GOD AND THE GAY CHRISTIAN?

A RESPONSE TO MATTHEW VINES

EDITED BY

R. ALBERT MOHLER JR.

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SBTS Press c/o Communications
2825 Lexington Ave. Louisville, KY 40280

Printed in the United States of America.

CONVERSANT

God and the Gay Christian? A Response to Matthew Vines is the first in a series of e-books that engage the current evangelical conversation with the full wealth of Christian conviction.

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CHAPTER ONE

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God, the Gospel and the Gay Challenge: A Response to Matthew Vines

R. Albert Mohler Jr.

Evangelical Christians in the United States now face an inevitable moment of decision. While Christians in other movements and in other nations face similar questions, the question of homosexuality now presents evangelicals in the United States with a decision that cannot be avoided. Within a very short time, we will know where everyone stands on this question. There will be no place to hide, and there will be no way to remain silent. To be silent will answer the question.

The question is whether evangelicals will remain true to the teachings of Scripture and the unbroken teaching of the Christian church for over 2,000 years on the morality of same-sex acts and the institution of marriage.

The world is pressing this question upon us, but so are a number of voices from within the larger evangelical circle — voices that are calling for a radical revision of the church's understanding of the Bible, sexual morality and the meaning of marriage. We are living in the midst of a massive revolution in morality, and sexual morality is at the center of this revolution. The question of same-sex relationships and sexuality is at the very center of the debate over sexual morality, and our answer to this question will both determine or reveal what we understand about everything the Bible reveals and everything the church teaches — even the gospel itself.

Others are watching, and they see the moment of decision at hand. Anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann of Stanford University has remarked that "it is clear to an observer like me that evangelical Christianity is at a crossroad." What is that crossroad? "The question of whether gay Christians should be married within the church."[1] Journalist Terry Mattingly sees the same issue looming on the evangelical horizon: "There is no way to avoid the showdown that is coming."[2]

Into this context now comes *God and the Gay Christian*, a book by Matthew Vines. Just a couple of years ago, Vines made waves with the video of a lecture in which he attempted to argue that being a gay Christian in a committed same-sex relationship (and eventual marriage) is compatible with biblical Christianity. His video went viral. Even though Vines did not make new arguments, the young Harvard student

synthesized arguments made by revisionist Bible scholars and presented a very winsome case for overthrowing the church's moral teachings on same-sex relationships.

His new book flows from that startling ambition — to overthrow two millennia of Christian moral wisdom and biblical understanding.

Given the audacity of that ambition, why does this book deserve close attention? The most important reason lies outside the book itself. There are a great host of people, considered to be within the larger evangelical movement, who are desperately seeking a way to make peace with the moral revolution and endorse the acceptance of openly gay individuals and couples within the life of the church. Given the excruciating pressures now exerted on evangelical Christianity, many people — including some high-profile leaders — are desperately seeking an argument they can claim as both persuasive and biblical. The seams in the evangelical fabric are beginning to break, and Vines now comes along with a book that he claims will make the argument so many are seeking.

In *God and the Gay Christian*, Vines argues that "Christians who affirm the full authority of Scripture can also affirm committed, monogamous same-sex relationships." He announces that, once his argument is accepted: "The fiercest objections to LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender] equality — those based on religious beliefs — can begin to fall away. The tremendous pain endured by LGBT youth in many Christian homes can become a relic of the past. Chris-

tianity's reputation in much of the Western world can begin to rebound. Together we can reclaim our light," he argues (3).

That promise drives Vines's work from beginning to end. He identifies himself as both gay and Christian and claims to hold to a "high view" of the Bible. "That means," he says, "I believe all of Scripture is inspired by God and authoritative for my life" (2).

That is exactly what we would hope for a Christian believer to say about the Bible. And who could fault the ambition of any young and thoughtful Christian who seeks to recover the reputation of Christianity in the Western world. If Vines were to be truly successful in simultaneously making his case and remaining true to the Scriptures, we would indeed have to overturn 2,000 years of the church's teaching on sex and marriage and apologize for the horrible embarrassment of being wrong for so long.

Readers of his book who are looking for an off-ramp from the current cultural predicament will no doubt try to accept his argument. But the real question is whether what Vines claims is true and faithful to the Bible as the Word of God. His argument, however, is neither true nor faithful to Scripture. It is, nonetheless, a prototype of the kind of argument we can now expect.

What Does the Bible Really Say?

The most important sections of Vines's book deal with the Bible itself and with what he identifies as the six passages in

the Bible that "have stood in the way of countless gay people who long for acceptance from their Christian parents, friends, and churches" (11). Those six passages (Genesis 19:5; Leviticus 18:22; Leviticus 20:13; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; and 1 Timothy 1:10) are indeed key and crucial passages for understanding God's expressed and revealed message on the question of same-sex acts, desires and relationships, but they are hardly the whole story.

The most radical proposal Vines actually makes is to sever each of these passages from the flow of the biblical narrative and the Bible's most fundamental revelation about what it means to be human, both male and female. He does not do this merely by omission, but by the explicit argument that the church has misunderstood the doctrine of creation as much as the question of human sexuality. He specifically seeks to argue that the basic sexual complementarity of the human male and female — each made in God's image — is neither essential to Genesis chapters 1 and 2 or to any biblical text that follows.

In other words, he argues that same-sex sexuality can be part of the goodness of God's original creation, and that when God declared that it is not good for man to be alone, the answer to man's isolation could be a sexual relationship with someone of either sex. But this massive misrepresentation of Genesis 1 and 2 — a misinterpretation with virtually unlimited theological consequences — actually becomes

Vines's way of relativizing the meaning of the six passages he primarily considers.

His main argument is that the Bible simply has no category of sexual orientation. Thus, when the Bible condemns same-sex acts, it is actually condemning "sexual excess," hierarchy, oppression or abuse — not the possibility of permanent, monogamous, same-sex unions.

In addressing the passages in Genesis and Leviticus, Vines argues that the sin of Sodom was primarily inhospitality, not same-sex love or sexuality. The Law of Moses condemns same-sex acts in so far as they violate social status or a holiness code, not in and of themselves, he asserts. His argument with regard to Leviticus is especially contorted, since he has to argue that the text's explicit condemnation of male-male intercourse as an abomination is neither categorical nor related to sinfulness. He allows that "abomination is a negative word," but insists that "it doesn't necessarily correspond to Christian views of sin" (85).

Finally, he argues that, even if the Levitical condemnations are categorical, this would not mean that the law remains binding on believers today.

In dealing with the most significant single passage in the Bible on same-sex acts and desire, Romans 1:26-27, Vines actually argues that the passage "is not of central importance to Paul's message in Romans." Instead, Vines argues that the passage is used by Paul only as "a brief example to drive home a point he was making about idolatry."

Nevertheless, Paul's words on same-sex acts are, he admits, "starkly negative" (96).

"There is no question that Romans 1:26-27 is the most significant biblical passage in this debate," Vines acknowledges (96). In order to relativize it, he makes this case:

> Paul's description of same-sex behavior in this passage is indisputably negative. But he also explicitly described the behavior he condemned as lustful. He made no mention of love, fidelity, monogamy, or commitment. So how should we understand Paul's words? Do they apply to all same-sex relationships? Or only to lustful, fleeting ones? (99)

In asking these questions, Vines argues that Paul is merely ignorant of the reality of sexual orientation. He had no idea that some people are naturally attracted to people of the same sex. Therefore, Paul misunderstands what today would be considered culturally normative in many highly developed nations — that some persons are naturally attracted to others of the same sex and it would be therefore "unnatural" for them to be attracted sexually to anyone else.

Astonishingly, Vines then argues that the very notion of "against nature" as used by Paul in Romans 1 is tied to patriarchy, not sexual complementarity. Same-sex relationships, Vines argues, "disrupted a social order that required a strict hierarchy between the sexes" (109).

But to get anywhere near to Vines's argument, one has to sever Romans 1 from any natural reading of the text, from the flow of the Bible's message from Genesis 1 forward, from the basic structure of sexual complementarity and from the church's faithful reading of the Bible for two millennia. Furthermore, his argument provides direct evidence of what Paul warns of in this very chapter, "suppressing the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom 1:18).

Finally, the actual language of Romans 1, specifically dealing with male same-sex desire, speaks of "men consumed with passion for one another" (Romans 1:27). This directly contradicts Vines's claim that only oppressive, pederastic or socially mixed same-sex acts are condemned. Paul describes men consumed with passion for one another — not merely the abuse of the powerless by the powerful. In other words, in Romans 1:26-27 Paul condemns same-sex acts by both men and women, and he condemns the sexual desires described as unnatural passions as well.

In his attempt to relativize 1 Corinthians 6:9, Vines actually undermines more of his argument. Paul's careful use of language (perhaps even inventing a term by combining two words from Leviticus 18) is specifically intended to deny what Vines proposes — that the text really does not condemn consensual same-sex acts by individuals with a same-sex sexual orientation. Paul so carefully argues his case that he makes the point that both the active and the passive participants in male intercourse will not inherit the

kingdom of God. Desperate to argue his case nonetheless, Vines asserts that, once again, it is exploitative sex that Paul condemns. But this requires that Paul be severed from his Jewish identity and from his own obedience to Scripture. Vines must attempt to marshal evidence that the primary background issue is the Greco-Roman cultural context rather than Paul's Jewish context — but that would make Paul incomprehensible.

One other aspect of Vines's consideration of the Bible should be noted. He acknowledges that he is "not a biblical scholar" (2), but he claims to "have relied on the work of scholars whose expertise is far greater than [his] own" (2-3). But the scholars upon whom he relies do not operate on the assumption that "all of Scripture is inspired by God and authoritative for [his] life" (2). To the contrary, most of his cited scholars are from the far left of modern biblical scholarship or on the fringes of the evangelical world. He does not reveal their deeper understandings of Scripture and its authority.

The Authority of Scripture and the Question of Sexual Orientation

Again and again, Vines comes back to sexual orientation as the key issue. "The Bible doesn't directly address the issue of same-sex *orientation*," he insists (130). The concept of sexual orientation "didn't exist in the ancient world" (102). Amazingly, he then concedes that the Bible's "six referenc-

es to same-sex behavior are negative," but insists, again, that "the concept of same-sex behavior in the Bible is sexual excess, not sexual orientation" (130).

Here we face the most tragic aspect of Matthew Vines's argument. If the modern concept of sexual orientation is to be taken as a brute fact, then the Bible simply cannot be trusted to understand what it means to be human, to reveal what God intends for us sexually, or to define sin in any coherent manner. The modern notion of sexual orientation is, as a matter of fact, exceedingly modern. It is also a concept without any definitive meaning. Effectively, it is used now both culturally and morally to argue about sexual attraction and desire. As a matter of fact, attraction and desire are the only indicators upon which the modern notion of sexual orientation are premised.

When he begins his book, Vines argues that experience should not drive our interpretation of the Bible. But it is his experience of what he calls a gay sexual orientation that drives every word of this book. It is this experiential issue that drives him to relativize text after text and to argue that the Bible really doesn't speak directly to his sexual identity at all, since the inspired human authors of Scripture were ignorant of the modern gay experience.

