

How Will You Engage People Struggling with Sexual Preference as Part of the
Discipleship Process?

A Paper

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By

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Introduction

With culture's frequent shifts toward acceptance of the gay lifestyle, and religious hostility toward those with the gay disposition, no other singular issue is of greater consequence for the evangelical community to figure out. When the secular conglomerate Disney rereleased one of their iconic films *Beauty and the Beast* featuring an openly gay character (LeFou) who heartthrobs over Gaston, there were reports of Christian-owned theaters refusing to show the film,¹ and these instances only highlight this dilemma. For the Church to successfully maneuver *through* the issue, the evangelical community must unite on a number of key theological doctrines central to this debate, namely God's purpose and desire for sex, and the expectations for Christian living. Two major views represent the debate in this discourse: the first is the Affirming Position that suggests gay persons honor God by pursuing gay relationships. Matthew Vines² and Dr. James Brownson³ hold this view. The second is what I have deemed the Conciliatory Position that suggests the need for biblical perspective; Dr. Gerry Breshears and Al Mohler⁴ hold this view. Following these two major views, I will present my view, which I have deemed the Equality view. After a critique of the views and the relevant Scripture, I will draw some conclusions for how the Evangelical Community can shift rhetoric and action to preach the Gospel to all people and advance the Kingdom of God. I begin this discourse with a premise agreed upon by all involved in the debate, in the words of Vines, "the most biblically sound position should prevail."

¹ <http://whnt.com/2017/03/03/owners-of-henagar-drive-in-theatre-opt-not-to-air-beauty-and-the-beast-because-of-homosexual-character/>

² Matthew Vines' teaching found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ezQjNJUSraY> will be cited throughout this discourse

³ Brownson, James. "Bible, Gender, and Sexuality." Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2013. Dr. Brownson's work will be cited throughout this discourse.

⁴ Mohler, Al. <http://www.albertmohler.com/2014/04/22/god-the-gospel-and-the-gay-challenge-a-response-to-matthew-vines/>

Affirming Position, held by Matthew Vines and Dr. James Brownson

“While straight people are told [by the Church] to avoid lust, casual relationships, and promiscuity,” Vines says, “gay people are told to avoid romantic relationships altogether.” He argues that heterosexual relationships are given more attention to how to interact appropriately within its limits, while homosexual relationships are ignored. Since heterosexual relationships can be abused, but also harnessed, the same scrutiny should be available to homosexual relationships. Vines has two major contentions with his opponents, and that is Jesus’ teachings in Matthew 7:15-20, that good teaching produces good fruit. He says, “Good teachings, even when they are very difficult, are not destructive to human dignity; they do not lead to spiritual devastation.” The second contention is that when God made Eve as a suitable helper for Adam, it was not because men and women are different in value and thus women are suitable helpers for men; but simply that Eve was a suitable helper for Adam. This was a singular event that occurred, thus Adam happened to be heterosexual; however, that does not speak to who can be an authentically suitable helper for a gay man, by which Vines declaratively states is another gay man.

Moving into Scripture, Vines interprets the pivotal Romans 1 text in a different way than the passage has been historically interpreted. The specific part of the text pertinent to his interpretation reads, *men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men...* “Nature,” according to Vines, means “social custom,” not “biological order,” and is therefore a culturally specific term that necessarily does not apply to believers today. Brownson picks up this argument with the Romans text and interprets another part in a different way than the

passage has been historically interpreted. Brownson suggests that the subjects' burning and degrading passions do not refer to desire generally, but instead to "intense or excessive desire" (168). Moreover, the focus of the Romans passage is "not on objective behavior but on passions that are running out of control and threaten to consume one's better judgment" (169). It is on these bases that Vines and Brownson represent the affirming view, that gay Christians honor God by pursuing relationships correlated with their sexual inclination, and that the passages condemning homosexuality all speak to historical-cultural circumstances irrelevant to gay Christians today.

