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15 RESPONSES TO ARGUMENTS AFFIRMING
SAME-SEX SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

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Introduction

If we were having this discussion 30 years ago, or even 20 years ago, very few people would have expected affirming Christians to defend their view with biblical arguments. For the most part, two positions dominated the dialogue: one that used the Bible and another that didn't. Most Christians thought that if you simply read the Bible, you'd clearly see that the Bible condemns all types of same-sex sexual behavior. End of story. No debate.

Regardless of whether you think the Bible is clear on this issue (and I actually think it is), there are a growing number of Christians, even evangelical Christians, who now hold to an affirming view of same-sex sexual relations. The debate is no longer about what the Bible *says*; it's about what the Bible *means*.

This distinction is crucial, and it means that people who wish to uphold the traditional Christian sexual ethic can no longer be content to ignore opposing views. Even if you are 100% convinced that the Bible condemns same-sex relations, it's still very important for you to know, wrestle with, and even consider the affirming arguments if you want to maintain a traditional view of marriage with any degree of thoughtfulness and credibility.

In this paper, we'll seek to understand why some Christians affirm the sanctity of consensual, monogamous, same-sex relations. We'll start with the biblical arguments used by affirming Christians, most of which have to do with the biblical prohibitions against same-sex sexual behavior found in Leviticus 18:22, 20:13, Romans

1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, and 1 Timothy 1:9-10. Then, in the second half of this paper, we'll address some general arguments against the traditional view of marriage.¹

Old Testament Prohibitions

The Old Testament doesn't say a whole lot about same-sex behavior. But there are two laws in Leviticus that clearly condemn it: Lev. 18:22 and 20:13.

"You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." (Lev. 18:22, ESV)

"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." (Lev. 20:13, ESV)

Both verses condemn male same-sex sexual behavior.² So how do affirming Christians address these two prohibitions?

Reason 1: Old Testament Laws Are No Longer Binding on Christians

Some affirming Christians point out that these commands are in Leviticus—the Old Testament law—and that Christians are no longer under the Old Testament law. Sure, it was wrong for *Israel* to engage in same-sex sexual behavior. But it was also wrong for *Israel* to eat pork, trim their beards, and gather sticks on Saturday. Christians, however, don't need to abide by these laws. They were for *Israel*. And they've been fulfilled and done away with in Christ.

While this affirming argument can still be found on Google, most thoughtful affirming Christians don't use it any more. It's not a very good

argument, and here's why: *Just because some laws in the Old Testament are no longer binding on Christians doesn't mean that no laws are.* There are many Old Testament laws that are still binding on Christians, including several prohibitions right here in Leviticus: incest (18:6-18; 20:11-14, 17, 19-21), adultery (18:20; 20:10), child sacrifice (18:21; 20:1-5), bestiality (18:23; 20:15-16), theft (19:11), lying (19:11), taking the Lord's name in vain (19:20), oppressing your neighbor (19:13), and many others—all written within one chapter of the laws prohibiting same-sex sexual behavior.

Just because *some* Old Testament laws aren't binding on Christians doesn't mean *no* laws are.

In fact, if you read Leviticus 18, you'll see that this chapter deals almost exclusively with sexual immorality, and all the laws about sexual immorality are carried over into the New Testament—adultery, incest, bestiality, and same-sex sexual behavior.³ Ancient Jews used the word *porneia* to describe all these sexual sins, and *porneia* is roundly condemned by New Testament writers (e.g. Matt. 5:32; 15:19). Scot McKnight, a New Testament scholar, says it like this: "When you double click on the term *porneia*... it takes you to Leviticus 18."⁴ It's hard to imagine why Lev. 18:22 and 20:13 would not apply to Christians, while these other laws would. In fact, when Paul prohibits same-sex behavior in 1 Cor. 6:9, he uses a word that formed from the same-sex prohibition in Lev. 18:22 and 20:13.⁵ According to Paul, then, the Leviticus prohibitions carry authority for new covenant believers.

Reason 2: The Old Testament Was Patriarchal

Another way affirming Christians deal with the prohibitions in Leviticus is to point out that sexuality at that time was profoundly patriarchal. That is, men were more valued than women, and women were seen as little more than sexual receivers and baby makers.

What does this have to do with the same-sex prohibitions in Leviticus? Some affirming Christians argue that men were forbidden from having sex with other men because such an act would *treat another man as a mere woman*. In male same-sex intercourse, one man must act “like a woman” in the sexual act—receiving rather than giving. In a patriarchal culture, where women were viewed as property and much less valuable than men, such an act would be disgraceful.

So was a low view of women driving the same-sex prohibition? And if so, should we follow a command that’s inherently demeaning towards women?

