God creates this "man" who we call "Adam," and places him in this beautiful garden that God had created called Eden. Now this account in Genesis 2 is widely accepted to be a parable, an alternative creation narrative to the violent creation narratives of the Ancient Near-East that preceded this Biblical story in human mythos. Adam and Eve are widely accepted as an allegory for all of humanity and it is a story of humanity daily walking in perfect relationship with God before our fall. So in Genesis 2, God places Adam in this idyllic paradise. After placing Adam here and telling Adam he can eat of the fruit of almost every tree, name each animal, walk in harmony with God . . . God looks at this human God has fashioned from the earth and God says something shocking in Genesis 2:18: "It is *not good* for the man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18).

It is not good for man to be alone. Six times as God creates this beautiful world in Genesis chapter 1 God surveys this creation and sees that it is "good." When looking at humanity, male and female, God sees that it is "very good." Now God looks at God's creation, this human being

that God has created and placed in this stunning Eden . . . and it is not good for the man to be alone. All of this paradise, idyllic, lush with greenery and flowing rivers; yet something is wrong. It is not good, because this human God has placed there is alone. God answers this by creating woman, “taken out of man.” But it is not gender that is central here, no, it is partnership. God was worried that God’s creation, this human being made to be in relationship with God, could not subsist in relationship with God alone, but rather needed human connection, a partner. Eden was perfect and yet it was disharmonious, imperfect, for humanity to be alone.

The complementarian interpretation highlights not the isolation of humanity but the gender of Adam and Eve. That hyper focus on the gender of the two individuals in Genesis 2:18 fails to understand the heart of this text, nor is it consistent with the rest of the Bible. Genesis 2:18 speaks to God’s profound concern for human isolation. Even humanity physically walking and talking with God each day could not answer this concern, humanity needed a partner. The heart of this passage was not about masculine and feminine, though the Genesis narrative certainly affirms a man and woman entering into partnership, but no, the text was speaking to humanities more primal need for human connection.

It is not good for humanity to be alone, and this is not just related to marriage. Jesus the incarnation of God knows this as he appoints twelve disciples and call them his friends (John 15:15). The New Testament church was to become something far more than a religious institution, it was meant to be a family (Acts 4:32-35). Marriage is created in Genesis 2:18-19 as an answer to this isolation of humanity, not the exclusive only answer, but a primary one.

I am continually struck by how Evangelicalism is playing with fire on the issue of gay marriage. God did not want humanity to be alone, but rather saw the need for us to be in deep, lifelong relationship. The New Testament even demands people marry rather than be consumed by issues of lust (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 7:9). Are we sure that God would not prefer gay marriage over crippling isolation? Might God prefer gay marriage over consuming lust? Is it possible that Paul’s instruction to marry even applies to gay marriage? Even in this magical “plain reading” of scripture to where respected theologians see in 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 1:10 and 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 6:9 a simple condemnation of sex between two men or two women, are these theologians so sure that a “plain reading” of Genesis 2:18-19 and 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 7:9 does not supersede that condemnation? The Bible is pretty clear: damning people to enforced human isolation or is *not good*.

### **The Limits of Marriage and Gender:**

Yet even marriage was not the end all of the covenant with God that complementarian scholars often indicate it to be . . . marriage in God’s teachings is beautiful, but temporary (Matthew 22:30). Yes, this institution is important to God, not rooted in gender, but rooted in humanities need for intimacy. The Bible affirms sex for all humanity (Song of Songs), though it constantly warns against the addiction/ idolatry of sex (Matthew 5:27-29).

Paul in the New Testament echoes the importance of marriage in answering both humanities sexual and emotional needs. However, Paul himself does not idolize marriage, but rather gives a full-throated endorsement, not for man and wife, but for celibacy. He openly says that celibacy is his preference for all Christians (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 7:7-8), and then acknowledges that such a command is difficult. Paul then expresses if people cannot control their sexual impulses, they

should get married, because it's "better to marry than to burn with passion." Paul is advocating celibacy, essentially asexuality, as the better path for humanity, but then Paul recognizes that this is hard for humanity. We were made for connection, both emotional and sexual connection, and Paul recognized that this sexual connection needed to be answered within the confines of marriage, but he also does not exalt marriage as the pinnacle of humanity. Important, beautiful, a way to combat our loneliness and sexual desire with a partner—yes, but not necessary, in fact for Paul, not preferred. Paul—and Jesus—value marriage, but see it as temporal, not an eternal covenant that will follow us into God's kingdom (where it will be presumed not be necessary).

Jesus and Paul also see gender through the same lens. A theology for the entire spectrum of LGBTQ+AI is quite simple, because in truth the New Testament gospel is not concerned with gender, but rather how God loves and interacts with all humanity. God created our souls and relates to us in the core of who we are (Psalm 139). This is part of the theme of Romans 8—nothing in all of creation can separate us from the love of God found in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:39). The Bible clearly acknowledges our differences and so it is not necessarily accurate to say that gender differences and sexual identity do not matter—they matter profoundly to God because they matter to us and God loves us. But God who created us sees the core of our humanity, who we are in the inmost part of our being (Psalm 139).

