

A Study Guide and Response to:

MEL WHITE'S

**What the  
Bible Says—  
and Doesn't Say—  
About Homosexuality**

Stanton L. Jones

A Study Guide and Response to  
Mel White's

**What the Bible Says—  
and Doesn't Say—  
About Homosexuality**

*by Stanton L. Jones*

The *Study Guide and Response* was written by Stanton L. Jones, Ph.D., © 2006. The moral stance of Wheaton College is expressed in its *Community Covenant* (the Covenant is available at <https://www.wheaton.edu/about-wheaton/community-covenant/>), but the views expressed here are those of the author and not of Wheaton College. The author is deeply grateful for the helpful comments and criticisms offered by several reviewers, and is solely responsible for its remaining deficiencies. Published by Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois.

.....

STANTON L. JONES is Provost of Wheaton College. Before his appointment as Provost in 1996, he was Professor of Psychology and Chairperson of the Psychology Department. He has been a Research Fellow of the Pew Evangelical Scholars Program, and a Visiting Scholar at the University of Chicago and the University of Cambridge. He served a three-year term (1999–2001) as a member of the Council of Representatives of the American Psychological Association, the central governing body of the APA. His recent scholarly work includes *Psychology and Christianity: Four Views* (InterVarsity), described in the *Christian Scholar's Review* as the most important book on psychology and Christianity published in the last 15 years, and *Homosexuality: The Use of Scientific Research in the Church's Moral Debate* (InterVarsity), which is being widely discussed in church debates about homosexuality. Dr. Jones holds a B.S. in Psychology from Texas A&M University, and an M.A. and Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from Arizona State University.

# Table of Contents

5	<b>Introduction</b> Comments to the Reader The Perspective of this Study Guide and Response The Perspective of Soulforce
12	<b>White's Eight Premises</b> Commentary on and Response to <i>What the Bible Says—and Doesn't Say— About Homosexuality</i> by Mel White
12	<b>Introduction</b> <i>"I take the Bible seriously. . . ."</i>
13	<b>First Premise</b> <i>"Most people have not carefully and prayerfully researched the biblical texts often used to condemn God's lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender children."</i>
15	<b>Second Premise</b> <i>"Historically, people's misinterpretation of the Bible has left a trail of suffering, bloodshed, and death."</i>
17	<b>Third Premise</b> <i>"We must be open to new truth from Scripture."</i>
18	<b>Fourth Premise</b> <i>"The Bible is a book about God—not a book about human sexuality."</i>
21	<b>Fifth Premise</b> <i>"We miss what these passages say about God when we spend so much time debating what they say about sex."</i>
29	<b>Sixth Premise</b> <i>"The biblical authors are silent about homosexual orientation as we know it today. They neither approve it nor condemn it."</i>
31	<b>Seventh Premise</b> <i>"Although the prophets, Jesus, and other biblical authors say nothing about homosexual orientation as we understand it today, they are clear about one thing: As we search for truth, we are to 'love one another.'"</i>
33	<b>Eighth Premise</b> <i>"Whatever some people believe the Bible says about homosexuality, they must not use that belief to deny homosexuals their basic civil rights. To discriminate against sexual or gender minorities is unjust and un-American."</i>
36	<b>Conclusion</b>
38	<b>Recommendations for Further Study on Homosexuality; Endnotes</b>



## Introduction

### Comments to the Reader

The question of the moral status of homosexual acts is tearing the Christian church apart in Western society. That question has now come in a new and forceful way to Wheaton College with the announced arrival of Soulforce's "Equality Ride" this spring term. This event presents us the opportunity to reexamine why we as an institution take the stance we do toward homosexual conduct and the persons who engage in it. The visit also presents us with the opportunity to respond to our visitors in a distinctly Christian way, manifesting sincere love even as we stand firmly on biblical truth. This document is written to Wheaton College students who will be thinking through these issues as a result of Soulforce's visit.

This document, however, is not your best general introduction to the difficult topic of the moral status of homosexual conduct and the persons who engage in it. Why? Because this document is necessarily *reactive*. It is written in response to the argument of another, thus giving priority to that other argument. If this is your first engagement with this issue, you need broader background and need to hear a more positive and powerful presentation of the complete traditional Christian perspective on these matters.

The traditional Christian understanding of homosexual conduct is but a small portion of a broader understanding of *sexual morality*, which in turn is imbedded in a broader understanding of *human sexuality*, which in turn is imbedded in a broader understanding of what it means *to be human*, which in turn is imbedded in a broader understanding of *humanity in relationship with the Sovereign God of the universe*. If you rely on this reactive document to understand the classical, historic understanding of the Christian church of homosexual conduct, sexuality and the human condition, *you will necessarily have a stunted and distorted understanding of that classic view, because this response has to be structured in response to the mistaken arguments contained in White's booklet.*

One student reviewer of this manuscript reminded me that those training to recognize counterfeit currency spend less time studying fake money and much more time studying the real thing, because the best way to recognize a fake is to know the real thing intimately. You will better recognize the errors in a bad argument when you have steeped yourself in truth. Thus, we strongly urge that you

first (before reading these materials) read the key scriptural passages dealing with this issue in their surrounding context. Read:

- Genesis 1-3 on the human condition
- Genesis 18:20 through chapter 19, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, along with the other passages of Scripture that reference it: Isaiah 1:7-17, Ezekiel 16 (whole chapter, but particularly verses 49-50), Jude 5-7, and 2 Peter 2.
- Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, and surrounding passages
- Matthew 5:27-32; 19:1-22; and related passages to hear Jesus on sexual purity
- Romans 1-3, but particularly 1:18-32
- 1 Corinthians 5-8, and particularly 6:9-20
- 1 Timothy 1:1-11

We then suggest you read one or more presentations of the traditional or classic Christian view on homosexual morality. On our campus, we have made widely available two such resources:

John Stott, *Same-Sex Partnerships?: A Christian Perspective* (Revell/Baker, 1998)  
Stanton L. Jones, *The Gay Debate* (InterVarsity Press Booklet, 1994)

These readings will give you the broader context, the positive context, for the traditional teaching of the Christian church on human sexuality.

As you prepare yourself to understand this issue, I urge you also to recognize, on the authority of Scripture itself, that settling questions of morality is serious business indeed. Difficult moral questions like these are not merely intellectual, but are spiritual at their very core because God links faith and obedience. In Matthew 16:24-26, our Lord said: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life?” (ESV). We must be conscious of grappling with these issues not just as an intellectual puzzle, but as a matter of faithfulness to the Lord of the universe and our Savior.

Jesus spoke on the centrality of our submission to God in deciding matters of morality when he stated, “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him” (John 14:21, NIV); the Apostle John, remembering those words at the end of his life, wrote in 1 John 2:4, “The man who says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him.” To understand how the apostles understood the linkage of true faithfulness and moral purity, read such passages as 2 Timothy 3:1-14, where Paul speaks to Christians in future generations who would be facing false teaching and moral confusion, or read Jude 1-23 on the same subject.

## The Perspective of this Study Guide and Response

The Christian church and contemporary American society are consumed with the question of homosexuality. Is it normal? Is homosexual behavior morally acceptable? Should persons who embrace “gay identity” be accepted fully in the Christian church? Can homosexual persons change? Doesn’t Christian charity demand inclusion, acceptance, tolerance, and embracing of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender peoples? These and the many related questions present all of us today with perplexing choices.

We are engaged in a task of evaluation: We each must examine the competing claims of those arguing all sides of this question, sincerely asking that God would speak to us in that search. This document seeks to engage and evaluate a specific “artifact” of this debate, Dr. White’s document, which is evaluating and challenging the traditional stance of the Christian church toward the morality of homosexual conduct.

All human evaluation is done from a “perspective.” To stand in evaluation of the work or thought of another, one must be clear about one’s own position, and also seek fairly and clearly to understand the views of the other. The following is my tentative summary of the classic position of the Christian church on sexuality and sexual morality, which is the perspective from which I offer this evaluation:

*Christians have believed that God the Father and Creator made humanity as physical and sexual beings, male and female equally in God’s image. He made us so that one man and one woman could be blessed to form an exclusive and life-long marital union in which to experience the joy of sexual and personal union, and possibly the gift of children. Indeed, Christian marriage serves as an earthly model of Christ’s love for his Bride, the Church (Ephesians 5:25-33).*

*We have also believed that all of humanity is fractured by the reality of sin, such that we experience many desires and inclinations that are not in accord with how God made us. In fact, we are even distorted in our thinking, such that we have difficulty recognizing the true, the pure, the good. Because of this reality, we celebrate that God spoke to his people through prophets and apostles in words preserved faithfully in the Bible to diagnose our brokenness and to reveal to us how he desires us to live.*

*At the very core of our faith, we proclaim and celebrate that God gave his own Son to die for us and to rise to live again in conquest of death itself that we might be forgiven by his mercy for our brokenness. He gave us his Word in the Bible to guide us in how to live a life pleasing to him. We further proclaim and celebrate that he gave us the Holy Spirit to come into our hearts and accompany and empower us to live that life. With his Word as a guide and the power of the Holy Spirit within, we experience not just forgiveness, but we are able to begin to experience the fruits of transformation in our personal lives as we grow in faith in him. We believe we can and will experience healing and growth from brokenness of all kinds toward wholeness and Christlikeness in this life.*



Christians believe they are called to follow Jesus Christ as their Lord (Acts 2:36; 1 Peter 3:15). Jesus stated, “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him” (John 14:21, NIV). Sexual purity is one way in which Christians are to show their love for their Lord—we are to conduct ourselves in accord with God’s “rules” as revealed in the entire Bible. Obedience (a word Americans do not often use today) is the best way that we, the recipients of God’s great gifts, can show our love for him, thank him with our lives for the gifts given, and best use those gifts.

The Bible consistently affirms the blessedness of sexual union between a man and woman married to each other, and urges us to restrain ourselves from all sexual intimacies outside that blessed union.<sup>1</sup> That this is a hard calling is suggested by the fact that the apostles often had to urge early Christians to pursue sexual purity and avoid sexual immorality. Adultery, fornication (or sexual impurity between unmarried people), rape, incest, sex with animals, and homosexual conduct are among those behaviors explicitly named in Scripture as contrary to God’s will.<sup>2</sup> Homosexual conduct is not a major preoccupation of Scripture, but whenever it is mentioned in the Bible, it is condemned unequivocally and forcefully. And what a glorious declaration we have in 1 Corinthians 6 when the Apostle Paul, after listing a wide array of sins in which believers had once been ensnared, including homosexual sin, declares, “And that is what some of you were!” (1 Corinthians 6:11, NIV). Freedom from a life of slavery to sin is possible in Christ.