Of what else were they ignorant? Vines claims to hold to a "high view" of the Bible and to believe that "all of Scripture is inspired by God and authoritative for my life" (2),

but the modern concept of sexual orientation functions as a much higher authority in his thinking and in his argument.

This leads to a haunting question. What else does the Bible not know about what it means to be human? If the Bible cannot be trusted to reveal the truth about us in every respect, how can we trust it to reveal our salvation?

This points to the greater issue at stake here — the gospel. Vines's argument does not merely relativize the Bible's authority, it leaves us without any authoritative revelation of what sin is. And without an authoritative (and clearly understandable) revelation of human sin, we cannot know why we need a savior, or why Jesus Christ died. Furthermore, to tell someone that what the Bible reveals as sin is not sin, we tell them that they do not need Christ for that. Is that not exactly what Paul was determined not to do when he wrote to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11? Could the stakes be any higher than that? This controversy is not merely about sex, it is about salvation.

Matthew Vines's Wedge Argument — Gender and the Bible

There is another really interesting and revealing aspect of Vine's argument yet to come. In terms of how his argument is likely to be received within the evangelical world, Vines clearly has a strategy, and that strategy is to persuade those who have rejected gender complementarity to take the next logical step and deny sexual complementarity as well.

Gender complementarity is the belief that the Bible's

teachings on gender and gender roles is to be understood in terms of the fact that men and women are equally made in God's image (status) but different in terms of assignment (roles). This has been the belief and conviction of virtually all Christians throughout the centuries, and it is the view held by the vast majority of those identified as Christians in the world even today. But a denial of this conviction, hand-in-hand with the argument that sameness of role is necessary to affirm equality of status, has led some to argue that difference in gender roles must be rejected. The first impediment to making this argument is the fact that the Bible insists on a difference in roles. In order to overcome this impediment, biblical scholars and theologians committed to egalitarianism have made arguments that are hauntingly similar to those now made by Vines in favor of relativizing the Bible's texts on same-sex behaviors.

Vines knows this. He also knows that, at least until recently, most of those who have rejected gender complementarity have maintained an affirmation of sexual complementarity — the belief that sexual behavior is to be limited to marriage as the union of a man and a woman. He sees this as his opening. At several points in the book, he makes this argument straightforwardly, even as he calls both "gender complementarity" and denies that the Bible requires or reveals it.

But we have to give Vines credit for seeing this wedge issue better than most egalitarians have seen it. He knows

that the denial of gender complementarity is a huge step toward denying sexual complementarity. The evangelicals who have committed themselves to an egalitarian understanding of gender roles as revealed in the Bible are those who are most vulnerable to his argument. In effect, they must resist his argument more by force of will than by force of logic.

Same-Sex Marriage, Celibacy and the Gospel

Vines writes with personal passion and he tells us much of his own story. Raised in an evangelical Presbyterian church by Christian parents, he came relatively late to understand his own sexual desires and pattern of attraction. He wants to be acknowledged as a faithful Christian, and he wants to be married — to a man. He argues that the Bible simply has no concept of sexual orientation and that to deny him access to marriage is to deny him justice and happiness. He argues that celibacy cannot be mandated for same-sex individuals within the church, for this would be unjust and wrong. He argues that same-sex unions can fulfill the "one-flesh" promise of Genesis 2:24.

Thus, he argues that the Christian church should accept and celebrate same-sex marriage. He also argues, just like the Protestant liberals of the early 20th century, that Christianity must revise its beliefs or face the massive loss of reputation before the watching world (meaning, we should note, the watching world of the secular West).

But the believing church is left with no option but to

deny the revisionist and relativizing proposals Vines brings to the evangelical argument. The consequences of accepting his argument would include misleading people about their sin and about their need for Christ, about what obedience to Christ requires and what faithfulness to Christ demands.

Vines demands that we love him enough to give him what he desperately wants, and that would certainly be the path of least cultural resistance. If we accept his argument we can simply remove this controversy from our midst, apologize to the world and move on. But we cannot do that without counting the cost, and that cost includes the loss of all confidence in the Bible, in the church's ability to understand and obey the Scriptures and in the gospel as good news to all sinners.

Biblical Christianity can neither endorse same-sex marriage nor accept the claim that a believer can be obedient to Christ and remain or persist in same-sex behaviors. The church is the assembly of the redeemed, saved from our sins and learning obedience in the school of Christ. Every single one of us is a sexual sinner in need of redemption, but we are called to holiness, to obedience and to honoring marriage as one of God's most precious gifts and as a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church.

God and the Gay Christian demands an answer, but Christ demands our obedience. We can only pray — with fervent urgency — that this moment of decision for evangelical Christianity will be answered with a firm assertion of

biblical authority, respect for marriage as the union of a man and a woman, passion for the gospel of Christ and prayer for the faithfulness and health of Christ's church.

I do not write this response as Vines's moral superior, but as one who must be obedient to Scripture. And so, I must counter his argument with conviction and urgency. I am concerned for him, and for the thousands who struggle as he does. The church has often failed people with same-sex attractions and failed them horribly. We must not fail them now by forfeiting the only message that leads to salvation, holiness and faithfulness. That is the real question before us.

ENDNOTES

1 Tanya Luhrmann, foreword to Ken Wilson, *A Letter to My Congregation: An Evangelical Pastor's Path to Embracing People Who Are Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender in the Company of Jesus* ([Version 1.0)] (Amazon.com, 2014).

2 Terry Mattingly, "*About Those Evangelical Whispers on Same-Sex Marriage*," Patheos.com, Thursday, April 17, 2014.

CHAPTER TWO

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How to Condone What the Bible Condemns: Matthew Vines Takes on the Old Testament

James M. Hamilton Jr.

Matthew Vines doesn't throw his knockout punch at the beginning of his book but at the end: "As more believers are coming to realize, [affirming same-sex relations as moral] is, in fact, a requirement of Christian faithfulness" (178).

With these words, Vines hopes to send to the mat, down for the count, the view held by the people of God ever since God made them male and female and said "the two shall become one flesh" (Matt 19:4–5; cf. Gen 2:24 LXX). The Law of Moses clearly prohibits same-sex relations (Lev 18:22; 20:13), and that prohibition is reinforced in the New Testament (Rom 1:26–27; 1 Cor 6:9–10; 1 Tim 1:10).

Vines employs an old, subtle strategy, asking "Did

God actually say?" (Gen 3:1). Calling for a re-examination of the Bible's teaching, Vines doesn't come out swinging but wooing. He wins sympathy by telling his own heart-wrenching story of not wanting to admit his own same-sex attraction. His father even told him the day he "came out" was the worst day of his life. With readers softened up by sentiment and compassion, Vines asks them to reconsider the Bible's teaching.

His attempt to convince readers that they should condone what God has condemned is a study in sophistry. Sadly, those who lack a firm foundation in the Scriptures, those who do not take up the Berean task of examining the Scriptures for themselves (cf. Acts 17:11) and those who do not examine the logic of Vines's arguments (to say nothing of those who want Vines to be right) might think the traditional view of marriage has been floored, like Mike Tyson at the hands of Buster Douglas.

But has it?

Tellingly, Vines does not encourage his readers to be like the Bereans in the Book of Acts — commended for testing all things by the Scriptures. Simply put, he can't afford to have readers test his arguments against the Scriptures. For people to endorse as righteous what the Bible says is sin, they must rely on the account of the Bible that Vines gives. To argue that people can do exactly what the Bible prohibits, Vines proceeds as others have before him. He

1. Isolates a small number of texts that speak directly to the issue;
2. Extracts those texts from the wider thought-world in which they fit, replacing it with contemporary standards and expectations;
3. Uses "evidence" that supports the case, whether that entails the reinterpretation of a few words or appeals to purported historical backgrounds that informed the author of the text but are irrelevant today; and
4. Makes pervasive use of logical fallacies: forces false choices, assumes conclusions, makes faulty appeals to authority, makes false analogies, etc. [1]

Every time Vines suggests that those who hold the Bible's teaching have caused gay people pain, he assumes his conclusion that the Bible does not treat all same-sex relations as inherently sinful (begging the question). Every time he dismisses the sexual complementarity of the created order, he rejects the thought-world of the biblical authors. Every time he quotes Greek or Roman authors to show that they viewed women as inferior to men, he imports a false background, smuggling in a thought-world foreign to the biblical authors.

On this shifting sand of failed logic and bad use of evidence, Vines builds his house: the conclusion that what the

Bible condemns as sinful must now be celebrated as righteous. Justice requires it.

But Christians believe that God determines the meaning of justice; that in the Bible God has revealed what justice is.

Vines engages in a kind of deconstruction of the Bible's teaching by isolating the six texts that speak explicitly on this issue. Having divided, he seeks to conquer by reinterpreting these passages.

Countering his attack requires understanding these texts in context, understanding them in the wider symbolic universe the biblical authors built with their words. If that seems complicated, take an example from *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. If we are to understand the significance of the ring of power, we must see how it fits in the context of the story J.R.R. Tolkien tells. In the same way, understanding what the biblical authors show and tell about same-sex relations requires setting their statements against the big story that unfolds in the Bible.

Vines gives lip service to the wider context of the biblical portrait, showing just enough awareness of it to create the impression that he accounts for it. For his case to stand, however, he cannot allow the full force of the wider story to be felt. That would destroy his argument.

Are you uncertain about whether these things are so? Look to the Bible. Allow the Bible to answer the question of whether it condones or condemns same-sex relations. Read the Bible for yourself. Start in Genesis 1 and read straight

through to see the context of the relevant statements. See which explanation of the Bible stands up to examination.

Other chapters in this book respond to what Vines says about the New Testament, about church history and about sexual orientation. My chapter focuses on how Vines interprets the Old Testament. In what follows, I will seek to sketch the wider story and thought-world in which we are to understand the sin of Sodom in Genesis 19, the command not to lie with a male as with a woman in Leviticus 18:22 and the death penalty for those who do in Leviticus 20:13.

The Old Testament's Explanation of the World

Authors communicate by showing and telling. Once they have told, they don't have to re-tell when they go on to show. In other words, as a writer introduces his audience to the world in which his story is set, if he tells them that world includes the earth's gravitational force pulling objects toward itself, he does not have to reiterate that explanation when he shows a plane crash. The author does not need to interrupt the narrative and remind his audience about gravity.

Anyone who understands this will question the interpretive skill of the person who isolates the account of a plane crash from its wider narrative, then attempts to prove that gravity did not pull that plane to the earth because, after all, the author did not mention gravity when he narrated the plane crash. Of course, if that interpreter does not like gravity, if he is committed to denying the influence of gravity

in his own experience, we can understand why he argues as he does, but we will not be convinced. After all, the author did tell us that his world included gravity — and nothing in his story ever went floating off into space.

This example about gravity is precisely the way that sexual complementarity — an idea that Vines acknowledges and then dismisses as irrelevant — functions in the Bible.

The story-world in which the Bible's narrative is set, of course, is presented as the real world, and so the narrative that unfolds in the Scriptures is the world's true story. Moreover, the teaching of the biblical authors is without error, normative and authoritative because God inspired the biblical authors by his Spirit (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20–21). This is the view that Jesus took of the Old Testament (John 10:35), and followers of Jesus think like he did.

