

Gay Unions: Consistent Witness or Pastoral Accommodation? An Evangelical Pastoral Dilemma and the Unity of the Church

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Introduction: Mapping the Debate among Evangelicals Regarding Committed Same-Sex Relationships

I write this as an evangelical, committed to Scripture as the only final rule for faith and practice. I write to those who believe (or at least grant some credence to the belief) that God's intention for human sexuality is that it find full expression only in the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman. I do not believe "gay marriage" to be sanctioned by Scripture and do not address those issues here. In another article at another time, all these things might be argued in detail, but, for the purpose of this article, these positions are simply assumed, so that I can address a cluster of issues that still arise, even when such things are assumed.

The cluster of issues I wish to address has to do with the way in which the church is called to live out its convictions regarding the meaning of sexuality, particularly as it deals with real people whose lives do not yet reflect fully God's intention for human life. More specifically, I want to address disagreements within the church about its pastoral approach in ministering to and with gays and lesbians *in committed relationships*. I assume that almost all Christians will agree that sexual promiscuity of any sort is incompatible with Christian faith. We are thus not talking about what is commonly termed the "gay lifestyle," involving multiple sex partners. Rather, we are dealing with the much more focused question of how the church should respond to gays or lesbians who profess to be Christian, and who are in committed, long-term sexually active relationships.

There are a number of reasons why it may be important to address long-term, committed gay or lesbian relationships as an ethical issue that is related to, but also in some ways distinct from, the general question about homosexual activity. In a number of biblical texts that address homosexual behavior, that behavior has linkages and associations that are clearly condemned in Scripture for a wide range of reasons. For example, in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19, homosexual behavior is linked to rape and violence. In 1 Kings 14, male prostitution is a cultic act associated with idolatry. In Romans 1:26ff., homosexual behavior is associated with insatiable lust. Many defenders of committed gay and lesbian unions argue that, because long-term faithful relationships between consenting gays or lesbians are not violent, are not

idolatrous, and are not the expression of insatiable lust, they should not be condemned on the basis of these passages from Scripture.

Evangelicals counter, however, that the moral logic by which homosexual behavior is rejected in Scripture is more complex. Such behavior is rejected not only because of its links with violence, idolatry, and lust, but more importantly because it violates the essential creational intent of God regarding sexuality, distorting the “one flesh” union of male and female which is the basis for sexual ethics throughout the Bible.¹

What is at stake, then, in the question of whether long-term, committed gay and lesbian relationships should be viewed as a distinct ethical issue, is how one should interpret the various “moral logics” that underlie the Bible’s proscription of homosexual behavior. This is a hermeneutical question, an attempt to discern the essential rationale and logic that shapes the rhetoric of Scripture. Regardless of the position one takes on this question, it is an important issue and worthy of reflection in its own right.

For the purposes of this article, however, I am not considering the entire range of this hermeneutical debate. Like most evangelicals, I interpret Rom. 1:26ff. to indicate that there is more at stake in the Bible’s rejection of homosexual behavior than merely an objection to violence and idolatry. Nor do I believe that excessive lust is the only grounds for the rejection of homosexual behavior in this passage. I believe that when Paul speaks in Rom 1:26ff. of “nature,” he is referencing God’s creational intent, that God intends genital sexuality to be expressed exclusively in the faithful union between a man and a woman in marriage, and that Paul speaks against homosexual behavior because it does not express that creational intent. I also recognize, however, that there are Christians who recognize and acknowledge the “one flesh” creational intent of God as narrated in Rom. 1:26ff. but nevertheless believe that the church must take a more complex and nuanced approach when it addresses Christian gays and lesbians in long-term committed relationships. This is the debate on which I intend to focus in this article. It is a debate that assumes that God *intends* full genital sexuality to take place between a man and a woman in the covenant of marriage. Yet there are some who, while holding to this position, may still consider gay unions as a distinct ethical category. The debate concerns whether the church must rigorously and consistently hold to its position on sexual ethics