Jesus is asked about marriage: a woman is married to a man who dies and then subsequently marries his brothers, who all die in turn—whose wife then, in God's kingdom, will she be? Jesus is very pointed: "you are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.<sup>30</sup> At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven (Matthew 22:29-30, Mark 12:25)." So marriage will not be a part of heaven, because we will be like angels. The inference here might be that angels are genderless, and we will be too, or at least that angels do not need to marry nor express sexual desire and we will not either one day in God's kingdom.

This fits well with one of Paul's seminal statements where he expresses that it is not gender that defines us:

*23 Before the coming of this faith,<sup>[1]</sup> we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. 24 So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. 25 Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.*

*26 So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, 27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.*

This is a widely studied and discussed passage. Non-affirming theologians are quick to dismiss this passage as a metaphor having nothing to do with the minimization of gender, but simply a statement that gender, while important, does not interfere with our status before God. That is an artful dodge. Yes, this is essentially a metaphor. Paul is not dismissing the reality of gender and

race and economic disparity . . . but this is also far more than that. Paul acknowledges the reality of gender, while establishing that our being united with each other in Christ strips away the differences of gender, race, and economic disparity before God. This is not just wishful thinking, rather it is a far-reaching statement about the kingdom of God.

Humanity was once under the law, a captive, until a life under Christ, being justified by faith, was revealed. As such we are not under the guardianship of the law anymore but are children of God through faith in Jesus Christ. That oneness in Christ is not bound by gender, nor race nor economic disparity—our union with Christ is above all things. They are temporary; they are not a part of God’s future kingdom, but rather a functional reality of this one. As we are no longer under the law, this passage is absolutely advocating that we put away the bigotry on these issues of gender, race and economics that were a part of our life under the law.

This interpretation of Galatians fits strikingly with what we see in the actions of Jesus and the disciples in the New Testament. Jesus avoids confirming he is the Messiah to his cousin, John the Baptist, whom Jesus considers “the greatest of men born from women,” and Peter and the disciples for years. The political leaders directly ask Jesus and he stays silent. Who is the first person within the Gospel narrative that we see Jesus confirm he is the Messiah to? A woman from Samaria who has been married multiple times. She is perhaps the most outcast person Jesus could have found, of the wrong race, gender, and economic and moral status for Jesus to reveal himself to—and yet when she says: “I know the Messiah is coming,” he responds, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he (John 4:25-26).” Jesus is constantly breaking barriers of gender as part of God’s kingdom, whether it is refusing to condemn an “unclean” woman (Mark 5:25-43, Matthew 9:20-22, Luke 8:43-48) or making Mary the first evangelist (John 20:17). Paul follows suit appointing women as apostles in the church (Romans 16:7). Gender is simply not the focus of this text, but, like marriage, a functional reality that the New Testament is not ignorant of.

**All Broken:** This is hard for some Christians, but we live in a Genesis 3 world, post fall, not a Genesis 1 & 2 ideal (Gushee 1485). All our sexuality is sinful, broken and distorted. None of us embody the ideal of Genesis 1 & 2. I am a straight man, married to one woman for 19 years. We both waited to have sex until marriage and have never had sexual relations with anyone else. My sexuality is the ideal of the modern Conservative Evangelical ethos, and it is broken. I deal with lust like every man I have ever known. Our marriage has had challenges, we are both stubborn people. While I had never had sex before marriage, I had dated, been in love, had my heart broken and also broke a heart or two. I have regrets. I know intimately that my attempts to love are pretty broken.

There was no teaching in my own Evangelical youth for healthy relationships and marriages. We were taught “don’t have sex before marriage and everything will be okay.” Many of our Evangelical marriages are marked by anger and control, sometimes abuse and fear. As we follow Jesus, our marriages get better, but this covenant thing is not easy.

Evangelicalism presents marriage as if there is this perfect ideal and that gay marriage is somehow “less than.” If we are honest, then we understand that all our marriages are “less than.” There is no perfect Biblical marriage, and it is profoundly arrogant to assume straight marriages are “better” than gay ones.

In this broken context, the reality is we do not know what marriages God can choose to bless/honor and what God will not. As we are about to see, the Bible is shockingly honest about the challenges of marriage and what marriage should start to look in God, and it is not gender that is the focus.

### **The Movement of the Bible Towards Covenant, Monogamy and Mutuality:**

Marriage itself has an interesting journey in the Biblical text, as we saw in Leviticus. The journey is not towards husband and wife exclusively, but rather a lifetime covenant bound by monogamy and mutuality, this beautiful picture of two people coming together, in fidelity and a mutual honoring of each other.

The birth of the Israelite people occurs in an ancient Near-East world filled with extensive violence such as human sacrifice. Polygamy was the normal way of the world. We see Abraham, under the suggestion of his wife Sarah, take a concubine. It is expected by Laban that Jacob will marry both of his daughters Rachel and Leah.