Genesis 1–3 introduces the story-world, the setting and moral parameters, of the Bible's narrative and our lives. This is a world that God made (Gen 1–2). Prior to human sin, everything was good (Gen 1:31), and as for humanity, "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27). Regardless of what people in other ancient societies may have thought about the inferiority of women, those who embraced Genesis 1 believed that men and women are equal in human dignity because God made male and female in his own image (Gen 1:27).

At several points, Vines asserts that whereas those who

hold to complementarity today hold that men and women have different roles but are equal in value, "in the ancient world, women ... were thought to have *less value*" (91, cf. 87–93, emphasis his). Anyone who thinks women inferior is either ignorant of or has failed to appreciate Genesis 1:27. When Moses and other biblical authors address same-sex relations, they do not forget Genesis 1:27.[2]

God made the world good, and he made both male and female in his image, equal in dignity. Genesis 1:28 also teaches that God created the sexual complementarity of male and female to enable them to do together what they could not do alone: "God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.'" The author who put Genesis 1 next to Genesis 2, Moses, intended the two accounts to be read as complementing one another. In Genesis 2, God gave to man the role of working and keeping the garden (Gen 2:15), and to the woman he gave the role of helping the man (2:18, 20). What took place when God presented the woman to Adam in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:22–23) is understood as normative for all humanity in Genesis 2:24: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."

Answering a question about divorce in Matthew 19:4–5, Jesus quotes Genesis 1:27, "male and female he created them," then Jesus quotes Genesis 2:24, "Therefore a man. ..."[3] Significantly, Jesus attributes the words of Genesis 2:24

to the one who made them male and female. Jesus asserts that God himself declared that what happened between Adam and Eve was determinative for mankind in general. When Vines argues against the idea that Genesis 1–2 teaches that procreation is a fixed standard for marriage (137–41), and when he argues that sexual complementarity is not required for the one flesh union (144–48), he sets himself against the understanding of Genesis 1–2 articulated by Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus said that God the Father created them male and female (Gen 1:27), and Jesus said that God the Father concluded from the union of Adam and Eve that man should leave father and mother and cleave to his wife, the two becoming one flesh (Gen 2:24; see Matt 19:4–5).[4] Matthew Vines does not interpret Genesis 1–2 the way Jesus did. The interpretation of Genesis 1–2 provided by Jesus is the one that binds the conscience of Christians.

Prior to sin, prior to the curses spoken in Genesis 3:14–19, God instituted marriage as a permanent, exclusive covenant between one man and one woman, and the one-flesh union of their bodies brings about a biological miracle neither could experience without the cooperation of the other: the begetting of children, procreation. Marriage is referred to as a creation ordinance because God made it in the garden prior to sin as a moral norm for all humans at all times in all places.

Rather than dropping into Genesis 19 or Leviticus 18 and 20 without consideration of the story-world Moses has

constructed from the beginning of his work, and rather than reading these passages through the categories and assumptions of other ancient cultures or our own, we must read Genesis 19 from the perspective Moses meant to teach. We cannot understand Genesis 19 or Leviticus 18 and 20 apart from Genesis 1–3.[5]

Prior to sin, there was no shame between man and woman (Gen 2:25). After sin, they hid their nakedness from one another (3:7). When God spoke judgment over sin, he cursed the serpent (3:14–15) and he made the roles assigned to the woman (3:16) and the man (3:17–19) more difficult. God's words to the woman in Genesis 3:16 provide the explanation of all marital disharmony, all sexual perversion and all procreative dysfunction — not only in the rest of Genesis but in the rest of the Bible. That foundational word of judgment also explains the perversion, dysfunction and disharmony experienced across world history.

God made the world good (Gen 1:31). Man and woman sinned (3:6). God spoke judgment (3:14–19), subjecting the world to futility in hope (Rom 8:20). Deviations from the norm, therefore, such as what Moses narrates in Genesis 19 or prohibits in Leviticus 18 and 20, are to be understood as departures from the created order.

Like the author who does not have to mention gravity when he narrates the plane crash, Moses has told his audience in Genesis 1–3 about the world in which his story takes place, when he shows them what happens in Genesis

19 he does not have to spell everything out. Similarly, with the created order stated in Genesis 1–3, when God gives commands in Leviticus that reflect the created order, those commands do not need to articulate the undergirding sexual complementarity. It has already been established. Vines makes specious claims: "the Bible never identifies same-sex behavior as the sin of Sodom, or even as *a* sin of Sodom" (75, emphasis original), and regarding Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 he demands that we ask, "Do these writings suggest that same-sex unions are wrong because of the anatomical 'sameness' of the partners?" (86-87). It is as though Vines asks, does the author specify that gravity pulled that plane to the ground?

Read in context, the commands against same-sex relations in Leviticus 18 and 20 mesh perfectly with the moral order of creation presented in Genesis 1–2, correctly interpreted by Jesus in Matthew 19:4–5. This indicates that Moses meant for the intentions of the men of Sodom to be viewed as flagrant violations of God's created order, as can be seen from the way later biblical authors interpret Genesis 19.

Vines suggests that Philo was the first to interpret the sin of Sodom as a same-sex violation. He argues that later biblical authors only speak of inhospitality and violence, arrogance and oppression when referencing Sodom. Vines also writes that the gang-rape intended by the Sodomites cannot be compared with the kind of committed, consen-

sual same-sex marriage relationship he advocates. Rape is obviously a violation of what God intended, but that does not mean that the same-sex aspect of Sodom's sin was not also a violation of God's intention.

As for later Old Testament interpretation of Sodom's sin, Vines fails to notice — or chooses not to address — a significant connection between Genesis 19, the two passages in Leviticus and Ezekiel 16:48–50.

Ezekiel, who makes abundant use of the book of Leviticus, describes various sins of Sodom (Ezek 16:48–49), then concludes, "They were haughty and did an abomination before me. So I removed them, when I saw it" (16:50). This indicates that the "abomination" committed by Sodom led to their destruction. Ezekiel's reference to Sodom's "abomination" uses the singular form of the term *toevah*, and that term is used in the singular only twice in the book of Leviticus, when same-sex intercourse is called an abomination in 18:22, and when the death penalty is prescribed for it in 20:13. The four other instances of the term in Leviticus are in the plural, making it likely that Ezekiel uses the term from Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 to reference the same-sex intentions of the men of Sodom.[6]

Jude also speaks of "sexual immorality" and the Sodomites' pursuit of "strange flesh" (Jude 7). Vines tries to explain away this mention of "strange flesh" as referring "to the attempted rape of angels instead of humans" (69). But the Genesis narrative refers to the angels as "men" (Gen

18:22), and that is how the inhabitants of Sodom designate them as well (19:5). For those who adopt the sexual complementarity taught in the Bible, the violation of the order of creation at Sodom is an abomination (Lev 18:22; 20:13; Ezek 16:50). That abomination is only intensified by the angelic identity of the men the Sodomites intend to abuse. 2 Peter 2:6–10 also treats the sin of Sodom as sexual immorality rather than as oppression, violence, a failure of hospitality or some other kind of sin.

The Sodom story in Genesis 19 shows the destruction of those who have deviated from the Bible's authorized sexual norm, and the prohibition of deviation from that norm is made explicit in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. Vines suggests that these Old Testament prohibitions are part of the law that has been fulfilled in Christ (78–83), attempting to buttress this with the argument that Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 "reflect the inferior value that was commonly accorded to women" (93).

In spite of what Moses wrote in Genesis 1:27, Vines alleges that Moses thinks women inferior to men. Moreover, in spite of what Moses established about the order of creation in Genesis 1–3, Vines argues that the problem with same-sex relations was not that they violated sexual complementarity but that they violated the gender roles appropriate to a patriarchal society because the act reduced the passive partner to the status of a woman.[7]

In addition to misrepresenting Moses, Vines does not

account for the punishment that fits the crime in Leviticus 20:13. If Vines is correct, the problem with same-sex relations is that the man who plays the active role degrades the man who plays the passive role by lowering him to the status of a woman. This understanding would make the active partner the more guilty,[8] and this degradation in patriarchal society is crucial to the distinction Vines draws between what Leviticus condemns and today's same-sex relations between equals.

Leviticus 20:13, however, neither says that only the active partner has sinned, nor does it say that only the active partner is to be punished. If it did, it might support the idea that the nature of the sin was the degradation of the passive partner to the inferior status of a woman. But Leviticus 20:13 punishes both active and passive partners as equals: "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them."[9]

The punishment in Leviticus 20:13 sheds light on Leviticus 18:22, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." The abomination here is not the degradation of a man to the status of a woman, as Vines would have it.

What is it that makes these practices abominations? The Bible's answer is that God's holy character determines what is holy and common, clean and unclean (e.g., Lev 10:10–11, cf. 10:1–11; 18:2; 20:8). The Old Testament law

was an expression of God's holy character. The new covenant law is likewise an expression of God's holy character. Because God's character has not changed, and because the proscription on same-sex activity is reiterated in the New Testament (Rom 1:26–27; 1 Cor 6:9–10; 1 Tim 1:10), Vines is wrong that "while *abomination* is a negative word, it doesn't necessarily correspond to Christian views of sin" (85, emphasis original). On the contrary, in the Old and New Testaments, sin is an affront to God's holy character and should be viewed with abhorrence and detested.

There are statements that treat forbidden food as an abomination, such as Deuteronomy 14:3, "You shall not eat any abomination." There are also sexual regulations not all Christians follow today (some do), such as Leviticus 18:19, "You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness." With cases like these we see a difference between the old and new covenant expressions of God's righteous character. Under the old covenant, God's unmixed purity was to be reflected in what Israel ate. With the coming of the new covenant, Jesus "declared all foods clean" (Mark 7:19), and God told Peter not to call common what he had made clean (Acts 10:15). The regulation about menstrual uncleanness reflects the way that under the old covenant people became unclean by contact with life fluids that had left the body — explaining why childbirth (Lev 12) and other bodily discharges (Lev 15) made people unclean.

Whereas the prohibition on the abomination of same-sex activity is reiterated in the New Testament, statements about uncleanness resulting from contact with life fluids that have left the body are not reiterated in the New Testament. Other moral verities, such as the command not to offer children to Molech (Lev 18:21) and the command not to lie with any animal (Lev 18:23), do not need to be reiterated to remain in force, being obvious from the order of creation.

Conclusion

Has Vines thrown the knockout punch to the biblical norm? Has he refuted the view that the only expression of human sexuality the Bible endorses is that between one man and one woman in marriage? Has he defeated the view that the Bible regards all indulgence of same-sex desire sinful?

In view of his logical fallacies, his failure to account for the big story that frames Genesis 19, Leviticus 18 and Leviticus 20, and his suggestion that the Old Testament presents women as inferior to men in spite of their Genesis 1:27 equality, I would say that Vines is not even in the ring. His attack on the Bible's teaching is ultimately an attack on the one who inspired the Bible, God.

