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**“HELP PASTOR! MY SON IS GAY!”
A STUDY ON THE PASTORAL CARE NEEDED FOR
CHRISTIAN PARENTS WITH ADULT GAY CHILDREN**

By

BARRY S. CURETON

**A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE
FACULTY OF COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY**

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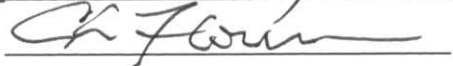
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Abstract

This study focused on the unique ministry needs of Christian parents who discover their adult child is gay, and the purpose of this study was to discover how Christian parents of gay adult children desire to be supported by their pastors. The following questions guided the research: What unique counseling issues do evangelical parents of gay adult children face? What types of pastoral support do these parents desire due to having gay adult children? What pastoral support strategies did the parents find helpful?

In order to understand how pastors can effectively minister to Christian parents whose adult children announce they are gay, two areas of literature were reviewed: the literature surrounding the current biblical debate on homosexuality and the literature on counseling Christian parents whose adult child is homosexual. The researcher also conducted interviews with Christian parents, and the resulting data detailed the emotional turmoil and spiritual struggle that these parents experience, as well as identifying the unique family situations that may cause conflict. Topics covered include: a review of the current biblical debate surrounding homosexuality, a summary of Christian counseling for families with a gay adult child, differing views regarding causation, the unique spiritual and emotional needs of parents and the family issues they face, and suggestions for offering hope and healing to struggling Christian parents.

The researcher hopes that this study will equip pastors to anticipate parents' questions and concerns, help them navigate the troubled waters of family conflict, and give them a sense of hope and a measure of healing.

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To God Be the Glory.

Scripture taken from THE HOLY BIBLE, ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION.
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Chapter One

Introduction

Bob and Jeanine received the news with shock. Their twenty-three year old son, Brad, broke the news to them that he is gay and has a partner, Dave. The news disturbs Bob and Jeannine because they are committed evangelical Christians who believe that their son's lifestyle is out of accord with their faith. Bob is a leader in his Bible church and leads a Bible study for young couples. His wife is active in the church's women's ministry. They have sought to raise their son according to the Bible and are in disbelief that their son is a homosexual. They wonder, "What did we do wrong?" and look for reasons. They blame themselves and hide the news from others, suffering in silence.

Problem Statement

Bob and Jeannine are typical Christian parents. Evangelical Christian parents who have adult gay children find themselves in a distressful family situation rife with conflict. They face questions and issues that are in many ways unique to their situation. First and foremost, for the Christian parent who discovers his son or daughter is gay, there is a death of dreams and expectations.

In his book, *When Homosexuality Hits Home*, counselor Joe Dallas remarks,

When listening to people describe their feelings about a homosexual loved one, *death* is the word I hear most often. Of course, words like *shock*, *fear*, and *confusion* are used as well, but the phrase "it feels like he died" comes up more than any other... When homosexuality hits home, I've come to believe, there *is* a death involved...it's the death of assumptions.¹

¹ Joe Dallas, *When Homosexuality Hits Home: What To Do When A Loved One Says, "I'm Gay"* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2004), 23.

He further adds, “the assumption our son or daughter will carry out our tradition, both religious and relational, expires when we learn our child has feelings we never assumed he or she would feel, and now holds beliefs we never imagined a member of our family would hold.”²

Psychotherapist Richard Cohen reiterates this view. In his book, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, he writes, “In all likelihood, this is not what you dreamed of or wished for your child’s future. The revelation of her homosexuality might well involve the loss of your dreams for her marriage and your grandchildren.”³

When Christian author, Ann Mobley, found out her son was homosexual, she experienced similar feelings. She comments,

In many ways, discovering your child is gay is initially a lot like a death in the family: the sense of unreality and numbness, the relentless pain, the shattered dreams, the loss of extended family through that child – all of which I experienced when my older son Nat was killed. But there is a major difference. This is a pain and loss often suffered in isolation, as there is no obituary notice, no friends gathering around to give comfort, no cards and notes of condolences, no flowers...because this is a loss that is difficult to share with others. You can hardly articulate the loss to yourself; how can you bear to put it into words to others?⁴

In her comments, Mobley not only reflects on the sense of loss, but also touches on the isolation many Christian parents experience after they learn their son or daughter is gay. They are often reluctant to tell other family members or friends, especially those

² Dallas, *When Homosexuality Hits Home*, 24.

³ Richard Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents: A Plan For Family Healing* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 38.

⁴ Ann Mobley, *If I Tell You I’m Gay, Will You Still Love Me? A Mother’s Journey to Truth and Grace* (Bloomington, IN: CrossBooks, 2013), chap. 2, Kindle.

in their church. As Cohen asserts, “When the child ‘comes out,’ the parents go in the closet.”⁵ He further comments,

Almost every SSA family member has said words like these: I am afraid of telling other family members and friends about our child’s homosexuality. I am afraid that when they find out, their opinion of our son and our family will change. Then the concept that our child is gay will be fixed in their minds, and the possibility of his coming out of homosexuality will become less and less.⁶

Cohen speaks of the parent’s dilemma, stating that, “There may be a tendency to be obsessed with thoughts such as, *What if _____ finds out? What if she says, ‘You must have been a lousy parent. Why else would you have a child who is gay?’*”⁷ He advises caution to parents when sharing their news with others, stating, “You will need to choose carefully those with whom you share about your child’s SSA, because there is so much judgment and rejection by those who should be the most loving and understanding. Sadly this is especially true in the religious community.”⁸

Ann Mobley epitomizes what many parents feel. She writes,

I certainly didn’t intend to tell anyone what I had learned about my son... I could not tell anyone about Dan. Then the realization hit me: Dan and I had changed places. He can come “out of the closet,” but I was going in. By revealing his secret life to me, he had found relief from his burden, but now it was my dark secret to carry. I had picked up the millstone, and it was one I could not ask others to help me carry.⁹

Suffering in silence, afraid to reveal their family situation, Christian parents of gay children can turn inward, struggle with overwhelming guilt, or blame themselves or

⁵ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 49.

⁶ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 47.

⁷ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 50.

⁸ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 50.

⁹ Mobley, *If I Tell You I’m Gay, Will You Still Love Me?*, chap. 2, Kindle.

their spouse. Speaking of her sense of self-blame, Mobley confides, “Feelings of guilt and shame consumed me. Where had my husband and I failed as parents? ...My feelings of failure as a Christian parent were like a healing weight of condemnation on my back, for I concluded that if others knew about Dan, they, too, would view me as a very poor Christian parent.”¹⁰

Many Christian parents seek understanding for what caused their child to become homosexual. As Mobley asserts, “When parents first learn of their child’s gay identity and same sex behavior, the most immediate and disturbing question seems to be, ‘How could my child be gay?’ That was certainly my foremost thought...What had gone wrong?”¹¹ Parents wonder, was it something they did or was he born that way? One mother’s turmoil typifies what many Christian parents wonder. She remarks, “I will never forget the day I came right out and asked him if he was gay. My heart broke when he said yes. From that day forward my mind was consumed with nothing else. I began to go over every little detail of his life. What did I do to cause this to happen? What could I have done to prevent this?”¹²

While causation is of great concern, parents’ also ask how they will relate to their children knowing that they have embraced an identity that is in opposition to their beliefs and convictions. Cohen aptly summarizes their conflict when he writes, “Here is the big question: Can you still love your child and yet completely disagree with his choice to

¹⁰ Mobley, *If I Tell You I’m Gay, Will You Still Love Me?*, chap. 5, Kindle

¹¹ Mobley, *If I Tell You I’m Gay, Will You Still Love Me?*, chap. 5, Kindle.

¹² Joe Dallas and Nancy Heche, eds. *The Complete Christian Guide to Understanding Homosexuality* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2010), 321.

adopt a gay identity?”¹³ Ann Mobley adeptly details the delicate balance that many parents try to maintain, a high wire act of demonstrating love towards their adult gay child while remaining true to their beliefs. She wondered,

By demonstrating love and acceptance of him as my son, would he interpret that as my acceptance of his homosexuality? Would he interpret my disapproval and rejection of his homosexual behavior as a rejection of him?.. I feared that if I stood true to God’s Word on the issue, it would drive a wedge between Dan and me, and the possibility of losing him or destroying the close relationship we had was tearing me apart. That was part of the blackness I feared, yet I knew in my heart my allegiance to God had to come first. I felt like I was walking a tightrope, trying to balance showing God’s love to Dan without compromising the standard and authority of God’s Word.¹⁴

In addition to navigating the murky waters of accepting the son without condoning his pursuit of same-sex relationships, Christian parents of adult gay children also deal with such issues as: How do they treat the boyfriend or girlfriend? Do they invite the couple to family gatherings and holiday celebrations? Do they allow the couple to spend the night in their home? Do they attend the couple’s wedding? Answering those questions can cause further family conflict and upheaval. Parents worry about possibly losing their child if they remain true to their convictions or possibly keeping their relationship but compromising their beliefs.

In addition, many Christian parents may find themselves at odds with other family members or friends as homosexuality and same sex marriage become increasingly acceptable in the United States. Christian parents may feel a lack of support as their value system becomes increasingly marginalized in a society that does not support their view. As Mobley writes,

¹³ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 22.

