

A Biblical Response to Homosexuality—Part 2 Galatians 5:13-15

Introduction

In a previous white paper, I laid out what I believe the Bible has to say about homosexual behavior. When considering this question, we must attend to the historical context, recognize God is still speaking, and avoid proof-texting. When we do, the Bible is clear: God disapproves of gay sex.

Based on their rhetoric, some Christians regard this as the last word on the subject. God disapproves and so do they. End of discussion.

Sadly, such Christians overlook the rest of what the Bible has to say. Though correct on what God says about gay sex, they have ignored what God says about how we should respond to those struggling with same sex attraction or, more generally, who engage in behaviors deemed sinful.

By continuing to hammer home only half the truth, such Christians are being hypocritical. They loudly claim to be biblical, but only focus on one part of the Bible's response. This helps explain why the main thing many in our culture know about the church is that it is "anti-gay." We shouldn't be surprised at resistance from the gay community.

In addition to regarding the behavior as sinful, what else does the Bible say about homosexuality? It tells Christians to live lives free from the bondage of sin and fully engaged in loving service. Although it doesn't mention homosexuality explicitly, Galatians 5:13 is crucial to providing the rest of the truth on this subject:

"You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love"
(NIV).

You were called to be free

For the Galatian Christians, freedom meant no longer having to keep the Law of Moses in order to be right with God. They were free from the requirement to be circumcised, free to follow Christ by faith.

Freedom comes up often in the debate over homosexual behavior. Those who engage in the gay lifestyle and those who defend the rights of others to do so appeal to freedom. "I was born this way; why shouldn't I be free to follow my orientation?" "If a person wants to have gay sex or marry another person of the same gender, what right does the government or anyone else have to interfere?"

Christians rightly question whether such questions reflect a proper understanding of freedom. After all, no one is ever free from authority. For Christians, God is the ultimate authority, both for themselves and everyone else.

They can't help but observe that while God's authority can be rejected, the consequences of that rejection are unavoidable.

Even if I reject all external authority—divine and human—I am not free; someone is still calling the shots. That “someone” might be culture, my peer group, myself, or some combination, but the result is the same: I've committed myself to an authority which lacks the objectivity and perspective provided in the Bible, God's written Word. I cannot say that my action has no harmful consequences; the best I can say is that from where I stand I see no harm in what I'm doing.

Christians also point out there is no such a thing as freedom from consequences. When we choose to do something, we have also chosen the consequences that accompany that action. This constitutes a moral law no less binding than the laws of nature.

While one is free to engage in a certain type of behavior, one isn't free from the consequences of that behavior. While we can't say what all those consequences might be, we believe that when God forbids a behavior, as he does with gay sex, He does so to spare us harm.

A culture is free to legitimize any behavior, but is not free from the consequences of that decision. Those justices dissenting from the 2015 US Supreme Court decision legalizing gay marriage made this point. Justice Alito wrote, “At present, no one—including social scientists, philosophers, and historians—can predict with any certainty what the long-term ramifications of widespread acceptance of same-sex marriage will be” (as cited in Emma Green, “The Conservative Split on the Meaning of Marriage, *The Atlantic*, July 1, 2015, www.theatlantic.com, accessed October 8, 2016).

While Christians may have a better understanding of freedom, we are not always successful at living up to our calling to be free. Like the Galatian Christians, we seem inclined to fall back into a legalistic understanding of salvation. While not tempted to submit myself to the Law of Moses, I am enticed by the Law of Steve. My opinion of what a Christian should look or act like or how they should worship is too often elevated to a level that should only be occupied by God's law.

One of the human laws enslaving many Christians today could be called the Law of Limited Grace. Many have come to believe, erroneously, that while God's grace can pardon them from the guilt of past and present sin, it cannot free them from the power of sin. They feel bound to continue sinning daily in thought, word, and deed. God's grace is seen as limited to removing the consequences of sins I can't help committing. It just isn't strong enough to help me not commit them.

Apparently the Galatians were also in danger of bondage to the Law of Limited Grace. Paul had to remind them that, “Those who belong to Christ Jesus

have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal 5:24-25).