¹ See Gen. 2:24. It is this same creational intent, evangelicals argue, that underlies the rejection of homosexual behavior in Lev. 18:22 and 20:13. The creational language of “one flesh” is brought to bear by Jesus on the question about divorce in Matt. 19:5ff and Mark 10:8, and is also used as a fundamental principle in the rest of the New Testament in addressing both the essence of marriage (Eph. 5:31ff.) and also why sex with prostitutes is wrong (1 Cor. 6:16). For a useful summary of this debate, see *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views*, by Robert A. Gagnon and Dan O. Via (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

for gays and lesbians, forbidding all homosexual activity (even in committed relationships), or whether the church should consider *accommodating* or perhaps *tolerating* some committed homosexual relationships as an expression of grace in the midst of human weakness and brokenness.

Accommodation and Concession as Ethical Categories

Something akin to the position of *accommodation* is evident, for example, in the article by the late Lewis Smedes, "Like the Wideness of the Sea."² Smedes describes homosexuality in that article as "a burden that some of God's children are called on to bear, an anomaly, nature gone awry."³ Smedes acknowledges that homosexuality is not God's intention for human life. But he goes on to argue, using the analogy of divorce and remarriage, that homosexual persons should be permitted – even encouraged – to enter into committed, long-term relationships in which their sexuality finds expression. He does not attempt to call such relationships "marriages" – he calls them "marriage-like covenants," but he does call for what he terms "supportive grace" in such situations.

Others might not be quite as quick as Smedes to *accommodate* committed gay and lesbian relationships, but might consider *tolerating* some committed homosexual relationships within the Christian fellowship, not so much as an expression of "supportive grace" as an attempt to "limit the damage" caused by more promiscuous alternatives. In contrast to Smede's term "accommodation," I categorize these approaches as *pastoral concession*. Here the analogy might be the way in which pastors work with heterosexual couples who are cohabitating without marriage, and who want to become part of the life of the church. The church clearly does not endorse such behavior, which undermines Scripture's teaching on the "one flesh" union and the covenant of marriage. But some pastors might take the strategy of encouraging heterosexual cohabiting couples to attend worship and participate in church activities, in the hope that they might establish relationships that would be supportive, and perhaps even move the couple toward marriage. A few pastors who adopt this approach of concession might even consider, under some circumstances, permitting such gay or cohabiting heterosexual couples to become members of the church, whereas most might, I suspect, regard that as going too far. I also suspect that almost all pastors who make use of the strategy of pastoral concession would draw a line at church office, both for gay couples and for heterosexual cohabiting couples, insisting that officeholders' lives should be more exemplary. Often, this overall strategy of pastoral concession is accompanied by an ecclesiology that emphasizes the way in which the church is a "fellowship of sinners" who are "on the way."

² *Perspectives* (May, 1999), 8-12.

³ *Ibid.*, 12.

Others argue that all approaches that employ either accommodation or concession will eventually weaken and compromise the church's moral teaching on sexuality. This position insists that what is most needed is the *consistent witness* of the church on sexuality, calling all people to chastity in singleness and fidelity in marriage between a man and a woman. In light of research suggesting that sexual orientation is not readily amenable to change, some of these pastoral leaders emphasize for gays and lesbians the call to chastity in singleness. Others may continue to pursue various approaches to assisting gays and lesbians to change their sexual orientation.

The various positions outlined here may be mapped out as follows in the table below. (The "welcoming and affirming" position is not discussed in this article, but it is added for the sake of completeness and in order to distinguish it from the "redemptive accommodation" position.)