¹⁴ Mobley, *If I Tell You I’m Gay, Will You Still Love Me?*, chap. 3, Kindle.

The moral landscape of America has changed dramatically since 1992 when my son informed me of his gay identity. Homosexual advocates have made great inroads into the culture of America, moving closer to their stated goal of same-sex behavior and relationships being viewed as natural and normal and therefore accepted on an equal status, legally and socially, with opposite sex relationships...to imply in any way that homosexual behavior is unnatural and immoral is seen as intolerant, cruel, and unchristian. ...It will become more difficult for Christian parents to stand against the cultural tide of tolerance and affirmation of homosexuality while at the same time it is increasingly crucial that they stay true to the biblical position of loving the homosexual but calling homosexual behavior wrong and sinful before God.¹⁵

The unique questions and issues confronting Christian parents whose adult children have come out are manifold, complex, and further complicated by a rapidly changing society. How do they approach their gay children? How do they walk that tightrope of loving their children while also remaining firm in their belief? These questions consume Christian parents but where will they go for answers? Will their pastor be able to offer the kind of counsel that they need for their very unique situation? Pastors may feel ill-equipped to offer advice on such a heated and controversial issue. Will their pastor be able to offer wise, informed counsel that helps answer their questions and gives them a sense of hope and peace?

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to discover how Christian parents of gay adult children desire to be supported by their pastors.

Research Questions

In view of the purpose of the study, the following questions guided the research:

1. What unique counseling issues do evangelical parents of gay adult children face?
2. What types of pastoral support do these parents desire due to having gay adult children?

¹⁵ Mobley, *If I Tell You I'm Gay, Will You Still Love Me?*, Introduction, Kindle.

3. What pastoral support strategies did the parents find helpful?

Significance of the Study

This study will enable pastors to understand the unique issues facing Christian parents with gay, adult children. The study will equip pastors to anticipate parents' questions and concerns, help them navigate the troubled waters of family conflict, and give them a sense of hope and a measure of healing.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following terms need to be defined:

Christian parent(s) – are those who adhere to the basic tenets of the Christian faith and who hold to the traditional interpretation of Scripture regarding homosexuality, that it is out of accord with God's will, even same sex relationships which are loving, consensual and committed.

Gay adult child(ren) – people who are over the age of eighteen and therefore, no longer legally under their parent's authority. They are men and women, who revealed to their parent(s) that they identify themselves as having a same-sex attraction and actively seek to fulfill their sexual orientation by being in or pursuing a relationship with someone of the same gender.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to learn what kinds of pastoral help evangelical Christian parents desire and require when they learn their adult child is homosexual. In order to understand how pastors can effectively minister to Christian parents whose adult children announce they are gay, two areas of literature have been reviewed: the literature surrounding the current biblical debate on homosexuality and literature on counseling Christian parents whose adult child is homosexual.

Biblical And Theological Framework

The biblical and theological debate surrounding homosexuality is extremely relevant to Christian parents who are searching for answers regarding their adult child's sexual orientation. Many parents consider teaching on both sides of the current national debate regarding homosexuality and same-sex marriage—a debate that has also raged in the church. Those parents may question which side of the debate represents the scriptural truth. Within the church, there are two opposing sides – the conservative side that supports traditional marriage between a man and a woman, and the pro-gay side that supports church-sanctioned unions between same-sex couples. Both sides of the debate acknowledge the importance of this controversial issue.

The Nature of the Debate

On the pro-homosexual side of the debate, Dan Via describes the serious state of the controversy and its scope within the church in *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two*

Views. He writes, “The church is in a time of conflict and uncertainty regarding the question of homosexuality. There are differences about the nature of biblical authority, differences about how to deal with conflicts within the canon, differences about the operation of the hermeneutical circle. There are conflicts among competent scholars about whether homosexual orientation is essential or constructed and about whether any homosexuals can change.”¹⁶

In the same book, conservative scholar Robert Gagnon also describes the seriousness of the debate when he states, “The greatest crisis facing the church today is the dispute about homosexual practice. No other issue has consumed mainline denominations for the past thirty years or holds a greater potential for splitting these denominations.”¹⁷ He outlines the broad ramifications of this controversial issue:

First, owing to Scripture’s intense opposition, the debate about same sex intercourse acutely raises the question of Scripture’s place in the life of the church. Second, the homosexuality issue involves our loved ones in significant ways. Some people do not want church and society to promote, and coerce our children to accept, an unnatural behavior that jeopardizes the standing of its practitioners before God and substantially increases the risk of health and relational problems. Others want to end what they view as a cultural opposition of “gays” and lesbians.¹⁸

The current debate “focuses on, at most at most, eight texts: Genesis 19:1-29; Judges 19:1-30; Leviticus 18:1-30; Leviticus 20:1-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-17; 1 Timothy

¹⁶ Dan O. Via and Robert A.J. Gagnon, *Homosexuality And The Bible: Two Views* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), under “Wandering In The Wilderness,” Kindle.

¹⁷ Via and Gagnon. *Homosexuality And The Bible*, under “Key Issues,” Kindle.

¹⁸ Via and Gagnon. *Homosexuality And The Bible*, under “Key Issues,” Kindle.

1:3-13; Jude 1-25; and Romans 1.”¹⁹ These passages either directly or indirectly apply to homosexuality. Those who support the traditional view of marriage see an unambiguous, consistent, biblical position based on the unified, cohesive teaching of these eight passages, that they believe condemn any kind of homosexual practice.

Dan Via succinctly summarizes the traditional position. He writes, “The traditional Christian position is that the revealed will of God allows only two sexual alternatives – heterosexual marriage or celibacy outside of marriage. All homosexual acts are immoral by their very nature in themselves...homosexual practice is forbidden in all circumstances. It does not matter if the relationship is grounded in love and is nonpromiscuous and nonexploitative.”²⁰

Jack Rogers summarizes the pro-gay side of the debate, stating, “Most Christians have been told at one time or another that the Bible condemns all homosexual relationships. This view is simply incorrect.”²¹ Rogers believes the eight passages which deal with homosexuality, “have been pulled out of context to justify”²² the oppression of homosexuals and asserts that, “when we apply the best methods of biblical interpretation...a very different picture emerges.”²³

¹⁹ Jack Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality: Explode The Myths, Heal The Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 66.

²⁰ Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality And The Bible*, under “Defense of the Traditional Position,” Kindle.

²¹ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 66.

²² Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 66.

²³ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 66.

While all eight passages are important and informative to the debate, for the purpose of this biblical portion of the literature review, the six most significant of the eight passages will be examined: Genesis 19, Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13, 1 Corinthians 6:9-17, 1 Timothy 1:3-13 and Romans 1:24-27.

Genesis 19

Until recently, Christians have traditionally viewed Genesis 19 as a clear polemic against homosexual practice of any kind. The traditional view held that God destroyed Sodom due to its wickedness, epitomized by the homosexual lust of the townsmen who wanted to have sex with Lot's angelic visitors. Yet, recent scholarship has asserted that, though Genesis may condemn sexual abuse and violence, it does not condemn adult monogamous homosexual relationships. For example, pro-gay scholar Megan Warner states in *Five Uneasy Pieces*, that Genesis 19, "has nothing of any note to say about consensual sex between men."²⁴ Jack Rogers, in his book, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*, asserts, "focus on the supposed homosexual aspect of the Sodom story comes only later, in nonbiblical literature, influenced by Greek philosophy, and also in the Muslim Qur'an"²⁵ but not from the text itself or from other Biblical texts which refer back to Genesis 19. Dan Via states emphatically, "Let it simply be said here that" Genesis 19 has "no direct bearing on the validity of contemporary consensual homosexual relationships;" rather it is "told in such a way as to condemn homosexual gang rape."²⁶

²⁴ Megan Warner, *Five Uneasy Pieces: Essays On Scripture and Sexuality* (Hindmarsh, South Australia: ATF Press, 2011), chap. 1, Kindle.

²⁵ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 68.

Even those holding to a conservative view regarding homosexuality admit that Genesis 19 does not speak to consensual homosexual relationships. In *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, conservative scholar Richard Gagnon acknowledges, “to the extent that the story does not deal directly with consensual homosexual relationships, it is not an ‘ideal’ text to guide contemporary Christian sexual ethics.”²⁷ In *Scripture and Homosexuality*, Marion Soards, who does not support same-sex marriage, reasons that Genesis 19 is “concerned with gang-rape violence and flagrant disregard for the sacred obligation to provide hospitality;” the wickedness of the townsmen “is not simply equivalent with homosexuality.”²⁸ Soards believes that, “Sodom and Gomorrah became symbols of God’s judgment, not symbols of homosexuality.”²⁹

The crux of the scholarly debate centers on which of Sodom’s sins does God destroy it. Is God’s wrath against homosexuality at all and if so, does the text speak to contemporary consensual homosexual relationships? For example conservative scholar Lindsay Wilson asks, “In light of recent scholarship, should we still conclude that homosexuality is an issue in the Sodom narrative, or is there a better way to read these texts? Is it only about inhospitality and violence, or is homosexual practice also condemned?”³⁰ Pro-gay scholars would deny any condemnation of monogamous same-

²⁶ Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality And The Bible*, under “The Old Testament,” Kindle.