God’s grace, says Paul, has “crucified the flesh,” that is, has killed my nature and made possible a new nature, one that lives “by the Spirit” and can “keep in step with the Spirit.” When it comes to overcoming sin, there is no limit to God’s grace; it can accomplish much more than we imagine.

While right to remind others of freedom’s true definition, to be biblical, Christians must also live out the full expression of freedom made possible by Christ. To preach freedom without living freely is worse than hypocrisy, for it abdicates the very example others so desperately need.

Do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh

Paul reminds the Galatian Christians that while free from the Law of Moses, they were not free from God’s moral law. The Galatians may have had trouble getting Paul’s point, but many of today’s Christians have learned this lesson all too well. At least they’re good at criticizing others, such as those who practice gay sex, of indulging the flesh.

As I’ve already made clear, Christians are not wrong to hold this view nor are we wrong to point out what God’s word has to say about sinning. We must, however, be just as ready to apply the same behavioral standard to ourselves as we do to others. When Jesus said we mustn’t try to remove a splinter from another’s eye if we have a log in our own, He wasn’t excusing splinters. He was restricting who had the right to help remove them to those who could do so most effectively.

Every single New Testament reference to homosexual behavior is found among a list of sins. Christians have been criticized—rightly—for focusing on one entry in the list and ignoring the others. What others? The list Paul provides in Galatians 5:19-21 contains the usual suspects:

“¹⁹ The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

Even the casual observer of today’s church will have no trouble finding examples of the above, especially of hatred, discord, jealousy, rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, and factions. Such divisions represent the scourge of contemporary evangelicalism. Are we as quick to criticize these sins as “sexual immorality”?

But “sexual sins are the worst kinds of sin.” I disagree. The seriousness of a sin correlates with the measure of reason required to produce it. Even parents

understand that childhood disobedience is more serious when premeditated and less serious when spontaneous.

Generally speaking, it takes more thought to commit the sins of idolatry, pride, selfish ambition, divisiveness and hatred, than to commit sexual immorality. At least in the heat of the moment, sexual sins are fueled by something other than reason, something that has a way of shouting down rational objections. This is why they're called sins of passion. Paul warns the Corinthians to flee sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 6:18), not because it is the most serious, but because it is the most likely to overwhelm us.

Christians are being biblical when they warn others to avoid sinning, but only when they themselves abstain from sin. We are not wrong to condemn sin in others, so long as we are just as rigorous in applying the same standard to ourselves.

Serve one another humbly in love

Here is the crux of the matter when it comes to a biblical response to homosexuality. Even if we have a right definition of freedom and even if we avoid sinning, we must also “serve one another humbly in love,” if our response is to be biblical.

Someone might object, “But we are loving. We hate the sin but love the sinner.” I have news for you: the world isn't feeling the love. According to recent research, when the vast majority of Christians and non-Christians want to describe the church, they call it “anti-homosexual.” What is coming across is not love, but “disdain” for those who are gay (Lee, *Torn* 2-3).

Our problem is not our stance on homosexuality. We oppose this lifestyle because the Bible opposes it. We are right to be concerned when society drives at breakneck speed into a dense fog, with no apparent regard for what the future may hold.

Our message may be right, but we are not as loving as we think we are. Why? Because we don't express an essential element of love, we don't “serve one another humbly in love” (v. 13). We need to do better at being known for humble love.

We must humble ourselves, first, for our lack of understanding. We've assumed same sex attraction is just a matter of choice when its causes are little known. Nature and nurture both play a role, but no one can say with certainty what their role might be.

We must humble ourselves for wrongly assuming that those who support a gay lifestyle do so out of disdain for morality. There are other very good reasons why people support gay rights, such as concern for the mental health of those struggling with same sex attraction, some of those struggles ending in suicide.

People support gay rights because they value authenticity. They reason that those who see themselves as gay should have the right to act consistent with their self-understanding. Some support gay rights as an act of resistance against what they see as untoward government intrusion. If we're humble, we'll be aware that those on the other side of this issue may have motives we can affirm.