The Leviticus chapters 18 and 20 passages we discussed portray a profoundly broken world, even within God's chosen people. Men are sleeping with their mothers, sisters, daughters-in law, taking multiple wives, in some cases taking their friends and neighbors wives who are presumed already married. This is a sexually hedonistic culture. As the text progresses across centuries, David the great King of Israel who all other Kings will be compared to has seven wives and possibly more concubines. Solomon his son will have nearly one thousand wives and concubines.

So part of what is fascinating here is that the Bible does not shy away from the consequences of this. Abraham is rebuked by God for fathering a child with a concubine. Jacob's actual "sister wives" bring him tremendous grief as their children fight, plot murder and sell a half-brother into slavery. David's infidelity leads him to murder and a confrontation with a beloved prophet. The consequences of David having children with at least seven different women are severe: one of his sons rapes his half-sister, only to be murdered by her full brother who then tries to take the kingdom from David. Another son claims the throne while David still lives leading to that son's death at the hands of his half-brother. Solomon's lust to marry close to five hundred women and take countless concubines into his bed leads to his dying an old fool and the break-up of Israel under one of his sons.

The Bible also takes an unflinching look at the consequences of patriarchal men not operating in partnership with their wives. Isaac refuses to recognize his wife's love of Jacob prompting a devastating feud. David has to be reminded, on his death bed, of his pledge to one of his wives, Bathsheba, to resolve the drama of his successor. For a patriarchal culture we see glimpses of mutuality emerging within marriage.

This continues into the New Testament: Elizabeth and Zechariah stand united in their child's name and his calling as her pregnancy in old age is questioned by their friends and neighbors. Mary, impregnated supernaturally, has to trust that her fiancé Joseph will not shame her publicly (which could be a death sentence) while Joseph, upon a visit by an angel, will choose to raise a first-born son that is biologically not his own in a world that values a man's namesake above all. Jesus chose to honor an unnamed woman from Samaria: to this day preachers assume she is a sinful woman—she has had five husbands and the man she is now with is not her husband—but

maybe Jesus recognized that she was not, at all, sinful. Maybe this woman was barren, and five men had married and discarded her in a short time for her inability to quickly bare children: that is not how God intended marriage to be.

What we see in the Bible is a progression of the covenant of marriage towards monogamy and mutuality, a fulfillment of Genesis 2, answering humanities loneliness with true partnership, what marriage was intended to be as Jesus referenced: the two shall become one flesh. It is difficult, messy, as all humanity is, but mutuality of marriage starts to emerge.

**Covenant and Monogamy:** Jesus is very clear how he interprets God's plan for covenantal marriage: monogamy, for life. For all the discussion about how seriously first century Judaism took sexual ethics, the reality is that the wealthy and elite men of Israel manipulated sexual ethics to exploit the system. Women were married off young, if she did not produce children for her husband soon enough, or did not cook well enough, or she simply grew a little older or he simply decided he wanted another woman, he could simply write a decree to divorce her, often damning her to poverty. Any and every reason was acceptable for a man to divorce his wife.

Jesus is asked about this:

*4 "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,'<sup>[a]</sup> 5 and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? 6 So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate."*

*7 "Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"*

*8 Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. 9 I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."*

(Matthew 19:4-9)

This is as shocking in that day as it is in this one, such that the disciples will say: "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry." (Matthew 19:10) The men of this culture take adultery very seriously; it is an immoral offense committed against God. But they believe they can legally, and morally, discard a woman to marry another at their own whim. No, Jesus is saying to them, *you* have committed adultery when you do this.

Jesus continues his brutal response. He recognizes that not everyone can accept this word, but "only those to whom it has been given." (Matthew 19:11) Then he shares that some people were born eunuchs and others are made eunuchs and others choose to be such for the sake of the kingdom (Matthew 19:11-12). Jesus is advocating monogamy, for life, or celibacy. When asked about the harshness he responds: *yes, some choose celibacy rather than monogamy, but that is not for everyone.* This is a far cry from the polygamy of the Old Testament. This is a strident monogamy that is echoed in the gospel letters by Paul (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 7:10-11).

Now, just a note, while the ethic of Jesus is monogamy, it is also clear that his teaching was not meant to be used as a form of control against women (or men) in abusive marriages or to prevent one from leaving an unfaithful spouse or to heap condemnation on those who are divorced. Jesus

makes a direct exception allowing one to file for divorce if their partner is unfaithful. Abuse of a partner is also a clear violation of the covenant bond of marriage as we will see in the next section. I believe the ethics of Jesus would allow, in fact would encourage, a partner to leave an abusive spouse. Last, the Biblical text is steeped in grace for all humanity. While the ethic is that of a monogamous lifetime covenant, the example we see in the text is extensive compassion and grace, not judgment for humanity and a deep recognition that this ethic is difficult (note the Samaritan woman in John 4, and the teachings of Romans 2:1-5 and 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 7:15, 7:32-35). This is an ethic for us to embrace and seek, particularly for Christian leaders, not a cudgel to use as judgment.