In view of the way Jesus interpreted Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 in Matthew 19:4–5, the attempt of Vines to overthrow the Bible's teaching is more like a kid on the street trying to

sucker punch the champ. The Bible's teaching, however, is untouched by any attempts to lay it low.

ENDNOTES

1 For "A Selection of Logical Fallacies from *God and the Gay Christian* by Matthew Vines," see http://jimhamilton.info/2014/04/22/a-selection-of-logical-fallacies-from-god-and-the-gay-christian-by-matthew-vines/.

2 Vines cites lower vow redemption prices for women in old covenant Israel (Lev 27:1–8) and other differences (91), but these can be explained the same way that lower wages for women in our own culture can be. They do not necessarily indicate that women were deemed *inferior as human beings*: differences in economic valuation of men and women in that culture, and our own, likely result from other factors.

3 The fact that Jesus read Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 together in Matthew 19:4–5 speaks against what Vines asserts, "While Genesis 1:28 does say to 'be fruitful and increase in number,' Genesis 2 never mentions procreation when describing the first marriage" (143). The connection between marriage and procreation, however, is so obvious it does not need to be stated. When Jesus speaks of the resurrection of the dead and says that the raised "neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels in heaven" (Matt 22:30), part of his point is that in the resurrection, as with the angels, there will be no procreation, so there will be no marriage.

4 On the issue of polygamy, the Greek translation of Genesis 2:24 (in the LXX) reads, "the two shall become one flesh," and this is the way that Jesus quotes the passages in Matthew 19:5. The Hebrew of Genesis 2:24 does not specify *two*, reading simply "they shall become one flesh." Still, every instance of polygamy in the Old Testament is presented in a negative light, indicating that the Old Testament authors understood Genesis 2:24 as the later Greek translator did and as Jesus authoritatively interpreted the text: pointing to the union of *one* man with *one* woman in marriage.

5 So also Gordon Wenham ("The Old Testament Attitude to Homosexuality," *Expository Times* 102 [1991]: 362): "It is now generally recognized that many of the most fundamental principles of Old Testament law are expressed in the opening chapters of Genesis. This applies to the laws on food, sacrifice, the sabbath as well as on sex."

6 For discussion and defense of this understanding, see Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 79–85.

7 Vines claims that this explains "why Leviticus contains no parallel prohibition of *female*

same-sex relations. If the issue were anatomical complementarity, female same-sex relations should be condemned on an equal basis. And yet, the text is silent in this matter" (93). Against this, the Old Testament laws are not and could not have been an exhaustive list. The commandments and prohibitions are clearly representative, on the understanding that applications from what is addressed could be made to what is not. Thus, nothing is said about female same-sex activity because nothing needs to be said. The prohibition of male same-sex activity obviously prohibits female same-sex activity.

8 Gordon Wenham ("The Old Testament Attitude to Homosexuality," 360) points out that in Middle Assyrian Law 20, only the active partner is punished, while "the passive partner escapes all censure."

9 Wenham writes, "The Old Testament bans every type of homosexual intercourse, not just forcible as the Assyrians did, or with youths (so the Egyptians). Homosexual intercourse where both parties consent is also condemned" (ibid., 362).

CHAPTER THREE

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Suppressing the Truth in Unrighteousness: Matthew Vines Takes on the New Testament

Denny Burk

Matthew Vines's treatment of New Testament texts about homosexuality focuses on three passages: Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. In doing so, however, he fails to account for the larger context of Scripture and its teaching on marriage and sexuality. Instead, he writes at length trying to disprove the notion that any of these verses really condemns what we now call homosexuality. Against a 2,000-year-old consensus within the Christian church, Vines contends that these verses do not mean what they appear to mean — that homosexuality is fallen and sinful and completely incompatible with following Christ. Vines argues that if these verses were properly understood,

everyone would see that there's nothing inherently sinful about homosexual orientation or behavior. Thus, there is no biblical reason to prevent "gay Christians" from entering into the covenant of marriage with a same-sex partner. Gay couples can fulfill the marital norms of Ephesians 5 just like their heterosexual counterparts.

A Subversive Hermeneutic from Matthew 7:15-16

Vines's argument is hobbled at the outset by a subversive hermeneutic. It is no exaggeration to say that Vines's reading of Scripture is an agenda in search of an interpretation. Hermeneutically speaking, the tail is wagging the dog in Vines's work. He simply assumes that the texts cannot mean anything negative about homosexuality. In an ironic twist, he bases his assumption on Matthew 7:15-16 — a text warning about false teachers, "You will know them by their fruits" (all Scripture references in this chapter, unless otherwise indicated, are from the New American Standard Bible 1977). Because opposing homosexuality harms homosexuals in his view (a bad fruit), the traditional texts must be reinterpreted in a way that is no longer harmful to gay people.

Not only is Vines's approach a gross misinterpretation of Jesus' words in Matthew 7,[1] it is also an uncritical use of an ethical theory called consequentialism. Consequentialism bases moral judgments on the consequences that accrue to human actions.[2] No human action is inherently good or evil in this theory, only its consequences. Thus one must not

pronounce judgment on human actions, only on the consequences that flow from those actions.

The problem with this theory is that it elevates our evaluation of consequences above Scripture as the standard for evaluating what is right and wrong. Also, consequentialism provides no objective definition of what defines a good or a bad consequence. A good consequence for one person may be a bad consequence for another.[3]

Nevertheless, this is exactly how Vines approaches the issue of homosexuality in his book. He alleges a variety of negative consequences that flow from calling homosexuality a sin. We must, therefore modify and reinterpret the Bible so that people no longer feel badly about its sexual ethic. That is why Vines has no problem sweeping away the 2,000-year-old consensus of the Christian church. That consensus understanding of Scripture causes some people to feel badly, so it must be done away with. I agree with Richard Hays' comments on this approach to ethical reasoning: "How strikingly indifferent is the New Testament ... to consequentialist ethical reasoning. The New Testament teaches us to approach ethical issues not by asking 'What will happen if I do x?' but rather by asking 'What is the will of God?'"[4]

Matthew 7:15-16 does have a warning for us, but not the one that Vines alleges. It warns us to watch out for wolves in sheep's clothing. In this instance, Vines is concealing the wolf of consequentialism in the clothing of Matthew 7. In

doing so, he misleads readers so that they feel they are doing the right thing when they suppress the message of key texts: Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:10 and Ephesians 5:21-33. Readers would do well not to be taken in by his efforts.

Suppressing the Truth in Romans 1:26-27

Vines rightly identifies Romans 1:26-27 as the "most significant biblical passage in this debate" (96). Nevertheless, he begins his exposition by telling readers that "these words of Paul have long haunted gay people" (95). Again, he misleads readers by arguing that these verses cannot mean what they appear to mean because the words "haunt" gay people. On this basis, he offers a revisionist interpretation, arguing that readers no longer have to choose between affirming same-sex relationships and affirming the authority of the Bible (96). His reading pretends that Christians can affirm both.

Vines admits that Paul's words about same-sex behavior are all negative, but Vines rejects the notion that Paul is ruling out all same-sex behavior. In Vines's own words:

> Paul wasn't condemning the expression of a same-sex orientation as opposed to the expression of an opposite-sex orientation. He was condemning *excess* as opposed to *moderation* ... he wasn't addressing what we think of today as homosexuality.

> The context in which Paul discussed same-sex relations differs so much from our own that it cannot reasonably be called the same issue. Same-sex behavior condemned as excess doesn't translate to homosexuality condemned as an orientation — or as a loving expression of that orientation (105-106, emphasis original).

Vines tries to show from a variety of historical sources that the issue Paul opposed was excessive lust, not homosexuality *per se*. Vines's argument depends on the specious claim that Paul did not know about same-sex orientation and therefore could only have been referring to certain kinds of excessively lustful homosexual acts. This view is a modified version of a thesis advanced by John Boswell and which has been decisively refuted by Robert Gagnon.[5]

Nevertheless, Vines's modification still relies on the faulty assumption that Paul was unaware of sexual orientation. To be sure, Paul did not use the term "orientation," but that does not mean that he was unaware of the concept.[6] The American Psychological Association defines sexual orientation as "an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic and/or sexual attractions to men, women or both sexes."[7] Notice that orientation involves a person's enduring sexual attractions and that sexual *attraction* is a virtual synonym for sexual *desire*.[8] Thus sexual orientation is one's persistent pattern of sexual desire/attraction toward either or both sexes.

If that is the definition, then the term "orientation" does not somehow take us to a category that Paul fails to address. Paul says that our sexual desires/attractions have a moral component and that we are held accountable for them. Look carefully at Paul's argument in Romans 1:26-27.

> For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

To be sure, Paul says that homosexual behavior is sinful. But he also says that the desires/attractions themselves are equally morally blameworthy and stand as evidence of God's wrath against sin: "For this reason God gave them over to degrading *passions* ... and [they] burned in their *desire* toward one another" (Rom 1:26-27). Sexual desire that fixates on the same sex is sinful, and that is why God's judgment rightly falls on both desires and actions. Again, the issue Paul addresses is not merely sexual behavior but also same-sex attraction.

Paul says that homosexuality is sinful because it goes "against nature" (Rom 1:26-27, author's translation). Vines gets around this obstacle by redefining what "na-

ture" means. For him, nature is a reference to patriarchy, and the reason homosexuality is "against nature" is that it does not conform to patriarchal gender roles (108-111). But this definition completely misunderstands what Paul means by the word "nature." For Paul, nature is not defined by secular sources (as Vines suggests) but by the Old Testament. In fact, there are numerous linguistic links between Romans 1:26-27 and the creation narratives of Genesis 1-2. For example, Paul's use of the relatively unusual words *thelys* for females and *arsen* for males strongly suggests he is relying on the creation account of Genesis 1 where the same two words are used.[9] These two terms accent the sexual differences between males and females and suggest that homosexual relationships violate God's creational intent.[10] Thus for Paul, "against nature" means that homosexuality goes against God's original design.

The bottom line is this: Vines interprets the text to mean that homosexuality is only wrong when it is based on excessive lust and when it defies patriarchy. Since committed monogamous gay relationships violate neither of these norms,[11] he argues, there is nothing in this text to prevent same-sex couples from entering into such a relationship. Nevertheless, this interpretation relies on a number of exegetical and historical implausibilities and is driven by a hermeneutical prejudice against what the text plainly means. Contrary to Vines, Paul has adopted the sexual ethic of the Old Testament, which condemns homosexuality in all its dimensions.[12]

Redefining Terms in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10

Vines confesses that he is not a linguist (117), but he nevertheless dives headlong into revisionist interpretation of key Pauline terms on homosexuality — *arsenokoitēs* and *malakos*. *Malakos* appears in 1 Corinthians 6:9, and *arsenokoitēs* appears in both 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10.

> Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate [*malakos*], nor homosexuals [*arsenokoitēs*], nor thieves, nor *the* covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9-10).

> Law is not made for a righteous man, but for those who are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers and immoral men and homosexuals [*arsenokoitēs*] and kidnappers and liars and perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound teaching (1 Tim 1:9-10).