We must humble ourselves, second, for how we've reacted. Some of us have lived by a double standard, condemning others' sins but neglecting our own. We've not been good listeners, considering ourselves righteous for refusing to engage with those who differ from us. We've called our response "righteous indignation," when it may have been only "fear of the other." When some of our own have honestly shared their same sex attraction, we have tended to treat them like enemies, not family. If we're humble, we'll admit we've responded poorly.

We must humble ourselves, third, because we are partly to blame for the way things are. Christians have not celebrated marriage as we should. We have not worked out a clear understanding of its timeless purpose. Instead we've offered only the uninspired and uninspiring reason given by everyone else, "because we love each other." How can we say we've honored marriage when we divorce as much as the unchurched and remain silent about the skyrocketing rates of cohabitation?

One study revealed that sexual abuse is one of the causes for as many as 15% of people adopting a gay lifestyle. Churches, both Protestant and Catholic, failed to take a strong stand against sexual abuse until we were forced to do so by culture.

By failing to respond as we should, we've made it more difficult for our children to remain in the church. They are being forced to choose, says Debra Hirsch, "between what appears to be a bad-tempered church (which their parents represent) and their LGBT friends" (Hirsch, *Redeeming Sex*, 136). For these and other failures, we Christians must humble ourselves.

True love is not only humble, it serves others. If we were going overseas to work as a missionary, we would be very conscious that we were there to serve, not to be served. We would bend over backward to avoid offense. Among those already offended, we would bend even further.

I suggest we think of the encounter with those supporting gay rights as cross-cultural. Let's use terms our conversation partners consider inoffensive, such as "gay" or LBGQTQ (lesbian, bi-sexual, gay, transgender, queer).

We should never use the expression, "hate the sin but love the sinner." We might understand what we mean by it, but the phrase is highly despised in the LBGQTQ community. Let's avoid talk of reparative therapy as a simple solution. While such therapy can bring some relief, it is not the panacea so often promoted. It is better to completely avoid a focus on causation and how to change.

If we were going overseas to serve as a missionary, we would prepare as well as possible. Loving service to the gay community requires no less. We need to know the difference between same sex attraction, homosexual orientation, and gay identity, and make sure we and our conversation partner are talking about the same thing.

Good conversation partners work hard to develop trust. If any try to bait us into an argument, we won't bite, knowing it will not bring clarity. Through it all, we will practice what someone has called "convicted civility."

We cross the cultural boundary hoping to persuade another to the rightness of our position. In the end, however, we must all finally leave our conversation partner to his or her own conscience.

John Wesley could be very direct, even confrontational, in his speaking and writing. Yet Wesley was convinced of the importance of respecting the conscience of others. In the midst of controversy, Wesley wrote,

if you love God, you will love your brother also; you will be ready to lay down your life for his sake; so far from any desire to take away his life, or hurt a hair of his head. You will then leave his conscience uncontrolled; you will no more think of forcing him into your own opinions, as neither can he force you to judge by his conscience. But each shall "give an account of himself to God."

It is true, if his conscience be misinformed, you should endeavor to inform him better. But whatever you do, let it be done in charity, in love and meekness of wisdom. Be zealous for God; but remember, that "the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God;" that angry zeal, though opposing sin, is the servant of sin; that true zeal is only the flame of love (Wesley, "A Word to a Protestant," XI: 191).

This is what it looks like when we humbly and lovingly serve those who are outside the church. But what about those who struggle over this issue within the church? As part of a ministry of compassionate pastoral care, churches should develop support groups for parents, for spouses, and for those questioning their sexuality and gender. "In an atmosphere of grace," asks Mark Yarhouse, "can we come alongside people who are navigating this difficult terrain?" (Yarhouse, *Gender* 159).

Yarhouse speaks of "sincere strugglers," Christ-followers who seek to be loyal to Jesus while wrestling with their same sex attraction. He encourages us to help sincere strugglers see that their impulses are not infallible. They must learn that their true identity is more than sexual, but rests in being God's beloved image-bearers.

We must help them understand a better definition of freedom. In the words of George MacDonald, "A free will is not the liberty to do whatever one likes, but

the power of doing whatever one sees ought to be done, even in the face of otherwise overwhelming impulse.