**Mutuality:** The Bible also has a strong ethic for how the covenant of marriage should be lived out and it is bound by mutuality, an equal sharing of love between two people. No passage is more striking in this than Ephesians 5:21-33. Once again, as we saw in Romans 1, the pinnacle text of Complementarian theology, used to subjugate women for centuries had the opposite message.

*<sup>21</sup> Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

*<sup>22</sup> Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. <sup>23</sup> For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. <sup>24</sup> Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.*

*<sup>25</sup> Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her <sup>26</sup> to make her holy, cleansing<sup>[b]</sup> her by the washing with water through the word, <sup>27</sup> and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. <sup>28</sup> In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. <sup>29</sup> After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church—<sup>30</sup> for we are members of his body. <sup>31</sup> “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”<sup>[c]</sup> <sup>32</sup> This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. <sup>33</sup> However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband. (Ephesians 5:21-33)*

Be subject to one another. In this beautiful, mysterious covenant, two people come together as one, also echoing the union of Jesus Christ and the true Christian church. This text also echoes 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 7:4, marital partners lives belong to each other. There is a reason Paul considers marriage to be difficult and consuming (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 7:7), these two people come together as equals, giving their bodies, in fact their entire lives, to each other in a way that they do not belong to themselves anymore.

Paul does not use the language of submission towards the husband, probably out of his understanding of the Greco-Roman world and its patriarchy, so he uses other language for the husband that denotes a far stronger commitment than submission: *love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*. Paul is not making a statement about the different

roles of men and woman in marriage, rather I suspect Paul is echoing “the greatest is the one who serves,” (Luke 22:26) and that there is no greater love than “laying down one’s life” (John 15:13). Paul cannot use the language of “submission” towards men in this milieu, so instead he paints a picture of radical submission,

In a patriarchal culture men do not submit to women, they rule over them. Paul is saying “you want to be in charge? Be ready to surrender your life as the incarnation of God surrendered his life.” His language here invokes submission. It is a striking command to Greco-Roman and Jewish men of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. The New Testament resets the human dynamics of power. God’s kingdom is not like this one. Even marriage is not meant to be an institution for men to control and abuse women, but rather something far more beautiful where two people come together in mutual submission to each other.

**God’s Ethic for Marriage? Understanding, Fidelity, Love & Mercy:** Paul, in Romans 1, the seminal “clobber text” of LGBTQ+ personhood, confirms this covenantal ethic of monogamy and mutuality. Paul goes on his epic rant against humanity as we have covered, identifying with the anger of the Roman church towards sin, railing against men committing sexual acts with each other, women submitting to something sexual Paul calls “unnatural,” saying that God had given them over to the sinful lusts (Romans 1: 24-27). Then he starts exposing the hypocrisy of all people, including the Christian church in Rome, discussing greed and evil, murder and envy, gossip and arrogance (Romans 1: 29-30). Then Romans 1:31 has this little tidbit that is interesting and the Biblical ethic for our sexuality emerges.

After railing against sexuality in many forms that the Christian church in Rome and even today would deem “unnatural” and then exposing hypocrisy by broadening his condemnation to all sins, committed by all people, Paul says about these people: “they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. <sup>32</sup> Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.” (Romans 1:29-32)

They are people without understanding, fidelity, love, mercy . . . although they know God’s righteous decrees, essentially, they do not follow them. So, what is it to follow God’s righteous decree? What is it to approach human sexuality and, more broadly, human life ethically? Well, according to the Bible it is to approach all with understanding, fidelity, love and mercy.

What a beautiful proscription for human marriage, not based on gender, but rather Kingdom ethics, found tucked into the primary text used to condemn gay marriage. Paul is not concerned about gender here nor does he give a detailed religious proscription for what sex can and cannot be. No, Paul expresses allegiance here to something far more fundamental. If you want to approach sexuality, of human life, with morality, it is found in our understanding for others, our fidelity to our commitments, love for each other and mercy towards those that are different.

Paul’s ethic, including the entire spectrum of human morality, is rooted in love. In Paul’s view even Christians who manifest gifts by the Holy Spirit (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13:1-2) or give to the poor, or demonstrate tremendous faith without love, it has no eternal meaning (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13:3). Paul’s definition of love echoes this understanding, fidelity and mercy with a list including patience, kindness, a lack of selfishness, a love that always protects, trusts, hopes and perseveres (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13:4-7). Paul sees love as “completeness” and feels that our spiritual gifts and



knowledge will pass away (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13: 8-12). Love (along with faith and hope) is eternal while all other things in this world, presumed including morality, is temporary (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13:13).

Paul follows the ethic of Jesus who sums up the culmination of the Old Testament law and prophets as “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’ and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Luke 10:27) Jesus continues this theme telling his disciples that humanity has “no greater love than laying down one’s life for that of their friends.” (John 15:13). John the Beloved, the other great theologian of the New Testament will echo this theme of love as God’s ethic countless times (1<sup>st</sup> John 4:16).