Taken together, these texts render an unambiguous judgment on these two terms. They are both sinful. That is why Vines questions whether English translations have rightly captured the meaning of these words. He argues that the terms

do not refer to homosexuality in general but to excessive lust and pederasty (same-sex relations between a man and a boy). According to Vines, therefore, every translation that suggests Paul opposes homosexuality generally is in error. Paul only means to oppose exploitative same-sex relationships.[13]

Vines has again adopted a revisionist translation that fails on a number of levels. It may very well be true that Paul's Greco-Roman context was dominated by the practice of pederasty. It is an illogical reduction, however, to shoehorn Paul's use of these two terms into that narrow frame. Paul is not drawing on his Greco-Roman context in his use of these terms. In fact, the term *arsenokoitēs* appears nowhere else in Greek literature until Paul coins the term here. There were other words for homosexual behavior, but Paul did not choose them. Rather, he coined a term that derives from the Greek translation of Leviticus 20:13, *arsenos koitēn*.[14]

In other words, Paul's sexual ethic is once again based entirely on his Jewish tradition whose Scriptures were unambiguously opposed to all forms of homosexual behavior, not just exploitative ones. As one pair of commentators put it,

> Paul opposed homosexual behavior on the basis of creation theology and because it is marked as a vice in the Torah and was stressed as a vice by Jews. Paul's opposition to all homosexual behavior ... seems to derive from Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, which represent absolute bans.[15]

Vines has an undue fascination with Paul's Greco-Roman context to the near exclusion of his Jewish identity. Time and again, Paul quotes from the Jewish Scriptures as the basis for his views. This is certainly the case in 1 Corinthians and especially in this section, which is freighted with material on sexual ethics. In chapter 5, Paul appeals to Leviticus 18 in his comments on an incestuous relationship. Later in chapter 6, Paul quotes Genesis 2:24 to admonish men in the congregation who were visiting prostitutes. Likewise, in this text, Paul is alluding again to Leviticus to establish the sinfulness of homosexuality. The wider context of 1 Corinthians and its intertextual connections to the Old Testament make this clear. Paul uses the terms *malakos* and *arsenokoitēs* to refer to the active and passive partners in a homosexual encounter. Like Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Paul identifies both halves of a homosexual coupling as sinful.[16] Paul prohibits all forms of sexual relationships between same-sex couples.[17] But Vines's myopic focus on two words and their Greco-Roman context leads him to miss this point entirely.

Distorting the Gospel in Ephesians 5:21-33

There is perhaps no more important text on the meaning and purpose of marriage than Ephesians 5:21-33. And Vines understands that its traditional interpretation stands in the way of his revision of marriage. So Vines invokes the text with the stated intent of subverting its traditional rendering. Vines recognizes that the text presents marriage as a

"mystery" that symbolizes Christ's union with his bride, the church. Nevertheless, he argues that same-sex unions can symbolize Christ's marriage as well as heterosexual ones. To do so, he reduces the norm of marriage to permanence. As long as same-sex couples stay together in a relationship of mutual self-giving, they honor Christ as well as any heterosexual couple (137).

The primary problem with this view is that it understates Paul's specific appeal to Genesis 2:24 to explain the meaning of marriage: "For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh" (Eph 5:31). Yes, the norm of marriage involves a permanent commitment. But it also involves more than that. Genesis 1-2 establishes at least seven norms for marriage: marriage is covenantal, sexual, procreative, heterosexual, monogamous, non-incestuous and symbolic of the gospel.[18] To miss any one of these elements is to distort the meaning of marriage, and Vines misses six of them.

Yes, marriage is covenantal (as Vines acknowledges). But that covenant is irreducibly heterosexual. That is why Jesus defines the marriage covenant in Matthew 19 as a monogamous heterosexual union: "Have you not read, that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh '?" (Matt 19:4-5). Again, this fundamental biblical reality is absent in Vines's book.

Conclusion

When I read Vines's treatment of Scripture, I am reminded of the words of liberal New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson:

> I have little patience with efforts to make Scripture say something other than what it says, through appeals to linguistic or cultural subtleties. The exegetical situation is straightforward: we know what the text says. But what are we to do with what the text says? ... I think it important to state clearly that we do, in fact, reject the straightforward commands of Scripture, and appeal instead to another authority when we declare that same-sex unions can be holy and good. And what exactly is that authority? We appeal explicitly to the weight of our own experience and the experience thousands of others have witnessed to, which tells us that to claim our own sexual orientation is in fact to accept the way in which God has created us.[19]

In spite of claims to the contrary, Vines's conclusions are not really all that different from Johnson's. Vines has rejected the straightforward commands of Scripture. He just does not want to admit that this is indeed what he has done. He wants to give an appearance that he is still in the evangelical fold. But make no mistake. He is not. As

he gives lip-service to biblical authority and to the need for salvation, his sheep costume looks really convincing. But do not miss that there really is a wolf concealed within — one that would like to devour as many sheep as possible with a Bible-denying, judgment-inducing error. The stakes really are that high.

ENDNOTES

1 The "fruit" metaphor appears a number of times in Matthew's gospel. Contrary to Vines, it does not signify bad outcomes generically. In the metaphor, fruit grows from a root. If a root is evil, then so will its fruit be evil. In Matthew 3:8, "fruit" symbolizes behavior that comes from a repentant heart. In Matthew 12:33, "fruit" stands for blasphemous words which flow from an "evil" heart. In Matthew 13:8, 23, it signifies "a lifestyle which responds to the preaching of the word" (R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007], 291). The good or bad quality of the fruit is determined solely by its conformity to God's revelation in Christ, not by any particular sinner's subjective impression of it (as Vines has it). Furthermore, Vines's misuse of Matthew 7:15-16 would create ethical anarchy if applied consistently. To wit: It may cause someone personal distress and psychological "harm" to tell them that they should not murder their neighbor. That would be a "bad fruit" on Vines's definition. Nevertheless, no one would permit murder just to avoid that "bad fruit."

2 Vines writes: "*Do the destructive consequences of long-held views among Christians warrant a reinterpretation of Scripture?…* Sadly, negative attitudes toward gay relationships have led to crippling depression, torment, suicide, and alienation from God and the church. I suggested that, if for no other reason, those destructive consequences should compel Christians to take a closer look at the relevant Scripture passages" (24-25).

3 Denny Burk, *What Is the Meaning of Sex?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 27-28.

4 Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation, A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperOne, 1996), 455.

5 Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001), 380-92.

6 The following discussion follows closely my argument in Denny Burk, "Is Homosexual

Orientation Sinful?," *Canon & Culture*, February 18, 2014, http://www.canonandculture.com/is-homosexual-orientation-sinful/.

7 "Answers to Your Questions: For a Better Understanding of Sexual Orientation and Homosexuality," *American Psychological Association*, 2008, http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/sexual-orientation.aspx. The DSM-4 defines sexual orientation as "erotic attraction to males, females, or both." See *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th, TR (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 2000), 535.

8 In this essay, I treat sexual *attraction* as a synonym for sexual *desire*. I believe this is justified by common usage of these terms in the literature. For example, Hollinger says that persons with homosexual orientation experience "ongoing affectional and sexual feelings toward persons of the same sex" (Hollinger, *The Meaning of Sex*, 172). Likewise, Grenz describes homosexual orientation as "the situation in which erotic feelings are nearly exclusively triggered by persons of one's own sex" (Stanley J. Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: An Evangelical Perspective* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997], 225). See also Jenell Williams Paris' book in which *orientation*, *attraction*, and *desire* are all three used as virtual synonyms (Jenell Williams Paris, *The End of Sexual Identity: Why Sex Is Too Important to Define Who We Are* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011], 99).

9 I am of course referring to the Greek version of the Old Testament. See Schreiner, "A New Testament Perspective on Homosexuality," 66. See also Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 290-91.

10 See Schreiner, "A New Testament Perspective on Homosexuality," 66.

11 In a later chapter, Vines argues that Paul's patriarchy is rendered obsolete by the gospel. See pp. 141-43.

12 G.J. Wenham, "The Old Testament Attitude to Homosexuality," *The Expository Times* 102, no. 12 (1991): 363: "Israel's repudiation of homosexual intercourse arises out of its doctrine of creation ... St Paul's comment that homosexual acts are 'contrary to nature' (Rom 1:26) is thus probably very close to the thinking of the Old Testament writers."

13 Again, Vines's argument is not original. For the most part, he is popularizing the views of Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

14 E.g., Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1997), 97: "Although the word *arsenokoitēs* appears nowhere in Greek literature prior to Paul's use of it, it is evidently a rendering into Greek of the standard rabbinic term for 'one who lies with a male [as with a woman]'" (Lev. 18:22; 20:13).

15 Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 242.

16 For this reason, I would commend Joseph Fitzmyer's translation of this verse as the most accurate I have seen: "Neither ... catamites, neither sodomites ... will inherit the kingdom of God." See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, The Anchor Yale Bible 32 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 248. See also 256-57.

17 Ibid., 258.

18 Burk, *What Is the Meaning of Sex?*, 88-106.

19 Luke Timothy Johnson and Eve Tushnet, "Homosexuality and the Church: Two Views," *Commonweal* (June 15, 2007): 15. On whether or not homosexuality is "freely chosen," Richard Hays argues, "Paul's condemnation of homosexual activity does not rest upon an assumption that it is freely chosen; indeed, it is precisely characteristic of Paul to regard 'sin' as a condition of human existence, a condition which robs us of free volition and drives us to disobedient actions which, though involuntary, are nonetheless culpable. . . . The gulf is wide between Paul's viewpoint and the modern habit of assigning culpability only for actions assumed to be under free control of the agent" (Richard B. Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell's Exegesis of Romans 1," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 14 [1986]: 209).

CHAPTER FOUR

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Have Christians Been Wrong All Along? What Has the Church Believed and Taught?

Owen Strachan

"History," journalist Ted Koppel once said, "is a tool used by politicians to justify their intentions." This quotation reflects a certain skepticism about the world not unknown to the media class, but it makes a valid point: among long-standing academic disciplines, history is among the easiest to use for one's purposes. It is therefore easy, one could say, to abuse it.

Skepticism over history is a valid place to start in considering the new book *God and the Gay Christian* by former Harvard student Matthew Vines. Vines takes on a weighty task in his new book. He seeks to prove that the Bible approves of a homosexual orientation, and that traditional

evangelical interpretation of six key biblical texts has erred. Though Vines is at pains to say "I am not a Bible scholar" (2), he nonetheless attempts to overturn centuries, even two millennia, of Christian consensus on the issue at hand.

Four Assertions Debunked

But Vines does not stop with lecturing the exegetes in his book. He attempts, in fits and starts, to overturn the prevailing historical narrative of the church's rejection of homosexuality. In what follows, I will address four major flaws in Vines's historical engagement. As I address the historical deficiencies of Vines's work, I will show that the Christian tradition speaks with one voice on the matter of homosexuality.

First, Vines's view that evangelicals sought the abolition of slavery primarily due to experience is incorrect.

In his first chapter, Vines makes the case for an evangelical reexamination of homosexuality on the grounds that Christians have historically reversed their positions due to experience. His test case for the "bad fruit" of an idea is abolition:

> [M]ost Christians throughout history understood passages such as Ephesians 6:5-9 and Colossians 3:22-25 to sanction at least some forms of slavery. But in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,

> Christian abolitionists persuaded believers to take another look. They appealed to conscience *based on the destructive consequences of slavery*. A bad tree produces bad fruit (15, emphasis original).