²⁷ Robert Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice Texts And Hermeneutics* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001), 71.

²⁸ Marion L. Soards, *Scripture And Homosexuality: Biblical Authority And The Church Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 15.

²⁹ Soards, *Scripture And Homosexuality*, 16.

sex relationships. As Warner asserts, “A close reading of the text does not support a conclusion that Genesis 19 demonstrates a divine stance against homosexuality, and that in fact this biblical story can quite properly be read as having nothing to do with homosexuality, as currently understood, at all.”³¹

If homosexuality is not in view, what is the sin of Sodom? Pro-gay supporters offer various other reasons for Sodom’s destruction. As Warner writes, the contemporary reader is free to identify “other themes and motivations that do not of themselves compel the holding of any particular view about homosexuality.”³² Other themes and motivations for Sodom’s sin which Warner and others suggest include inhospitality, sex with angels and aggravated sex. A discussion of each follows.

Some pro-same sex advocates see the central sin of Sodom as inhospitality – the refusal to care for Lot’s guests and/or their desire to abuse them. Rogers summarizes their position when he writes that the central idea in Genesis 19, “is the sacred obligation of hospitality for travelers (and the ways in which sinful people often violated this sacred obligation). In a desert country to remain outside at night, exposed to the elements, could mean death.”³³ Megan Warner offers a contextual argument to support this view. She sees a connection between the hospitality of Abraham shown to the angelic messengers in Genesis 18 and their treatment by the mob in Genesis 19; she argues that it is “entirely

³⁰ Michael Bird and Gordan Preece, eds., *Sexegesis An Evangelical Response To Five Uneasy Pieces On Homosexuality* (Sydney: Anglican Press Australia, 2012), 49.

³¹ Warner, *Five Uneasy Pieces*, chap. 1, Kindle.

³² Warner, *Five Uneasy Pieces*, chap. 1, Kindle.

³³ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 67.

possible that the authors, or editors, of chapters 18 and 19 meant to contrast the extreme hospitality of Abraham and Lot with the extreme inhospitality of the men of Sodom.”³⁴

Daniel A. Helminiak concludes, “The sin of the Sodomites was that they refused to take in needy travelers.”³⁵ And Warner asserts, “the text itself never explicitly identifies sodomy as the crime”³⁶ which brought Sodom’s destruction.

Related to the inhospitality argument is the debate concerning the meaning of the Hebrew word *yada* that is usually translated “to know.” Scholars debate how to translate *yada* in Genesis 19:5. Genesis 19:5 reads, “And they called to Lot, ‘Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out so that we may *know* them.’”³⁷ As Donald Wold writes in *Out of Order*, “Should it be translated to mean that the men of the city merely wanted to acquaint themselves with the two strangers, or does *yada* have a sexual connotation in this passage?”³⁸ The traditional view holds to a translation that emphasizes that the men wanted to know Lot’s visitors in a carnal way and thus, translate the passage as “to have sex with them.” However, same-sex proponents argue that *yada* simply means that the men wanted to meet with the mysterious guests. How should *yada* be understood in Genesis 19:5? Does the passage suggest the men of Sodom wanted sex with the strangers or a simple handshake?

³⁴ Warner, *Five Uneasy Pieces*, chap. 1, Kindle.

³⁵ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 48.

³⁶ Warner, *Five Uneasy Pieces*, chap. 1, Kindle.

³⁷ Emphasis added.

³⁸ Donald Wold, *Out Of Order: Homosexuality In The Bible And The Ancient Near East* (San Antonio, TX: Cedar Leaf Press, 2009), 79.

Pro-gay apologists represented by scholars Bailey, Boswell, and McNeill argue that yada in Genesis 19:5 “meant ‘get acquainted with’ not ‘have sexual intercourse with.’”³⁹ Boswell states this view succinctly when he writes:

Lot was violating the custom of Sodom (where he was himself not a citizen but only a “sojourner”) by entertaining unknown guests within the city walls at night without obtaining the permission of the elders of the city. When the men of Sodom gathered around to demand that the strangers be brought out to them, “that they might know them,” they meant no more than to “know” who they were, and the city was consequently destroyed not for sexual immorality but for the sin of inhospitality to strangers.⁴⁰

On what do they base their position? Some base their argument on the frequency in which yada conveys the meaning “to get to know” in the Old Testament. As B. Doyle points out, yada “is used 1058 times in the Hebrew Bible, only 15 of which refer to sexual knowing.”⁴¹ He believes that the sheer “statistical weight of the non-sexual usage of (*yada*)”⁴² requires an examination of the context of the passage in order to accurately discern if the meaning of yada has a sexual connotation. He asserts that yada in Genesis 19:5, 8 does not have a sexual connotation because its earlier meaning in Genesis 18:19, 21 clearly does not have one.⁴³

Similarly, Morschauser sees the context of Genesis 19 as a “judicial enquiry” in which the men of Sodom “wish to know some facts about these men to see if their being

³⁹ Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice Texts And Hermeneutics*, 73.

⁴⁰ Wold, *Out of Order*, 80.

⁴¹ Bird and Preece, *Sexegesis*, 54.

⁴² Bird and Preece, *Sexegesis*, 54.

⁴³ Bird and Preece, *Sexegesis*, 54.

offered hospitality would be a danger to the city itself...they simply wanted to interrogate the visitors and determine whether or not they were spies.”⁴⁴

While proponents of the traditional view of Genesis 19 acknowledge that yada rarely has a sexual connotation in the Hebrew Bible, they argue that the immediate context leaves “little room for doubting the sexual connotation.”⁴⁵ For example, Gagnon argues that the context of yada in Genesis 19:8 demonstrates that the men wanted to know, “to have sex with,”⁴⁶ the messengers. In Genesis 19:8, Lot offers his two virgin daughters, who have “not known a man,” in order to appease the men who want “to know” the strangers. Lot would not offer his two virgins daughters as substitutes, unless he clearly perceived the gang intended not to interrogate the messengers but to abuse them sexually. Wilson agrees with Old Testament scholar Dr. Gordon J. Wenham, who argues that since the context clearly uses yada in Genesis 19:8 in a sexual way, it therefore establishes a sexual connotation for yada in 19:5. Thus, as Wilson summarizes, “both the wider and immediate context support the view that sexual intercourse with these strangers was an issue.”⁴⁷ Similarly, White agrees with Wilson and states that 19:8 “establishes, beyond all reasonable doubt, the essential correctness of the translation of *yada* ... that of a desire for *sexual* contact with the visitors... Obviously, it has the same meaning in both passages: sexual activity, sexual knowledge.”⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Bird and Preece, *Sexegesis*, 55.

⁴⁵ Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice Texts And Hermeneutics*, 73-74.

⁴⁶ Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice Texts And Hermeneutics*, 73-74.

⁴⁷ Bird and Preece, *Sexegesis*, 57 .

Pro-gay theorists like Boswell counter that Lot's offer of his daughter was a bribe which had "no sexual overtones."⁴⁹ As Bailey conjectures, "Its connection with the purpose (whatever it was) for which the citizens demanded the production of his guests is purely imaginary. No doubt the surrender of his daughters was simply the most tempting bribe Lot could offer on the spur of the moment to appease a hostile crowd."⁵⁰

Others argue that Lot simply mistook the men's intentions, believing that the men wanted to know his guests in a carnal way when they only wanted to get acquainted. Thus, they conjecture that, "the use of the verb in 19:8 does not provide the context for its meaning in verse 5"⁵¹ and the men simply wanted to get acquainted with the new men in town. Warner typifies this view when she asserts, "Lot, for his part, misunderstood the intentions of the men of Sodom, interpreting their request as being of a sexual nature, and responds by offering his daughter for their sexual abuse."⁵²

Doyle offers a different reason for the misunderstanding in a convoluted rationale. He suggests that the men of Sodom "were not out on a frenzied search for sexual gratification, their ultimate plan was 'to know' the divine presence and thereby rise above the divine in an act of hubris."⁵³

⁴⁸ White, James R. White and Jeffrey D. Neill, *The Same Sex Controversy* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2002), 34.

⁴⁹ Wold, *Out of Order*, 80.

⁵⁰ Wold, *Out of Order*, 80.

⁵¹ Bird and Preece, *Sexegesis*, 55.

⁵² Warner, *Five Uneasy Pieces*, chap. 1, Kindle.

⁵³ Bird and Preece, *Sexegesis*, 54-55.

Those on the traditional side of the debate counter that Lot correctly perceived the intentions of Sodom's citizens. Lindsay Wilson suggests that there is more to the sin of Sodom than just a lack of regard for strangers in need of shelter. He sees Genesis 19:7 as pivotal to the debate, which rests on whether Lot's description of their action as wicked, "refers only to a breach of hospitality and the use of force, or whether it also has in view the crossing over of a sexual boundary."⁵⁴

As Wold points out, Lot clearly understood what the men meant by wanting to "know them," and he rebukes the townsmen for their desire that he describes as "wicked."⁵⁵ Lot was "familiar with the men of the town and knew their history and behavior, despite his not being a native;" he "expected that some specific harm would come to his guests, or he would not have used the expression *wicked thing*."⁵⁶ White agrees with Wold, stating that Lot has "not misunderstood the desire of the men of Sodom. He is not so out of touch with reality that upon hearing these men just want to 'welcome' the visitors to the city that he offers his daughters to them so that they can do with them what they want!"⁵⁷ In other words, Lot offered his virgin daughters as a sexual alternative to appease the lustful men. His offer makes no logical sense if his neighbors simply wanted to quiz the new visitors in town.⁵⁸ Wilson also notes, if the townsmen's

⁵⁴ Bird and Preece, *Sexegesis*, 59.