Understanding. Fidelity. Love. Mercy. According to Paul in the Bible these are the hallmarks of God’s righteousness in our lives. This echoes Jesus own teachings on the human experience. We see tremendous understanding from Jesus towards people throughout his ministry, from Nikodemus the tax collector (John 3) to the woman caught in the act of adultery (John 8:1-11).

Fidelity is the undergirding of Jesus one extensive discussion of marriage: the two shall become one flesh, (Matthew 19:4) any man who divorces their wife, except for sexual immorality, commits adultery (Matthew 19:9). Jesus begs for fidelity here, fidelity from rich men of Israel towards their wives, an exception to allow divorce of those who do not show fidelity and a warning that any man discarding his wife and marrying another has broken fidelity with his first wife.

We have already discussed Jesus’ view of love and finally we come to mercy. This is the other hallmark of Jesus ethic. Those who show mercy are those who will receive mercy (Matthew 5:7). How many times must I forgive my brother, Peter asks. “Not seven times, but seventy-seven times,” (Matthew 18:21-22) Jesus answers. Jesus on the cross echoes the seminal words “father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,” (Luke 23:34).

I certainly do not think that Paul was intending to sum up Jesus’ ethic for sexuality in Romans 1:31. This is an offhand comment after decrying human immorality and before setting up his great dissertation of God’s kindness . . . but it is an offhand statement from Paul, after a dissertation on human sexuality, that is a summation of how God intended human morality to be. It is a rare moment in the New Testament text where Paul, who is passionately committed to justification by faith alone, expresses what human morality should look like, and it echoes Jesus’ teachings and life beautifully.

Paul knew this writing in the book of Philippians. Earlier we discussed Paul’s recognition of the limits of holiness in Philippians chapter 3. Paul establishes his credential as one who was “holy,” and then dismisses all of it compared to a relationship with God, that is by faith. A few paragraphs later, Paul says goodbye to the Philippians church and offers another rare moral instruction:

*“<sup>8</sup> Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. <sup>9</sup> Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.”*  
(Philippians 4: 8-9)

I suspect this is what God is thinking when God sees our pathetic religious discussions on gay marriage: stop this silliness. Whatever is pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy, focus on such things, not rank judgment of other people. Does the professed love between two men, two women demonstrate understanding, fidelity, love and mercy? If so, what is the issue?

Does God Affirm LGBTQ+IA and by extension, gay marriage? Of course God does. God loves all of humanity (John 3:16). God is not obsessed with sin, we are. God's moral ethic, as echoed by Paul, is rooted in understanding, fidelity, love and mercy. This is what a marriage, dedicated to God, looks like. We are obsessed with gender, God is not. On some level, we are obsessed with marriage and purity, God is not. God certainly values marriage, and advocates covenant, but it is an institution designed to meet our human need for emotionally intimacy, sexual desire and procreation. God desires that all our relationships operate in love and mercy. Our treatment of each other is of utmost importance in God's ethic. In centering our ethic around the gender of those having sexual relations the church has cheapened the teachings of Jesus Christ. This is the brutal reality for American Evangelicalism in this moral discussion. Evangelicalisms current moral ethic is far easier than what the Bible advocates here.

The Bible is not concerned with the categories of action, as evidence by Paul saying, "everything is permissible, though not everything is beneficial," (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 10:23) however we are to live lives worthy of Christ. This means whatever we do needs to be marked by the law of love: fidelity, mercy and understanding. So we go back to the seminal questions, can a gay marriage honor God? According to the Bible of course, as long as it is marked by such understanding, fidelity, mercy and love. This is a far higher ethical standard than we operate by within our churches. This is what marriage should look like in God's kingdom. Gender is not the center of our ethic, our treatment of each other in marriage and relationships, fueled by God's love and mercy for all of us, becomes the critical ethic.

The heart of Jesus statement in Matthew 19 was to advocate monogamy, two people, for life with a recognition that this is hard (note that Jesus says this is difficult in Matthew 19), rather than affluent men treating their spouses as if they are disposable. However, the New Testament, as evidenced by the actions of Jesus, is full of grace for humanity, recognizing that this monogamy Jesus advocates for will be difficult. And even this lifelong marriage directed by God is valuable when it is marked by understanding, fidelity, mercy, and love.

All of this speaks to what covenantal marriage is Biblically: monogamy and mutuality, a sharing of intimacy and love between people that is governed by fidelity. This is the profound movement of marital and sexual relation in the Biblical text from Genesis 2:18 saying "it is not good for the man to be alone," to the New Testament that advocates a presentation for marriage rooted in mutual submission to us today. Two people in submission to one another, valuing each other's lives above their own: this is the model of marriage in the Bible. The Bible was never against gay marriage, two people pledging themselves to each other in fidelity and love. The Bible was deeply against oppression, particularly men shaming and violating other men. It was not just an indictment of pederasty, but the whole Greco-Roman and Ancient Near-East pattern of men abusing men and women. God is deeply concerned about sexual immorality, specifically the violation of others, whether it be through sexual violence, infidelity or abuse of our partner.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgenderism, Queer or Questioning, Intersex and Asexual or Ally. Nothing here would prohibit one from being a Jesus follower and as a Jesus follower, God's

concern is simply if we are walking in fidelity and mercy, love and understanding with each other. These are the higher laws. God is simply not concerned with sexual identity beyond God's deep concern and love for all humanity. God advocates our sexual behavior be expressed in covenantal marriage: two people, mutually submitted to each other, monogamous, for life, a marriage rooted in understanding, fidelity, love and mercy.