What is the relationship of Wheaton College’s position on sexual morality to this historic perspective?<sup>3</sup> We seek to be in conformity with this historic stance and to remain faithful to it. Wheaton College, top to bottom, is a voluntary community of like-minded Christians in the Protestant evangelical tradition. We affirm the complete truthfulness of the Bible and seek to live lives (including our sexual lives) in accord with its teaching. In the words of our Community Covenant, this “involves practicing those attitudes and actions the Bible portrays as virtues and avoiding those the Bible portrays as sinful.” We are explicit and clear that we cherish “chastity among the unmarried (1 Corinthians 6:18) and the sanctity of marriage between a man and woman (Hebrews 13:4)” and that we see as inconsistent with our Lord’s teachings all “sexual immorality, such as the use of pornography (Matthew 5:27-28), pre-marital sex, adultery, homosexual behavior, and all other sexual relations outside the bounds of marriage between a man and woman (Romans 1:21-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; Genesis 2:24; Ephesians 5:31).”

See John Stott’s coverage of this general topic in *Same-Sex Partnerships*, Chapter 1 (pp. 9-15), Chapter 3 (pp. 31-40), and Chapter 6 (pp. 69-72).

The members of the Wheaton College community affirm the right of others to disagree with us. We welcome free discussion with all, and view it as our calling

to engage respectfully those who disagree with all or part of the views that define our community. We seek to be a place where people who recognize their brokenness come to grow and minister. It is thus a good thing to have among us those who experience same-sex attraction and who live chastely in accord with our moral commitments. We seek to be a community of love, acceptance, and encouragement to those struggling with God's call on their sexual lives in this area and others. We acknowledge that we are imperfect: Some who experience same-sex attraction among us have been hurt by unloving attitudes and actions by some of us; for this we seek forgiveness and growth in love. Some in our community violate their word freely offered in affirmation of our Community Covenant. We also recognize that some have left our community and embraced other views of sexual morality; we respect their right to disagree with us but respectfully disagree with their choices. We are privileged to live in a country that recognizes our God-given right to freely exercise our religious beliefs and to establish institutions, like our College, that reflect those beliefs. We recognize and grieve over violence and injustices perpetrated against persons because of their sexual orientation; we repudiate all such violence and injustice even while we affirm the continuing validity of our faith's moral teachings and deny any causal connection between those teachings and such violence and injustice.

That is the perspective of this response. What of the position or perspective of Dr. White and Soulforce, the position or perspective from which they are critiquing the traditional teachings of the Church? In evaluating this document speaking to Christians about the meaning of the biblical text, we must inquire after the religious commitments that form the framework of this document promoted by Soulforce.

## **The Perspective of Soulforce**

Let's begin with the purposes of Soulforce. The purposes of Soulforce as an organization are clearly articulated on their website:<sup>4</sup>

*“The purpose of Soulforce is freedom for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people from religious and political oppression through the practice of relentless nonviolent resistance.”*

*Wherever you are on your journey of faith,  
Whatever your sexual orientation or gender identity,  
Whatever your religion, race, age, ability, color, or creed,  
You are welcome to join us in learning, teaching, and applying  
the ‘soul force’ principles of relentless nonviolent resistance  
as taught by Gandhi and King  
as we work together to stop spiritual violence*

*against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender people  
that flows out of the teachings and actions  
of religious leaders and their communities of faith.*

—*The People of Soulforce*

Clearly Soulforce is a broad, inclusive organization that welcomes diverse religious beliefs. A review of the website also produces the closest expression of a creed or faith-statement for the Soulforce organization:<sup>5</sup>

***Six Soulforce Beliefs About Myself***

- 1. I am a child of a loving Creator, a daughter or a son of the Soulforce at the center of the universe.\**
- 2. I am loved by my Creator exactly as I am. My sexual orientation is not a sickness to be healed nor a sin to be forgiven. My sexual orientation is a gift from my Creator to be accepted, celebrated, and lived with integrity.*
- 3. I am not an accident. I have a purpose. I was shaped by my Creator to love God and to assist in God's eternal struggle to win justice for all Her children who suffer injustice.*
- 4. I will not discover my purpose nor realize my power (my own soulforce) until I join my Creator in doing justice (making things fair for all.)*
- 5. When I join my Creator in doing justice, my own life will be renewed, empowered, and made more meaningful.*
- 6. In serving others, it is as much my moral obligation to refuse to cooperate with evil as it is to cooperate with good.*

*\* Neither Gandhi nor King required sectarian allegiance to any one statement of faith or religious practice. Soulforce is an interfaith and ecumenical movement. Wherever you are on your own faith journey, you are welcome to do justice with us.*

What are we to make of this perspective? Rev. Dr. Philip Turner (former Dean of the Episcopal Berkeley Divinity School at Yale) has been observing and attempting to influence the theological developments in one mainline denomination, the Protestant Episcopal Church in the U.S.A., a denomination that has grown increasingly accepting and inclusive of gays and lesbians. His analysis is that the growing acceptance of “sexual minorities” in many churches is based not on some minor adjustment of moral standards, but rather on a *radical shift in theological foundations*:

We must say this clearly: The Episcopal Church's current working theology depends on the obliteration of God's difficult, redemptive love in the name of a new revelation. The message, even when it comes from the mouths of its more sophisticated exponents, amounts to inclusion *without qualification*... [This] working theology [of the Episcopal Church is] one which most Anglicans in the rest of the world no longer recognize as Christian.<sup>6</sup>

The “Soulforce Credo About Myself” is a creed typical of the type of inclusive theology about which Turner is commenting. The Soulforce theology simply and directly says, “God accepts us as we are without qualification.” Traditional Christian theology, in contrast, affirms God’s righteousness, justice and sovereignty; human sinfulness and depravity; Christ’s divinity and costly death and resurrection; our need for justification before God by Christ’s atoning death; the call to follow Christ in obedience as our Lord; and the Holy Spirit’s work not only of applying the blood of the Lamb of God that we might be justified, but also of living in our hearts that we might be freed from sin. Our inclusion in God’s family, then, *does* involve “qualification” (if we can put it that way): without the death of Christ on the cross we would be lost, without God’s Spirit moving our hearts to repentance we would be lost, without our acknowledgement of Jesus as Lord and Savior we would be lost. We are *not* acceptable as we are. God asks something of us—he asks us to die to ourselves and to be born again.

The Soulforce theology as expressed is theistic rather than Christian—it affirms a loving and accepting God *and stops there*, rather than affirming a loving and completely righteous and just God who pursues sinful people by offering his own Son to die for us and rise in triumph over death. The only mention by Soulforce of anything like redemption of human life is associated with human effort directed at establishing justice (*“I will not discover my purpose nor realize my power [my own soulforce] until I join my Creator in doing justice [making things fair for all.]; When I join my Creator in doing justice, my own life will be renewed”*) without mention of the Christian belief in the sufficiency of God’s work on our behalf. In this theology, there is no room for sin, no need of costly redemption, and no call to follow Christ as Lord sacrificially.

I note in conclusion that though Dr. White is the founder of Soulforce, these core distinctives of Soulforce as an organization may or may not reflect his personal theological views. His document, though, is offered as a Soulforce document, and so the commitments of the organization are relevant. You will also see in reading White that he does more deconstructing of the traditional view than he does constructing or clarifying his own views and the basis for them.

### **Questions for Reflection**

1. Compare the “Soulforce Credo About Myself” to the Apostle’s or Nicene Creed; reflect on similarities and differences.
2. Earlier we said that all evaluation is done from a “perspective.” How will the theology of Soulforce affect its critique of the teachings of the Bible and of the Christian church?

## White's Eight Premises

Commentary on and response to *What the Bible Says—  
and Doesn't Say—About Homosexuality* by Mel White

### Introduction

Mel White—*"I take the Bible seriously. . . ."*

It is a good thing to take the Bible seriously. The person who does not take it seriously is unlikely to interpret it rightly. Seriousness may well be a *necessary* condition for proper biblical interpretation. *But is it sufficient?*

No. Taking the Bible seriously is no guarantee of interpreting it rightly. Most of the heretical movements that have troubled the Church throughout its life have been started by those claiming to take the Bible seriously. Marcion claimed to be taking the Bible seriously when he counterposed the angry god of the Old Testament against the loving God of the New, and hence urged the dismissal of the Old Testament from the canon for Christians. Arius, claiming to take the Scriptures seriously, redefined and qualified the divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ such that he was judged to have denied the Trinitarian nature of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Pelagius, claiming to take the Scriptures seriously, denied the doctrine of original sin and taught salvation through human effort at keeping God's law.<sup>7</sup> Each of these leaders and their movements were declared heretical by the Church, which, following the teaching of the Scriptures and of the apostles, clung to the "pattern of Christian truth"<sup>8</sup> which they had learned from their spiritual parents.

One of the most disconcerting aspects of conflict in the Church (conflict which is ongoing and multifaceted) is the way that all sides typically claim to be faithful to biblical authority. Further, all sides claim seriousness in their engagement with Scripture or sincerity in the views offered. Clearly there are some aspects of the biblical witness that are difficult to interpret and around which well-meaning Christians can and do disagree. After all, major denominations still have differences with each other. But it is equally clear that if the Scriptures can mean *anything* then ultimately they must mean nothing.<sup>9</sup> As Wheaton students enter church leadership, they will have to confront repeatedly the question of how to understand the Scriptures rightly, truthfully, even when incompatible interpretations are offered with all seriousness and sincerity. So the question is, What does the Bible teach?

Dr. White concludes his first premise by citing 1 Thessalonians 5:21: "Test all things and hold fast to that which is good." He is absolutely right; this is our calling. But hear the words of Jude in Jude 17-23 as he expounds this theme at greater length:

But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. They said to you, "In the last time there will be scoffers, following

their own ungodly passions.” It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit. But you, beloved, build yourselves up in your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. And have mercy on those who doubt; save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh. (ESV)

### **Questions for Reflection**

1. *Do all persons who take the Bible seriously understand it rightly?*
2. *What conditions other than seriousness must be in place to lead to proper understanding of and response to the meaning of the Bible?*

### **White’s First Premise**

*“Most people have not carefully and prayerfully researched the biblical texts often used to condemn God’s lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender children.”*

True. But let’s think about this claim carefully. It is true that many have not themselves personally researched this matter, but then many have not themselves personally researched other doctrines that they accept and trust, such as the doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation, or of the authority of Scripture. Many have not personally and deeply studied various moral beliefs that they take to be true, such as Just War or Pacifist teachings, or the immorality of abortion. But responsible, trusted leaders in the Church *have* researched the teaching of the Bible on such issues, including the matter of sexual morality. They have in fact reflected on these matters exhaustively, for centuries, and during this time the teaching of the Church has remained essentially stable until very recently. Even now, as a few American and European mainline denominations teeter on this matter, the worldwide Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, and the conservative Protestant denominations in America and around the world, remain firm: homosexual conduct is always judged immoral. The critical mass of Christians in the world today continue to accept the traditional moral teachings of the Church. Are Christians unwise today to trust the historic teaching of the Bible and the Church? Put differently, are the individual judgments of a handful of advocates and church leaders (including many committed to the conduct that is itself in dispute) a firm basis on which to reject the Church’s reading of the seemingly clear message of Scripture for almost 3,000 years?