	Welcoming and affirming	Redemptive accommodation	Pastoral concession	Consistent witness
	Committed lifelong marriage is God's intention for partnership and sexual expression of gay and lesbian persons (whom God both created and intended to be gay or lesbian). Such marriages should be celebrated and consecrated by the church.	God's intention for human sexuality is that it should be expressed in the lifelong covenant of marriage between a man and a woman. But God's redemptive accommodation for gays and lesbians is that they express their sexuality within a single committed, lifelong relationship. Such a relationship is under God's redemptive blessing.	God's intention for faithful human sexuality is either heterosexual marriage or celibacy. Yet gays and lesbians should be welcome in the church, and if they are unable to remain celibate, committed lifelong partnerships can be tolerated as a concession to brokenness, but should not be understood to be under God's blessing.	A homosexual orientation is not usually chosen. Despite this tragic dimension to the issue, the only paths of faithful Christian expression for human sexuality are either heterosexual marriage or celibacy. The church must welcome gays, but must also call them to abstain from homosexual activity.
Is "gay marriage" legitimate?	Yes	Maybe	No	No
Are "civil unions" good public policy?	Not preferred	Yes	Maybe	No
Ordain gays and lesbians in committed	Yes	Maybe	No	No

relationships?				
Committed gays and lesbians come to the Lord's table?	Yes	Yes	Maybe	No
Key ethical analogy	Marriage as committed love	Remarriage after divorce	Cohabitation without marriage	Incest or adultery
Key theological category	Goodness of creation	Sanctification as partial and progressive	Sin as brokenness	Sin as departure from divine intention

The three positions I have discussed above (redemptive accommodation, pastoral concession, and consistent witness) share, at least in a broad sense, the conviction that homosexuality is not God's intention for human sexual expression, but they differ, sometimes markedly, in the interpretation and pastoral application of that insight. It is those differences that I hope to explore in this article. I myself lean toward the position of consistent witness, that the church should not sanction gay unions but should call gays and lesbians to the biblical standard of chastity in singleness and fidelity within heterosexual marriage. But I am also aware of the pastoral dilemmas inherent in such a position. It is those pastoral problems and dilemmas that I wish to explore here. In this exploration, my thesis is that the church needs an ongoing dialogue among these various positions in order to deepen its faith and practice and to grow in its ability to proclaim the fullness of God's redemption.

To this end, I want first to explore one of the fundamental distinctions that emerges commonly in evangelical discussions of homosexuality: the distinction between a homosexual *orientation* and homosexual *behavior*. I believe that exploring this distinction further may help clarify what is at stake in the variety of evangelical options sketched briefly above.

The Orientation/Behavior Distinction

One of the most common assertions one hears from evangelicals (as well as Roman Catholics) on the subject of homosexuality is the claim that, while a homosexual *orientation* is not sinful, homosexual *behavior* is. Even among those who hold such a position, of course, there are large differences. Some would liken the situation to the general experience of temptation, in which one's impulse to act wrongly or self-destructively does not determine one's morality; instead the focus should fall on the way in which one chooses to respond to such

impulses. Others might take an even more generous approach, suggesting that homosexual impulses are not even morally equivalent to temptations to sin, but are simply reflective of one's emotional disposition – and again, the key moral issue is how one behaves in light of such a disposition.

Despite the variety of ways in which such positions are further clarified and defined, what lies at the heart of many such positions is the fundamental distinction between orientation and behavior, between inclination and action. One is not morally responsible for one's orientation, but one is morally responsible for one's behavior. This conviction has resulted, in many Christian circles, in a desire to affirm (with sometimes greater and sometimes lesser balance) two stances at the same time: a *resistance* to homosexual *behavior*, and a *welcoming and compassionate* posture toward homosexual *persons*.

This distinction between inclination and action assumes something enormously important for moral thinking: the centrality of the *will*. At the heart of moral responsibility is our ability to *choose*. We are morally responsible for what we choose to do (and the subsequent implications and consequences of our choices); we are not morally responsible, however, for what we have not actively or passively chosen. Moreover, the distinction between inclination and action is critical for understanding human freedom. We are not slaves to our impulses, but have the ability to control them and to choose the good. This assumption is the foundation of human society. So there is good reason to distinguish between orientation and behavior, between inclination and action.

Yet it doesn't take much analysis to see that this distinction may also be more complex than it originally appears. Jesus, after all, seemed to take a dim view of the notion that behavior is all that matters, and that what happens inside your mind is irrelevant. He cautioned that even for a man to look at a woman with lust in the heart is to commit adultery (Matt. 5:28: "But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.") Inner hatred of another is the equivalent of murder (Matt. 5:21-22: "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire.") For Jesus, at least, there was a close moral link between the impulse to sinful behavior and the behavior itself. He saw the root of sinfulness not so much in wrong behavior as in the condition of the heart that gives rise to the behavior (e.g. Matt. 15:18-19: "But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.")