Here are two responses to this challenge. First, while the Old Testament *world* was deeply misogynistic (that is, it devalued women), the Old Testament itself is not. Certainly, there are some laws and statements that seem to uphold men as more valuable as women, but when considered against the backdrop of the rest of the ancient world, the Old Testament is quite liberating towards women. Several women are held up as heroes of the faith, more courageous than the men around them (Rahab, Ruth, Deborah, and Abigail, to name just a few). Plus, the creation account of Genesis 1 makes the claim—radical for that time—that women and men equally possess the image of God. Many ancients believed only kings possessed God’s image. The Old Testament says all people, including every single female on the planet, were created in

God’s image. So, while the ancient world was misogynistic, it doesn’t seem that the Old Testament itself reflects the same degree of patriarchy.⁶

Second, and most importantly, there’s nothing in the actual text of Scripture (in Leviticus or elsewhere) suggesting that the *reason* men shouldn’t have sex with each other is that they shouldn’t act like “mere” women. Read through Leviticus 18 and 20 for yourself. Or read through the entire book of Leviticus. There’s nothing in Scripture which says that men shouldn’t have sex with other men *because* this would treat another man as a lowly, baby-making, kitchen-bound woman. The commands in Leviticus simply state in absolute and unqualified terms: Men shouldn’t have sex with other men. Affirming Christians who pump these commands full of patriarchal assumptions assume things about the text that are not clearly there.

Reason 3: Same-Sex Prohibitions Were Really about Domination and Exploitation

Another point sometimes raised by affirming Christians is that consensual, monogamous, same-sex relations didn’t exist in the ancient world. Sure, it was common for masters to have sex with their male slaves, older men to have sex with younger teenage boys, or victims of war to be raped by their male conquerors. But these are acts of *sexual exploitation*, not consensual love.

So are the prohibitions in Leviticus only talking about *exploitative* same-sex acts (for instance, a master raping his male slave)? Or do they ban *consensual* same-sex acts as well?

The answer is both. Of course exploitative acts are forbidden. The Bible would never sanction a master raping his slave, or any other act of sexual violence.

But there's nothing in the biblical text that limits the prohibition to such acts of sexual exploitation. Again, don't just believe me. Go back and carefully read the prohibitions. Do they mention masters or slaves or prostitutes or rape or older men having sex with teenage boys? The language of Leviticus simply says that men (not just masters, or older men, or victors of war) shouldn't have sex with other men (not just slaves, or younger boys, or war victims). There's nothing in the text or around the text that limits the prohibition to acts of exploitation.

Some affirming Christians say that the biblical text doesn't need to specifically mention exploitation since *every same-sex relationship in the ancient world was exploitative*. But this simply isn't true either. For what it's worth, we know very little about same-sex relations in the ancient world. But the evidence we do have is somewhat diverse. Sure, we have evidence of exploitative same-sex relations, but we have evidence of consensual relations as well.⁷ So we can't just assume that all relationships back then were abusive. Some were, but some weren't. And Leviticus doesn't limit its same-sex prohibitions to abusive acts. All types of male same-sex behavior are condemned.

In short, if you *look at the text and study its historical context*, there's no evidence that Leviticus was only prohibiting certain types of same-sex behavior.

Reason 4: The Sin of Sodom Was Not Homosexuality

Before we leave the Old Testament, we need to mention the story of Sodom (Genesis 19). As you may recall, a couple of angels show up to Lot's house in the city of Sodom and the men of the city mistake the angels for men. After trying to have sex with the two angels, the Sodomites are struck with blindness as divine punishment for their evil attempt.

Some Christians point to this passage as clear evidence that God condemns same-sex sexual behavior. However, it's important to notice that what's happening in Genesis 19 is *not* consensual same-sex love; it's *attempted sexual violence*—like an ancient version of modern-day prison rape. If a man in prison rapes another man, it's usually not because the perpetrator was gay. It's an act of domination and power. Likewise, the men of Sodom were trying to gang-rape Lot's guests. If we're going to examine the text fairly, in this case, exploitation *is* the issue. The men of Sodom were not courting Lot's guests, bringing them flowers and asking them out for a romantic stroll under the moonlight. Consensual same-sex love is not the focus; sexual violence is. And, for what it's worth, whenever the Bible refers back to the sin of Sodom, it never mentions same-sex sexual behavior.⁸

It's true that *if* the men of Sodom had gone ahead and raped the two men (or angels), they would have violated Lev. 18:22 and 20:13. But it's important to stay focused on the main point of the passage and the main sin depicted there. Consensual same-sex sexual activity is nowhere to be found in Genesis 19, and yet consensual same-sex love is the pressing ethical question facing the church. To use the Sodom story as evidence that God prohibits consensual same-sex love is like using Donald Trump's Twitter account as evidence that cell phones are sinful.