Several of White’s claims in this section are misleading or fail to bear up under close scrutiny. Take the issue that “Jesus says nothing about same-sex behavior.” What are we to make of this? Does Jesus’ silence communicate either that he was neutral toward the behavior or approving of it?

Note that if Jesus’ silence connotes toleration, neutrality or approval, then

Jesus must also be understood as having that same stance of toleration or approval toward other behaviors condemned in the Old Testament on which he is equally silent. Jesus (as recorded in Scripture) did not speak explicitly to homosexual conduct, but neither did he speak of rape, incest, or sex with animals. Does Jesus' silence suggest indifference toward or approval of these patterns?

Make no mistake about it; some theologians do interpret Jesus' silence as fully permissive. Gay Episcopalian New Testament scholar L. William Countryman, for example, concludes that "The gospel allows no rule against the following, in and of themselves: . . . bestiality [sex with animals], polygamy, homosexual acts," or "pornography." On such matters, he argues, we are not free to "impose our codes on others."<sup>10</sup> So in this vision of the freedom "in the Gospel," sex with animals, pornography, and polygamy are legitimate expressions of freedom.

But far from being a lax sexual libertarian, *Jesus was tough on sexual morality*. When the topic of adultery comes up, he tightens the standards to include a condemnation even of what goes on in our minds (lust; Matthew 5:28). When the topic of divorce arises, he so tightens the standards for the dissolution of marriage (by disempowering husbands to put away their wives at will) that his disciples exclaim, "It is better not to marry!" (Matthew 19:1-12). In this context, it boggles the mind to think that the lack of a recorded word from Jesus himself should be interpreted as sexual liberty. It is much more likely that his silence connoted approval and endorsement of the moral condemnations of the Old Testament; his was the silence of agreement, the silence of that which did not need to be stated because it was taken for granted.

One other matter deserves explicit mention: What are we to make of the lack of complete uniformity in the teaching of the Church? When we say "the Church has always taught that homosexual conduct is wrong," what are we really claiming? Are we claiming complete uniformity, that there has never been a confused or contrary voice raised? Of course not. Throughout its history, the Church has struggled to remain faithful to the faith taught by the prophets, apostles, and by the Lord Jesus himself, even while discordant voices within its bounds claimed new understandings and new revelations that contradicted established teaching. (Remember our earlier mention of Marcion, Arius, and Pelagius.) If the requirement to accept a teaching of the Church is a complete absence of anyone who has ever uttered an alternative view, then there would be no church teaching at all.<sup>11</sup>

### **Questions for Reflection**

1. *When should the established teaching of the Church be questioned or challenged, and when accepted? What will be our standards for deciding what is "true"?*
2. *Should the teachings of the Bible itself ever be questioned or challenged?*

## White's Second Premise

*"Historically, people's misinterpretation of the Bible has left a trail of suffering, bloodshed, and death."*

We must state it emphatically: Unjust violence against homosexual persons is wrong and repugnant to God. Christians everywhere should condemn such violence and condemn the application of biblical or church teachings to justify such. And some of this violence inflicted on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people has been committed with an expression of religious justification, which we must emphatically renounce and condemn.

Now, what about this statement as a premise for White's argument? It is no mistake that this is White's second premise. Through history, the Church has consistently approached the Scriptures asking *first*, "What has God said?" Other consequences and issues follow after. White approaches this differently. After establishing that few have themselves studied the issue, he then sets up *as a foundation for the remaining study* the perception that the teachings of the Bible—as classically understood—have been a source of violence and death for gays and lesbians. It seems to me that he does this for two reasons. The first is rhetorical: Many have argued that the best way to advance the cause of gay acceptance is to elicit sympathy for gays and lesbians by two key moves—"portray gays as victims, not as aggressive challengers" and "make victimizers look bad."<sup>12</sup> Students engaging this issue must be aware and reflective about the emotional power of such stories of victimization. Stories are powerful, but are we hearing the full stories and the right stories?

Secondly, if we approach the teachings of the Bible with a presupposition that "The traditional teaching of the Church has been the cause of violence and death, *and therefore that teaching must be wrong*" then we are predetermined to move away from that traditional teaching. Yes, some have misapplied the Scriptures to evil ends, and these failings need to be acknowledged. For example, in recent years a great failing of the evangelical church has been our failure to recognize and act on racial injustice in our society. The lack of evangelical support for the civil rights movement and of the continuing fight against racism in America and around the world is appalling. When we recognize errors, we must, in submission to God, seek to do right.

Yes, some biblical teachings have been wrongly applied. But the teachings of the Scriptures have also been *rightly* applied by the Church to counter evil: to seek to stop the excesses of the Crusades (including pogroms against Jews), to bring an end to slavery, to oppose Nazi fascism, and so forth. Yes, "even the devil can cite Scripture for his purpose," but God still uses Scripture for his purposes, and we are only in the right when we are aligned with those purposes.

Here is the central issue: White says, "We'd like to believe that no person of good will would misuse the Bible to support his or her prejudice." We agree. But clearly White is making an implied claim that the Bible does not condemn



homosexual behavior, but only *appears* to do so when someone misuses it to support his prejudices. But this argument falls apart if it can be shown that *the Bible really does teach that homosexual conduct is wrong*. If the Bible actually does teach this view, then it is not prejudice to accept and proclaim that teaching.<sup>13</sup>

One final set of reflections on the use, throughout this booklet, of tragic stories where persons spouting various expressions of God's judgment engage in heinous acts of violence or threaten violence. These are genuinely tragic as presented. Again, violence of this sort has no role in Christian life. Such acts must be labeled for what they are: *appalling acts of evil*. It is our hope that the Christian church will ever be active in preventing any such acts in the future.

But life is complex, and it is hard to know when we have heard the full story. There have been many misrepresentations in the media as stories have been put to political ends. Many will remember the media-saturation coverage of the Matthew Shepard case several years ago. Shepard was brutally pistol-whipped and left to die strapped to a rural fence in Wyoming in the bitter cold. His death was widely declared a hate crime against gays, an act presumed to have been motivated by raw hatred of and disgust with gays. The murder was used to denounce the historic teachings of the Bible and to denounce the Church as the source of such hate (just as White does here). Such hatred of homosexual persons and any acts of violence against homosexual persons, it is argued, must be grounded in and fueled by the Christian teaching that homosexual conduct is immoral. The moral teachings of the Bible and the Church are guilty by presumed association.

But years later, Matthew Shepard's murder now appears to have had nothing to do with homophobia, but rather to have been a complicated instance of a drug-frenzied robbery gone bad.<sup>14</sup> After years of the Shepherd case being used as a prime example of homophobic hate, it is now reasonably clear that Christian moral teachings and hatred of gays had nothing to do with this tragedy. The Shepard murder was a tragedy, true, but what implications does it have now for our deliberations? What assurance do we have that we have all of the facts in the cases cited by White here?

Further, we live in a moment in time when the media coverage of such supposed hate crimes against gays is intense, but there is little coverage of the opposite sort of story. Consider the murder of Mary Stachowicz, a faithful conservative Catholic, who was murdered by 19-year-old Nicholas Gutierrez.<sup>15</sup> Gutierrez stabbed and strangled Mrs. Stachowicz, and then hid her body. Why? Because she expressed her Christian views to him that his homosexual lifestyle was sinful, and told him of the possibility of finding new life in Christian faith. This story hardly created a ripple in the media. How many more such stories are there out there? More importantly, what difference do such stories make?

Our stance must be first, on the basis of the Christian moral teaching itself, to repudiate all such violence and hatred. Second, we must insist that we consider by itself the truth of the moral and factual claims of the Bible. We should do so without prior constraints from the supposed consequences of those claims.

Without such a stance, any view taught by the Bible that is claimed to have negative consequences (such as “people who believe in the deity of Jesus become Jew-killers” or “people who believe in the sanctity of all human life become fundamentalist terrorists like the abortion bomber”) can be dismissed without serious consideration as to whether it is *true*.

### **Questions for Reflection**

1. *What is the relationship between the truthfulness of a particular moral or theological view and the possible consequences of those views?*
2. *If we accept the basic argument that judging people to be acting immorally leads to hatred of and violence toward those people, then can any moral judgments be made? In other words, does White’s argument here, taken to its logical end, make it impossible to ever judge any action immoral since such a judgment might lead to hate?*
3. *Can we make moral judgments about the behavior of real people without hating them or condoning violence toward them?*

### **White’s Third Premise**

*“We must be open to new truth from Scripture.”*

Many are likely to respond positively (at some level) to this claim, precisely because it is widely understood that it is every Christian’s responsibility to listen—every day, every minute—for God to speak anew from the Scriptures and to take us yet one step further in our journey toward becoming like Christ. There is an element of truth here.

But what if White really means that we must be open to the overthrow of the established teaching of the Bible itself and of the Church on a significant matter of sexual morality that has been a settled matter since the time of Moses? Should we be open to the “new truth” that “*My sexual orientation is a gift from my Creator to be accepted, celebrated, and lived with integrity*” (from the “Soulforce Credo About Myself”)? Should we be open to the “new truth” that Paul was simply wrong in repeatedly reiterating that homosexual conduct is considered wickedness by God? In the past, the kinds of new truth that have been welcomed in the Church have typically been those where Scripture presents a complex and (at first) confusing pattern of teaching. But in the case of homosexual conduct, the testimony of Scripture is unanimous, straightforward, and unilaterally negative.

Some have argued that the Protestant Reformation was an instance of Christians asserting “new truth” from Scripture, that by questioning or challenging the teachings of the Roman Church on such matters as justification by faith, indulgences, and clerical celibacy, the Reformers were calling for new truth to be recognized by the Church in contrast to established teaching. But this is a flawed reading: First, the Reformers viewed their work as that of clearing away the false

“new truths” that had crept into church teaching in favor of a return to the “old truth,” the established truth of Scripture. Second, in doing so, *their standard was the clear teaching of Scripture itself*. They recognized that they could not challenge the established teaching of the Church without themselves being open to being challenged on whether they were themselves remaining faithful to the Scriptures. And so they formalized the teaching that the Church was to be *continually reforming*, to be continually open to being brought into ever closer conformity to the teaching of Scripture itself (the old truth). They also formulated the rule that Scripture must be interpreted in light of Scripture; specifically, that any ambiguous aspects of scriptural teaching should be understood in light of the clear and explicit teachings of Scripture. And so we ask, Is moral condemnation of homosexual conduct clear in Scripture?

Here we must also ask about who is in the right place to bring us such new truth. White is calling for readers to accept his teaching about the meaning of the biblical texts. He seems to be questioning the integrity of past interpreters as he brings up prejudice and the like. But is White himself the best teacher for the reader to trust? Many of those pushing for acceptance of homosexual persons in the Church argue that the best person to properly interpret of the biblical teachings about sexual morality is someone who is himself gay. But can you find biblical precedent for that? (Read, for example, 1 Timothy 3 or Jude.) The apostles would not proclaim that the best person to interpret matters of sexual morality is the very person immersed in the behavior pattern in question.