In the practice of civil law, however, Jesus' analysis is almost impossible for us to implement. Every modern society believes quite firmly that the civil liability attached to murder should be far more severe than any civil liability one might incur for harboring hatred of another in one's heart. In fact, modern societies generally take a dim view of any attempts to sanction or restrict by means of the law what might or should happen within the hearts of its citizens; we tend to believe that society should restrict its legal sanctions to observable, measurable *acts*. We generally believe that any attempt by the legal structures and powers of a society to probe and censure the hearts and the motives of its citizenry is an invitation to the worst kind of totalitarianism. Western societies have "been there, done that," and don't want to go back there again.

In fact, it is precisely this contrast between a legal and behavioral approach on the one hand, and a focus on interior, subjective states on the other that stood at the center of one of Jesus' recurring conflicts (especially in Matthew) with the "scribes and Pharisees," and which led Jesus to refocus his exposition of the Torah on inner dispositions and not just on outward behaviors. Jesus insisted that it is not acceptable to observe "the letter of the law" but to ignore its spirit and intent. One must seek to embrace the law not only in externals, but as the will of God shaping one's entire disposition and heart. On seventeen occasions in the gospels, Jesus accused his opponents of being "hypocrites," play-actors whose inner dispositions and outward actions were in sharp disjunction. In this, Jesus extends a long-established tradition in Scripture that contrasts the outward appearance and the heart (c.f. 2 Cor. 5:12, 1 Sam. 16:7). We confront here one of the fundamental distinguishing characteristics of the New Covenant, in which the law will be "written on the heart" (Jer. 31:33, Rom. 2:15). This movement from external constraint to internal transformation is the distinguishing mark of the transforming work of the Spirit in Romans 6-8.

So we confront, still today, the need for two levels of ethical reflection. We still need the written law – the articulation of constraints upon behavior that channel human life into productive channels and ward off evil and destruction. As we have seen, the articulation of the law depends for its very life on the distinction between orientation or inclination and behavior. This is the ongoing function of the law for human society, including Christian society. But Christians also know that this focus on external behaviors can never be sufficient in our relationship with God and with ourselves. Before God and in our own hearts, it is not enough to focus simply on behaviors; here our motives, our emotions, our grudges and resentments, our hopes, dreams, and fantasies are all in view, for good and for ill. And God's redemptive work with us is not complete until the whole person – behavior, emotions, dispositions, hopes and dreams – is transformed by the Holy Spirit. We also know that, because of the weakness of

our wills, our behavior will never be fully transformed unless our hearts are cleansed and renewed by the Spirit.

What this means is that the orientation/behavior distinction is a *secular* distinction. By this I mean a distinction that is operative in the *seculum*, the period between the first coming of Christ and the second coming, that period where we live with one foot in the "age to come," already tasting its transformation and blessing, and one foot in "this age," still struggling with the power of sin, buffeted by temptation and weakness of will. But though we live in this "between time," Jesus directs our attention toward the age to come and its attendant inner transformation and invites us to look for the inbreaking of that new age into our lives here and now by the power of the Spirit. Jesus invites us to look beyond the orientation/behavior split (as necessary as that distinction is for life in the here and now) to a time when we are transformed from the inside out, when both heart and body, both inclination and action, glorify God and demonstrate the full rich diversity of human life which God intends.

Healing the Orientation/Behavior Fracture

This raises a challenging question for Christian gays and lesbians: what should they expect of the Spirit's work in their lives? What is the path toward wholeness on which the Spirit is leading them? It is one thing for evangelicals to insist that the path toward wholeness does not include engaging in homosexual behavior. That position is in keeping with the witness of Scripture as "law," as an external constraint upon behavior that preserves God's intention for human life. But let us suppose, for the moment, that a gay Christian accepts that constraint and commits himself to avoiding, as much as he can, same-sex sexual relations. But now, he asks, how is he to understand and interpret his own emotional life, his inner inclinations and dispositions?