⁵⁵ Wold, *Out of Order*, 87.

⁵⁶ Wold, *Out of Order*, 87.

⁵⁷ Wold, *Out of Order*, 34-35.

⁵⁸ Wold, *Out of Order*, 88.

intention only to meet with the visitors, they had ample opportunity to meet and greet the strangers in the public square before Lot took them into his home.⁵⁹

Furthermore, the violent reaction to Lot's refusal does not "reflect the demeanor of would-be hospitable folk."⁶⁰ The context makes clear their intentions were evil. Wold points out, "If no harm upon his guests was imminent, Lot would have delivered them over to the Sodomites immediately so they could get 'acquainted.'"⁶¹ As Wilson asserts, when the men say to Lot in Genesis 19:9, "we will deal worse with you than with them." In this response, the men's "implication is that they had already decided how they would deal with the travelers,"⁶² that is, they wanted to abuse them sexually. Wilson also cites Letellier who remarks that the context of Genesis 19 suggests that Lot correctly understood the intentions of the men; he states, "the manner in which Lot reacts, his anxiety that they should not sleep in the street, his action in standing between the door he has closed on his guests and the large noisy crowd (v.6) and his own reference to their evil intentions (v.7) suggest" that the Sodomites' sexual intentions "can hardly be avoided."⁶³

Even after being blinded, the men still aggressively persisted in trying to get to the angelic messengers. This reaction is hardly the behavior of men who want to offer a harmless, hearty hello. As Wilson remarks, "Regarding Lot as mistaken misinterprets the

⁵⁹ Bird and Preece, *Sexegesis*, 56.

⁶⁰ Wold, *Out of Order*, 88.

⁶¹ Wold, *Out of Order*, 88.

⁶² Wold, *Out of Order*, 59.

⁶³ Bird and Preece, *Sexegesis*, 58.

story, for it makes no sense as to why the messengers had to blind the men of Sodom to thwart their plans (19:11).”⁶⁴

Wold adds to the argument through his study of *yada* with other Semitic languages. He points out from his comparative study that, “all of the Semitic peoples, as well as the non-Semitic Egyptians, apparently shared a common expression for sexual intercourse in their equivalents of the Hebrew verb *yada*,” Wold concludes, “we may judge accurately that the use of *yada* at Genesis 19:5 and 19:8 was a standard Semitic idiom for sexual behavior.”⁶⁵

Wold shows how the Septuagint translates *yada* in Genesis 19:5 with the Greek, *syngenometha* that denotes sexual intercourse. *Syngenometha* is used to translate *yada* in Genesis 39:11 and also has a sexual context.⁶⁶ In Genesis 39:11, the Septuagint translates *yada* with *syngenometha*, when it refers to Potiphar’s wife’s desire to have sex with Joseph. Wold writes, “Considering its use in the Septuagint, *syngenometha* is a specific term for sexual intercourse, not a general term for getting acquainted.”⁶⁷ Biblical scholar James B. De Young concurs with Wold’s view and concludes:

Certainly Boswell... is wrong when he denies that there is any implication of carnal knowledge. More specifically, on the basis of both Septuagintal and secular sources it seems clear the verb *synginomai* in Gen 19:5 has the meaning “to know carnally”. Rather than being ambiguous there is strong evidence that the LXX translators wished to be very explicit in order to communicate a sexual sense, even a homosexual sense. The ambiguity of the Hebrew (if present) is removed by

⁶⁴ Bird and Preece, *Sexesgenesis*, 58.

⁶⁵ Wold, *Out of Order*, 84.

⁶⁶ Wold, *Out of Order*, 86-87.

⁶⁷ Wold, *Out of Order*, 87.

the special term of the LXX, which everywhere else in the LXX refers to carnal knowledge.⁶⁸

Gagnon boldly states that, “few scholars today, even among supporters of homoerotic behavior, adopt Bailey’s argument”⁶⁹ in which the sin of Sodom is inhospitality. Wold concludes that he “finds no justification for the arguments...that inhospitality was the reason for the destruction of Sodom.”⁷⁰

In addition to the sin of inhospitality, Megan Warner offers yet another reason for the destruction of Sodom – the desire to have sex with angels. She writes, “This story then, if it is about sex at all, is not about consensual sex between men, but about the pack-rape by human males of divine beings.”⁷¹ Furthermore, she linguistically connects Genesis 6 and Genesis 19:7 because both use the same word for wickedness and asserts, “This striking use of the language of wickedness (r’) supports an argument that, had the men of Sodom gone on to have sex with the visitors, their crime would not have been homosexuality but hubris—the pursuit of the divinity by means of intercourse with divine beings.”⁷²

Adopting this argument, others interpret the Sodomites’ craving for “strange flesh” in Jude 6 and 7 to mean a desire to have sex with angels, not with other men as

⁶⁸ Wold, *Out of Order*, 87.

⁶⁹ Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice Texts And Hermeneutics*, 74.

⁷⁰ Wold, *Out of Order*, 89.

⁷¹ Warner, *Five Uneasy Pieces*, chap. 1, Kindle.

⁷² Warner, *Five Uneasy Pieces*, chap. 1, Kindle.

otherwise viewed.⁷³ However, “there is one rather obvious problem with this idea. *The men of Sodom did not know the visitors were angels;*” the Sodomites thought the visitors were “mere men, like themselves.”⁷⁴ Sodom’s sin could not have been the desire of men to have sex with angels because the men of Sodom were unaware that the messengers were angelic beings.

Adding yet another layer of argumentation, Warner boldly asserts that the account of Sodom, “has nothing of any note to say about consensual sex between men;” rather, “what appears to be contemplated by the men of Sodom in Genesis 19:5 is not homosexual *per se* but pack-rape.”⁷⁵ Warner asserts that the men were not trying to fulfill their lustful desires, but they were seeking to dominate the visitors through penetrating them anally. As Warner writes, “The simmering anger and violence in the narrative do not support an idea that the men of Sodom were seeking to seduce the visitors, but rather suggest that they sought to exert power over them.”⁷⁶

Helminiak offers a similar argument to Warner. He points out that victors in battle often sodomized the vanquished soldiers in order “to insult the men by treating them like women.”⁷⁷ Helminiak believes that the author of Genesis 19, “was not concerned about

⁷³ James R. White and Jeffrey D. Neill, *The Same Sex Controversy*, 48-49.

⁷⁴ White and Neill, *The Same Sex Controversy*, 48-49.

⁷⁵ Warner, *Five Uneasy Pieces*, chap. 1, Kindle.

⁷⁶ Warner, *Five Uneasy Pieces*, chap. 1, Kindle.

⁷⁷ Daniel A. Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality* (New Mexico: Alamo Square Press, 2000), 46.

sex in itself, and it was irrelevant whether the sex was hetero- or homosexual.”⁷⁸ He concludes that the “point is abuse and assault, in whatever form they take. To use this text to condemn homosexuality is to misuse this text...Sexual orientation is not the point.”⁷⁹ Rogers reiterates Helminiak’s position when he writes, “In that culture, the most humiliating experience for a man was to be treated like a woman, and raping a man was the most violent such treatment;”⁸⁰ to be penetrated like a woman was to be made inferior like a woman in their social status.

Pro-gay proponents believe that Genesis 19 is either about an infringement of the sacred obligation to extend hospitality, about dominance through sexual abuse or about a misunderstood attempt to get acquainted with Lot’s guests. Yet, those who argue for a traditional understanding of Genesis 19 believe that pro-gay proponents offer conclusions that are too narrow by asserting that Genesis 19 has nothing at all to do with homosexual practice. Instead, they argue that the “wicked thing” the men of Sodom want to inflict upon the messengers in Genesis 19:6, homosexual rape, is an example of the overall wickedness for which the Lord condemns Sodom in Genesis 18:20-2.⁸¹ As White writes, “to point out to other sins of Sodom and Gomorrah as if this means homosexuality was not part and parcel of the sin of the cities is to assume far too narrow a range of sin in their experience.”⁸² He further speculates that the men of Sodom were consistently

⁷⁸ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 47.

⁷⁹ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 47.

⁸⁰ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 67.