See John Stott’s coverage of the general topic of the arguments for revising our understanding of the biblical teaching in *Same-Sex Partnerships*, Chapter 4 (pp. 41-59).

### **Questions for Reflection**

1. *How are we to recognize “new truth” from Scripture, and what should be its relationship to established truth?*
2. *How would the biblical writers view the teaching authority of a person calling for acceptance of sexual immorality who is living the very lifestyle in question?*

### **White’s Fourth Premise**

*“The Bible is a book about God—not a book about human sexuality.”*

According to White, the Bible “was never intended to be a book about human sexuality. Certainly, you will agree.” White seeks to establish his point by glossing the teachings of the Bible as incoherent and patently unacceptable. He claims “the Bible accepts sexual practices we condemn and condemns sexual practices that we accept,” and then seems to presume that this obviously shows that the Bible must be in error. There is, of course, an alternative view: That the Bible actually

presents a coherent and powerful sexual ethic, that Dr. White presents a distorted view of the Bible's teachings when he argues that its teachings are incoherent, and finally that when there is a gap between the biblical teaching and our behavior, it is we (and not the Bible) who are wrong and in need of correction.

White makes quite a number of false claims in this section:

- divorce is *not* strictly forbidden as he claims (citing Mark 10); rather, the Bible presents a complex picture for interpreters where divorce is condemned for some reasons but grudgingly allowed for other reasons<sup>16</sup>
- the Bible does *not* “say clearly that sex with a prostitute is acceptable for the husband but not for the wife”; rather, the Bible condemns sexual unfaithfulness in all forms<sup>17</sup> and yet reports descriptively the various sexual infidelities of several major characters in the Bible (as it does their other failings as well)
- polygamy is *not* “acceptable” in the Bible, but rather from the first mention of sexuality and marriage in Genesis 1 and 2 we are taught that marriage is to be between one man and one woman; polygamy, like prostitution, is reported descriptively as something that “happened,”<sup>18</sup> and clearly not everything that “happened” in the biblical narrative is meant to be approved (think of King David’s adultery with Bathsheba and indirect murder of her husband; 2 Samuel 12)
- there are *no* strict prohibitions in the Bible against “interracial marriage” as White claims; rather, marriage outside the Jewish *faith* was condemned; inclusion in the community of Israel was never racial, as members of any tribe and people on the earth were invited to become one of the covenant people (and hence become candidates for marriage to other Jews)
- there are *no* strict prohibitions in the Bible against “birth control,” though the Roman Catholic Church and some Protestant groups believe this is a legitimate inference from Scripture.

This leaves, though, a number of issues that White raises that *are* challenging (e.g., capital punishment for various sexual sins, the prohibition of sex during menstruation, and the like). It would take too long to develop detailed responses to all of these. The classic understanding for handling these issues has been the conceptual separation in Old Testament law of moral, ceremonial and civil laws; this distinction is reflected in several Reformation confessional statements. **Moral laws** (like “Thou shall not commit adultery”) are presumed to be universally applicable and eternally enduring; they apply in all places at all times, for the Christian church as for the people of Israel. The **ceremonial laws** (like the ban on sexual intercourse during a woman’s menstrual period, the ceremonial uncleanness that a man would experience if he had a “wet dream,”<sup>19</sup> or the many dietary and cleanliness restrictions on the Jewish people) were grounded in creating a distinctive culture for the covenantal people of God so that they might have a clear sense of identity apart from the pagan people surrounding them. It was these

ceremonial laws that Jesus, in his earthly ministry, often set aside, and it was these rules that the early apostles agreed not to lay upon the Gentile converts to faith in Christ.<sup>20</sup> Finally, the Old Testament contains numerous **civil regulations**. The Hebrew people, after all, were not just a religious body but were also a nation. Hence you find in the Old Testament regulations such as civil punishments for moral crimes (e.g., the civil death penalty for the immoral act of adultery), as well as rules for many things from sanitation to building codes.<sup>21</sup> Some of these regulations and penalties seem puzzling or even barbaric to modern readers, but often careful study can help to put these harsh penalties into context.

But back to White's big point: Is the Bible a book about God, or a book about human sexuality? Answer: It does not have to be either/or; the Bible is both about God and about our sexuality, and about much more besides. The Bible is certainly more than a book about God. It is a book about God *and about us*, a book about how God relates to us and about how we relate to him. And it is as clear in Scripture as it is in the day-to-day lived reality of our lives that if we are to understand ourselves, we desperately need to understand our sexuality since it is such a central and vital part of us (and surely White would agree). We must understand our sexuality as a gift from God, understand it in its ideal form as he intended for us to experience it, understand how profoundly broken and distorted our sexuality is (for all of us, not just or principally for homosexual persons), understand how our sexuality might be redeemed along with our whole personhood, and understand how God wills us to behave in the area of sexuality.

A few final comments by Dr. White in this section merit response:

- White claims that “organizations representing 1.5 million U.S. health professionals . . . have stated definitively that homosexual orientation is as natural as heterosexual orientation.” This is actually false. The professional organizations have acted to *remove* homosexuality from the list of mental disorders, but declaring something to *not be a mental illness or disease* is not the same as stating “definitively that homosexual orientation is as natural as heterosexual orientation.”
- White further claims that these same organizations have stated that “it is dangerous or inappropriate to tell a homosexual that he or she could or should attempt to change his or her sexual orientation.” This is misleading. Under the leadership of gay activists within these organizations, concerns have been expressed and warnings have been sounded, but little proof has been offered to date that change is impossible or that the attempt to change is dangerous.<sup>22</sup> Change attempts are not (yet) considered unethical or to be malpractice in any of the professional organizations.
- White claims that the experience of millions of gays living “productive and deeply spiritual lives . . . demands that we at least consider whether the passages cited to condemn homosexual behavior should be reconsidered.” Evangelical Christians must think about this challenge carefully. Applying

the same logic to other cases will help to make the problems clear: Millions of people cohabit before marriage (what Christians have historically called fornication) and yet live productive lives. Should their “productive lives” lead us to reevaluate our moral judgment that such behavior is sinful? Of course not. Millions, even billions of people follow other gods and embrace other faiths, and also live productive lives. Should their “productive lives” lead us to deny Jesus’ own teaching that he is “the way, the truth, the life” and that no one comes to the Father except by him? Again, of course not.

### **Questions for Reflection**

1. *Is the Bible a book only about God without implications for or teachings about our sexuality?*
2. *Is the traditional sexual ethic of the Church coherent and consistent?*
3. *What are we to make of “the otherwise good person” who engages in sexual immorality or any other kind of sin?*

### **White’s Fifth Premise**

*“We miss what these passages say about God when we spend so much time debating what they say about sex.”*

Now we are into the heart of the matter for evangelicals: What does the Bible teach? We would have to write too much to both refute White’s errors and to establish clearly the teachings of these passages. We recommend that the reader consult John Stott’s coverage of the key biblical passages in *Same-Sex Partnerships* (Chapter 2; pp. 17–30) for a faithful and informed introduction to the biblical issues. For those who want to dig deeper into these issues, a number of key theological references are provided at the end of this document. But now to engage White’s argument.

First, at the broad level, White again resorts to a false dichotomy: Suppose these passages are speaking about God *and* about sexual conduct. Let me put it yet more directly: Passages about sexuality tell us both about our holy and loving God *and* our sinfulness and need for God’s redeeming grace in our lives. A full understanding of the teachings of the Bible leads to deeper knowledge of God and deeper self-knowledge.

Second, let us orient our minds positively before we examine these “prohibition” passages. The Bible does not deal with sex in an exclusively negative fashion (the “thou shalt not” passages). The Bible begins with an affirmation of our being made as human beings with bodies and sexes and sexuality (Genesis 1–2; carefully study these passages for yourself). Embodiment as physical beings, as explicitly *sexual, male and female, physical* beings, is blessed as a creational good (“it was very good,” Genesis 1:31, NIV). Furthermore, consummation of a heterosexual

marriage in sexual intercourse has been viewed as creating a divinely blessed and intended outcome, a “one flesh” union between wife and husband (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:5; 1 Corinthians 6:16). This truth has formed the basis for the Church’s high view of marriage (1 Timothy 4:1-5; Hebrews 13:4) and negative stance toward divorce. Historically, the Christian church has affirmed marriage between one person of each sex as the creational norm for intimate sexual expression and the optimal nurture of children. In addition to the creation of this one-flesh union, sexual intercourse must be seen biblically as serving the purposes of biological reproduction (Genesis 1 and 2), and of providing pleasure (Proverbs 5:15-20) and legitimate gratification of a basic human drive (1 Corinthians 7:1-9). The general biblical teaching on sexuality is unashamedly positive!

In light of these realities and purposes of our sexuality, the core of the traditional sexual ethic of the Christian church for two millennia and of the Hebrew people before and since has been that God commends and commands chastity, both for married people (through maintaining the exclusivity of sexual intimacy with one’s spouse) and for unmarried people (through refraining from intimate sexual relations). But some may ask, Is chastity for singles cruel or impossible? Celibacy—that is, voluntary restraint from intimate sexual expression—while not the creational norm for adults, is nevertheless approved in words by the Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 7) and by example in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ himself. This teaching and example ought to caution Christians about accepting any view that elevates sexual intimacy to a basic necessity of full humanness or denies the possibility of a meaningful celibate existence, especially where the latter is formed and carried out in the context of a Christian community that equally and fully values the gifts of all its members. Celibacy may be hard, but it is neither cruel nor impossible.

Now, as we begin our analysis of biblical passages dealing with homosexual conduct as examples of sexual immorality, let’s think briefly about sexual sin in general. On the one hand, sexual sin may rightly be described as no different from or no more heinous than other sins. After all, sexual sins appear as one kind among many entries in the various “vice lists” in the Scriptures. But on the other hand, Scripture also puts particular emphasis on sexual purity, urging us to “flee sexual immorality,” and states explicitly that sexual sin is unlike any other type of sin in that it produces a personal union disapproved by God and thus is a sin against our own bodies, which are the temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:15-18).

This is our general framework for approaching biblical teachings on homosexual conduct. From it, what are we to make of White’s analysis?

**Genesis 1 & 2:** We would agree with White that the claim that “God shaped us, and . . . said, ‘It’s good’” is indeed the heart of the text. But by saying it is the heart, we are not saying that we can’t learn much more than that from Genesis. We learn additional truths as well, including that we were made as two types of beings,

male and female, complementary to and for each other, made for union with each other in marriage, and blessed with the capacity to reproduce. White tries to make much of the fact that the text is silent on some complex and puzzling additional issues, but he creates confusion by doing so. Every text—from the Bible to the phonebook—says certain things and not others. The fact that a particular text leaves certain issues alone does not take away from the core truths it does teach. Why limit the teaching of Genesis 1 and 2 to one simple lesson?