Those of us who do hold a traditional sexual ethic must resist the temptation of racing uncritically to certain passages and overlooking what they actually say in order to find support for our view. We need to step back and think through how we're interpreting the Bible and how we're applying it to this discussion.

For an in-depth investigation of the story of Sodom,

see our Pastoral Paper "Was Homosexuality the Sin of Sodom?" (Available at centerforfaith.com.)

New Testament Prohibitions

Three passages in the New Testament prohibit same-sex behavior. The most important is Romans 1:

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error (Rom. 1:26-27, ESV).

The other two times same-sex sexual behavior is mentioned are in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy:

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 (1 Cor. 6:9-10, ESV).

[U]nderstanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for

those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, *men who practice homosexuality*, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine (1 Tim. 1:9-10, ESV).

In English, at least, these passages seem rather clear. So how do affirming Christians interpret them? Again, it's important to make sure we actually listen to and try to understand these arguments. Listening doesn't necessarily mean *agreeing*. But you can't disagree until you actually understand what it is you're disagreeing with. Real dialogue in search of the truth only happens when people on *both* sides of a conversation are willing to hear all the evidence, even evidence that threatens to change their minds. You can't be proven right unless you take the risk of being proven wrong

Reason 5: It's Exploitation—Again

One of the most popular affirming interpretations for these New Testament passages is the same "exploitation argument" we saw in the Old Testament. Again, some say that the only type of same-sex relations that existed in the ancient world, including the Greco-Roman world of the New Testament, was exploitative—rape, prostitution, and pederasty, which refers to older men having sexual relations with teenage boys.

Our two-fold response to this argument is same one we gave above. In short, *look at the text and study its context*.

As with the Leviticus passages, there's nothing in these New Testament passages that mentions masters or slaves or prostitutes or rape or older men having sex with boys. In fact, there are several different Greek words for "pederasty," and none of them are used in these passages.⁹ (None of them actually occurs in the New Testament.) Of course, the biblical writers would have condemned pederasty, but they didn't *only* condemn pederasty. All types of male-male sexual relations were considered to be outside of God's will and design.

What's fascinating is that several affirming scholars actually agree with this point. For instance, the late Louis Crompton, a self-identified gay man, was a brilliant scholar who wrote a 500-page book called *Homosexuality and Civilization*.¹⁰ In it, he says:

According to [one] interpretation, Paul's words were not directed at "bona fide" homosexuals in committed relationships. But such a reading, however well-intentioned, seems strained and unhistorical. Nowhere does Paul or any other Jewish writer of this period imply the least acceptance of same-sex relations under any circumstance. The idea that homosexuals might be redeemed by mutual devotion would have been wholly foreign to Paul or any other Jew or early Christian.¹¹

Bill Loader is the world's foremost scholar on sexuality in ancient Christianity and Judaism, and he's an affirming Christian. He's published thousands of pages in eight books on the topic.

Still, he rejects the argument that the only same-sex relationships in the ancient world were *exploitative*. Loader says that Rom. 1:26-27 included, but was by no means limited to "exploitative pederasty," "sexual abuse of male slaves," or "same-sex acts ... performed within idolatrous ritual contexts."¹² And again: "It is inconceivable that [Paul] would approve of any same-sex acts if, as we must assume, he affirmed the prohibitions of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 as fellow Jews of his time understood them."¹³

The idea that New Testament writers were *only* prohibiting exploitative same-sex relations is neither biblically nor historically accurate.

Reason 6: Paul Condemns Having Sex Against One's Own Nature

This argument is based on Rom. 1:26-27, where Paul says, "For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are *contrary to nature*." Some affirming Christians argue that God is only condemning heterosexuals who have abandoned their natural desire for the opposite gender and pursue sexual relations with the same gender. In other words, the "nature" Paul's referring to is their natural sexual orientation. Straight people shouldn't have gay sex.

This interpretation, however, doesn't follow what Paul is actually saying. He does not say "contrary to *their* nature," but "contrary to nature" (*para physin* in Greek). The Greek phrase *para physin* was often used by other ancient writers to describe same-sex sexual relations.¹⁴ The phrase wasn't used to describe sexual orientation. The Stoics, for instance, believed that same-sex relations were *para physin* since they went against the order of nature—a sort of moral code built into creation. Christians and Jews believed

something similar, though they spoke in terms of a personal Creator who could be known through creation (a point made clear in Rom. 1:19-23). The point is, Paul is not saying some people left behind their innate heterosexual urges to pursue same-sex partners for whom they felt no innate desire. He's saying that some people have gone against the Creator's will and design for sexual expression (that is, male-female marital relations) to pursue sexual relations with members of their same sex.