⁸¹ Wold, *Out Of Order*, 87.

homosexual in their orientation, which is why Lot offered his daughters as substitutes, knowing that the townsmen would not accept them or have a sexual interest in them. This, White believes, is an indication that this account does condemn homosexual practice, even consensual relationships.⁸³

While White suggests that the Sodomites' intent to rape Lot's guests was solely from homosexual lust, Gagnon offers other motives. He believes that a variety of motives may have driven the men of Sodom. Whether lust or a desire to dominate, scripture does not reveal, but Gagnon echoes White by suggesting that, "the inherently degrading quality of same-sex intercourse plays a key role in the narrator's intent to elicit feelings of revulsion on the part of the reader/hearer."⁸⁴ He believes that homosexuality plays a part in Sodom's judgment that God based on more than a case of inhospitality to strangers or rape "but rather attempted *homosexual* rape of male guests."⁸⁵ The homosexual element in the intended rape makes the intended deed so "dastardly."⁸⁶

Gagnon also draws an interesting parallel between the judgment in Genesis 6 and Sodom's destruction in Genesis 19. He connects the flood's judgment against mankind's "unnatural sexual relations"⁸⁷ with angelic beings and Sodom's destruction due to the

⁸² White and Neil, *The Same Sex Controversy*, 42.

⁸³ White and Neil, *The Same Sex Controversy*, 35.

⁸⁴ Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice Texts And Hermeneutics*, 71.

⁸⁵ Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice Texts And Hermeneutics*, 75 (Emphasis added).

⁸⁶ Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice Texts And Hermeneutics*, 76.

⁸⁷ Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice Texts And Hermeneutics*, 75.

same-sex desires of its townsmen; both instances are examples of illicit sexual desires of fallen humanity that are contrary to God's design for sexual intimacy.

Wold dismisses the pro-gay inhospitality argument when he writes, "The inhospitality interpretation of the Sodom story should be rejected."⁸⁸ He reasons that the "men of Sodom appeal to Lot to release the strangers for the purpose of homosexual relations—if not rape. It is possible that they do this for sociological reasons as a demonstration of their dominance and power over strangers, but there is no mention of this in the biblical account."⁸⁹ He concludes that there is "the need for sound methods of interpretation based on objective findings from the language of the text and from supporting extrabiblical sources. The view that homosexuality should be replaced by inhospitality in the Sodom story cannot be supported from these sources."⁹⁰

Several passages in the Old and New Testament refer to the judgment of Sodom. Same-sex proponents quickly draw the conclusion that these other biblical references to Sodom do not suggest homosexuality as the reason for its judgment. For example, Rogers asserts that, "the sin of Sodom is mentioned several times elsewhere in the Bible, but never in connection with homosexual acts. In the Old Testament references to Sodom, the sins of the city are variously described as greed, injustice, inhospitality, excess wealth, indifference to the poor, and general wickedness."⁹¹ Yet, conservatives do see a connection to homosexuality in some of these verses. Ezekiel 16:48-50 is an example,

⁸⁸ Wold, *Out Of Order*, 89.

⁸⁹ Wold, *Out Of Order*, 89.

⁹⁰ Wold, *Out Of Order*, 89.

⁹¹ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 68.

“As I live, declares the Lord GOD, your sister Sodom and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done. Behold this was the guilt of you sister Sodom: she and her daughters took pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty and did an abomination before me. So I removed them when I saw it.”

Same-sex advocates like Helminiak do not acknowledge any reference to homosexuality in Ezekiel 16. Helminiak asserts,

Some would like to see homosexuality in that text. They point out that the word abomination occurs throughout this chapter of Ezekiel and even in verse 50, right after the verse about Sodom. They understand this to refer to Leviticus 18:22: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination”...But in the Hebrew Scriptures the word abomination is used to refer to many things. The abomination in question here is Jerusalem’s “adultery” and “harlotry,” and these words are being used symbolically. They do not refer to sexual acts but to idolatry. To Israel’s infidelity to God, and to child sacrifice and murder. Even though verse 50 mentions “abominable things” and is referring to Sodom, verse 49 says exactly what the abominable things in this case were. It says outright what the wickedness of Sodom was, and male-male sex is simply not mentioned. Chapter 6 of Ezekiel is about other things.⁹²

While gay proponents see no connection to homosexuality in Ezekiel 16, scholars on the traditional side do. For example, White sees the text in a completely different light. He argues:

The citation of verse 50 completely changes the conclusions we must reach by listening to the text. There is surely no question that the appearance of the term abomination and how it is obviously differentiated from the inhospitality and heartlessness of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah (and in fact is seen as the *result* their indolence and pride), takes us directly back to the issue of Genesis 19. The judgment of God is directly linked to the commission of abominations, the Hebrew word associated with homosexuality in His law (Lev 18:22, 20:13).⁹³

⁹² Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 48.

⁹³ White and Neill, *The Same Sex Controversy*, ?.

Wold echoes White and argues that abomination means sexual sin, and therefore, Ezekiel refers to the sexual sin of Sodom by committing abominations as well as the other sins of inhospitality and injustice. He writes:

To understand Ezekiel 16:48-49, we must begin with verse 43, where Ezekiel says to Jerusalem: “Because you have not remembered the days of your youth but have enraged me by all these things, behold, I in turn will bring your conduct down on your head,” declares the Lord God, ‘so that you will not commit this lewdness(*zimma*) on top of all your other abominations.’” A study of the word *zimma*... (“wickedness, lewdness, depravity”) shows that it refers to premeditated sexual crimes (Lev 18:17; 20:14; Judg. 20:6; Ezek 16:27, 58; 22:9; 23:27,29,35,44,48; 24:13), is applied to deliberate sin, and sometimes stands parallel to words for lust and harlotry in Ezekiel. It falls under the general category of “abominations” that cause impurity and are repulsive to the God of Israel. Ezekiel uses the language of hyperbole to stress the excesses of Jerusalem’s sins against God. In no way does he diminish the sins of Sodom or Samaria in his comparison, nor does he catalogue all the sins of Jerusalem’s neighbors. His hortatory emphasis is on converting Jerusalem, not destroying them. He therefore seeks to motivate them to righteous conduct (16:60-63) by shaming them. That is why the prophet sees to make the crimes of Jerusalem more serious than those of Samaria and Sodom.⁹⁴

Two passages in the gospels refer to Sodom: Matthew 10:12-15 and Luke 10:10-12. Matthew 10:12-15 reads, “As you enter the house, greet it. And if the house is worthy, let your peace be upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. Truly, I say to you, that it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.”⁹⁵ Luke 10:10-12 reads, “But whenever you enter a town and they do not receive you, go into the streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet we wipe off against

⁹⁴ Wold, *Out of Order*, 88-89.

⁹⁵ Matthew 10:12-15.

you.’ Nevertheless, know this, that the kingdom of God has come near. I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town.”⁹⁶

Pro-gay advocates argue that Jesus urges the disciples to pass judgment on certain cities because of their inhospitality to the disciples. As Helminiak asserts, “Even Jesus understood the sin of Sodom as the sin of inhospitality.”⁹⁷ Rogers argues, “when Jesus referred to the sin of Sodom, as recorded in Luke 10:12 and Matthew 10:15, he was passing judgment on cities that refused hospitality to his traveling disciples.”⁹⁸

White counters that Jesus does not focus on inhospitality in his warning about the cities that would not receive the disciples in Matthew 10:14-15. He writes,

While it is admitted that Jesus does not speak of homosexuality in connection with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, it must also be admitted that Jesus nowhere refers to their sin as that of inhospitality. It is inappropriate to assume that Jesus is approving of the revisionist interpretation of the of the Genesis account of the destruction of Sodom as due *solely* to inhospitality. This assumption is made because the judgment is placed in the context of people not receiving the disciples. Such an interpretation completely ignores the fact that Sodom’s judgment had become axiomatic for the fullest outpouring of God’s wrath throughout the Old Testament. It is not a matter of the cities of Jesus’ day being *inhospitable* to the disciples, as if they would not provide food, water, or shelter. Instead, these cities refused to hear the good news of the gospel. Theirs was a hardhearted rejection...for which they would suffer swift retribution.⁹⁹

White asserts that Jesus uses Sodom to illustrate the severity of God’s judgment and does not focus upon the sin for their judgment.¹⁰⁰ White points out that Jesus argues from the lesser to the greater; if Sodom was judged for its wickedness, how much more so will

⁹⁶ Luke 10:10-12.

⁹⁷ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 49.

⁹⁸ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 68.

⁹⁹ White and Neill. *The Same Sex Controversy*, 46.

¹⁰⁰ White and Neill. *The Same Sex Controversy*, 46.

those cities, “that had experienced the visitation of the very apostles of the incarnate Lord, but refused their message of repentance and faith.”¹⁰¹

While conservative scholars debate the merits of the various arguments pro-gay scholars advance in Genesis 19, conservative scholars make their strongest case for the traditional view within the context of Genesis 2 where they argue that God condemns all homosexual practice. Wilson states, “Genesis 2 in particular sets out the foundation of sexuality and relationship, by outlining the nature of a suitable, equal helper and the shape of that relationship. God’s pattern for humanity consists of one woman and one man living together exclusively as one flesh. This is the nature of marriage, and would rule out, among other possibilities, a same sex...marriage.”¹⁰²

Wilson agrees with Richard Hays who asserts that from “Genesis 1 onwards, scripture affirms repeatedly that God has made man and woman for one another and that our sexual desires rightly find fulfillment within heterosexual marriage...This picture of marriage provides the positive backdrop against which the Bible’s few emphatic negations of homosexuality must be read.”¹⁰³

Thus, Wilson asserts that Genesis 2 “cannot be ignored in coming to a view about homosexuality today.”¹⁰⁴ Genesis 2 gives principles that “must be assumed in subsequent narratives such as Genesis 19....By the time the reader comes to Genesis 19, it is assumed that they have adopted the creation principles of Genesis 2. This includes

¹⁰¹ White and Neill. *The Same Sex Controversy*, 46.