The case for abolition included reference to the consequences of slavery, to be sure. But even a cursory summary of classic abolitionist writings shows that the evangelical abolitionist movement was richly exegetical. In *The Selling of Joseph* (1700), a short pamphlet by Puritan judge Samuel Sewall, Sewall made reference to more than a dozen Bible verses. His case was rigorously biblical: "And seeing God hath said, *He that stealeth a Man and Selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death*, Exod. 12:16." Thus Sewall concluded that "Man Stealing is ranked among the most atrocious of crimes," a view that he substantiated from a range of Old and New Testament texts.[1] Other famous abolitionists sounded the same biblical horn, with the "Immediatist" movement led by William Lloyd Garrison citing text after text in its appeal.[2]

For Vines, experience drives interpretation. He felt same-sex attraction, and concluded that the Bible must support his lifestyle. In his biographical comments, he cites the normalcy of homosexual experience as a matter of fact — "criticizing [gay people] for not trying to be straight didn't make sense" (6). *God and the Gay Christian* is a lengthy exercise in reading Vines's experience, and affirmation of

it, into Scripture. The abolitionists, by contrast, judged their experience by reference to Scripture. Unlike the pro-slavery faction, they did not go to the Bible to justify their behavior and their society's practice, but to critique it.

Christians have historically operated in consonance with the Reformation decree that Scripture is *norma normans*, "The norm that norms."[3] We are image-bearers, yes, but we are also fallen image-bearers who must be remade by the gospel of Jesus Christ and thus put to death our sinful tendencies (Rom 6:6; Col 3:10). Sadly, Vines is twisting Scripture to fit his desired sin patterns. We find this same behavior in history, but on the wrong side, not the right side.

Second, Vines's view that past Christians disapproved only of certain homosexual acts but not a homosexual orientation is deeply flawed.

Vines develops an argument throughout *God and the Gay Christian* that boils down to this: ancient Christians, like other influential voices, spoke against certain homosexual acts but did not speak to the sinfulness of sexual orientation. Vines concludes that this means that past Christians would have had no quarrel with homosexual orientation. And thus, knowing this new category of human experience today, we are free to approve of a gay Christian lifestyle. He says by way of summary, for example, that "ancient societies didn't think in terms of exclusive sexual orientations" (36).

He sharpens the point further in his discussion of Romans 1:26-27: "Same-sex behavior condemned as excess doesn't translate to homosexuality condemned as an orientation — or as a loving expression of that orientation" (106).

It is true that the exact term that the same-sex lobby uses to describe self-described gay and lesbian people, "orientation," was not used until recently. But this is a red herring, and an anachronistic one at that.

The term "orientation" is recent, but Christians have called incidental or regular homosexual practice sinful for millennia. Commenting on Romans 1:27, fourth-century pastor Ambrosiaster traced the root of homosexual sin to "contempt of God." Those falling into homosexual passion "changed to another order and by doing things which were not allowed, fell into sin" — sin so destructive that it "deceives even the devil and binds man to death."[4] It is hard to see anything but biblically justified condemnation of homosexuality in these words, whether as a discrete act or a fixed state of lust.

Preaching on this same passage, Chrysostom concluded of those who practiced homosexuality that "not only was their doctrine satanic, but their life was too."[5] This passage is of particular note, because Vines cites a portion of it (106), but he leaves out this section, claiming only that Chrysostom condemned "excessive" lust. This is no new argument (indeed it is a well-worn one). Vines's contention suffers not merely from a common misreading of Romans 1, but from a failure to cite properly Chrysostom's homily. Both the "doctrine"

and the "life" of those who abandoned "what is according to nature" — i.e. those who embraced homosexual behavior — should be considered "satanic." There is no stronger term by which one may identify sin than that.

Chrysostom's words from the fourth century are instructive and reflective of the broader Christian moral tradition of the past two millennia. For him and countless others of orthodox fiber, homosexual behavior cannot be considered as an isolated act unrelated to moral concerns. The heart that willingly indulges in such behavior is thoroughly sinful. There can thus be no abstraction of practice, as Vines strains to prove. If it is wrong to get drunk, then it is wrong to be oriented (whatever this means precisely) toward drunkenness. If it is wrong to commit pedophilia, then it is wrong to be oriented toward pedophilic acts. If it is wrong for a husband to harm his wife physically, then it is wrong to be oriented toward doing so. There cannot be what Vines calls a "loving expression" of these and any other sins.

Believers still dishonor God after our conversion, but we no longer find our identity in our sin, as Vines wants to do. Indeed, one wonders whether the "coming out" experience of "gay Christians" is more of a conversion than their profession of faith.

For the truly repentant, our identity is in Christ, and we have left behind our wicked practices and our former identities, becoming by the grace of God a "new self" in Jesus (Col 3:10).

Third, Vines is wrong to argue that Christians have never made the case against homosexual practice based on "anatomical complementarianism."

God and the Gay Christian may have the moral legitimization of homosexuality in its sights, but there is a strong secondary target as well: biblical gender roles. Throughout the text, Vines mixes both subtle and explicit rebukes of complementarianism. In a manner that initially seems unseemly, for example, he pats Paul on the back for his good-hearted (if ultimately unsuccessful) attempt at championing the equality of men and women. "Paul," he writes, "may not have endorsed fully equal roles for men and women, but his views were remarkably egalitarian within his cultural context" (110).

I say this seems unseemly, but perhaps I am unduly swayed by Paul's apostolicity. We are in the age of equality, after all, which means a 20-something with no formal theological credentials feels no hesitation about telling an apostle of the living Lord, a man who saw Christ with his own eyes and shed blood for the gospel, "Nice try, buddy."

In general, *God and the Gay Christian* is rarely more gymnastic, more contorted, in its theologizing than in its presentation of biblical gender. As the executive director of the Council on Biblical Manhood & Womanhood (CBMW), I took special interest in Vines's attempt to jettison both sexual "complementarity" and "anatomical differences" (27-28).

Vines attacks what Scripture plainly teaches and our bodies plainly show: men and women are different. We each equally bear the image of God. But in the most basic and obvious of terms, we don't have the same shapes. Our bodily differences tell us something about who we are and who we are to be. This information is crucial in such practical tasks as procreation and the nurturing of human life, though publicly saying so of late has landed complementarians in the cultural dunk tank.

Vines wants to plunge complementarians under water. When it comes to Adam and Eve, he posits that "the Genesis text focuses only on what these two have in common" (47). This is a remarkable statement. Adam needed a human being, a fellow image-bearer, who would be able to procreate with him, bear his child and nurture said child. Augustine says it forthrightly: Eve, the helper of Adam, was created "for the sake of bearing children."[6]

The point is simple, and marvelously so. Only someone not like Adam could bear children. "Anatomical complementarity" is as fixed a fact as can be. This is true unless one forcibly refigures one's gender, a process Vines wholeheartedly endorses, and which may be the most audacious position he takes in a book chock-full of audacity (165, 176-77). There are professing evangelicals currently queuing up to endorse same-sex marriage and curry favor from the cultural elite when the moment is right. Fewer Christians are presently in the "The Bible Allows Boys to Become Girls" line, but their

numbers will increase in coming days. Currently, Maine and California allow boys identifying as trans-gender to enter girls' restrooms.[7] Vines approves wholeheartedly of this.

Problems with gender abound in the text. In a passage from chapter 5 on Leviticus, Vines cites a number of figures from history, mixing Christian and non-Christian voices. Whether intentional or not, this common shortcoming of *God and the Gay Christian* seems to present the Christian quoted as affirming the unbiblical prejudices of his non-Christian peers. In the passage in question, for example, there are vast theological differences between the two figures Vines cites: Plutarch and Clement of Alexandria. Vines misreads Clement as engaging in the "denigration of women" when he is not; he is calling men to be manly and not womanly, just like the Bible does (1 Kings 2:2; 1 Cor 16:13).

But this is not all that is awry in this passage. Vines claims that the rejection of same-sex relations on the part of ancient Christians owes to their cultural prejudice against women, not any fixed belief in "anatomical complementarity" (90). This is a take-your-breath-away kind of claim. Countless Christians have grounded their rejection of same-sex relations in natural complementarity, which surely includes anatomical design. A select range of voices on this matter:

Tertullian, influential in the second and third centuries AD, said of Romans 1:26-27 that, "When Paul asserts that males and females changed among themselves the natural

use of the creature into that which is unnatural, he validates the natural way;"[8]

Chrsysostom referenced "legitimate intercourse" in condemning homosexual intercourse;[9]

Speaking of the sin of Sodom, Martin Luther argued in the 16th century that same-sex conduct "suppresses nature":

> [I]nasmuch as they departed from the natural passion and longing of the male for the female, which is implanted into nature by God, and desired what is altogether contrary to nature. Whence comes this perversity? Undoubtedly from Satan, who after people have once turned away from the fear of God, so powerfully suppresses nature that he blots out the natural desire and stirs up a desire that is contrary to nature;[10] and

John Calvin spoke in the Reformation period of the 16th century against same-sex passions as reversing "the whole order of nature."[11]

The use of "nature" in these and many other denunciations of homosexual behavior refer to the natural bodily and constitutional design of men and women. In both the early church and beyond, the Christian tradition has argued for the goodness of heterosexual marriage based on the "natural" design of the human body and, correspondingly, what Luther calls "implanted" desire for complementary sexual

experience. Conversely, homosexual practice is considered "unnatural," for it is opposed both to God-authored design and desire. This two-sided view is so popular as to be both dominant and essentially unquestioned in Christian history.

Fourth, Vines's view that celibacy is not enjoined upon all homosexuals is unbiblical and ahistorical.

The preceding helps make sense of another of Vines's central contentions in *God and the Gay Christian*. Vines makes the case that Christians have historically advocated for celibacy to avoid "abusive or lustful practices," a category that in his view excludes homosexual "covenantal relationship[s]" (18). Requiring all same-sex-attracted people to be celibate, after all, causes them to "detest their existence as embodied, sexual beings" (54). Whether a heterosexual or a homosexual, then, Vines argues that if one is called to celibacy through a divine gift, then one may practice it. If one is not gifted with celibacy, then Vines believes that one can feel free to enter into a God-glorifying "covenantal relationship" of either heterosexual or homosexual form.

Vines begs the question here, though he would not admit that he does so. The Bible, as we have said, renders homosexual behavior sinful. There is no context, however covenantal, however relational, in which Scripture countenances morally permissible homosexual activity. As the surrounding chapters make clear, Scripture deals with same-sex behavior in

exclusively negative terms. This has major implications for Christians who feel such impulses. It means, contra what Vines argues, that whether such persons experience the "gift" of celibacy or a sense of calling to this state, they are of necessity and for all their life called to abstain from homosexual behavior. This is true whether one is sexually attracted to the same sex, non-humans, multiple people at once, preteens or any other perverse sexual attachment.