Given the context of Romans 1 and how *para physin* is used by other writers in Paul's day, it's unlikely that Paul is talking about people simply deviating from their own sexual orientation.

Reason 7: The Real Problem was Excessive Lust

A similar affirming argument says that same-sex relations were condemned because Paul considered them the result of excessive lust. That is, straight men got bored having sex with women, and out of their lust, they explored new and kinky territory with other men.

Whereas the previous argument focuses on the *types* of same-sex relations, this argument focuses on the *reasons why* men were having sex with other males. Both arguments are trying to distinguish between same-sex relations back then and same-sex relations today.

It's easy to see how someone reading Romans 1 might come to this conclusion. Paul says that men "were consumed with passion for one another" (Rom. 1:27), which sure sounds like lust. But pay close attention to what Paul is writing. Is lust the only reason why these relations were wrong?

Paul doesn't actually say this. If you look at the broader context, Paul's point is that men departed from their Creator's intention by having sex with other males. Of course there's passion and desire involved. That kind of goes hand in hand with any sex act—gay or straight! (Could any couple have sex and *not* be "consumed with passion for one another?") But the passion or lust is not the reason why Paul says same-sex sexual behavior is wrong.

Other Theological and Relational Arguments

The arguments we'll cover in the second half of this paper deal with broader themes and questions that go beyond interpreting the five prohibitions against same-sex sexual behavior.

Reason 8: Understanding Same-Sex Laws along a Trajectory Ethic

This one has arguably become *the* leading argument by thoughtful affirming Christians. In many ways, it's an attempt to get around the counterarguments I've given to the previous affirming arguments.

A trajectory ethic assumes that the Bible doesn't always give us a complete or fully developed position on all ethical matters. Take slavery, for example. The Bible never comes out and condemns slavery as an institution. However, we can see some rumblings of the institution being challenged, especially in the New Testament. That is, we can identify a *trajectory in the Bible that doesn't quite condemn slavery but is moving towards this goal.*

Some argue the same thing with women in the Bible. (The trajectory argument isn't the *only* argument for women's ordination, by the way.) The Old Testament appears to be patriarchal, but the New Testament is moving towards full equality and liberation. Some argue, therefore, that the biblical trajectory is headed towards the full inclusion of women into all areas of ministry and leadership. Since the Bible gives us an incomplete ethic (so the argument goes), we still

see a residue of patriarchy in passages where Paul tells women to keep silent in church (1 Corinthians 14) and forbids them from holding leadership and teaching positions (1 Timothy 2). Follow the trajectory towards its logical conclusion, and these patriarchal commands fade away.

Let's just assume a trajectory ethic for slavery and women. The question is: Can we also identify the same trajectory for same-sex relations? Does the Bible begin to move away from prohibiting same-sex sexual behavior? Is there anything in the Bible to suggest that gay marriage might be included as part of God's intention?

Many affirming Christians say, "Yes!" But there's really no evidence for this. From Genesis to Revelation, there are almost no changes to God's parameters for sexuality and marriage. I say "almost" because there are some. Polygamy, for instance, is allowed in the Old Testament, but we see the New Testament moving away from it. Divorce too was allowed in the Old Testament, but Jesus himself tightened up on those laws in the New. Think about it. *When the Bible augments its vision for marriage and sexuality, it moves towards a stricter ethic, not a more expanded one.* We see movement towards the Genesis 1-2 ideal of one man and one woman bound together in an inseparable one-flesh union.

Reason 9: Christians Have Often Been on the Wrong Side of History Before

I often hear people point out that for hundreds of years, the church believed slavery was okay. We only recently realized, they say, that slavery is a horrible evil. Is not the current debate about same-sex relations the same thing?

Non-affirming Christians are like our slave-owning forefathers. One day, we'll realize that we were on the wrong side of history.

In some ways, Christians have been on the wrong side of history when it comes to the LGBT+ conversation. Some Christians have mistreated, shunned, dehumanized, and failed to love LGBT+ people. We've not taken the time to listen or to learn from LGBT+ people, and some Christians wish that gay people simply didn't exist. History will look back and say, "What was wrong with you Christians?" just as we look back on our slave-owning forefathers and say, "What was wrong with you people?"

But this is a posture problem, not a theological problem. Believing that marriage is a one-flesh union between two sexually different persons and that God intends sexual expression to take place within this covenant of marriage doesn't mean we should mistreat or shame LGBT+ people.