Conciliatory Position, held by Dr. Gerry Breshears and Dr. Al Mohler

While "conciliatory" may not accurately define the content of Breshears and Mohler's argument, it tends to define the tone in which their content is spoken. Breshears begins his argument by affirming the biblical truth that all persons are made in the image of God (Gen. 1-2). Moving on, citing Hebrews 10, Breshears argues that if Christians deliberately continue sinning after receiving the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, just the fearful expectation of judgment. Therefore, as this truth applies to gay persons, if they become believers, they should pursue a lifestyle free from sin fully aware that when they mess up, they are still forgiven but will be judged by their actions; while being gracious to forgive the individuals, God never overlooks sin.

Breshears' argument moves from shared human dignity and responsibility, to God's plan for marriage and sex in general. His comments can be condensed as such: all sexual activity, regardless of one's inclination, outside of the marriage between a

man and a woman is sexual immorality. Breshears maintains this emphasis on action in his summarizing points on the Old Testament passages by identifying a clear distinction between attractions and actions; the overwhelming emphasis is on actions. His argument concludes with a call for perspective. Breshears suggests that while homosexuality is included in the laundry list of sins unacceptable for God's people, greater emphasis is placed on heterosexual sin; therefore, we should follow that example and be more concerned of the heterosexual sin of our brothers and sisters than our homosexual brothers and sisters.

While using blistering language at times in his critique of Vines' book, Mohler also argues these points with Breshears. Where Mohler breaks off with Breshears is his insistence that any deviation from evangelical orthodoxy, like what Vines' suggests, is not simply incorrect but undermines all the reliability of Scripture. "The most tragic aspect of Matthew Vines' argument [is 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." Both Breshears and Mohler would affirm that gay people can be saved by the power of the Gospel and subsequently be transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Affirming and Conciliatory Positions

The primary strength of the affirming position is that for the most part, their premises are true; however, their primary weakness is that those true premises do not follow the rules of logic and flow into the conclusion that they offer. Their premises include: (1) gay people have been poorly treated by the Church; (2) the Bible most

certainly does not condemn same-sex attraction; (3) Jesus' death and resurrection save gay people if they believe the Gospel; and (4) God created a suitable helper for man *because* it was not good for man to be alone. These four primary premises are true, but do not logically flow into the Affirming Position's conclusion that God is honored when gay persons pursue lifelong monogamous relationships with another gay person.

What makes Vines' argument in particular so appealing is his incredibly lengthy use of these true premises. While not all his premises are true, nearly all are, and that sets him up as a presenter with a high level of credibility when a conclusion finally arrives. This is a practice employed by professional logicians, simply because the truth to your conclusion is based upon the credibility and truth of your premises. The problem arises when the conclusion does not logically flow from the premises; the result is instead an audience ready to believe whatever conclusion you reach that gets lost when following highly emotional and true premises. I do not believe Vines' intention is to be deceptive, but this is an important critique to note. His argument begins by saying that while he is gay, his personal emotions should have no part in his argument, and that again is true. His problem though, is his argument is plagued with personal and emotional statements and premises justifying his change in the historically agreed upon interpretations of key texts. The sheer intensity in his passion from those emotional pleas as well as his high level of logical formulae are why his view is so attractive and garnered the incredible amount of response from the evangelical community that it did.

The Conciliatory position is yet another example of a controversial subject where the middle ground is employed to avoid conflict. In this case, there is a reason for this though and that is the general absence of the topic of homosexuality throughout

Scripture, other than the six passages frequently discussed on the matter. It is difficult to make a lengthy and in-depth biblical argument about a subject when the Bible gives few details about it. So while I tend to view the middle ground, passive method of dealing with controversial issues as the generally weak position, in this case it is warranted. The Conciliatory position is then required to take into consideration how the minimal number of texts interacts with the larger fabric of the Biblical narrative, particularly in the realm of moral law.

The primary weakness, though, is in the manner in which they present their case. This is specifically geared toward those within the Conciliatory camp along Mohler's aggressive and sometimes combative style. In his lengthy response to Vines' book, he begins by introducing Vines as a "young Harvard student" who made a lecture video that went viral, and who "did not make new arguments" presenting "a very winsome case for overthrowing the church's moral teachings on same-sex relationships." This is a classic ad hominem attack and is counterproductive to his argument, considering he begins his argument with a logical fallacy.