**Genesis 19:** White treats the Sodom text as if we can and should choose between homosexual sin and other sins (rape, inhospitality) as the focus of the passage. Again, why be forced to choose? If a man rapes a single woman, he is guilty both of rape per se but also, in some sense, of fornication (certainly lust as well) and of violence. The presence of one sin does not eliminate the others. We often compound our sins.

Scripture as a whole treats the people of Sodom as wicked in multiple ways. White quotes Ezekiel 16:48-49, but he *mistranslates* the final passage as “They were arrogant and *this* was abominable in God’s eyes.”<sup>23</sup> A more accurate translation is “They were haughty and did an abomination before me” (ESV). Robert Gagnon discusses how this arrogance leading to abomination (rather than arrogance as an abomination) must be understood as a reference to the depravity of homosexual sin.<sup>24</sup> In other words, White wants to reduce the passage to saying something simple like “They were arrogant and their arrogance was abominable,” but the better understanding of the passage is “They were arrogant and in their arrogance they did arrogant, abominable things.” This is consistent then with the understanding of the sin of Sodom seen in Jude 7 and 2 Peter 2:6-8. The sin of Sodom was arrogance *and* attempted sexual violence *and* sexual depravity *and* many other evils. Once again, it is not either/or.

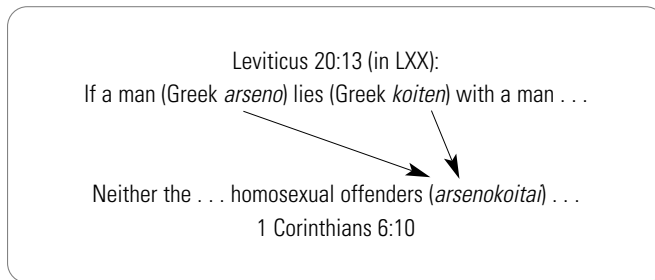
**Leviticus:** White dismisses the teachings of Leviticus with some superficial reasoning by 1) construing it to be a “Holiness Code,” defined as “a list of behaviors that people of faith find offensive in a certain time and place,” 2) asserting the code to have been “written for priests only,” and further 3) claiming that “Jesus and Paul both said that the holiness code in Leviticus does not pertain to Christian believers.”

Each of these assertions is false: 1) How can White claim that a moral violation like incest (Leviticus 18) is something only offensive at a certain time and place? If Leviticus is nothing more than a temporary holiness code, the conclusion that incest, rape, and other offenses are mere matters of cultural taste follows; this is obviously unacceptable. 2) Many of the regulations in this book of the Bible apply to the entire people of Israel, not just the priests, as any casual glance will indicate.<sup>25</sup> Also, note how the book often addresses “all the sons of Israel” (e.g., Leviticus 17:2), and not just the priests. 3) Note that White does not say where Jesus and Paul make these comments dismissing Leviticus. Where are these



passages? Until he clarifies, we would refer the reader to the earlier discussion of Jesus' views of sexual ethics. Jesus clearly accepted, built on, deepened and even radicalized the Old Testament teachings on sexual morality. It is particularly problematic for White to suggest that Paul thinks Leviticus is irrelevant. In a later section, White invokes "the mystery of *arsenokoitai*," the unusual word Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 that is commonly translated "homosexual sin." This mystery is not such a mystery, and in its unraveling, we see a more complex picture of Paul's use of Leviticus.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 forbid a man lying with another man as one would a woman. Leviticus was originally written in Hebrew, but Paul was a Greek-educated Jew writing to Gentiles in the common language of the day, Greek, and probably using the Greek translation of the Old Testament available in that day, the Septuagint or LXX, for his Scripture quotations. The Greek translation of these Leviticus passages condemns a man (*arseno*) lying with (*koitai*) another man (*arseno*); these words (excuse the pun) lie side-by-side in these passages in Leviticus. Paul joins these two words together into a neologism, a new word (as we do in saying database or software), and thus he condemns in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy what was condemned in Leviticus.



So the most credible translation of what Paul is condemning in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy is a *person doing exactly what Leviticus condemns*: homosexual sex (a "man-lier"). Far from dismissing the relevance of Leviticus, Paul is implicitly invoking its enduring validity for our understanding of sexual sin. He is saying, "Remember what it said not to do in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13? Don't do that!" Paul, far from dismissing Leviticus, is drawing on it as the very foundation of his teaching on homosexual conduct.

White also says in this section that "in every age, people of faith are responsible for setting moral and ethical standards that honor God." This claim should set off alarm bells for us. Christians have historically thought that it was *God's* prerogative to set the moral and ethical standards that will give him honor and glory; it is our proper response to obey. Jesus said it clearly: "Whoever has *my commands* and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him" (John 14:21, NIV). The Apostle John, remembering those words at the end of his life, wrote in

1 John 2:4, “The man who says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do *what he commands* is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (NIV, emphasis added). This is the Christian way—to submit to God as the law-giver, not to assert ourselves as law-makers.

Finally, White invokes the common misunderstanding of the story of Onan. This is misdirection. In Genesis 38 it is clear that Onan “spilling his seed” was a sin not because of the seed hitting the ground, but because Onan disobeyed God’s direct command<sup>26</sup> to establish an heir for his dead brother and his brother’s widow, thus securing the widow’s future and the continuity of the brother’s name in Israel’s history.

**Romans:** White (using Smedes) repeats a common misunderstanding of Paul’s key passage in Romans 1. He claims that Paul here is speaking about the lives of individual sinners. It is as if Paul is claiming that the way an *individual person* becomes a homosexual is by first refusing to acknowledge and worship God, resulting in hardening of heart, abandonment by God, and then homosexuality. But this is a distortion of Paul’s meaning.<sup>27</sup>

Paul, in Romans, is making a theological argument about the whole human race. He argues basically that when we *corporately*, as a human race, refuse to acknowledge and worship God, the result is a hardening of heart, which results in God’s judgment. This judgment then results in a multitude of obvious distortions and depravities as humanity rebels even against the obvious designs of nature (our bodies). Paul brings in homosexual lust as an obvious (to him and to his audience) example (and that is all it is, an example) of just how devastatingly complete the distortion of sin can become. When we can no longer recognize what is “natural” (man and woman together completing each other and capable of reproducing themselves, all by God’s design) and instead burn with passion for the “unnatural,” the devastation of sin is obvious! Paul’s argument here is about our common plight as humans, not about individuals. In the process of making this theological argument, Paul is obviously affirming the continuing validity of the moral judgment of the Old Testament that homosexual sex is immoral.

**1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy:** Dr. White summarizes the thrust of 1 Corinthians as Paul’s exclamation that “You are breaking God’s heart by the way you are treating one another.” But clearly Paul is agitated by something else as well; he is distressed that the Corinthians, despite God’s grace, are sinning against their just and loving God—particularly that they are sinning sexually.

White says, “Paul tells them that what God wants is not strict adherence to a list of laws, but a pure heart, a good conscience, and a faith that is not phony.” Yet again, White leaves out key aspects of Paul’s meaning in this simple and selective summary, and thus distorts Paul’s meaning. White continues, arguing that “God doesn’t want us squabbling over who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out.’ God wants us to love one another. It’s God’s task to judge us. It is NOT our task to judge one another.”

This is a poor interpretation of Paul’s argument. Let’s look at the words of the

apostle himself. Indeed, in 1 Corinthians 4:4-5 Paul admonishes the Corinthians, saying, “I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes.” But immediately Paul launches into *precisely the kind of moral argument White so wants to avoid*. He first singles out a specific and heinous type of sexual immorality: “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father’s wife. And you are arrogant! [apparently in their tolerance of this sin] Ought you not rather to mourn?” (5:1-2a). And then Paul moves to judge and discipline this sexual immorality: “Let him who has done this be removed from among you” (5:2b). Sexual immorality is in fact such a problem in the Corinthian church that Paul must expand his argument and explicitly call for judgment and discipline: “I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people” (5:9); “For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. ‘Purge the evil person from among you’” (5:12-13, ESV).

This then leads Paul to the culmination of his argument when, under God’s inspiration, he explicitly teaches about the relationship of our behavior to our eternal fate:

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes [*malakois*] nor homosexual offenders [*arsenokoitai*] nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-10, NIV)

Later, we will discuss the broader meaning of this passage in terms of God’s grace and love. For now, let’s focus again on the meaning of *malakois* and *arsenokoitai*. White advances his argument for the acceptance of homosexual conduct by limiting and confusing the meaning of these two key Greek words. Both of these words, *malakois* and *arsenokoitai*, are compound words (like our “software” or “database”) and, respectively, mean literally “soft ones” and “man-liers” (or as J. I. Packer interprets it, “man-bedders”). Dr. John Stott has a complete discussion of the meaning of the Apostle Paul in these Corinthians and Timothy passages.

White’s limiting of the word *malakois* to mean “effeminate call boys” or “hired hairless young boys” is too restricted as an interpretation of this term. Stott reflects the much more commonly shared view that this term refers to the “passive partner” in a homosexual pairing. In the ancient world, men were often presumed the active sexual partner and the woman as the passive sexual recipient, and so this term most likely means the “one who receives as a woman” in a homosexual pairing.

White’s construal of the meaning of *arsenokoitai* is not just too restrictive, it is problematic. We discussed the meaning of the term *arsenokoitai* in our earlier dis-

cussion above about Leviticus. The *arsenokoitai* are those who are active partners in a homosexual liaison; people who do precisely what the Levitical commands prohibit. Stott's discussion, in contrast to White, reflects the prevailing view of contemporary biblical scholars.

**Summary of the biblical material:** In conclusion, what can we say about the question of whether or not the Bible condemns homosexual conduct? No less of a respected and central figure in 20th-century Christian theology than Wolhart Pannenberg (no raving fundamentalist) has stated that "The biblical assessments of homosexual practice are unambiguous in their rejection." Further, he stated that "the entire biblical witness includes practicing homosexuality without exception among the kinds of behavior that give particularly striking expression to humanity's turning away from God."<sup>28</sup>

Dan Via, professor emeritus of New Testament at Duke Divinity School and a "progressive" working actively to increase full acceptance of gays in the church, nevertheless recently conceded that "The four pertinent Old Testament texts . . . present an unambiguous and unconditional condemnation of homosexuality."<sup>29</sup> Then broadening his focus to the entire Bible, Via says, "Christians who want to take an open, nontraditional position on this [i.e., on homosexual practice] should be able to find biblical support for it. Of course, the few biblical texts that deal explicitly with the subject offer no such support."<sup>30</sup> This does not stop Via from arguing for full acceptance, but at least he concedes that the explicit teachings of Scripture are against his views.

The Bible speaks infrequently of homosexual conduct. When it does, it is unequivocally and forcefully negative. White has given us little reason to change that understanding. The biblical evidence is for a wide-ranging and fundamental condemnation of all homosexual intimacy.

Before closing out our discussion of the teachings of the Bible on sexuality, we raise a question for the reader: What sexual ethic would White and others like him put in place of the traditional understanding? Remember our depiction of that traditional teaching at the beginning of this document: God blesses full sexual intimacy between a man and a woman united in a life-long union; he also blesses and praises chastity of unmarried people. All other expressions of sexual union are outside his will. What would replace this view?