## **2: Conclusion: A Practical Ethic for the Church**

**Consistency and Repentance:** Our behavior within American Evangelicalism towards the LGBTQ+AI+ community has been unconscionable. American Evangelicalism has long been in a state of "cheap grace" that Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke of in the 1930's. Jesus' teachings in the New Testament have essentially been abandoned: for example the Sermon on the Mount, the pinnacle of Jesus thought, is minimized as an unrealistic look at God's future kingdom, not to be attempted here and now. Thus, Jesus' teachings on non-violence, forgiveness, greed, humility and so many other issues are virtually ignored in our ethical formation. American Evangelicalism has a deficit of ethics right now, rather it is deeply rooted in culture wars, opposed to both modernity and post-modernism that emerged in the 1960's. I fear we are a prosperity and purity cult, concerned with how God's blessing will give us wealth and power and concerned with ensuring the virginity of our children as they enter their twenties.

In this broken culture of "cheap grace," a strident non-affirmation of gay marriage and LGBTQ+ personhood became the litmus test for a church to claim it was a "Bible believing church." This issue and this people became an easy target for American Evangelicalism to draw a line on "sin" while not upsetting a church culture where divorce and greed have been rampant. Now judging any group of Christians for hypocrisy is challenging: no church body has ever been perfect, a church is made up of people and all people are flawed. Even in our imperfection a church has a responsibility to confront sin and while I strongly disagree, American Evangelicalism consistently sees gay marriage and LGBTQ+ personhood as "sinful," so it may seem unfair to indict the church for hypocrisy on an issue where they believe they are being moral. But no, the church has been guilty of rank hypocrisy here and needs to repent.

No religious body is perfect, no Christian people is without "sin," but a religious body must be consistent with how they approach a single ethical issue towards different people groups, or it is guilty of disqualifying hypocrisy. It is one thing for the church to have weak to non-existent ethics on issues of greed and then be stringent on issues of sex for all people . . . but for the American Evangelical church to exile LGBTQ+ individuals and their allies for their sexual practices, personhood and views while being silent on the sexual practices of straight Christians is abhorrent.

And this place of abhorrent hypocrisy is where we are at in American Evangelicalism. Many of these churches do not believe an LGBTQ+ identifying person can be a Christian (a ridiculous theological view), many more churches indicate they are inviting to all, but then disallow same-sex couples from participating. All of American Evangelicalism prohibits their pastors from performing gay marriages and prohibits the ordination of gay clergy. Some movements, such as the Vineyard, argue that gay clergy are "technically" allowed, they simply need to pledge celibacy. That view is dishonest both theologically and in practice. First, there is simply no

Biblical justification for forcing celibacy on some individuals. Second, the Vineyard USA, of which I have belonged for sixteen years, has no known gay clergy; they essentially put such severe restrictions in place that it cannot happen. There is no place in American Evangelicalism for LGBTQ+ individuals who have any interest in ever being in a covenant relationship.

At the same time, sex among straight individuals is rampant with little to no condemnation, being afforded a grace that is simply not there for LGBTQ+ persons. I am an insider within American Evangelicalism, 4<sup>th</sup> generation Assemblies of God Christian, a graduate of their institution, North Central Bible College/ University. I worked as a Dean of Men and Center Director with Minnesota Teen Challenge for ten years, a lay minister with the Vineyard for seven years, attended the largest Seminary in the US and have served for five years as a Pastor of a Vineyard church. The Evangelical community has had strict ethical teaching on sex for their young adults, what we call purity culture, but virtually no ethical teaching or boundaries for straight adults in the church. Divorce is common. Sex among single adults is rampant. Infidelity among the Pastorate is not uncommon, with some guidelines holding Pastors accountable but always with opportunity for grace and restoration whereas LGBTQ+ persons are considered outcasts by nature of their identity.

In my own experience, the senior Pastor of the large mega-church I interned at as a twenty-one-year-old railed against teenagers having sex while he in fact was having multiple affairs on his wife, he still Pastors to this day, though with a different denomination. Another older Pastor I went to seminars with was having an extensive affair. An associate at a church I am close with had dozens of affairs over fifteen years. When I interviewed for a position five years ago, I was a finalist at a church that had removed their Pastor for infidelity and while I was interviewing, their interim Pastor who interviewed me was committing infidelity. Board members cheat on their spouses, repent, and remain in leadership for them to only cheat again months later. Divorce is as common in the American Evangelical church as it is outside of it. Pastors rarely speak against divorce as to do so will dramatically effect giving and drive older business professionals out. Within our single adult ministries, there is little teachings against sexual activity outside of the bounds of marriage, while such activity is common.