¹⁰² Bird and Preece, *Sexegesis*, 52.

¹⁰³ Bird and Preece, *Sexegesis*, 53.

¹⁰⁴ Bird and Preece, *Sexegesis*, 52.

understanding homosexual activity as contrary to God's purposes."¹⁰⁵ In other words, the created order and model for sexuality given in Genesis 2 informs the reader how to view the homosexual behavior in Genesis 19. Wilson asserts, "since Genesis 2 outlines the context and parties for appropriate sexual activity, this has significant implications for homosexual activity."¹⁰⁶ Gagnon summarizes the traditional argument for Genesis 19 when he writes:

To suggest that the story does not speak to the issue of homosexual behavior between consenting adults, even in an indirect way, is misleading. Undoubtedly for the Yahwist, the difference between consenting homosexual intercourse and coerced homosexual intercourse was that in the former both participants willingly degraded themselves while in the latter one of the parties was forced into self-degradation. The burden of proof is entirely on those who would assert otherwise, particularly given the Yahwistic material in Genesis 2-3 that gives etiological sanction only for marriage and sex between male and female,... the exclusively heterosexual relationships portrayed throughout the Yahwistic source, and the Pentateuch in assessing abhorrent sexual practices. While the story of Sodom, because of the added factors of inhospitality and rape, is not an ideal passage for studying the Bible's views on same-sex intercourse, it nevertheless remains a relevant text.¹⁰⁷

In sum, proponents of the traditional view of marriage rest their argument on God's creation order in Genesis 1 and 2 in which they see a model for God-ordained and designed heterosexual marriage. This model would, by its very nature, exclude same-sex unions. In regards to Genesis 19, conservative scholars assert that the passage demonstrates how homosexuality plays a significant part in the destruction of Sodom,

¹⁰⁵ Bird and Preece, *Sexegesis*, 52-53.

¹⁰⁶ Bird and Preece, *Sexegesis*, 54.

¹⁰⁷ Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice Texts And Hermeneutics*, 78.

and they view pro-gay arguments as “intent on drowning out”¹⁰⁸ the plain meaning of the text by multi-faceted theories.

Leviticus 18:22, 20:13

In addition to Genesis 19, the biblical debate surrounding homosexuality centers on two other passages in the Hebrew testament: Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. Proponents of same-sex relationships argue that God gave Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, part of the purity code, to the Israelites to distinguish them from their surrounding pagan neighbors. They assert that God gave these regulations to a particular people, at a particular time, and therefore, the regulations have no relevance today. For example, Helminiak sees Leviticus 18 as a prohibition for the Jews only with a “religious, not ethical or moral”¹⁰⁹ basis. There is “no thought given to whether the sex in itself is right or wrong. The intent is to keep Jewish identity strong.”¹¹⁰ He asserts, “Leviticus makes no statement about the morality of homogenital acts as such or in general.”¹¹¹

Helminiak argues that the “Hebrew Testament forbids homogeneity for purity reasons,” and that male-male penetrative sex “makes one unclean; it is simply a ‘religious taboo.’”¹¹² He asserts that the “single text that talks about homogeneity forbids it -- but precisely because it is ‘unclean,’ not because it is wrong in itself.”¹¹³ Helminiak further

¹⁰⁸ White and Neil, *The Same Sex Controversy*, 27.

¹⁰⁹ Heminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 55.

¹¹⁰ Heminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 55.

¹¹¹ Heminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 66.

¹¹² Heminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 69.

argues that since many of the purity codes of the Old Testament were abrogated in the New Testament dispensation (e.g. dietary laws, regulations concerning the priesthood), the same-sex prohibitions do not apply to the New Testament church. He argues that the “purity requirements of the Law are no longer significant.”¹¹⁴ The purity requirements are no longer valid in his view because the “Christian Scriptures insist that cleanness and uncleanness do not matter.”¹¹⁵ Helminiak claims that there is “no condemnation of homogenital sex in and of itself in the Christian Testament—neither because of purity concerns or other concerns.”¹¹⁶ Soards offers a similar argument stating, “Given that we confess in faith that Christ is the end of the law (Romans 10:4), it is impossible to declare the necessary relevance of these verses for our world today...Grace, not law, governs Christian life.”¹¹⁷

Rogers agrees with Heminiak and argues that the Bible distinguishes between the Levitical purity codes that were “culturally-conditioned laws” and the law of love which Christ fulfilled and admonishes New Testament believers to follow.¹¹⁸ Rogers suggests that when “these texts in Leviticus are taken out of their historical and cultural context

¹¹³ Heminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 72.

¹¹⁴ Heminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 71.

¹¹⁵ Heminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 72.

¹¹⁶ Heminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 73.

¹¹⁷ Soards, *Scripture And Homosexuality*, 17.

¹¹⁸ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 69.

and applied to faithful, God-worshipping Christians who are homosexual, it does violence to them.”¹¹⁹

White argues against this interpretation. He points out that the judgment for homosexual acts was not only for the Jews but was universal. The former pagan nations who inhabited the promised land suffered divine judgment for the same abominations listed in Leviticus; thus, these prohibitions against homosexuality “transcended ethnic boundaries.”¹²⁰

White also counters that critics like Rogers inconsistently apply the purity codes as culturally conditioned and therefore not applicable today. For example, Rogers considers other sins listed in the purity code such as incest and bestiality as universally immoral today. White believes that same-sex proponents are “showing their own subjectively selective approach to biblical interpretation”¹²¹ by arguing that the Levitical prohibition against homosexuality is culturally conditioned while not acknowledging that other prohibitions are universally accepted as repugnant.

Gagnon concurs with White and argues,

Lev 18:22 occurs in a larger context of forbidden sexual relations that primarily outlaws incest (18:6-18) and also prohibits adultery (18:20), child sacrifice (18:21), and bestiality (18:23); these prohibitions continue to have universal validity in contemporary society. Only the prohibitions against having sexual intercourse with a woman “in her menstrual uncleanness” (18:19) does not.¹²²

¹¹⁹ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 69.

¹²⁰ White and Neil, *The Same Sex Controversy*, 66.

¹²¹ White and Neil, *The Same Sex Controversy*, 76.

¹²² Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice Texts and Hermeneutics*, 113.

Gagnon emphasizes the seriousness of homosexual conduct which “was not merely prohibited but also regarded as a supreme offense, a penalty consistent with its description as an ‘abomination.’”¹²³ Smith concurs with Gagnon and states that the

...seriousness of all sexual offences (sic) within Leviticus 18 is heightened with the warning of covenant curses in vv. 24-30 for disobedience. Verse 24 is clear that committing a sexual offence (sic) will defile the people and the land. It is not simply a case of impurity, but the complete reversal of their holiness... There is no substitute and no mitigation of the penalty.¹²⁴

Smith points out, “there is always a way to atone through ritual for ritual impurity, whereas there is no such provision for impurity in Leviticus 18. The defilement of a sexual offence (sic) is irreversible by ritual. The only way to atone for the defilement caused by sexual offences (sic) is by being cut off from God, his people, and the land (vv. 28-29).”¹²⁵

Scholars debate the meaning of *toevah* in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, translated “abomination.” Rogers downplays the meaning of *toevah*, and defines it as something that merely “makes a person ritually unclean, such as having intercourse with a woman while she is menstruating.”¹²⁶ Yet, Gagnon stresses the word’s weightiness; it means more than ritualistic impurity but “is generally applied to forms of behavior whose abhorrent quality is readily transparent to contemporary believers.”¹²⁷ He further argues:

¹²³ Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice Texts and Hermeneutics*, 114.

¹²⁴ Bird and Preece, *Sexegesis*, 77.

¹²⁵ Bird and Preece, *Sexegesis*, 78.

¹²⁶ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 69.

¹²⁷ Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice Texts and Hermeneutics*, 120.