Note that White never states positively what his sexual ethic is. He never says, for example, that homosexual persons should remain chaste until marriage and remain utterly faithful to their one life-long partner until death. Also note that the support offered by Soulforce for bisexual persons (as a class) would mean that the group *cannot* be advocating monogamy as Christians have traditionally understood it; after all, what can monogamy mean for a person whose inclinations demand partners of both genders? If our orientations are a gift from God and are the divine indicators that shape our morality, what moral norms are there beyond our own inclinations? (Are we thus laws unto ourselves?)

These are not mere speculative concerns. We quote here biblical scholar Robert A. J. Gagnon on the departures from the traditional sexual ethic that are being advocated actively in the Christian church today.<sup>31</sup>

Even respectable male homosexual activists have long been making the point that the principle of monogamy is too stifling. For example, Andrew Sullivan, a senior editor at *The New Republic* and a well-known columnist (and a homosexual man [who also, we would note, identifies himself as a Roman Catholic]), wrote in his book *Virtually Normal: An Argument about Homosexuality* (Random House, 1996):

*There is more likely to be greater understanding of the need for extramarital outlets between two men than between a man and a woman; and again, the lack of children gives gay couples greater freedom. . . . Marriage should be made available to everyone. . . . But within this model, there is plenty of scope for cultural difference. There is something baleful about the attempt of some gay conservatives to educate homosexuals and lesbians into an uncritical acceptance of a stifling model of heterosexual normality. (pp. 200-204)*

Marvin Ellison, professor of Christian ethics at Bangor Theological Seminary and an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA) (and homosexual man), calls for a “broader debate” on the subject of multiple partners in *Same-Sex Marriage? A Christian Ethical Analysis* (Pilgrim Press, 2004):

*Should marriage, as the legal sanctioning of an intimate sexual affiliation, be limited to two and only two persons . . . ? Should religious communities bless multiple coexisting sexual partnerships? Surely one concern with polyamorous affiliations is exploitation, or what feminist critics of polygamy have called an “excess of patriarchy.” But how exactly does the number of partners affect the moral quality of the relationship? This question requires a serious answer. Could it be that limiting intimate partnerships to only two people at a time is no guarantee of avoiding exploitation, and expanding them to include more than two parties is no guarantee that the relationship will be exploitative? (p. 155)*

He also asks, “How might it be possible to break with compulsory monogamy and make marriage genuinely elective, as a vocation (or calling) for some but not all?” (p. 154). . . .

The Metropolitan Community Churches bill themselves as “a worldwide fellowship of Christian churches with a special outreach to the world’s gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities” and “the world’s largest gay and lesbian spirituality organization.” Their 2005 General Conference in Calgary (Alberta, Canada, July 21–26) included the presentation or workshops:

*Building Closets or Opening Doors (Polyamory), Fran Mayes. Have we who know the freedom of coming out to live without fear or shame created our own MCC closets? The stories of some of us who love and/or partner with more than one other person will be presented as told to me for my dissertation "Polyamory and Holy Union in UFMCC". . . .*

### **Questions for Reflection**

1. *Has White presented a compelling case for overturning the historic understanding and teaching of the Church about homosexual conduct?*
2. *What ethic will replace the traditional ethic if it is displaced?*

### **White's Sixth Premise**

*"The biblical authors are silent about homosexual orientation as we know it today. They neither approve it nor condemn it."*

White is even stronger in stating his premise within this section than he is in his initial summary, saying: "The Biblical authors *knew nothing* of homosexual orientation as we understand it, and therefore said nothing to condemn or approve it." Here, White claims that, more than simply being silent, the biblical authors *knew nothing* of homosexual orientation. This is an interesting claim—to not only know what the biblical writers wrote but even what they knew.

Further, White paints a picture of complete ignorance about homosexual orientation before the 19th century, and suggests that the only kind of homosexual practice the biblical writers would have known might have been "the rituals of the priests and priestesses who pranced around the statues of Aphrodite and Diana."

Modern scholarship has established that this is simply wrong. It is true that the biblical passages do not invoke directly the modern idea of sexual orientation. But it is worth noting that Romans 1:26-27 does not simply speak of behavior, but invokes the idea of people "consumed with passion for one another," a description that clearly bears some resemblance to the concept of an erotic orientation.

More importantly, modern archeological and historical study has established that an idea like that of our sexual orientation was well-established in the ancient world, though obviously that modern English term was not used. In Greece and Rome, there was sufficient awareness of homosexual inclination to engender discussion of causal hypotheses about homosexuality ("These people are different; why are they that way?"). There was even a fairly well-developed (though primitive) biological hypothesis for the causation of male and female homosexuality that suggested that these persons were somehow an "in-between" gender (a speculation which is not unlike the current brain and cognitive research that keeps finding ways in which gays and lesbians are "gender atypical").<sup>32</sup> White is actually wrong that Ulrichs was a great originator, because Ulrichs was so taken with the specu-

lations of the ancient Greeks and Romans that he actually used their terms to advance his own speculations. This all means that Paul—a citizen of the Greco-Roman empire—inhabited a sexual world not unlike ours today, a world in which there was wide awareness and discussion of a multitude of sexual variations. In that context, Paul continues to proclaim that homosexual sex is contrary to God’s will.

We should also discuss briefly the claim by White that “The Biblical authors . . . said nothing to condemn or approve” homosexual orientation. In a sense, this is true. The biblical authors focus on behavior, not on what motivates it. White wants us to believe somehow that this opens up the possibility of the acceptance of the homosexual lifestyle, but it would appear that the opposite is the result: The biblical focus on conduct (which we all can control) rather than orientation (which we do not directly choose or will) appears to establish the basis on which we can with integrity separate a person’s conduct, conduct which we view as immoral, from our love and care for the person who engages in that conduct.

This does not lead to the conclusion that homosexual orientation is itself morally neutral; after all, it is not what God would have intended for the person who has such inclinations. Homosexual orientation is a proclivity toward a certain kind of sin, and in a biblical/creational sense, is “not natural.” This is the point made by the Roman Catholic Church in the recent Vatican Letter *Homosexualitatis Problema* in saying that “Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder.”<sup>33</sup>

But simply having the orientation itself is not the same as actively committing a sin; God is concerned with what we do with our inclinations. Heterosexual males often struggle with their inclinations to be promiscuous; despite a desire to be sexually pure, most heterosexual men are “oriented” to be attracted to many women. Is this inclination toward promiscuity morally neutral? Of course not; it is itself part of our moral brokenness. Though it is “natural” in the sense of being common and not chosen, it is profoundly “unnatural” in falling far from what God meant us to experience. This sinful inclination gives rise to the opportunity to sin, but God wants us to respond with integrity and choose what is right.

Similarly, God is concerned with what homosexual persons do with their inclinations. Mel White, as he publicly acknowledges, was married with children before he “came out,” at which time he left his wife and children and began living with his male partner. While his pain and struggle were no doubt enormous, was his violation of his marriage covenant and his embrace of an adulterous affair his only options, and were they options honoring to God?

Finally, has White clearly established that “the writers of the Scripture are not the final authorities on human sexuality”? Isn’t this precisely what we should be affirming as Christians? That God, the author of the Bible through the inspiration of its human authors, is the final authority on human sexuality and that we hear his wisdom in the Bible?

## Questions for Reflection

1. *The Credo of Soulforce* says, “My sexual orientation is a gift from my Creator to be accepted, celebrated, and lived with integrity.” Is any orientation that is “natural” (in the sense of not being consciously chosen but rather resulting from factors outside our control) a gift from the Creator to be accepted, celebrated, and lived with integrity? If so, what about a heterosexual orientation toward promiscuity, or toward polyamory or sexual violence?
2. What separates acceptable and unacceptable orientations? If we bring in factors other than that the orientation is “natural” (unchosen), then how are those criteria justified, and why is the Christian judgment that same-sex conduct is immoral viewed as invalid?

## White’s Seventh Premise

*“Although the prophets, Jesus, and other biblical authors say nothing about homosexual orientation as we understand it today, they are clear about one thing: As we search for truth, we are to ‘love one another.’”*

In this passage, White links traditional views on homosexual immorality with scientific ignorance, considerably overstating and twisting the historical issues of Copernicus and Galileo.<sup>34</sup> But White raises what must be, along with the question of what the Bible teaches, the other most central issue in this debate: What does it mean to love the homosexual person?

See John Stott’s discussion of the meaning of faith, hope, and love as applied to the issue of homosexuality in *Same-Sex Partnerships*, Chapter 6 (pp. 69-83).

For White, love means acceptance. He urges us to respond with “We don’t understand your views about sexual orientation, but we love and trust you. As long as you love God and seek God’s will in your life, you are welcome here.” The major problem with this must be that White presupposes that *love is acceptance and tolerance*. But is that what love means in Scripture?

We must again cite a key teaching of our Lord Jesus: “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him” (John 14:21, NIV). Obedience is linked to love by our Lord, and so if our highest goal is to lead others to love the Lord of the universe, how can we truly be loving others if we do not lead them to consider obedience to God’s commands as the highest expression of that love for God?

Further, to cite an old (but valid) truism, if a child is sick and in need of surgery, it is the cruel parent who avoids the pain of the surgery that can make the child well in favor of masking the pain with drugs while avoiding the surgery. The loving parent accompanies the child through the pain in order that the child’s ultimate well-being might be attained.



We are all sick indeed. Sin is our diagnosis. If Scripture teaches that homosexual conduct is one clear and distinct type of sin, are we acting in love if we mask or cover that over? Here, the issue again reduces to the question of what the Bible teaches: if it teaches that homosexual conduct is sin, then it is cruelty, not love, to pretend that this life-pattern is one to which God is indifferent. Traditionally, Christians have taken Paul's instruction quite seriously:

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. 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. (1 Corinthians 6:9-11, NIV)

Paul's teaching here is *not* that any person who ever experiences homosexual desire or who has engaged in homosexual acts will not inherit the kingdom of God and go to hell. His clear meaning here is rather that those who give their lives to patterns of behavior that constitute active rebellion against God's revealed will are evidencing a rejection of God's grace and a rejection of the Lordship of Christ over their lives. These persons in rebellion against God cannot expect to inherit the kingdom of God.

And here we must briefly mention a subject that White does not mention at all: healing. "And that is what some of you were," says the Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 6:11). At the very least, this statement must mean that some whose lives were dominated by homosexual sin had forsaken that sin and found freedom from sexual sin to live a chaste single life. Perhaps it means as well that some had found a more complete healing that allowed them the fullness of heterosexual experience in marriage. John Stott discusses this issue in *Same-Sex Partnerships*, Chapter 6 (pp. 73-78), and I do as well in *The Gay Debate* and much more fully in Chapter 5 of my book *Homosexuality*.<sup>35</sup> Exodus International is an organization that links and coordinates the many ministries dedicated to pursuing healing and freedom for people experiencing same-sex attraction and sexual brokenness; their website <http://www.exodus.to> is full of resources and testimonials of those who claim significant healing.