It may be easier for heterosexuals to understand this question if they recall their own state before finding a mate and becoming married. In that state, a great deal of emotional energy is devoted to meeting and interacting with people of the opposite sex, who hold a great deal of interest. Not all of this interest is overtly, or even covertly, sexual in character. Heterosexual men like to talk with women, to joke with them, admire them, touch them, and interact with them. Heterosexual women may spend a good bit of time thinking about the men who interest them, contemplating what it would be like to be with them and to experience life together. These men and women find those of the opposite sex interesting, attractive, engaging, enjoyable to be with, stimulating. They find that being with those of the other sex calls the best out of them and inhibits some of their less than desirable characteristics. In other words, the process of falling in love is about a whole lot more than just sexual attraction, even though that may be a significant part of it.

So how are gays and lesbians to understand and to interpret their own analogous tendencies to fall in love with those of their own sex, to find their own sex interesting and engaging, stimulating, admirable, and desirable? Merely eschewing same-sex genital behavior doesn't begin to provide all the answers to such questions. Are they to resist every impulse to admire another of the same sex? Is every unbidden inclination to be interested in someone of the same sex to be understood as a temptation to sin? When does an interest in another that is not overtly sexual in character "cross the line" and become sexual in character? Such lines are not at all easily discerned.

In other words, despite the fact that a distinction between orientation and behavior is essential to moral and social life, that distinction does not answer all the questions gay Christians raise as they seek to be guided by the transforming power of the Spirit in their lives.

Some Christians, cognizant of this problem, have devoted themselves to developing "reparative therapy" approaches to ministry with gays. These approaches seek to change or at least modify the sexual orientation of gays and lesbians, so that they find themselves attracted to those of the opposite sex. There are instances when such approaches appear to have been at least somewhat effective. It is also the case, however, that the track record of such approaches is mixed at best and has also been the source of further pain for some gays, as they have disastrously attempted marriages for which they were not really emotionally ready, or have sunk into depression when they have found their sexual orientation resistant to such efforts to change. Overall, "reparative therapy" approaches have had limited successes and significant attendant difficulties. While providing one answer to the dilemma of how gays are to respond as Christians to their sexual orientation, these approaches have not proved themselves to be effective as the answer for all gays.⁴

A second approach may be found in the wisdom gained by celibate Christians in living out their vocation. For some Christians called to celibacy, sexual desire is channeled or sublimated into the deepening and strengthening of one's deepest

⁴ Jones & Yarhouse, two researchers who adopt a conservative evangelical response to homosexuality, summarize the social-science "change" literature as follows: "We do not share the optimistic and seemingly universal generalization of some conservative Christians who seem to imply that anyone with any motivation can change, if change is taken to mean complete alteration of sexual orientation to replace homosexual with heterosexual erotic orientation. Even the most optimistic empirically grounded spokespersons for change by psychological means say that change is most likely when motivation is strong, when there is a history of successful heterosexual functioning, when gender issues are not present, and when involvement in actual homosexual practice has been minimal. Change of homosexual orientation may well be impossible for some by any natural means. Yet the position that homosexuality is unchangeable seems questionable in light of reports of successful change." *Homosexuality: The Use of Scientific Research in the Church's Moral Debate* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 148.

desire: the desire for communion with God. For other Christians called to celibacy, the dynamics of sexual attraction are not to be simply sublimated away, but rather appreciated, yet held in restraint. To be celibate is not to be asexual, but to enjoy and appreciate one's sexuality within the constraints of one's commitments to avoid genital sexual contact or the kind of deep intimacy that might inappropriately awaken sexual desire in another. Often such an approach to celibacy emphasizes the freedom that celibacy brings to be more fully devoted to the Lord and the Lord's work (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 7). In either case, celibacy is most importantly not simply a decision *against* sexual activity, but a decision *for* God and God's service.