Plus, the church's historic view of slavery is not the same as its historic view of same-sex relations. For the last 2,000 years, the church has always and unanimously viewed same-sex sexual relations as immoral. But the same unanimity has not existed in its view of slavery. Throughout church history, various religious and political leaders have opposed slavery. William the Conqueror (1027-1087), Saint Wulfstan (1009-1095), Anselm (1033-1109), Pope Paul III

(1468-1549), and even the great theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) all said slavery was sin. Sociologist Rodney Stark writes, "The problem wasn't that the leadership was silent. It was that almost nobody listened."¹⁵ In fact, not only did historic Christians dissent against slavery, but Christians also led the way in ending slavery in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Christians are far from perfect; it's why we need a perfect Savior. But it's not as if the entire body of Christ for 2,000 years was pro-slavery. The church *has*, however, held to a uniform belief about same-sex relations until the late 20th century (in the West). Yes, we should consider the possibility that we might have been wrong side of history. But we also need to consider the possibility that we might have been right—that perhaps 2,000 years of unanimity are not mere coincidence.

Reason 10: I Was "Born this Way," How Could it Be Wrong?

This argument is often invoked on blogs and in popular media, even though scholars realize that it's not scientifically accurate. Some affirming Christians argue that gay people are "born gay" and should therefore be allowed to express their love within the context of a consensual, monogamous relationship. Put differently, since God made some people gay, he shouldn't punish them for engaging in same-sex relations.

There are several things wrong with this line of reasoning. First, it misunderstands God's involvement in human birth. While God is Creator and He gives life to the womb, every human since Adam is born into a fallen world where things "aren't the way they're supposed to be."¹⁶

People are born with all sorts of biological, mental, and emotional traits that aren't naturally aligned with God's will. Simply because a person experiences a desire that appears to be inborn doesn't mean they should act on that desire—no matter how strong or seemingly fixed that desire is.

So even if some people were born with a fixed same-sex orientation, this wouldn't in itself mean they should engage in same-sex behavior. Even Justin Lee, founder of the Gay Christian Network, doesn't buy into this argument. He says:

Just because an attraction or drive is biological doesn't mean it's okay to act on... We all have inborn tendencies to sin in any number of ways. If gay people's same-sex attractions were inborn, that wouldn't necessarily mean it's okay to act on them, and if we all agreed that gay sex is sinful, that wouldn't necessarily mean that same-sex attractions aren't inborn. "Is it a sin?" and "Does it have biological roots?" are two completely separate questions.¹⁷

And Justin is an affirming gay Christian. Still, he believes that the "born this way" argument isn't a good way to construct a Christian sexual ethic.

But are people "born gay?" Without getting caught in the weeds of research, the best scientists who have studied the question of orientation say that it's not that simple. There's most likely a complex blend of nature (biology) and nurture (environmental influences) that shapes same-sex desires. According to the

American Psychological Association,

[N]o findings have emerged that permit scientists to conclude that sexual orientation is determined by any particular factor or factors. Many think that nature and nurture both play complex roles.¹⁸

A recent major study on sexual orientation by Johns Hopkins University comes to similar conclusions.¹⁹ Keep in mind, these aren't fundamentalist Christians trying hard to prove the "born this way" argument wrong. These are just scientists doing good scientific research.

So whether the cause of same-sex attraction is nature or nurture (or both), the Bible still prohibits same-sex sexual behavior.

Reason 11: Shouldn't Christians Just Love Everyone?

Many people say that the non-affirming view is inherently unloving. It's unloving, they say, to "deny a person's right" to pursue the romantic relationship they desire. After all, a same-sex relationship isn't harming anyone. Why do Christians care about what two people do in the bedroom? And didn't Jesus teach his followers to love people—all people—especially those have been marginalized?

Before wrestling with this argument, we must all check our hearts and ask: Have we been unloving towards gay people? Have you told a gay joke, laughed at a gay joke, looked down upon a gay person, or ignored someone who's wrestling with same-sex attraction? There are many ways in which straight Christians have not been loving

towards gay people. When we hear the “What about Love?” argument, we need to first repent from any unloving thing we’ve said or done.

We also need to make a clear distinction between a societal ethic and an ethic for the church. I don’t think it’s the church’s job to project a Christian ethic on the rest of society. When we talk about same-sex sexual relations or same-sex marriage, we are embodying and articulating a distinctive *Christian* ethic for the church—one that’s based on Scripture and confirmed by tradition. Christians should be able to love people without forcing them to adhere to a Christian ethic.

As for the argument itself—that we should just love everyone—it rightly prioritizes love but wrongly defines it. Jesus tells us to “love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12), and that last part is important. When Jesus loved his disciples, he didn’t always (or usually) affirm their behavior or desires. It’s worldly love, not Christian love, that says: if you love me, you’ll affirm everything I desire to do and everything I believe to be true about myself. When Jesus loved people, He loved them towards holiness, not away from it. And this includes sexual holiness—as defined by Scripture.