What constitutes a loving response to someone whose life seems directed toward *not* inheriting the kingdom of God? The greatest act of love would be to help such a person get to a place of being washed in the blood of Jesus, of beginning the process of being sanctified, and of achieving justification in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. Yes, we must do this with patience, kindness, gentleness—indeed with all of the gifts of the Holy Spirit—but a loving confrontation with the moral teachings of the Bible is part of what it means to speak the truth in love.

Finally, note this: If we want to live a life of love and believe that our God is love, then we can best understand how to love by looking to God's own actions as the perfect model of love. A pattern of loving confrontation with the reality of our sin is the pattern modeled by God himself in his relationship with his people, and this is as true of the actions of Jesus as in God's other dealings with his wayward people.

God is not indifferent to our sinful behavior. If we aspire to be loving *as God is loving*, then we cannot turn our backs on his own expressions and descriptions of how he is loving. And we find the Scriptures simply filled with examples of God coupling his condemnation of the sin of his people with his loving pleas for us to return to him for his mercy and to live with him while striving to live according to his will. Moral condemnation is not inconsistent with love. God's moral condemnations are both an expression of his just character (he cannot *not* condemn what is wrong) and of his loving character (he condemns in order to redeem and save).

White also invokes the following argument, though only implicitly: Homosexual people who claim faith in Christ seem to exhibit evidence of the Spirit of God in their lives, so shouldn't we then allow them full fellowship and remain agnostic about whether their homosexual conduct is sinful? This reduces logically to the following argument: *Morally questionable behavior in one area can be ignored if there is evidence of virtue and/or of the Spirit in other areas of life.* But this argument is invalid. The Apostle Paul condemns precisely this sort of reasoning in his confrontations with the Corinthians who felt that their manifestation of the miraculous gifts of the Spirit exempted them from the moral demands of God's will.

### **Questions for Reflection**

1. *Is it possible to truly love a person when expressing that their behavior is immoral?*
2. *Can love be disconnected from confrontation over sin?*
3. *Is it loving to accept the behavior of persons who are engaged in sinful life patterns?*

### **White's Eighth Premise**

*"Whatever some people believe the Bible says about homosexuality, they must not use that belief to deny homosexuals their basic civil rights. To discriminate against sexual or gender minorities is unjust and un-American."*

What a complex web of issues this premise raises. First, note that Soulforce is seeking to change the moral teachings of the Christian church, as they regard these teachings as the source of the "spiritual violence" and the "religious and political oppression" of homosexual persons. Their basic argument seems to be that the only way to establish full civil rights for gays and lesbians is to change the moral teachings of the Church and its various institutions. But it is a basic

civil right, a Constitutional right from the First Clause of the Bill of Rights, that Americans have the right to free exercise of religious belief.<sup>36</sup> Exercising that right, we traditional Christians proclaim the teachings of the Bible, including the judgment that homosexual conduct is immoral. We form religious organizations, like Wheaton College, that conform with our religious beliefs. Is there any paradox or inconsistency when, in the name of civil rights, Soulforce seeks to *force* the people who make up the traditional Church (including the institution of Wheaton College) to change our moral and ethical teachings?

Second, we must ask if “homosexual persons” or “homosexuals” is a legitimate class. In some senses, *of course* there is such a thing as the group “homosexuals.” But let’s think carefully: Are “homosexuals” a “class” (a human categorization that somehow reflects an ultimate and enduring reality) like human beings or males or females, or is this categorization a temporary human construction like Republicans and Democrats, or more to the point, is it one like adulterers, categorized by a pattern of sinful behavior? Scripture itself seems to treat people like a class based on their behavior (those who commit adultery are considered to be adulterers), but clearly this is a class that can change, as adulterers can cease to be in that class when they cease their adulterous behavior.

If the biblical focus on sexual behavior is primary, then maybe treating sexual orientation as we treat gender is mistaken. If classes of persons grouped by their sexual behavior (or appetites), “sexual minorities,” can be defined this way, what about those even smaller minorities who are oriented toward polyamory (the “love” of multiple partners) or sexual violence?

Think about Soulforce’s description of homosexual persons as “sexual or gender minorities” as well as their invocation of the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Certainly homosexual persons are a minority in a statistical sense, but are homosexual persons “minorities” as racial minorities are? Many African-Americans, including individuals as different as Jesse Jackson and Thomas Sowell, utterly reject the linkage of the quest for “gay civil rights” with the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S., and many are deeply offended that homosexual advocates seek to parallel sexual orientation and race.<sup>37</sup>

Finally, the debate about homosexual persons in a pluralistic and secular American culture is not one simply of granting or recognizing rights, but rather one of *conflicts of rights*.<sup>38</sup> What of the right, grounded in freedom of religion, of a pastor to call homosexual conduct a sin from the pulpit? Does a Christian widow renting out a room in her house have a right not to support an immoral lifestyle by not renting her room to a gay couple? What of the right of the Christian bookstore owner (or a college or church, for that matter) to not hire a person whose moral lifestyle is unacceptable by that owner’s beliefs?

These are not hypothetical concerns. In recent years, a number of very troubling incidents have occurred in Canada, which is a few years ahead of the U.S. in its acceptance of gay rights and the legal force applied against those who are seen as “intolerant.” The following are a few of the most alarming precedents:<sup>39</sup>

- A Catholic high school was forced by the courts to allow a gay teen to bring his male romantic interest to the school prom despite the explicit and religiously-based behavior code of the school.
- “Marriage commissioners” (the Canadian equivalent of justices of the peace) have been told to resign their public posts if they intend, based on their religious beliefs, to refuse to perform homosexual marriages.
- An evangelical Christian placed an ad in a local newspaper, the *Saskatchewan Star Phoenix*, to protest growing acceptance of homosexuality. The ad simply superimposed on two male stick figures a red circle and bar (the universal symbol for “not allowed”), with four Scripture references underneath (and no other commentary). He was convicted of a hate crime, and the judge suggested that the Bible verses could be construed as hate literature.
- A professional printer who owned his own company refused to print material for the Canadian Gay and Lesbian Archives because it violated his religious beliefs. He was fined and forced to print the material against his will. He lost all appeals and was left with \$170,000 in legal fees.
- A school psychologist was declared guilty of “conduct unbecoming a member of the British Columbia College of Teachers” for authoring a newspaper editorial questioning the “wisdom of promoting the homosexual agenda.” This “conviction” in a professional society was appealed to the courts but was not overturned.

In recent days Swedish pastor Ake Green was convicted of hate speech for calling homosexual conduct a sin in a sermon. His conviction was upheld through lower Swedish courts, and overturned only in the Swedish Supreme Court, and then only on the basis that the conviction would likely have been overturned in the high court of the European Union.<sup>40</sup>

Christians should join in the rejection and prevention of violence toward gay and lesbian peoples. We should strive to contribute to a society where the basic civil rights of all persons are protected before the law. But as is commonly debated today, where does the protection of *basic* civil liberties end and the assertion of *special* rights for a “protected class” begin? And when does the advancement of “basic civil rights” for homosexual persons begin to erode the basic civil right of freedom of religion for individual Christians (and non-Christians) and for groups and institutions of Christians?

### **Questions for Reflection**

1. Are there ways in which the right of free exercise of religion is in tension with the “basic civil rights” of homosexual persons?
2. What are the “basic civil rights” of homosexual persons?

## Conclusion

Dr. Mel White is an effective communicator, but is his argument valid that we can read the Bible somehow to be permissive of homosexual, bisexual, and transgender lifestyles?

You find in White's document very little in the way of a deep reading of the message of the Bible. Instead, we encounter a series of arguments—a rhetorical or persuasive strategy—that utilizes the following techniques:

- He draws us into reading the Bible *through* tragic stories of the victimization of gay and lesbian people, stories that are truly tragedies but told in a way that elicits from us guilt and empathy that predisposes us to distance ourselves from any moral condemnation of homosexual behavior.
- He strips or reduces complex scriptural passages to limited core teachings in such a way as to pass over or bury the rich and challenging additional meanings they embody.
- He raises doubts and fuels skepticism about the meaning of passages that have been essentially clear in the eyes of the Church for millennia.
- In the end, he proposes no clear Christian sexual ethic to replace the one he has sought to displace, rather just leaving us with the vague sense that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals are nice, trustworthy people whom we should affirm and accept.

In contrast, I urge you to consider again the core of what we understand to be the Gospel: The sovereign and loving God of the universe made us and loves us. We all are tainted with the contagion of sin, and we all rebel against God. We are all sexual beings by design, and our sexual natures reflect both creation and the fall, and are exceedingly mysterious, complex, deep, and conflicted. God revealed his truth and will for our lives, including his moral guidance for all of humanity, and did so both to diagnose our sinfulness and to guide us in our faltering efforts to follow him and express our love for him. And he sent his son Jesus to die for us and rise in triumph over death for us that we might be forgiven, adopted as his children, and live new lives as we abide in him.

As one small but clear part of his guidance for our lives, we have seen how there is clarity and consistency to the traditional understanding of sexual ethics derived from the Bible, and that in this ethic homosexual conduct is clearly condemned as contrary to God's will. There are good reasons to see these moral laws as binding today. And quite significantly, we have seen that this Christian understanding offers hope to the homosexual person: hope for forgiveness of sins, hope for release from bondage to sexual and other sins, hope for grace and fulfillment in life submitted to sexual purity and healing, hope that the entire Church will embrace these persons experiencing same-sex attraction as fellow sinners and as fellow disciples who follow the Risen Lord in obedience and humility.

Brothers and sisters, trust the Gospel, for in it we find life. Hear the Apostle John at the end of his life (1 John 1:5-2:6; ESV):

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may be sure that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.

Amen.

## Recommendations For Further Study on Homosexuality

The Exodus International website <http://www.exodus.to> is a good source for up-to-date practical resources, including testimonials for those who have left the “gay lifestyle” in various ways. This site is particularly useful for those seeking help.

*Brief introductions to this complex issue:*

John Stott, *Same-Sex Partnerships?: A Christian Perspective* (Revell/Baker, 1998).

J. I. Packer, “Why I walked: Sometimes loving a denomination requires you to fight.” *Christianity Today*, Jan/03, pp 46–50.

Stanton L. Jones, “The loving opposition: Speaking the truth in a climate of hate.” *Christianity Today*, 7/19/93, pp. 18–25. (Original version of *The Gay Debate*)

*For practical/clinical help:*

See the Exodus International website <http://www.exodus.to> for current resources.

Mark A. Yarhouse & Erica S. N. Tan (2004). *Sexual Identity Synthesis: Attributions, Meaning-Making, and the Search for Congruence*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Mark A. Yarhouse & Lori A. Burkett (2003). *Sexual Identity: A Guide to Living in the Time Between the Times*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Robert Davies and Lori Rentzel, *Coming Out of Homosexuality* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993).