Certainly, this is another important avenue for gays who believe that God calls them to avoid homosexual behavior. The attractions, interests, and desires that arise within them are not to be pushed out of consciousness, but rather are to be restrained and appropriately channeled, in keeping with one's larger call to service and obedience to God.

Two further things are worth noting about celibacy. First, the long experience of the church is that celibacy is not a vocation to be practiced in isolation. In order for people to be faithful to commitments to celibacy, they need to be in significant and deep relationships of support and accountability with others who understand and share their vocation. Our own capacity for self-deception, particularly in sexual matters, is high enough that if left to ourselves, we will find this an extremely difficult path to walk. If the church is going to call gay people to celibacy, it had better be prepared to walk beside them in that calling.

Secondly, while there are clearly ways in which *all* people are called to celibacy, at least for periods of time (e.g., before marriage, or after the death of a spouse, or when one is unable to marry for a variety of reasons, or during a spouse's illness, etc.), there are also indications in Scripture suggesting that celibacy may be easier for some than for others over the long haul. In 1 Corinthians 7:9, for example, Paul notes that "it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion." Some experience celibacy as a gift (1 Cor. 7:7); others as a burden that may be difficult to carry.

How is the church to advise those gays for whom reparative therapy has failed, and for whom celibacy is experienced as an overwhelming burden? Here is where two distinct paths begin to diverge from each other, and difficult choices must be made—choices that are, in many respects, mutually exclusive of each other. But before exploring these two paths, it is worth making an observation about our context that must be addressed clearly as we consider these questions. We address these questions from a North American cultural context that is sexually saturated, and which upholds sexual expression as a kind of inalienable

right—even an obligation. Our society devotes itself almost fanatically to the cultivation and stimulation of desire: desire primarily for goods and services, but also for sexual fulfillment (often associated with the marketing of various goods and services which will enhance sexual fulfillment, from music to clothing to automobiles to enhancements to one’s physical attractiveness). We are trained from birth onward to see ourselves as creatures with needs and to see the meaning of life as the meeting of our needs. It is not coincidental that, in such a narcissistic society, we experience enormous sexual pain and brokenness: escalating divorce, abuse, loneliness, and hurt. We must recognize that, regardless of how we interpret the will of God for the sexual expression of gays and lesbians, we come to this question from a culture that generally handles its sexuality quite badly, conceiving sexuality almost exclusively as a means to self-fulfillment, in contrast to the biblical linking of sexuality with faithfulness and fruitfulness. Our culture is not wise on this subject, and Christian perspectives on the subject may well appear rather odd to those not formed by Christian practices.

Two Paths Diverge

In this cultural context, within the church, two paths diverge, regarding how the church should interpret the will of God toward gays for whom celibacy seems an unbearable burden. There are some evangelicals such as Smedes who take Paul’s advice in 1 Corinthians 7:9 as a rough starting point, and who assert that if gays and lesbians are unable to live celibate lives, they should at least express their sexuality in committed relationships, rather than in promiscuous relationships. These committed relationships, they may argue, should not necessarily be understood as the equivalent of marriage. (Opinions may differ on this issue.) Nor, as we have noted, should they necessarily be understood as completely expressive of the will of God for human life generally. Yet this accommodating approach may be understood as the church’s pastoral accommodation to weakness, or as an attempt to limit the destructive impact of sin on a person’s life. Sometimes, as with Smedes, the analogy of remarriage after divorce is used: Jesus is clear in Mark 10:11-12 that remarriage after divorce is always in violation of God’s deepest purpose for marriage, which is lifelong faithfulness. Yet the church has come to understand that God’s grace can encompass human failings and human weakness with forgiveness and a new beginning. Just so, they argue, God’s grace and forgiveness can redemptively encompass and support a committed sexual relationship between gays or lesbians. For others who take the path of concession, the key pastoral issue is establishing priorities and limiting damage. This position argues that it is better to work with gay couples pastorally than to adopt a position that will simply result in their leaving the fellowship entirely.