Vines believes that such impulses are part of the "goodness of creation" and the body (67). He is woefully wrong. All aspects of the body are in some way corrupted by sin: murderous anger, perverse desires, lustfulness, lewdness. Christians are not permitted to give vent to desires God prohibits. All people have dignity and worth, as Vines says, but outside of God's transforming work, we do not glorify our Creator by rendering him the holistic worship he desires. Though image-bearers, with body and soul we dishonor him and invite his just judgement (Rom 3:10-18).

By contrast, the apostle Paul disciplined his body and kept it under control as we all must (1 Cor 9:27). Vines argues that such a state is both harmful and essentially impossible (18), but the testimony of countless Christians proves otherwise. Whether or not one marries, self-control over all desire, including immoral sexual desire of either a homosexual or heterosexual kind, is God's Spirit-shaped gift to all who trust Christ (Gal 5:22-23). Celibacy must be practiced by those who are tempted to give vent to any

sinful, fallen desire. Without holiness "no one will see the Lord," the author of Hebrews reminds us (12:14).

Christian history supports this reading of Scripture. Were Luther confronted with a "gay Christian man" who sought a monogamous "covenantal" relationship with another man, he would have pointed not to the structure of the relationship for his denunciation of it — whether it was mutual or not — but the very "perversity" of a man longing for another man. To be sure, the idea that celibacy wouldn't apply to a person experiencing same-sex attraction is historically novel. But this does not mean that a novel practice is acceptable or would have been acceptable to past leaders of the Christian church.

In sum, Vines seems to believe that if he can dream up a term or a category related to homosexual activity that was not encountered by historic Christians, then said historic Christians would affirm such activity. This position is deeply problematic for obvious reasons. If online pornography is not expressly prohibited in Scripture, does that make it morally acceptable? If a young man wishes to engage in "covenantal" sexual encounters with multiple partners at once, can he do so?

Vines's hermeneutic, endorsed enthusiastically by Rachel Held Evans and others, allows these examples to be morally permissible, if not laudable. This is indeed a "game changer" of a text, as Evans says. Its sexual ethics are altogether secular, not Christian. In embracing fully transgender identity, in fact, Vines and his celebrity endorsers have run far past even most professedly secular people. *God and the*

Gay Christian is not modernized Christianity, as it claims. To work off of J. Gresham Machen's characterization of Harry Emerson Fosdick, Vines has produced not a new kind of Christianity, but a new paganism in Christian dress.

Make no mistake: the packaging is appealing, the presentation is winsome and self-aware, and everything seems neat and clean, if slightly edgy in content. The pleasing presentation and calm tone, however, conceal a neo-pagan heart. *God and the Gay Christian* is at its core a shocking call to bodily gratification and sexual revolution that, in places, outpaces even the irreligious in its permissiveness.[12]

Practical Application

In conclusion, I suggest three ways for contemporary Christians to approach the issue of the historicity of so-called gay Christianity.

> *1. Christians who feel as though they might be on the wrong side of history must know that quite the opposite is true.*

Vines seeks to "open up a conversation" about homosexuality among evangelicals precisely because the discussion of the previous two millennia has gone in one direction, and that is the exact direction that Scripture itself goes (3). The Bible does not affirm "gay Christianity," and no major figure among evangelical leaders prior to the 20th century did, either. The category of "orthodox pastors and theologians

who historically affirmed gay Christianity" is not merely a small set, but an empty one.

We must note that it is deeply ironic that the position which supposedly places us on the wrong side of history is none other than the historic position. Two millennia of the church's history, hundreds of Protestant denominations and thousands of church leaders all testify to one reality: until the last few decades, Christian doctrine has unswervingly affirmed heterosexual marriage as the only moral context for sexual activity. This kind of consensus on a theological issue is strikingly rare, and powerfully important for our public engagement. The church must take heart in speaking up against sin today, and can take courage from the witness of the Christian past.

2. Christians are reminded by God and the Gay Christian *to engage history fairly and respectfully.*

Frequently, Vines cites historic Christian voices to support his creative exegetical conclusions. But the fact that some evangelical preachers focused, for example, on the issue of inhospitality in their preaching on Sodom in Genesis 19 — as John Calvin did — does not mean that they would approve of the behavior of the "gay Christian." Vines is guilty throughout his book of concluding that, when a few scattered voices he chooses to cite do not explicitly prohibit homosexual practice in their exposition of a given passage,

they then take a neutral stance toward it. But this is not fair. It treats historical exegesis of a certain text as sealed-off from all other texts. Christians should be motivated by a reading of this book to remember the importance of relative theological coherence when considering the doctrine of a given thinker or pastor. In so doing, evangelicals will not abuse history, but will approach the discipline fairly.

3. Christians must continue to preach the truth in love, seeking the conversion of lost sinners — sinners like us.

I have not come away from my engagement with *God and the Gay Christian* unnerved or surprised. I am not hysterical over the book, contrary to the media's stereotypes of believers. I am burdened for Matthew Vines, and I pray that he repents of his sin and his sinful teaching and discovers the transforming grace of Jesus Christ just as I, a sinner, did many years ago. I am stirred by this book, furthermore, to preach not a freedom driven by the "innateness of one's passions," as Robert Gagnon has characterized the secular kind of liberty, but a freedom found only in the convicting and converting power of the cross and the empty tomb.[13]

When this convulsive power strikes in the human heart, we cease using history to justify our own intentions, as a skeptical journalist famously said. We cease dressing up what novelist Joseph Conrad called our "heart of darkness" in the robes of Christ. We repent of all our sin, the normal

and the abnormal, acknowledging, as R. Albert Mohler Jr. has observed, that we all are perverse. From the worst to the cleanest, we repent, beating our chest in ruin. Then clothed in the righteousness of Jesus, we rise, a new creation in Christ. The new has come; the old has passed away.

ENDNOTES

1 Samuel Sewall, "The Selling of Joseph" (1700), referenced at http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1026&context=etas.

2 For more, see Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

3 See Timothy George, *Evangelicals and Nicene Faith: Reclaiming the Apostolic Witness*, Beeson Divinity Studies (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 32, 69.

4 Gerald Bray, ed., *Romans*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998), 47.

5 Ibid, 47.

6 Mark Sheridan, ed., *Genesis 12-50*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 69.

7 See my piece for The Federalist, "Children's Restrooms Are the Next Front Line in the Gender Wars," accessible at http://thefederalist.com/2014/02/18/childrens-restrooms-are-the-next-front-line-in-the-gender-wars.

8 *Romans* (Ancient Christian Commentary), 46.

9 Ibid, 47.

10 Jaroslav, Pelikan, ed., *Luther's Works, Volume 3: Lectures on Genesis 15-20* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1968), 255.

11 John Calvin, Commentary on Romans 1:26, accessed at http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom38.v.vii.html.

12 For more on contemporary neo-paganism, see my *Patheos* essay "Your Neo-Pagan Neighbor and the Gospel" at http://www.patheos.com/blogs/thoughtlife/2014/01/your-neo-pagan-neighbor-and-the-gospel-part-one.

13 Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 391.

CHAPTER FIVE

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Is a 'Gay Christian' Consistent with the Gospel of Christ?

Heath Lambert

Is a "gay Christian" consistent with the gospel of Christ? Matthew Vines's answer to this question is the exact opposite of the one provided by historic Christianity. Vines's book, *God and the Gay Christian*, is an unfortunate reversal of thousands of years of moral clarity about homosexuality. He says,

> [I]t isn't gay Christians who are sinning against God by entering into monogamous, loving relationships. It is the church that is sinning against them by rejecting their intimate relationships (162).

Just 20 years ago, it would have been unthinkable to propose such a statement. In 2014, the core conviction of

a significant book by a major publisher is that the nearly unanimous, historical understanding about the sinfulness of homosexuality is now the problem. It would take a massive amount of argumentation to justify such an extreme and innovative position. But one of the most significant problems in *God and the Gay Christian* is a faulty assumption that leads to an emotional appeal.

The assumption concerns homosexual orientation and is composed of two different elements. The first element of Vines's assumption is that homosexual orientation, as we know it today, is an entirely new issue from homosexual acts committed in the ancient world — the same-sex acts discussed in Scripture. He states:

> The bottom line is this: The Bible does not directly address the issue of same-sex *orientation* — or the expression of that orientation. While its six references to same-sex behavior are negative, the concept of same-sex behavior in the Bible is sexual excess, not sexual orientation (130, emphasis in original).

For Vines, the Bible condemns homosexual acts defined by unnatural and excessive lust, not people who have a fixed homosexual orientation. This new understanding of orientation, according to Vines, is simply not addressed in Scripture, and so the Bible's condemnation of same-sex acts is not relevant for today.

The second element of Vines's assumption about homosexual orientation is that, as an inherent part of a person, it is unchangeable. He says, "Gay people cannot choose to follow opposite-sex attractions, because they have no opposite-sex attractions to follow — nor can they manufacture them" (103). For Vines, homosexual orientation is innate and immutable.

Vines charges that Christians have misapplied the Bible's teaching on homosexual acts to those with a homosexual orientation. In doing so they have created an expectation of change for them that is unattainable.

Vines's two-fold assumption about homosexual orientation leads to a powerful emotional appeal. He believes that pain and trauma are the result of Christian calls to repent of homosexuality. When Christians ignorantly summon gay people to change, it leads to heartbreak and even death. Vines's book is replete with painful and tragic accounts of gay men taking their life after trying in vain to change. These narratives motivate Vines's assault on Scripture and are the hallmarks of his book.

Vines's book makes it seem that the only way to show care for people struggling with homosexuality is to accept their sinfulness. Christians throughout the ages, however, have believed that love requires a tender call to repentance. A life devoid of repentance is a life devoid of Christ. If Christians follow Vines's attempt to reverse the church's moral position on homosexuality, their loving call to repent of sin

will be silenced, and the grace of Jesus Christ to change people will be obscured.

What is at stake in this debate is nothing less than our love for troubled people and the very gospel of Jesus Christ.

I want to correct Vines's false assumptions about homosexuality in three ways. First, I want to show that Vines's statements in his book go far beyond the evidence that exists for homosexual orientation. Second, I want to object to the idea that a so-called orientation makes a behavior morally acceptable. Third, I want to challenge on empirical and biblical grounds the notion that it is impossible to change homosexual orientation. After all this, I want to show that the call to be a Christian who is an unrepentant homosexual is not only at odds with the gospel of Jesus, but is also unloving.

What We Know about Orientation

Vines is unable to prove many of the assertions he makes in his book. And psychologists actually know a great deal less about homosexual orientation than he claims. When the American Psychological Association (APA) weighed in on homosexuality in 1952 with the first edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (*DSM*)* it declared homosexuality to be a mental illness. By 1974, it declared that homosexuality was no longer a mental illness. By 2000, it declared that the people with mental illness were the ones who were troubled by their homosexuality.

This dramatic shift did not happen because of any new in-

formation about the nature of sexual orientation. No empirical data contributed to increased understanding about the influence of nature or nurture in determining orientation. The APA changed its position on homosexuality because of increasing cultural acceptance of homosexuality. The APA knows as much about sexual orientation today as it did in the 1950s.