Now, I agree with the grace and understanding American Evangelicalism has on many of these issues. Marriage is hard, divorce should not be disqualifying of leadership within Christianity, rather it needs to be taken case by case as most of American Evangelism does. Infidelity is destructive, but people can repent, step away from ministry or church boards and walk-through restoration, saving marriages. The church needs to be welcoming in all these cases; we should not shame individuals going through divorce nor should we demonize those who have been unfaithful. The church also should not be the sex police for consenting adults in our churches. The Biblical mandate is for sex in the covenant of marriage, but the text professes profound grace for all people. I think we have handled the issue of divorce relatively well in Evangelicalism. I am glad we do not interfere in the private sex lives of single Christians . . . but we do need to clearly teach straight Christians that the Bible advocates monogamy and mutuality, in a lifetime covenant while having tremendous grace for all.

The issue is this—and this is a massive problem: American Evangelicalism has a respect for the private sex lives of consenting straight adults, grace for straight couples who divorce and restoration for infidelity among straight couples that American Evangelicalism does not have for

LGBTQ+ persons. I do not think gay marriage is a sin—but for the bulk of American Evangelicalism that does, the plain truth is we have had mercy and grace for the sexual indiscretions of straight Christians while exiling LGBTQ+ persons for their very identity. With straight individuals we barely teach that Jesus forbids divorce and sex outside of marriage, while we question the salvation of LGBTQ+ persons and ignore their covenantal marriages.

I can understand that we have differing views on the sinfulness of gay marriage and LGBTQ+ personhood. Most within American Evangelicalism read the plain translated text of Romans 1, 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 6:9 and 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 1:10 and they see same-sex relations as inherently sinful. I disagree, but that is at least a fair interpretation. There is no credible way for the church to prohibit gay marriage from its pews and allow divorce and remarriage in the church. A plain reading of the Bible prohibits divorce completely. It only allows an exception in cases of sexual infidelity, and only for the party that was not unfaithful. And Paul's teaching in the New Testament? Paul prohibits divorce and remarriage calling the subsequent marriage adultery. In Paul's ethic you do not get remarried after divorce, if you divorce, you must reconcile with your spouse or you will stay single, that is it. And sex outside of marriage? In Jesus ethic you have entered a covenant bond in your sexual act.

Now, for the tenth time, the Bible has tremendous grace here. It simply does not hold humanity to these radical standards, but rather advances them as the ideal with a tremendous grace for all of us. But American Evangelicalism is holding LGBTQ+ persons to the letter of the plain written text regarding sexuality, while showing grace to the shortcomings of straight individual. It is hypocrisy. It is bigotry. And those of us with LGBTQ+ friendships are done with this hateful approach towards our loved ones in the gay community.

American Evangelicalism would never—nor should it-- ban remarried persons from the church. It would never—nor should it-- view sex outside of marriage as disqualifying for salvation. It would never—nor should it-- tell those who have been unfaithful to their spouse or gotten divorced to get out of Christianity. To do so would be cruel, a violation of the mercy of the New Testament. Also, the church would simply never do this, as to do so would cost the church millions in attendance and hundreds of millions in tithe money. But all three of these issues: divorce, remarriage, and sex outside of marriage, are far more clearly prohibited in the Biblical text than gay marriage or LGBTQ+ personhood.

This is the same overarching ethical issue: marriage and the expression of our human sexuality. We have a moral obligation to be consistent on this ethical issue with all people. I support grace. Divorced and remarried straight individuals, as well as those who are sexually active, as well as LGBTQ+ identifying persons all have a place in God's kingdom. We can work issues out, case by case. It is incompatible with the Bible for Christian denominations to perform marriages for divorced and remarried persons but not gay marriages, the former is clearly prohibited in the Bible, the latter is not mentioned.

On the issue of LGBTQ+ personhood and gay marriage, the instincts of so people many fleeing the church are completely accurate: our denominational approach to the assumed "sin" of LGBTQ+ personhood and marriage is rooted in bigotry, not theology or the Bible. Yes, Evangelicalism, including the Vineyard movement I belong to, the Assemblies of God, Southern Baptists, Missionary Covenant, and the rest have been bigoted against the gay community. We

have grace for clear sexual sins of straight Christians while exiling LGBTQ+ persons for their identity and perceived sexual sins. It is morally wrong and the church must repent. Now.

**The Way Forward:** There does need to be strong ethical teaching on human sexuality from the church and to be blunt, fifty years ago we chose the wrong ethical line to take a stand. Being in the trenches of ministry, I have learned that most American Evangelicals do not want to discriminate against LGBTQ+ personhood. There are some Christians in these churches certain that LGBTQ+ personhood and gay marriage is inherently wrong—but they are increasingly in the minority. I'm convinced based on countless conversations that many American Evangelicals have deep love for all people and in 2023 have relationships across the spectrum of sexuality.