The other path of consistent witness says a clear “no” to these approaches. Instead, it calls the church to stand with those who embrace the Bible’s clear teaching that all genital sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage is forbidden by God. Either God may change the sexual orientation of a gay or lesbian person, or they must remain celibate in order to be within the will of God. This position believes that humans have no inalienable right to sexual self-expression, and that the church’s basic moral teaching on the issue of sexuality is at stake here. From this perspective, pastoral “concession” or “accommodation” appears as inconsistency and a capitulation to cultural trends that threatens to confuse and undermine the church’s teaching about sexuality in general. From this perspective, for the church to engage in such pastoral accommodation is to give up its authority to call *heterosexuals* to chastity in singleness. If we concede that some gays and lesbians cannot be celibate, what will we say to heterosexuals who cannot marry but insist that they too must be sexually active? Have we not simply capitulated to our society’s belief in the inalienable right to sexual self-expression?

Despite my own sympathies with this argument, I also recognize pastoral accommodation as a Christian practice. Marriage after promiscuity and remarriage after divorce violate the “one flesh” principle cited by Jesus in Mark 10:8-9, but they are, I believe, appropriate pastoral accommodations in light of God’s forgiving grace.⁵ Pastoral concession is also clearly a Christian practice. It is at root the expression of patience in pastoral care. If God himself is “slow to anger,” pastoral leaders too can wait at times for the Spirit to work in people’s lives. Yet the further question remains whether such accommodation or concession is appropriate in sanctioning or tolerating gay unions, where there is usually no repentance or acknowledgment that such behavior is sinful or departs from the divine intention. Here is where many evangelicals, myself included, find a stumbling block and feel the need to return to the more fundamental question of whether God’s intention for human sexuality is really recognized when such policies of pastoral accommodation or concession are put into practice.

It is worth noting that it is precisely the issue of pastoral care that forces these two paths to diverge so sharply from each other, and which forces people to adopt vigorously one path and to reject the other, *even though both sides may agree, at least in a broad sense, that homosexual behavior is not God’s intention for human life.* It is almost impossible for a local congregation at the same time to call some gays and lesbians to celibacy and to make pastoral concessions to others who are in committed sexual relationships. Either a church lends its support to gays

⁵ It is worth noting that whereas Scripture itself seems to recognize some forms of accommodation in the practice of divorce and remarriage (in the case of unfaithfulness [Matt. 5:31] and unbelief [1 Cor. 7:15]), there are no such accommodative practices within Scripture itself on the question of homosexual behavior.

committed to celibacy and questions the appropriateness of those gays who are sexually active (whether in committed relationships or not), or the church sanctions committed gay relationships, calling into question whether celibacy is really the only, or even the preferred option for gays and lesbians.

This practical dichotomy in pastoral care forces the split between these two paths, the path of pastoral accommodation or concession and that of consistent witness. Almost of necessity, when it comes to actual practice, one must love one path and hate the other. To do otherwise is to confuse the very persons for whom we are trying to care. So those who advocate a pastoral accommodation or concession to committed gay relationships must almost inevitably appear to disparage celibacy as a real option for gays and lesbians, to tend toward weakening the consistent message of Scripture proscribing homosexual behavior, and thus appear to embrace the American assumption of “the inalienable right to sexual fulfillment,” an unfortunate concession to one of the less than salutary aspects of modern culture. Likewise, those who refuse to make any concession to committed relationships among gays or lesbians are sometimes simply at a loss to know what to say to gays for whom reparative therapy has failed and for whom celibacy seems an unmanageable burden, and end up at best offering such people little hope and at worst implicitly commending precisely the kind of hypocrisy that Jesus so roundly condemned in his disputes with the scribes and Pharisees.

I think it is fair to say that most advocates for pastoral concession or accommodation to committed gay and lesbian relationships do not want to disparage celibacy, do not want to concede to the American assumption of “the inalienable right to sexual fulfillment,” and do not want to undermine the authority of Scripture. And advocates of a consistent witness genuinely want to offer hope to gays and lesbians, to discourage hypocrisy, and to heal the painful gap between one’s inner disposition and one’s outward behavior.