Currently, the APA defines sexual orientation as "an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes." When describing where this attraction comes from, the APA is honest that "although much research has examined the possible genetic, hormonal, developmental, social, and cultural influences on sexual orientation, no findings have emerged that permit scientists to conclude that sexual orientation is determined by any particular factor or factors."[1] The facts presented by the APA about sexual orientation are much more modest than Vines's assertions. When the APA describes orientation, it talks about patterns of desire.

Similarly, the Bible does not use the word "orientation." It does, however, use a synonym: desire. Vines's assertion that the Bible does not understand orientation is therefore untrue. His error is the common one of assuming that because the Bible uses different terminology than modern people it does not address the same concerns.

Desire, sexual or otherwise, is one of the more common topics in Scripture. 2 Peter 3:3 and Jude 16 each speak of those who "follow their sinful desire." Romans 13:14 and

Galatians 5:16 talk about not gratifying the desires of the flesh. Colossians 3:5 talks about evil desire. James 1:14 says, "Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire." These are just a few examples. The point is that the Bible understands the powerful and persistent issue that Vines calls orientation in its use of the language of desire.

'Orientation' Does Not Determine Morality

When we begin to speak biblically about the strong and consistent desires that drive homosexual behavior, it leads us to think differently about the many sad and tragic stories that fill Vines's book. These stories are told to demonstrate the power of homosexual desire and the difficulty (Vines would say, the impossibility) of change. Such stories are meant to encourage Christians to accept homosexuality. I have many friends who struggle with homosexual desire, and, as a biblical counselor, I have some sense of how difficult the fight can be. Imagine the consequences, however, of allowing our sinful desires to mandate morality.

Vines's emotional appeals allow those with deep-seated and long-standing desires to demand their acceptance regardless of any objective standard of morality. Many strong and awful desires that a person experiences as resistant to change could use the same argumentation that Vines employs in his book. This is exactly what will happen when we allow our desires to become normative, and when sexuality is defined outside the Bible's clear and historical parameters.

Vines fails to understand that in a fallen world the strength of our sinful desires is a demonstration of our guilt, rather than our innocence. His book is based on the astounding moral claim that isolated desires for homosexual activity are condemned in Scripture, while a persistent pattern of desire (i.e., orientation) is acceptable. Vines does not see the truth that sinful patterns of desire are worse than the isolated acts. For example, serial killers are judged more harshly than those guilty of manslaughter. People who lie all the time are less trustworthy than those who commit an isolated act of deceit. It is an unbelievable act of moral confusion to claim that repeated patterns of sinfulness make an act righteous.

"Orientation," far from making homosexual acts more acceptable, actually shows how deeply sin has infiltrated our lives. All of us who have experienced patterns of immoral desire need to be assured that such patterns do not constitute an ethical improvement on isolated acts. This claim is not hateful. The Bible's clear moral standard is meant to point all of us to a savior who does not accommodate our sinful desires, but changes them. All of us who struggle with deeply engrained sinful desires should not rationalize our sins, but fly into the arms of a redeemer.

It Is Possible to Change Orientation

In his entire book, Vines never demonstrates that homosexual desire is unchangeable. The closest he comes to proof

is his correct observation that an ex-gay ministry, Exodus International, closed down after acknowledging repeated failures in its ministry (18). He concludes from that fact that it is impossible for homosexuals to change.

Several reasons exist why such a ministry would fail. One reason is that it really is impossible for those with repeated homosexual desires to change. Other reasons are that change is possible, but the ministry was going about it the wrong way; increasing cultural acceptance of homosexuality discourages change; change is a long, hard road that takes a lot of time; or those seeking help were not fully committed to change. Those are five obvious reasons. Vines only considers one of them.

I don't know why Exodus International failed. One thing that I do know is that, in Christ, change is possible for even the most entrenched desires.

In their book, *Ex-Gays? A Longitudinal Study of Religiously Mediated Change in Sexual Orientation*, Stanton Jones and Mark Yarhouse engaged in an empirical study examining the possibility of change in homosexual desire. After a meticulous presentation of data, they state the findings of their study — which is exactly the opposite of Vines's assertion that change is impossible.

> The general picture that emerges from our analyses of these data is that, on average, this population has experienced significant change away from homo-

> sexual orientation and toward heterosexual orientation ... The most surprising single finding, and one that is replicated over several different measures, is that the population most likely on average to manifest significant change is the "Truly Gay" population ... Common sense and dominant clinical professional opinion would clearly predict that these would be the research subjects least likely to report fundamental change, and yet consistently it was this group that reported the greatest degree of change.[2]

As believers in Jesus Christ, those are exactly the results we would expect. They bear out the words of 2 Peter 1:3-4:

> His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

Peter says that the patterns of sinful desire lead to corruption. He also says that believers in Jesus Christ can escape that corruption by the power of Jesus Christ mediated through the promises in the Word of God. One of the most

precious and powerful truths in the Bible is that believers are not locked into the corruption created by their strong, sinful desires. They can escape. They can be free.

A Story of Change

I once counseled a man named Tony who always knew he was different. As a child he preferred girl's toys and girl's clothes. As an adolescent he was only attracted to other boys. As an adult, his sexual relationships confirmed that he was gay. The day he revealed the truth to his parents they told him that they already knew. They made clear that they loved and accepted him for who he was. Shortly after this, he moved away to college, where friends who accepted his lifestyle surrounded him. Before long, Tony met Mike and the two began to live together. Tony was in love with Mike and had the support of his friends. Things were great.

Then one day, Tony met Jesus Christ. At a college event a student minister named Ethan shared the gospel with him. As Tony listened to the gospel, the words sunk down into his heart and he believed. Tony was born again. The Spirit who had come to dwell in Tony's heart convicted him of sin and, without anyone encouraging him, he knew he needed to repent of his homosexuality. Tony shared this struggle with Ethan who connected him with a ministry that wanted to help him.

What followed was hard. Mike was hurt and angry when Tony broke up with him. He did not understand what hap-

pened to the man he loved. Tony's parents had a similar response. They were concerned that their son had been brainwashed by "religious zealots." Such negative responses were difficult for Tony, but he kept leaning into his new Christian community and trusting the Lord for strength to endure.

The next several years were difficult. Temptations were constant. Failure was common. Tony frequently felt wooed to return to his lifestyle, and sometimes he did. One night Mike came by to plead with him to return. Tony was overwhelmed with temptation and spent the night with Mike in a hotel room before making a final break with him. There were numerous times in those early years when Tony battled homosexual lust and indulged in pornography. Through it all, though, grace was growing in his heart.

I began counseling Tony five years into this struggle. I have had the honor of a front row seat as the Lord has changed him. Over the years, Tony's patterns of desire and behavior have changed. About a year ago, he began to experience physical attraction to women. Tony was thankful for this, but it was never the main goal of our counseling together. Our goal was sexual purity. And that may or may not include sexual desire. Tony's process of change would be just as legitimate without this experience since holiness is not tantamount to heterosexual desire.

Vines tells a few tragic stories of failure. I know those stories are out there. But it's dishonest to ignore the other stories. What about the hundreds and thousands of Chris-

tians who are changing, like Tony? What about the many who pursue holiness in spite of their sinful desires? What about Wesley Hill?[3] What about Sam Allberry?[4] What about Christopher Yuan and Rosaria Butterfield?[5] These Christians are, like all of us, trusting in Jesus on the road toward greater sexual purity.

A 'Gay Christian'?

Vines assumes the existence of gay Christians because he is more familiar with homosexuality than he is with God's powerful transforming grace. Vines wrote a book about homosexuality. How I wish he had written a book about the power of God to change people by his grace. If he had written a book about the power of Jesus to change people, he would know that there really is no such thing as a gay Christian.

The reason gay Christians do not exist is found in one of the passages that Vines attempted to revise, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11. The apostle Paul says,

> Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in

> the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

After listing sins that keep people out of the kingdom of God, Paul says, and such were some of you. It is hard to imagine sweeter words. I have committed sins on that list. You have too. Paul says, however, that for those whom Jesus has washed, sanctified and justified, their sins no longer define them. Jesus does.

In Christ, believers have a new identity. That is why a "gay Christian" is not consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ. That doesn't mean that change is easy. It is not. That doesn't mean that people don't struggle with homosexual desire. They do. That doesn't mean that we know all the best ways to help people change. We need to grow in wisdom. It also doesn't mean that people experience the fullness of change this side of heaven. Sin runs deep, and change is hard. But God takes all of us adulterers, murderers, drunks, swindlers — and homosexuals, too — and he changes who we are. He gives us a new identity. He no longer recognizes us by our sin, but by his own son.

All Christians are broken-hearted at the experience of pain by those who struggle with same-sex desires. Every believer in Jesus knows what it is to love things God hates. Every believer has experienced the large chasm between our life and the demands of the law.

Vines looks at that pain, however, and diagnoses the

wrong problem. He sees the problem as the call to repentance, rather than the sinfulness of sin. He thinks that if he could just create a culture of acceptance then that will take away the pain.

But it won't work. The reason: "the grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God will stand forever" (Isa 40:8). Years after people forget Vines's book, the Word of God will still say the same thing. Furthermore, the Spirit who inspired it will still be testifying in the hearts of our fellow Christians who struggle against same-sex desire. Faithfulness requires that the church know what to say to our brothers and sisters in Christ who come to us for help with this problem. If we listen to Vines, we will lose our voice and fail those seeking God's grace to change.

In writing a book focused on homosexuality, Vines misses the gospel. Jesus Christ promises change and a new identity to anyone who would repent. Repentance is not the dirty word that *God and the Gay Christian* presents it to be. Repentance is life, hope and peace. The call to repent is built on the precious promise that there is grace for you to be different regardless of your sinful desires.

Vines's project is a tragic one because, if successful, it will keep the sheep from hearing the voice of the shepherd and from life and peace and change.

That means all of us who know the truth must love our homosexual neighbors by letting them know that Jesus is still calling, softly and tenderly. He will draw near with

powerful, transforming grace to anyone who repents. All of us who know that truth must renew our commitment to put a loving arm around our brothers who used to be defined by homosexuality, and let them know that they are now defined by Christ. We need to tell them that in Christ they are not gay. All that Christ is and all that he has is theirs by faith. We must remind one another that Christ will — sooner or later — use his magnificent power to reorient all of us to the freedom from sinful desire.

ENDNOTES

1 https://www.apa.org/topics/lgbt/orientation.pdf

2 Stanton Jones and Mark Yarhouse, *Ex-Gays? A Longitudinal Study of Religiously Mediated Change in Sexual Orientation* (Downer's Grove: IVP Academic) 2007, 275-76.

3 Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan: 2010) Hill uses the language of "gay Christian" but in a very different way than Matthew Vines.

4 Sam Allberry, *Is God Anti-Gay? And Other Questions about Homosexuality, the Bible, and Same-Sex Attraction* (UK: The Good Book Co., 2013)

5 Christopher Yuan, *Out of a Far Country: A Gay Son's Journey to God. A Broken Mother's Search for Hope* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2011). Rosaria Butterfield, *Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor's Journey into Christian Faith* (Pittsburg: Crown and Covenant, 2012).

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