The Vineyard Movement I belong to is in this camp. The Vineyard has long had an ethic that all are welcome which has partly made their non-affirming stance since 2014 so painful. Almost daily I talk to Christians within the Vineyard that want to welcome LGBTQ+ persons fully into their churches, but they have been taught for so long that this is an issue of sin. They are profoundly confused why LGBTQ+ persons do not feel safe in their churches . . . constantly I hear “but we love everyone” and “everyone is welcome.” That is of course, simply not true. LGBTQ+ persons are not welcome if the church believes that their sexual identity is morally wrong.

So much of American Evangelicalism is still in reaction to the dramatic social changes of the 1960's. In our reaction we chose the wrong ethical line when we made heterosexuality, rather than covenant, monogamy, and mutuality the guidepost for human sexuality. Evangelicalism prefers broad strokes and the one-word answer here should have been monogamy with tremendous grace for all. We have demonized the gay community while much of the straight Christian church struggles to be faithful to their partners. It is heartbreaking.

Regardless of the argument I and so many others have made in support, some American Evangelicals may never be able to reconcile gay marriage as compatible with the Bible. But I think most Evangelicals would welcome a new approach where monogamy was the guidepost for human sexuality, rather than gender. Very similar to how we have handled the issue of divorce and remarriage, gay marriages would be performed by Pastors based on the fidelity of the two partners with the same assessment with which we should approach all marriages.

Regarding the clergy, Evangelical churches have again made the wrong dividing line. Too many movements, Vineyard USA, The Evangelical Covenant church, The Assemblies of God, in making gay marriage a fault line for the pastorate, chose a qualifying issue for the pastorate that demonized “the other” rather than looking at their own issues. There is an obvious dividing line for Pastoral sin and ordination, and it is monogamy, not gay marriage.

Denominations across Evangelicalism need to remove their prohibitions against ordaining LGBTQ+ clergy or Pastors performing gay marriages immediately. These prohibitions are rooted in poor theology that embraces a plain reading of the Biblical text while we do not embrace a plain reading approach to the sexual practices of straight Christians. Obviously, many local churches will not agree with gay marriage or clergy. That is fine. Let local congregations decide this issue just as we allow local congregations to decide whether to perform a marriage for someone who has been sexually active outside of marriage or ordain someone who has been divorced and remarried, using monogamy as the primary guidepost while then looking at

mutuality within the relationship. I pray that this work has convinced you that this theological issue is not nearly as easy as Evangelicalism has made it.

**For the Vineyard:** Speaking specifically to the leadership of the Vineyard movement USA I belong to: repent and allow local Pastors and churches to make the decisions on performing gay marriages or ordaining gay clergy, as you have always done for straight persons. The non-affirming path the Vineyard has gone down the past nine years is not consistent with our values. This is most obvious in our movement's deception here. The theological statement created in 2014 was titled: "Pastoring LGBT Persons" and was billed as a guidebook for Pastors in the movement. It was simply not that, rather it was a theological statement attempting to debunk any theological views that affirmed LGBTQ++ personhood and marriage. The statement was not published publicly but rather hidden from Vineyard Christians across the movement and only given to senior pastors under the orders they did not put it online or disseminate it. I was in seminary in 2015, after years of ministry work, and needed the statement for a paper and was denied because "I was not a senior pastor." Today, as of this writing, the Vineyard non-affirming statement, the most direct our movement has had on issues of ordination and marriage cannot be found on any Vineyard USA website. Like many Denominations (Gushee 22), the Vineyard movement is afraid of its own theological statement here.

Meanwhile Vineyard leaders are using that unavailable 2014 statement to exclude and abuse, not just LGBTQ+ persons, but Vineyard leaders who are sympathetic to LGBTQ+ persons. A famous Christian author, straight, faithfully married, a longtime leader in her church, is removed from teaching Sunday school because she has personal affirming views on gay marriage. Pastors are told to leave the movement because in their honest wrestling with scripture, they believe the Bible affirms gay marriage. Twelve years ago, when I left the Assemblies of God in the midst of a successful ministry career, I did so because I did not see the legalism and judgment, the deceit, in the Vineyard movement that had become ubiquitous in Evangelicalism. I do now and it is heartbreaking.

On the issue of LGBTQ+ personhood and gay marriage, the Vineyard has not followed our own values of local control, everyone is welcome, and theological diversity. We became just another controlling Evangelical movement right when Evangelicalism was being exposed for not being rooted in Jesus. Our behavior this past nine years is not who we are.

God affirms LGBTQ+ personhood and marriage. The text is not silent on our human sexuality and marriage, rather it recognizes our need for such emotional and physical connected creating a portrait that roots our sexuality in covenant, monogamy, and mutuality. Biblically sex is meant to be in the context of covenant, with one person, for life, only broken by death or the infidelity or abuse of one partner. In that covenant it is monogamous and marked by mutual submission. A loving relationship of understanding, fidelity, love and mercy.

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