Equality Position, held by Daniel Harrison

Critique of the passages is an important step in sifting through the debate. Both Vines and Brownson premise their arguments with these statements respectively: "The most biblically sound position should prevail;" and the most proper interpretation is when a text is in its larger fabric of the Bible. The Conciliatory position closely aligned with evangelicalism would certainly agree with those statements, that the most biblically sound position, taking into consideration the larger biblical narrative as the most viable.

Genesis 19 is peculiar in that it does not specifically mention homosexuality, but it is instead implied. Vines and Brownson are right to identify this passage as one misinterpreted to speak of homosexuality. The language used to describe the sins of the people in Sodom and Gomorrah are in reference to the Sons of God from Genesis 6, which I argue elsewhere refers to inter-species sex between fallen angels and human women, which subsequently caused the flood. This is a debated interpretation of Genesis 6; however, the language carries over to suggest that the sinful people of Sodom and Gomorrah learned there were angels in their midst and their desire was to share in that sexual experience with such a creature. Sodom and Gomorrah is therefore a text condemning sexual immorality generally, not homosexuality specifically.

The two Leviticus passages (18:22, 20:13) are hard for someone in the Affirming position to downplay. There is an obvious condemnation of homosexuality activity. Contrarily, it is also hard for someone in the Conciliatory position to pinpoint these two texts without also considering their context within Mosaic Law, which was fulfilled by Jesus. Any justification given as to why Christians can eat bacon and shrimp, have various length in hair, and mix clothing has to be the same justification for these two passages specific to homosexuality, particularly the penalty for committing such an act, considering all fall within the same context.

In 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Paul employs a brilliant logical equation: the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God, there are ten sins that represent unrighteousness, and those he writes to used to be defined by those sins but were washed; three premises, but no conclusion. If the unrighteous will not inherit, and if ten sins represent unrighteousness, and if Christians used to be defined by those sins but are no longer

defined due to what Christ did, where is the “therefore” clause? It is implied: therefore, these sins are not too great to be covered by Christ. “Homosexual” and “effeminate” activity are included in this list Paul gives. Vines’ and Brownson correctly identify that Greek had no word for homosexuality, because it is a rather recent, Freudian, term. But what the Greek text does say is adequately represented in the English translations by those two words. As is the case with these two types of gay sin *and* the other eight, they all deal with action, not attraction.

The Romans 1 passage is the most pivotal passage. The idea of men abandoning their natural function with woman and exchanging it for another man is clearly speaking of biological function not a social custom as Vines suggests. Much of Vines and Brownson’s argument can be simplified into a postmodern argument that the Bible was written ages ago and therefore is irrelevant so we should take what we want and make it relevant. This is a dangerous road to go down. Breshears and Mohler’s argument can be simplified into an evangelical argument that God foreknew all of time and inspired the writing and longevity of the text; therefore, to claim that what God wrote was ignorant to our present age is in itself a negative diagnosis on the foreknowledge of God. Another key and simple contrast between the two is the Affirming position pinpoints brief texts about their subject while the Conciliatory position appeals to the larger Biblical framework; while the Affirming position would claim they appeal to context, a heavier weight to context is given with the Conciliatory position.

These texts alone do not give us much to work with, other than a clear condemnation of homosexual actions; however, those actions are no more condemned than any other type of sexual immorality and is rather under the umbrella of sexual

immorality. My Equality position is closer to the Conciliatory position than the Affirming position. Breshears and Mohler are correct to appeal to the larger biblical narrative of marriage and sexuality by which to judge the homosexuality issue. Sex is meant as a gift for those who are within a God-blessed marriage; all sex outside of that is therefore outside of God's desire, regardless of the sexual inclination of the specific individual.

My position, the Equality Position, affirms that all are created in the image of God, that all are sinful and have different sinful inclinations, that all are condemned to eternal death because of their sin, that Jesus' death atoned for the sins of all sinners as the manifestation of grace, that eternal salvation is dependent upon a sinner's repentance and baptism in response to the Gospel, and that all Christians are held to the same standard for holy living in all areas of life. This last point is the most critical to our discussion: that all Christians are held to the same standard for holy living in all areas of life. Who is holier, a heterosexual pastor who cheats on his wife with another woman or a homosexual pastor who refrains from all sexual activity? The labels of "heterosexual" or "homosexual" in the end are meaningless because holy living is all that matters. This conclusion affirms the notion that homosexuality is not a special kind of sin that is more or less condemned but simply is part of the umbrella of sexual immorality. The Equality position, therefore rejects much of the Affirming position and accepts much of the Conciliatory position as the most biblically sound option in light of the larger context and biblical narrative of holy living. I believe when the concept of holy living is framed as I have framed it, the holes in the Conciliatory position are filled.