The road our brothers and sisters are traveling is not an easy one, nor is it always a quick trip. We must stick with them as they persevere in what may be a life-long condition.

The same is true for those struggling with issues of gender incongruence. These are not likely rebels seeking to bust the binary of male and female and usher in a genderless society. More likely, they are just people who want to find peace in their own skin.

The church should provide a loving environment for these who struggle with their sexuality and gender. To humbly serve means welcoming such people, allowing them to belong because they believe, giving them time to become what they and all other Christians were meant to be.

Our churches should be centered sets rather than bounded sets. Debra Hirsch illustrates the difference with a story from her native Australia. A tourist asked the farmer how he kept his sheep together without fences. The farmer replied that fences are unnecessary if you dig wells. Having water, the sheep don't wander (Hirsch, *Redeeming Sex*, 193).

Instead of a bounded set with fences, our churches should be centered sets. These have a strong, well-defined center, but are permeable at the edges. Jesus is the center of this set, the water near which the sheep want to stay.

Our churches should “lead with embrace, not theology” (Hirsch, *Redeeming Sex*, 145). They should welcome all people, seeing them as image bearers first, and only then as sinners in need of salvation. Acceptance should precede repentance. This kind of church sees its role as leading people to Christ who will lead them into the church. The church’s responsibility is to then walk with them on the path toward holiness.

This kind of church leans toward grace, practicing what Hirsch calls “generous spaciousness” (*Redeeming Sex*, 132). After all, if “God’s kindness is intended to lead [us] to repentance” (Romans 2:4), perhaps He wants to accomplish the same result from our kindness.

Such churches avoid gay bashing and “preaching to the choir.” They are places where the truth can be known and discovered, whether God chooses to reveal it through the Bible or science. When it comes to facilities, a church like this is quick to install a family bathroom rather than force someone to leave the fellowship.

Churches that love with humble service will devote themselves to addressing a biblical view of personhood, sexuality, marriage, and holiness. Why include holiness in this list? Because it is the crucial missing piece. As I’ve researched

this topic, I have found so many disparate voices calling for less preaching against homosexuality and more preaching on holiness.

Little wonder. Those struggling with same sex attraction and gender dysphoria are being confronted with the question of what makes them who they are. Holiness reminds all of us that we are more than our sexuality or gender. Each of us is made in God's image and we will only find our true fulfillment in Him. As Yarhouse reminds us, holiness steers those who struggle, not toward heterosexuality, but toward Christ-likeness (*Homosexuality*, 165).

Holiness is also essential for those of us seeking to speak truth into this issue. As Wesley reminds us, holiness is love for God and humanity. Such love finds perfect freedom in surrender to God. Those who love God refuse to live by their sinful nature, but live by the Spirit. Out of the holy heart comes the kind of loving humble service that steps across the street to engage with the Other in the name of God. Only a holy heart can tell the whole truth about homosexuality.

Telling the whole truth is needed now more than ever. By only sharing part of the Bible's message, we've made matters worse. We must not shy away from speaking of God's disapproval of gay sex, even if this makes some unhappy. At the same time and with equal conviction, we must speak of the freedom to live above our natural state, and we must back up our words with our example. Ours must be lives of humble service, expressing the holy love that is the world's best hope.

Suggested Resources

Debra Hirsch, *Redeeming Sex: Naked Conversations about Sexuality and Spirituality*. (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2015).

Justin Lee, *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays-vs.-Christians Debate*. (New York: Jericho Books, 2012).

Andrew Marin, *Love is an Orientation: Elevating the Conversation with the Gay Community*. (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2009).

Jenell Williams Paris, *The End of Sexual Identity: Why Sex is Too Important to Define Who We Are*. (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2011).

Mark A. Yarhouse, *Homosexuality and the Christian: A Guide for Parents, Pastors, and Friends*. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2010).

Mark A. Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture*. (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2015).

John Wesley, “A Word to a Protestant,” *The Works of John Wesley*, Third Edition, Volume XI, (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1984).

Website from the US Conference of Catholic Bishops: www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/homosexuality/always-our-children.cfm