Worshipping other gods, child sacrifice, incest, bestiality, adultery, theft, oppressing the poor, false testimony in court against another person, and deceit are not oddities of a superstitious, pre-Enlightenment people whose sole function was to keep the people of God separate from the surrounding culture. It is contextually clear that what is generally meant by *tôēbâ* is something that “Yahweh hates” (Deut 12:31; Prov 6:16). The passage of time produces changing conceptions of what is detestable to God (as well as changing civil penalties) but, in this case, what is striking is the high degree of continuity between the values of Israelite culture and post-Enlightenment culture.¹²⁸

Unlike Helminiak and Rogers, who view Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 as culturally conditioned Jewish requirements which have no bearing on New Testament believers, Gagnon asserts, “Christians do not have the option of simply dismissing as injunction because it belongs to the Holiness Code. The same God who gave the laws of the Mosaic dispensation continues to regulate conduct through the Spirit in believers. A substantial case must be made for affirming conduct that was regarded with such revulsion.”¹²⁹ To fortify his argument, Gagnon points out, “Paul himself, the very apostle who proclaimed salvation in Christ ‘apart from the law,’ clearly believed that there was considerable continuity in the divine will across the two covenants in matters of sexual ethics.”¹³⁰ He argues:

Paul consciously formulated his opposition to the same-sex intercourse in the light of Levitical prohibitions is evident from the following. Paul’s stance against incest in 1 Corinthians 5 echoes the incest laws in Lev 18:6-18 (cf. the description “father’s wife” in 1 Cor 5:1 with Lev 18:7-8 LXX). His reference to same-sex intercourse, along with other vices, as “worthy of death” in Rom 1:32 may have had in view the penalty of death prescribed for homosexual intercourse in Lev 20:13. His use of the word *aschēmosynē* (“indecent exposure”) in Rom 1:27 coincides with its usage twenty-four times in Lev 18:6-19; 20:11, 17-21

¹²⁸ Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice Texts and Hermeneutics*, 120.

¹²⁹ Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice Texts and Hermeneutics*, 122.

¹³⁰ Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice Texts and Hermeneutics*, 122.

(LXX) to describe various illicit sexual acts. The word *akatharsia* (“uncleanness, impurity”) in Rom 1:24 appears also in Lev 18:19; 20:21, 25 (LXX).¹³¹

Gagnon also asserts that the proscriptions against homosexual acts are not culturally limited but are a prohibition as they go against God’s creative order and design for human sexuality defined in the Genesis creation account. He argues that males:

...were created by God anatomically and otherwise, for pairing with an “other,” not a “like,” of the same species. The thinking of the legislators of the Holiness Code was apparently not “Men should not take on the role of women in sexual intercourse because women are inferior beings but rather “Men should not take on the role of women in sexual intercourse because God created distinct sexes, designed them for sexual pairing, and did so for a reason.”¹³²

Smith concurs with Gagnon and also argues that Moses roots the Levitical prohibition of homosexuality in the created order and the “principle of male-female covenant marriage relationship.”¹³³ Smith sees a connection between the degree of deviation from that order and the degree of the punishment. She writes:

God’s purpose for his creation is to maintain the distinction between male and female within their unity and this distinction is to be reflected in the covenant marriage relationship where the husband and wife become one flesh. Any deviation from this norm set by God as lawgiver within his creation is a sexual offence and thus, every sexual offence is culpable before the living God. In the case of homosexual acts, the penalty is death because it deviates so far from God’s created order that there is no longer distinction and thus it brings disorder and impurity. Moreover, there is no provision for a substitutionary sacrifice or for mitigation of the penalty. Atonement is through the death of the offenders, which creates a permanent separation between God and the offenders, the offenders and the covenant people, and the offender and the land.¹³⁴

¹³¹ Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice Texts and Hermeneutics*, 121-122.

¹³² Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice Texts and Hermeneutics*, 142.

¹³³ Bird and Preece, *Sexegesis*, 74.

¹³⁴ Bird and Preece, *Sexegesis*, 82-83.

Having examined the central texts in the Hebrew testament concerning the debate on homosexuality, an examination of central New Testament texts follows, looking at 1Corinthians 6:9-10, 1Timothy 1: 9-10, and Romans 1:24-27.

1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10

Scholars debate what, if any, connection 1Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1Timothy 1:9-10 have to homosexuality. They ask whether Paul has homosexuality in mind in his list of vices and if so, whether he condemns all homosexual relationships, even those that are committed, caring and loving. Gagnon pinpoints the heart of the issue, stating:

Of critical importance in determining the relevance of 1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10 for contemporary discussions of same-sex intercourse is the meaning of the terms *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi*. Some scholars argue that the meaning of these terms cannot be known, or that they refer to something other than participants in same-sex intercourse, or that they designate only distinct types of homosexuals that bear little resemblance to contemporary expressions of homosexuality. If any of these positions are true, it might discredit their use by those opposed to homosexual practice.¹³⁵

Helminiak echoes Gagnon when he asserts that the meaning of these verses “depends on the translation of two Greek words--*malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*--and their translation is highly debated.”¹³⁶ In addition, Rogers states that these words are ambiguous because they “occur in lists with no context,” and therefore, “it is difficult to know exactly what they mean.”¹³⁷

Helminiak points to the various ways different Bible versions translate *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* to illustrate their apparent ambiguity. He states, “Various modern versions translate those words differently. Different translations render

¹³⁵ Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice Texts and Hermeneutics*, 306.

¹³⁶ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 105.

¹³⁷ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 70.

Arsenokoitai as “‘homosexuals,’ ‘sodomites,’ ‘child molesters,’ ‘perverts,’ ‘homosexual perverts,’ ‘sexual perverts’ or ‘people of infamous habits.’” He continues saying, malakoi “is rendered as ‘catamites,’ ‘the effeminate,’ ‘boy prostitutes’ or even as ‘sissies.’”¹³⁸

Proponents of same-sex relationships claim these words have no connection to homosexual relationships that are loving and committed. Pro-gay scholar John Boswell, in his work *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, argues, “vigorously that *malakoi* indicated ‘unrestrained’ or ‘wanton’ or ‘dissolute,’ and *arsenokoitai* indicated ‘male prostitutes,’” and Boswell sees “no denunciation of homosexual activity in 1 Corinthians 6.”¹³⁹ Likewise, Helminiak argues that malakoi “has no specific reference to homogeneity. On the other hand, *arsenokoitai*, which occurs in two texts, may be some kind of reference to male same-sex acts.” Yet, he asserts, “If it is, these acts condemn wanton, lewd, irresponsible male homogenital acts but not homogenital acts in general.”¹⁴⁰

Conservative scholar Soards argues that arsenokoitai involves homosexual acts and sees a connection between 1 Corinthians 6:9 and Leviticus 18:22 which condemns homosexual practice. He purports:

...interpreters almost universally understand the word *arsenokoitai* in 1 Cor. 6:9 to be an idiom derived from the Septuagintal version of Lev. 18:22, which in part reads *kai meta arsenos ou koimethese koiten gynaikos* (“and you shall not sleep in bed with a man as with a woman”), and of Lev. 20:13, which contains the words *kai hos an koimethe meta arsenos koiten gynaikos* (“and whoever may lie in bed with a man as with a woman”). Thus Paul’s declaration presupposes the condemnation of homosexual acts by the Holiness Code of Leviticus...1Tim.1:9-

¹³⁸ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 106.

¹³⁹ Soards, *Scripture And Homosexuality*, 19.

¹⁴⁰ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 105.

10 contains the word *arsenokoitai* (“male bedders”) again, apparently assuming Lev 18:22 and 20:13, or at least 1 Cor. 6:9.¹⁴¹

Helminiak, who is on the other side of the debate, also acknowledges 1 Corinthians 6:9 has a link to Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, saying:

...the Greek-speaking Jews coined the term *arsenokoitai*. They created the term by translating literally the rabbis’ shorthand Hebrew phrase into the Greek. If this is the case, and there is no certainty about it, *arsenokoitai* relates to the prohibitions of male same-sex acts in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, and it means men who have penetrative sex with men...So it seems, 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 may be repeating the prohibition in Leviticus 18:22.¹⁴²

Despite the connection to Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, both scholars argue that there is not enough exegetical evidence to assert confidently that 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10 condemn all kinds of homosexual relationships. Soards concedes that the “primary intention of these verses is not to teach about homosexuality, and only directly may we derive information regarding homosexuality from this material.”¹⁴³ Helminiak agrees with Soards as he states, “the conclusion should be very simple. Nobody knows for certain what these words mean, so to use them to condemn homosexuals is really dishonest and unfair.”¹⁴⁴ And Rogers, quoting Nissinen concurs, “The modern concept of ‘homosexuality’ should by no means be read into Paul’s text, nor can we assume that Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 6:9 ‘condemn all homosexual relations’ in all times and places and ways. The meanings of the words are too vague to justify this claim, and

¹⁴¹ Soards, *Scripture And Homosexuality*, 19.

¹⁴² Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 111.

¹⁴³ Soards, *Scripture And Homosexuality*, 20.

¹⁴⁴ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 107.

Paul's words should not be used for generalizations that go beyond his experience and world."¹⁴⁵

Furthermore, Helminiak dismisses the connection between *arsenokoitai* in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and its linguistic connection to Leviticus 18 as irrelevant to today's debate of homosexuality. He believes that while Leviticus condemns "men lying with men," "an understanding of that whole text and its culture make clear that its condemnation applies to something irrelevant both to early Christianity and to most of our contemporary Western world. That something is ritual impurity, violation of the ancient Jewish taboos that surrounded a man's Jewish identity."¹⁴⁶ Helminiak adds,

Later, using the Greek term *arsenokoitai*, two texts in the Christian Testament perhaps reiterate the Hebrew condemnation of men lying with men. But the understanding of these texts show that these very same words apply to something very different again. That something would be abuse, exploitation and lust associated with male-male sex in the first-century Roman Empire.¹⁴⁷

As the term has evolved over the centuries, he argues, "the English words *men lying with men*" has a different meaning today; "this phrase suggests male homosexuality--which, according to contemporary scientific understanding, implies a normal variation in sexual attraction that inclines men to emotional and genital intimacy with each other."¹⁴⁸

Therefore, he asserts,

...if *arsenokoitai* does refer to male-male sex, these texts do not forbid male homogeneity as such. In first-century, Greek -speaking, Jewish Christianity, *arsenokoitai* would have referred to exploitative, lewd, and wanton sex between

¹⁴⁵ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 71.