Application in Ministry

Therefore, what is holy living for the gay Christian? The exact same standard of holy living for the heterosexual Christian: to abstain from all sexual activity except with the person of the opposite gender to whom they are married. Eve was not a suitable helper for Adam just for the sex, but for the companionship, relationship, and partnership in duties and responsibilities. The gay Christian has two options in this regard: (1) marry a woman, or (2) remain single, as Paul did.

The first contention people may have with this, particularly unbelievers, is the idea of a gay man marrying a woman. They may even bring in ethical arguments as far as the treatment of the woman is concerned. I would agree that it would be unethical for such a man to withhold his sexual inclination from his wife; she *should* know so she can be a suitable helper to him, and him to her. However, to suggest that sex is the only purpose in a relationship or marriage is to not understand relationships or marriage.

An additional contention some may have is the plausibility of a gay man marrying a woman. They may ask, "Well isn't he going to lust after attractive men he sees?" Probably, but no more or less than a heterosexual husband would lust after attractive women he sees. A husband's struggle is always going to be with lust and in making every attempt to not lust and instead to adore his wife. The lust in both cases is equally sinful and equally a struggle.

Next, it is important in these emotional, reactionary times to refrain from giving special treatment simply because of prior mistreatment. To be sure, apologizing is an excellent step in building bridges, but watering down the call on all Christians to live holy lives is not an acceptable response. One tendency we have with certain minority

groups, such as those struggling with same sex attraction, is to give them a separate theology. The same Jesus saves both the gay and the straight. The theology and expectations should also be same. Identifying terminology may be different simply because of the gender involved, but the principle is the same.

A second tendency is to give certain minority groups special parameters for salvation. Following America's dark history of slavery, black Christians were not given special privileges to salvation because of their mistreatment in society; instead, a true biblical understanding would conclude that race is irrelevant to the terms of salvation. Similarly, simply because society has treated LGBT individuals poorly does not give them a pass when it comes to sexual behavior. The same gospel saves all sinners, whether their sin is heterosexual or homosexual. Just as it is wrong to expect more from gay Christians due to social uncomfortability or mistreatment, it is also wrong to expect less due to an elevated weight given to cultural changes than biblical teaching. This is what Vines ultimately wants: retribution for the mistreatment he has received as a gay Christian in the tune of reforming orthodoxy to align with cultural norms and practices. This is postmodernism at its core.

Vines believes gay Christians have a place in churches and in church leadership, up to and including senior pastor roles. I would disagree with him if the standard of living is aligned with his thinking. Gay Christians are called to live holy lives, so when it comes to their own sexual inclination, their fleshly desires may be strong but for them to deny their fleshly desires for the sake of honoring God does just that, honors God. I agree with Vines though that gay Christians have a place in churches and in church leadership, up to and including senior pastor roles, so long as they live holy lives equal

to the standard set on their heterosexual peers. In fact, a gay Christian who denies his own fleshly satisfaction for the sake of honoring God is an exemplary believer who ought to be encouraged before the whole assembly of believers. These individuals have perhaps the most unique opportunity to preach what it means to make your body a holy temple of the Holy Spirit. What does it mean to deny your own desires for the sake of Christ? A gay Christian abstaining from sexual activity can tell you. Our youth particularly, but also our adults, need to hear what it means to be a sinner, what it means to be saved by grace, and how it looks to live a holy life that honors the Lord.

Lastly, one of the biggest contributors to the prolonging of this debate is general unfamiliarity on the subject; homosexuality is taboo, what we do not understand, we reject, and yet, we must all come to understand the issue better as it becomes ever more pervasive in our culture. By placing gay Christians who lead holy lives in positions of leadership within our churches, we break down unnecessary walls and allow a conversations to occur that lead people to see that we are all called to holy living. We must not embrace our sin as the end of the road, but instead see it as the basis for our repentance and baptism to Jesus Christ. This too, will allow us to live out the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:11, *Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.*