Christian ethics can’t be reduced to the secular code of “do whatever you want as long as it doesn’t hurt anyone.” It’s true, most sins end up hurting other people. But some don’t. If I bow down to an idol in the secrecy of my basement, I’m not hurting anyone. If my wife and I didn’t have kids, and we happened to “fall out of love with each other,” we wouldn’t hurt anyone by getting a divorce. But the Bible never uses the “do whatever you want as long as it doesn’t hurt anyone” logic for determining what is right and

wrong.

As we love people, we must love them as Jesus loved them—towards holiness, not away from it.

Some people describe this posture with the phrase “love the sinner, hate the sin.” I actually don’t like this phrase. It sounds too self-righteous—as if we are standing over here shrouded in all our holiness, while loving all those other dirty sinners over there. At least, that’s how the phrase sounds when gay people hear it.

Instead of “love the sinner, hate the sin,” how about “love the sinner, hate your own sin, and let’s pursue Christ together!” That’s the texture of Christian love.

Reason 12: The Bible Hardly Talks about Homosexuality

It’s true that Scripture mentions same-sex relations less than a dozen times. And for “verse counters,” this must mean that it’s not all that important. After all, the Bible mentions greed and the misuse of money in more than 2,000 passages! Why aren’t we more concerned about the abuse of wealth than we are same-sex sexual behavior?

Let’s linger on that last line for a second. Are we more concerned about same-sex sexual behavior than we are about the misuse of wealth? Why? Do we have a strong biblical case for our concern? Do we misuse wealth? Do we give generously to the poor? Will we inherit the kingdom of heaven if we haven’t clothed the naked, feed the poor, and visited those in prison? Are you regularly practicing these things—things that Jesus said are essential for salvation (Matt.

25:31-46)?

God addresses the misuse of wealth and calls it a crime 400 times more often than He addresses same-sex sexual behavior.

Now, to be clear, just because some sins are addressed more often than others doesn't mean they're worse sins; or, if some sins are only addressed a few times, that doesn't mean they are merely misdemeanors in God's court. Followers of Jesus should pay close attention to both frequently and infrequently addressed sins. And just because something is mentioned only a few times in the Bible doesn't mean it doesn't matter to God. I may rarely tell my kids that they aren't allowed to drive my truck, but that doesn't mean it's not an important prohibition. And I may delve into lengthy sermons twice a day about why they need to brush their teeth, but this doesn't mean dental hygiene is more important than underage driving.

The point is, if we truly love Jesus, we will pay close attention to all of God's commands and not try to weigh them on the scale of significance based on frequency. God may have reasons unknown to us (and there are cultural and historical reasons as well) that explain why he mentioned some things only a few times while other commands seem to inhabit every other divine breath.

Reason 13: Jesus Never Mentioned Homosexuality

This is true. Jesus never explicitly mentions homosexuality. And some people have understood this silence to mean he either doesn't care about it or he probably would have affirmed same-sex relations. But this is reading way too

much into Jesus's silence. Here's why:

First, Jesus was a Jew, and first-century Judaism was the context of his life and teaching. The topics debated with other Jews were always ones that were disputed within Judaism (like divorce or how to keep the Sabbath). But same-sex relations were never disputed within Judaism. Every Jew in and around Jesus's day believed that same-sex relations were against God's will. And this is probably why Jesus never mentions it. It wasn't relevant for his specific, Jewish context.

Second, although he doesn't mention same-sex relations, Jesus does mention "sexual immorality" more broadly. In Matt. 15:19, for example, he says, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander." Again, every Jew in Jesus's day considered same-sex relations to be immoral based on the sexual laws in Leviticus 18. Even though Jesus doesn't directly mention same-sex sexual behavior, he does so indirectly.

Third, when Jesus *does* depart from a traditional Jewish sexual ethic, he doesn't expand that ethic but tightens it. For instance, divorce was debated within Judaism. Some Jews were strict about appropriate grounds for divorce, while others were more lenient. Jesus holds to a stricter view. The same is true with adultery. Many Jews believed that you hadn't committed adultery unless you actually slept with another person's spouse. But Jesus tightens the Jewish ethic: "But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:28). Again, when Jesus does depart from a Jewish sexual ethic, he moves towards a stricter ethic, not a more lenient one. Based on what Jesus does say about sexual ethics, there's no evidence that he

would have affirmed same-sex relations if the question came up.

In sum, Jesus’s silence on same-sex relations cannot be taken as indifference or affirmation. We must interpret Jesus within his first-century Jewish context (and not our 21st-century Western one). For an in-depth paper on Jesus and homosexuality, see our Pastoral Paper “Why Didn’t Jesus Mention Homosexuality?” (Available at centerforfaith.com.)