This analysis does not mean that the present debate over homosexuality is a chimera, or that the divisions are not as deep as they may appear. The divisions are very deep. Nor does it mean that Christians will not have to choose between two very different paths; they will indeed have to choose, if they hope to engage real people pastorally at all. But this analysis does suggest that Christians should be careful about the way they engage this dispute in the larger church. That care should focus on two dangers inherent in these two paths. First, we need to be careful about caricaturing the positions of those with whom we disagree. Our opponents in this debate are usually attempting to grapple with real problems that tend to be minimized by our own position. Secondly, we need to be attentive to the vulnerabilities and weaknesses of our own positions. The path of pastoral accommodation or concession can easily devolve into simply ignoring

what Scripture teaches when we don't like it. (And the church may already be well down that path on the issue of divorce.) The path of consistent witness can easily devolve into congratulatory self-righteousness, hypocrisy, or a narrow and unbiblical concern with behavior only, to the neglect of the redemption of the whole person. (And most churches committed to this position can point to little effective ministry to and with gays and lesbians.) In our attempts to demonstrate the correctness of our positions, we may be tempted to minimize the vulnerabilities inherent in our own positions, and thus fall prey to those dangers all the more. Again, this is not to say that we should abandon our positions for a sea of subjective "opinion," where there is no clear grasp on truth. It is to say, however, that there is much that all sides of this debate do not yet know and need to continue to learn about. From my perspective, advocates of pastoral concession or accommodation need to engage Scripture more deeply and consistently and to critique our culture's assumptions about sexuality at a more basic level. "Consistent witness" advocates need to grapple more deeply with the pastoral issues involved in ministering to and with gays and lesbians, and with the vulnerability of their position to a "don't ask, don't tell" form of hypocrisy. Others who take a different path may construct a different list.

Walking Two Paths Together?

This may mean, surprisingly, that these two paths *need* each other, despite their seemingly irreconcilable differences. Unless we believe there is nothing more to learn about homosexuality and the church, we are most likely to learn in an environment where there are others who will challenge us, especially in those areas where we have the natural tendency to be most blind. In particular, where both paths agree on the central teaching of Scripture regarding sexuality (that God intends full sexual expression to take place only in heterosexual marriage), might not these two paths, as contentious and conflicting as they appear to be, agree that the church will flourish more fully when congregations that follow these two paths are in communion with each other than when they are apart?

At stake here is the basic distinction between the discernment of scriptural truth (What does the Bible say about God's intention and purpose for human sexuality?) and the discernment of its most appropriate pastoral application to contemporary life in North America. Can those of us who are in essential agreement regarding the most basic witness of Scripture learn to live with each other as we struggle to discern how best to live out that message in a culture in which sexual brokenness is rampant, and in which the church struggles both to be heard and to be understood?

What might such an approach look like practically, in the polity of the church? It might call the church, first of all, to a shared articulation of core theological understandings regarding sexuality. It might also invite the church to articulate

more clearly and precisely the range and extent of pastoral flexibility appropriate to interpreting those core convictions. More specifically, it might invite a denominational dialogue around concession and accommodation as pastoral strategies in general, as well as their applicability to homosexuality in particular. This approach would also need to recognize that individual congregations will be required, almost of necessity, to take a more specific and focused pastoral approach to the question of gay unions. At the local level it is unlikely that the same congregation will be able to adopt a consistent witness approach with some persons and concession or accommodation with others. Local congregations will be forced to choose. But at the higher levels of the life of the church, we would need to find ways to facilitate conversation around pastoral strategy, which could help ensure that the diversities around pastoral strategy do not degenerate into hardened disagreements about core theological convictions.

All this is no easy task, of course, but we must also consider the alternatives: the enervating possibility of schism, and the present reality that we all need to grow in our pastoral effectiveness and faithfulness with gays and lesbians, and that we need each other to be able to grow most effectively. The question is, can we trust one another to learn from each other, even when our positions threaten and challenge each other? I believe we need to do so. Time will tell if we are able.