Mario Bergner, *Setting Love in Order* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995)

*Theological and other resources:*

Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001). (scholarly; **core resource**)

Robert A. J. Gagnon, “Why the Disagreement Over the Biblical Witness on Homosexual Practice? A Response to Myers and Scanzoni, What God Has Joined Together?” *Reformed Review*, Autumn 2005, 59 (1), pp. 19–130. Available at <https://repository.westernsem.edu/pkp/index.php/rr/article/view/1548>; retrieved February 17, 2006.

Robert A. J. Gagnon, “The Bible and homosexual practice: Theology, analogies, and genes.” *Theology Matters*, 7 (6), Nov/Dec, 2001, pp. 1–13. (at <https://www.theologymatters.com/NovDec01.PDF>; click Back Issues, Nov/Dec 01) See other Gagnon resources at <http://www.robgagnon.net/>

Stanton L. Jones and Mark A. Yarhouse, *Homosexuality: The Use of Scientific Research in the Church’s Moral Debate* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

Updated in Jones, S., & Kwee, A. W. (2005). Scientific research, homosexuality, and the Church’s moral debate: An update, *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 24 (4), 304–316.

Dan O. Via and Robert A. J. Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

Thomas E. Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow? Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993).

Stanley Grenz, *Welcoming But Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

## Endnotes

1. This basic position has been reiterated repeatedly in history; note for instance the way this is framed in the Heidelberg Catechism: “Q. 108. *What does the seventh commandment [‘Thou shall not commit adultery’] teach us? A. That all unchastity is condemned by God, and that we should therefore detest it from the heart, and live chaste and disciplined lives, whether in holy wedlock or in single life. Q. 109. Does God forbid nothing more than adultery and such gross sins in this commandment? A. Since both our body and soul are a temple of the Holy Spirit, it is his will that we keep both pure and holy. Therefore he forbids all unchaste actions, gestures, words, thoughts, desires and whatever may excite another person to them.”*

2. See, for example, the explication of the 7<sup>th</sup> Commandment in the Westminster Longer Catechism, Questions 137-139, as just one piece of evidence that this has been the stable teaching of the Christian church over time.

3. In this area, Wheaton College stands with the consistent teaching of the Christian church, here well-represented by the consistent teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. For example, on November 4, 2005, the Vatican issued its “Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in view of their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders,” [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_20051104\\_istruzione\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20051104_istruzione_en.html) and retrieved December 8, 2005. Quoting from that letter:

“From the time of the Second Vatican Council until today, various Documents of the Magisterium, and especially the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, have confirmed the teaching of the Church on homosexuality. The *Catechism* distinguishes between homosexual acts and homosexual tendencies.

“Regarding *acts*, it teaches that Sacred Scripture presents them as grave sins. The Tradition has constantly considered them as intrinsically immoral and contrary to the natural law. Consequently, under no circumstance can they be approved.

“Deep-seated homosexual *tendencies*, which are found in a number of men and women, are also objectively disordered and, for those same people, often constitute a trial. Such persons must be accepted with respect and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. They are called to fulfill God’s will in their lives and to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord’s Cross the difficulties they may encounter.”

The footnote reference for these paragraphs (fn 8) cites previous statements from the Roman magisterium, including the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* “(*editio typica*, 1997), nn. 2357-2358” and also various Documents of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith including the “Declaration *Persona Humana* on certain questions concerning sexual ethics (29 December 1975)” and the “Letter *Homosexualitatis Problema* to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the pastoral care of homosexual persons (1 October 1986);” the footnote further states that “With regard to homosexual inclinations, the Letter *Homosexualitatis Problema* states that ‘Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder.’” <http://www.soulforce.org/main/mission.shtml>; retrieved 8/3/05.

5. <http://www.soulforce.org/main/step1.shtml>; retrieved 8/3/05. Note that this articulation of the views of Soulforce do not mean that these views characterize every member of Soulforce; individual members may have religious views more or less in alignment with orthodox Christian views.

6. Philip Turner, “An unworkable theology,” *First Things*, June/July 2005, pp. 10-12; quote p. 12; emphasis added. Available at <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft0506/opinion/turner.html>

7. Timothy George, “The pattern of Christian truth,” *First Things*, June/July 2005, pp. 21-25. Available at <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft0506/articles/george.html>

8. *Ibid.*

9. For a recent and personal example of such conflict, read Dr. Robert Gagnon’s account of a current controversy (as of May 2005) within the Presbyterian Church USA at <http://www.robgagnon.net/Achtemeier-LaymanControversy.htm> ; pay particular attention to the way that some parties avoid grappling with the question of when teachings or assertions depart from biblical teaching in such controversies.

10. L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today* (Fortress Press, 1988; quotes pp. 243-245).



11. Richard J. Neuhaus, for instance, provides a helpful and recent sketch of the considerable disagreement within the American Catholic Church with the various authoritative teachings of the Church discussed here in fn 3 in his article “The Truce of 2005,” *First Things*, February 2006, pp. 55–61.

12. See the classic book, Marshall Kirk and Hunter Madsen, *After the Ball: How America Will Conquer Its Fear and Hatred of Gays in the '90s* (New York: Plume/Penguin, 1990; quotes pp. 183, 189).

13. Often when the issue of prejudice is raised, advocates like White have in mind not an intellectual prejudice but the seemingly “natural” response of many heterosexuals that there is something distasteful about the idea of sex between two people of the same sex. The suggestion seems to be that anyone who has such a reaction is “biased” and their views delegitimated. But is this a “prejudice,” or might it have something to do with a deeply engrained and widely shared sense of what God intended as natural and good (heterosexual sex) versus that which was not intended by creational design?

14. Two resources for this story: 1) Virginia Heffernan, “Was the killing of Shepard an anti-gay hate crime?” *New York Times*, November 26, 2004, Sec. E, pg. 34; accessed electronically via Lexus-Nexus. 2) ABC News, November 26, 2004, “New details emerge in Matthew Shepard murder,” retrieved October 25, 2005; at <http://abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=277685&page=1>

15. David Sisler, “Hate crimes,” retrieved May 6, 2005 at [www.catholiceducation.org/articles/media/me0033.html](http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/media/me0033.html)

16. For “sexual immorality” (Matthew 19:9), or for desertion (1 Corinthians 7:15); these “exceptions” to the condemnation of divorce are widely debated. It is worth noting here that quite a number of writers point to the issue of divorce as a powerful example of hypocrisy in the evangelical church. Why, they ask, do evangelicals “go ballistic and absolutistic” on homosexual conduct and yet placidly accept rampant divorce in their midst? I would argue that this point is an excellent one, but is our best answer to say “since we have accepted morally lax standards on divorce we must also on homosexual conduct”? or is the better answer to say, “You are right, and we must begin to treat divorce with the moral seriousness that Scripture itself does while also maintaining its clear teachings on homosexual conduct.” It must be acknowledged, though, that Scripture itself allows for divorce under certain circumstances, but that there are no circumstances where homosexual conduct is allowed. This means there will always be “gray” in the Church’s teachings on divorce.

17. Prostitution is termed “wickedness” in Leviticus 19:29, throughout the Proverbs (e.g., 7:6–27), and in other places in the Scriptures (e.g., Deuteronomy 23:18).

18. The developmental character of God’s special revelation of his will for our lives is obvious in Scripture. In the New Testament we see a raising of the expectations when, for instance, Christ goes beyond mere behavioral restrictions (adultery) to condemn even states of the heart (lust). It would appear that God revealed more and more of his standards to his people as they were ready to understand and live by those standards. This helps us to address polygamy, for example, which (like slavery) is described and regulated (e.g., Deuteronomy 21:15–17) in the Scriptures, but never approved. The earliest biblical statements about marriage undercut the practice of polygamy; after all, how can a man and woman become one flesh, as in Genesis 2, when there are six women and one man? Yet God, in his mysterious wisdom, chose not to try to forbid polygamy in early Israeli society but rather determined and willed that it would simply die out as the Hebrew people grew in number and sophistication in understanding God’s work among them and his will.

19. Deuteronomy 23:10.

20. See particularly Acts 10–11; 15:22–35.

21. On sanitation, Deuteronomy 23:12–13; on building codes, Deuteronomy 22:8.

22. This is discussed in chapter 5 of Stanton Jones and Mark Yarhouse, *Homosexuality: The Use of Scientific Research in the Church’s Moral Debate* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

23. Emphasis added.

24. Robert A. J. Gagnon, pp. 57–59, in Dan O. Via and Robert A. J. Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003). I should also add that were I to revise my 1994 *The Gay Debate* today, I would change the way I dealt with this passage in light of Gagnon’s excellent treatment cited here. I failed to see how this passage *does* address sexual sin.

25. See, for example, the regulations about disease in Leviticus 13.

26. Deuteronomy 25:5–10.

27. For a readable explanation of this, see chapter 4 of Thomas E. Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow?*; for the more complete and scholarly treatment, see Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*.

28. Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Homosexual Experience," *Christianity Today*, November 11, 1996, pp. 35-36. Quote p. 36.
29. Dan O.Via, p. 4, in Dan O.Via and Robert Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).
30. *Ibid.*, p. 29
31. This material quoted from Robert Gagnon's website; retrieved August 17, 2005; this report is well worth reading in full: <http://www.robagnon.net/HeterosexismResponsePart2Science.htm>.
32. See Mark Smith, "Ancient bisexuality and the interpretation of Romans 1:26-27," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 64 (Summer, 1996), pp. 223-256; William R. Schoedel, "Same-sex eros: Paul and the Greco-Roman tradition" (pp. 43-72), in David Balch (Ed.), *Homosexuality, Science, and the "Plain Sense" of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000); and Gagnon, Robert A. J., *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*.
33. See reference in fn 3; published in the United States as "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons," Documents of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987).
34. Shea, W. R., "Galileo and the Church," (pp. 114-135), and Westman, R. S., "The Copernicans and the churches" (pp. 76-113), in D. C. Lindberg & R. L. Numbers (Eds.), *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter between Christianity and Science* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986). See also the treatments of Copernicus and Galileo in Brooke, J. H., *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and Russell, C. A., *Cross-currents: Interactions between Science and Faith* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 1985).
35. Jones and Yarhouse, *Homosexuality*; *ibid.*
36. Note that early Christians had no such guaranteed right under Rome for free exercise, but rather saw it as their obligation and joy to exercise and proclaim Christian faith even under threat of death.
37. As discussed in "Homosexuals hijack the civil rights bus: Claiming a 'civil right' to 'marry' the same-sex demeans a genuine struggle for liberty and equality" by Janet M. LaRue at <http://www.cwfa.org/images/content/hhcrb.pdf> ; retrieved December 15, 2005.
38. See the paper referenced in the previous footnote for one interesting discussion of these issues.
39. From Chris Kempling, "Religious Freedom in Canada," retrieved October 25, 2005, from <http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/persecution/pch0080.html>.
40. <http://www.family.org/cforum/news/a0038730.cfm>