Reason 14: Isn’t This Just an Agree-to-Disagree Issue?

This isn’t precisely an argument for the affirming view, but it’s often raised by people who question whether non-affirming Christians should even care about this issue at all. Is it really a big enough issue for Christians to fight about and divide over? Can’t we all just agree to disagree—like some people do about, say, the timing of the rapture—and not let this divide us?

While I’m not a fan of creating disunity, Scripture always considers sexual immorality to be a very serious issue. Nowhere in Scripture does Jesus shrug his shoulders at sexual sin and say, “Well, there are different viewpoints on this issue, so let’s not make a big deal about it.” Whenever same-sex relations are mentioned, they are treated as serious deviations from God’s will (Lev. 20:13; Rom. 1:26; 1 Cor. 6:9-10).

The Bible does talk about some ethical questions as “agree-to-disagree” issues. Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8-9 mention some so-called “grey areas” that Christians can disagree on, but sexual sins aren’t among them. Whenever sexual sins are mentioned, they are profoundly serious and nonnegotiable. I’m not saying that Christians

should just assume that the traditional view is correct. I believe every Christian should consider the reasons for each view and weigh them against Scripture. But I also think that Christians should consider the grave danger of calling something “righteousness” when God calls it “sin.” We can’t afford to throw up our arms and plead the fifth.

I don’t think the question of what marriage is, or whether same-sex sexual relations are morally permissible, are agree-to-disagree issues. Our God, who created us as sexual beings and instituted marriage in the Garden of Eden, has revealed to us his guidance on how to honor him with our sexuality.

Reason 15: Christians Don’t Care about Gluttony and Divorce but Still Condemn Same-Sex Relations

This argument doesn’t give any evidence for affirming same-sex relations; it simply points out that non-affirming Christians brush over other sins—like gluttony and divorce—so why should they care about same-sex relations?

Yes, it’s true, some Christians (certainly not all) have been lax in their view of gluttony and have ignored the wide-spread problem of unbiblical divorces and remarriages. There’s no excuse for this. We shouldn’t respond in turn with another, “Yeah, but…” We should acknowledge it. Own it. And repent from it. In fact, I would go so far as to say that one of the blessings of the LGBT+ conversation is that it has forced the church to reflect on its own sins and ask the question, “How can we be more holy in our marital and sexual lives?”

That said, there’s no logical or ethical or biblical reason why laxity in one area (gluttony or

divorce) should encourage laxity in another (same-sex behavior). I can't imagine Jesus looking at the church's gluttony and divorce rate and saying, "Well, since you all have really dropped the ball by overeating and divorcing your spouses, I think it's only fair that you lighten up a bit more on my Father's sexual ethic."

With the divorce question in particular, we should acknowledge that not every divorce is against God's will. Jesus allows for divorce if there has been sexual infidelity (Matt. 5), and Paul says that if an unbelieving spouse leaves, the believing spouse is no longer bound to that marriage (1 Cor. 7). While divorce is never encouraged, the Bible does make some allowances. But the same cannot be said of same-sex sexual behavior. There's nothing in the Bible that views some types of same-sex behavior as permissible.

In short, we should respond to the "What about Gluttony and Divorce?" response by taking the gluttonous log out of our own eyes, so that we can help others who are struggling with sexual (including same-sex) temptations.

Conclusion

Here's the thing about these arguments—they're not the real issue. Logically and biblically, the traditional view of marriage makes the most sense of the Bible and Christian tradition. It's not primarily because of these arguments that so many Christians are changing their view about the historic Christian sexual ethic. Most often, Christians are changing their view because they want to show compassion toward LGBT+ people. Most affirming Christians think that the traditional view of marriage is incompatible with compassion, and they think that the only way to love LGBT+ people is to redefine the Christian view of marriage. The arguments discussed in this paper are important, but refuting these arguments won't usually change people's hearts. Love, not logic, contains more power in demonstrating the credibility of your view.

Until Christians can show compassion and empathy toward people LGBT+ people, our views will not carry much weight. Our ethics will feel cold and depersonalized—detached from the lives of real people. Compassion without truth is empty sentimentality; truth without compassion is lifeless and powerless in an age of justice. What we need is both. The gospel demands both: faithful allegiance to God's intention for human sexuality, and radical love extended to the marginalized.

Further Reading

For a more thorough response to some of the affirming arguments mentioned above, please see the following books:

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

Kevin DeYoung, *What Does the Bible Really Teach about Homosexuality?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015)

Preston Sprinkle, *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality is Not Just an Issue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015)

For a book that contains scholarly arguments for both affirming and non-affirming views, see:

Preston Sprinkle (ed.), *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016)

Notes

1. This paper originally appeared as chapters 4-5 of a discussion guide by Clare De Graaf and Laurie Krieg titled *Leading your Church to be as Gay-Friendly as the Bible Teaches*. This paper has been slightly modified from its original form.
2. Female same-sex relations aren't mentioned in this text, or anywhere in the Old Testament. (The only place they are mentioned in the Bible is in Rom 1:26.) Female same-sex relations are rarely (perhaps never) mentioned outside the Old Testament during this time either. The first clear reference we have of lesbian relations comes in the writings of the 7th-6th century B.C.E. poet Sappho. So the Old Testament is not alone in its silence about female homoeroticism. Perhaps romantic love between women didn't exist in the Old Testament world, or, more likely, it was kept secret. Either way, it would be unnecessary for Leviticus to prohibit something that wasn't being practiced or was simply unknown.
3. The only possible exception is Lev. 18:19, which says that a man shouldn't have sex with his wife while she is menstruating. Some people say that this law is no longer binding, but I've never actually seen a good argument that shows why it's totally okay for a husband to have sex with his wife while she is menstruating. There's nothing in the Bible telling Christians that after Jesus's resurrection, the Old Testament ban on menstrual sex is overturned.
4. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2015/04/06/did-jesus-talk-about-homosexuality/>
5. Paul uses the Greek word *arsenokoitēs* (1 Cor. 6:9) to describe male same-sex sexual behavior. This word is made up of two Greek words: *arsēn* and *koitē*. *Arsēn* simply means "male," while *koitē* means "bed" but is often used in a sexual sense (i.e. "to sleep with"). The exact word *arsenokoitēs* does not occur in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, but the individual parts (*arsēn* and *koitē*) do appear. In fact, we see both *arsēn* and *koitē* in close proximity in Lev. 18:22 and 20:13. The Greek reads: *kai meta arsenos ou koimēthēsē koitēn gynaikeian* ("and you shall not lie with a male with the lying of a woman," Lev 18:22) and *kai hos an koimēthē meta arsenos koitēn gynaikos...* ("and whoever lies with a male with the lying of a woman..." Lev 20:13). Paul almost certainly has these Levitical passages in mind when he mentions (and prohibits) same-sex sexual behavior in 1 Cor. 6:9.
6. See Paul Copan's book *Is God a Moral Monster?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011). He does a great job looking at the seemingly harsh treatment of women in the Old Testament against the background of the ancient world.
7. See Preston Sprinkle, "Same-Sex Relations," in *Dictionary of Daily Life in Biblical and Postbiblical Antiquity, Vol. IV* (ed. Edwin Yamauchi and Marvin Wilson; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2017).
8. See Isa. 1:10-17; 3:9; Jer. 23:14; Matt. 10:5-10. Some think that Jude 7, which mentions the men of Sodom going after "strange flesh" (*sarkos heteras*), supports the traditional interpretation. But in the context of Jude's epistle, "strange flesh" refers not to people of the same sex, but to angels—the ones whom the Sodomites were seeking to rape. The phrase "strange flesh" literally means "other flesh" and ironically contains the Greek word *heteras*, from which we get *heterosexual*. If *homosexual* relations were what Jude meant, it would have made much more sense for him to say "same flesh," not "other flesh."
9. The Greek word *paiderastēs* was widely used to refer to "the love of boys," as was *paidophthoros* ("corruptor of boys") or *paidophthoreō* ("seducer of boys"). Another pair of Greek words, *erastēs* and *erōmenos*, was often used to describe the older man (*erastēs*) and his boy-lover (*erōmenos*). Again, none of these words is used when the New Testament prohibits same-sex relations.

10. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

11. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

12. *The New Testament on Sexuality (Attitudes Towards Sexuality in Judaism and Christianity in the Hellenistic Greco-Roman Era*; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 325.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 322.

14. See, for instance, Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 3.37-42; cf. *Abr.* 133-141; Josephus, *Against Apion*, 2.199; 2.273-275; Seneca, *Moral Epistles*, 122.7; Rufus, *On Sexual Matters*, 12; Plutarch, *Dialogue on Love*, 5; cf. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 16.4.3; Aeschines, *Tim.* 185; Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 13.84 (605d); Diodorus Siculus, *Hist.* 32.10.9.3.

15. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/julyweb-only/7-14-53.0.html>

16. This is the title of Cornelius Plantinga's excellent book on sin: *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

17. Justin Lee, *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays-vs.-Christians Debate* (Jericho Books, 2013), 62.

18. <http://www.apa.org/topics/lgbt/orientation.aspx>

19. <http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/number-50-fall-2016>