¹⁴⁶ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 114.

¹⁴⁷ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 114.

¹⁴⁸ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 114-115.

men. This, and not male-male sex in general, is what the term would imply. This then, and not male-male sex in general, is what the biblical text opposes.¹⁴⁹

While Helminiak sees 1 Corinthians 6:9 as culturally conditioned, Gagnon believes 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 condemn homosexual relationships of any kind, even committed ones. First, Gagnon argues that *malakoi* definitely refers to homosexuality, not just effeminate men in general. He asserts that since *malakoi* “are sandwiched in between adulterers (people who commit an act of immoral sexual intercourse) and *arsenokoitai* (people who have something to do with immoral act of same-sex intercourse),” then *malakoi* also has something to do with immoral sexual intercourse; the definition of *malakoi* as “soft” also “suggests males playing the female role in sexual intercourse with males.”¹⁵⁰ He concludes, “it is evident that ‘soft men’ in 1 Cor. 6:9 refers not to any male with effeminate traits but instead to males who function in the role of the passive homosexual partners and who also undertake to erase their distinctively masculine nature.”¹⁵¹ Thus, Gagnon believes that 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 condemn all kinds of homosexual activity based on the meaning of *malakoi*, which refers to the passive partner in the homosexual relationship and *arsenokoitai*, which refers to the dominant partner in a homosexual relationship.

Gagnon further strengthens his argument by stating that Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 aligns with Paul’s teaching in Romans 1:24-27.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 115.

¹⁵⁰ Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice Texts and Hermeneutics*, 308.

¹⁵¹ Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice Texts and Hermeneutics*, 310.

¹⁵² Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice Texts and Hermeneutics*, 338.

Furthermore, he asserts, “the term *malakoi* has most in view males who seek to transform their maleness into femaleness in order to make themselves more attractive as receptive or passive sexual partners of men; *arsenokoitai* has most in view men who serve as the active sex partners of the *malakoi*.”¹⁵³ Gagnon believes the meaning of Paul’s words are quite plain and that neither “term can be widened in meaning to include heterosexuals or narrowed in meaning to exclude certain non-exploitative forms of homosexual intercourse.”¹⁵⁴ Not only are 1Corinthians 6:9 and 1Timothy 1:10 consistent with the rest of Paul’s teaching on homosexuality, Gagnon asserts,

...*arsenokoitai* has intertextual connections to the Levitical prohibitions of homosexual intercourse and to the exclusive endorsement of monogamous, heterosexual marriage in Genesis 1-2, in the Decalogue prohibition of adultery, and in the Deuteronomic expulsions texts. Both vice lists clearly establish that, in the author’s view, believers who do not turn away from participating in homosexual intercourse are among those who will be excluded from God’s coming kingdom.¹⁵⁵

In other words, both *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* refer to homosexual practices which are in violation of God’s created order and design for human sexuality, monogamous heterosexual unions through marriage.

Romans 1:24-27

Having surveyed the various arguments about Genesis 19, Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13, 1Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1Timothy 1:9-10, the central issues of the debate involving Romans 1 will be examined.

¹⁵³ Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice Texts and Hermeneutics*, 338.

¹⁵⁴ Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice Texts and Hermeneutics*, 338.

¹⁵⁵ Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice Texts and Hermeneutics*, 339.

Helminiak highlights the importance of Romans 1 to the biblical debate concerning same-sex relationships. He outlines several reasons for its significance, “Without doubt, this passage from Romans is the most important statement of homosexuality in the Bible” because it is the “only one Christian Bible text that actually discusses homogenital acts.”¹⁵⁶ While acknowledging its importance, Helminiak disparages the traditional interpretation of Romans 1 by asserting that the passage “is the famous text from which people get the notion that gay sex is ‘unnatural’” and from which “people argue that venereal diseases—and today, HIV disease and AIDS -- are the punishment for homogenital activity.”¹⁵⁷

Those on the traditional side of the debate, however, do not express the views that Helminiak suggests. Scholars like Gagnon offer other ideas concerning the importance of Romans 1. Gagnon aptly states that Romans 1:24-27 “is commonly seen as the central text for the issue of homosexual conduct on which Christians must base their moral doctrine.”¹⁵⁸ Gagnon lists several reasons why this particular text is so crucial to the theological debate concerning homosexuality from a conservative perspective. Gagnon argues, Romans 1 “is the most substantial and explicit discussion of the issue in the Bible. It is located in the New Testament. It makes an explicit statement not only about same-sex intercourse among men but also about lesbianism. And it occurs within a

¹⁵⁶ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 75.

¹⁵⁷ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 75.

¹⁵⁸ Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice Texts and Hermeneutics*, 229.

substantial corpus of material from a single-writer, which allows the interpreter to properly contextualize the writer's stance on homosexuality."¹⁵⁹

Gagnon states emphatically that Romans 1:24-27 is "the most difficult text for proponents of homosexual behavior to overturn"¹⁶⁰ given its apparent negative view of homosexuality. (Nonetheless, same sex proponents offer various alternative understandings of Romans 1. Key to their arguments is the meaning of "natural" and "unnatural" in Romans 1:26-27.

Romans 1:26-27 reads,

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those which 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.¹⁶¹

Pro-gay scholars question Paul's meaning of "nature" and "natural" in this passage. The central issue is whether Paul refers to God's created order for human sexuality or whether he means something else. Pro-gay scholarship denies that Paul uses "nature" to signify a God-ordained design for human sexuality. Instead, proponents offer a different view represented by John Boswell, who writes:

What is even more important, the persons Paul condemns are manifestly not homosexual: what he derogates are homosexual acts committed by apparently heterosexual persons. The whole point of Romans 1, in fact, is to stigmatize persons who have rejected their calling, gotten off the true path they were once on. It would completely undermine the thrust of the argument if the persons in question were not "naturally" inclined to monotheism. What caused the Romans

¹⁵⁹ Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice Texts and Hermeneutics*, 229-230.

¹⁶⁰ Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice Texts and Hermeneutics*, 230.

¹⁶¹ Romans 1:26-27.

to sin was not that they lacked what Paul considered proper inclinations but that they had them.¹⁶²

To Boswell, Paul is not condemning homosexuals who “have a permanent sexual preference” but heterosexuals who have gone against their *natural* sexual orientation and have engaged in homosexual acts.¹⁶³ Soards sums up the pro-same sex argument succinctly when he writes, “Paul is not denouncing those who are truly homosexual. Rather it is argued that Paul is referring to licentious heterosexual persons who have engaged in homosexual acts.”¹⁶⁴

Furthermore, in defining the term “against nature,” Boswell cites Romans 11:24, in which God acts “against nature” in grafting the Gentiles into the church, to demonstrate that the term “against nature” has “no moral connotation.”¹⁶⁵ He argues that since “against nature” is morally neutral in Romans 11:24, it therefore, does not have any moral connotation in Romans 1:26-27.¹⁶⁶ Rather, he believes the term “signifies behavior which is unexpected, unusual, or different from what would occur in the normal order of things: ‘beyond nature,’ perhaps, but not ‘immoral.’”¹⁶⁷ Rogers agrees with Boswell and cites Nissinen and Helminiak when he writes:

What does Paul mean by “natural” and “unnatural” in Romans 1:26-27? In the original Greek, the words are *physis*, “nature,” and *para physis*, “against nature.” For Paul, the “unnatural” is a synonym for “unconventional.” It means something

¹⁶² Wold, *Out of Order*, 180.

¹⁶³ Wold, *Out of Order*, 181.

¹⁶⁴ Soards, *Scripture And Homosexuality*, 22.

¹⁶⁵ Wold, *Out of Order*, 181.

¹⁶⁶ Wold, *Out of Order*, 181.

¹⁶⁷ Wold, *Out of Order*, 181.

surprisingly out of the ordinary. The most significant evidence that “natural” meant “conventional” is that God acted “contrary to nature” (Romans 11:13-24). That is, God did something very unusual by pruning the Gentiles from a wild olive tree, where they grew in their natural state, and grafting them into the cultivated olive tree of God’s people (Rom. 11:24). Since it cannot be that God sinned, to say that God did what is “contrary to nature” or “against nature,” (v. 24) means that God did something surprising and out of the ordinary” Paul is not talking in Romans 1:26-27 about a violation of the order of creation. In Paul’s vocabulary, *physis* (nature) is not a synonym for *ktisis* (creation). In speaking about what is “natural,” Paul is merely accepting the conventional view of people and how they ought to behave in first-century Hellenistic-Jewish culture.¹⁶⁸

White dismisses both Rogers’ and Helminiak’s interpretation. He argues that the context clearly defines the meaning of “against nature” in 1:26, 27. He writes:

The meaning of “against nature” is defined by the context. The word translated “sexual function” is not ambiguous or questionable. The conjunction of the word for “natural” is likewise clear, and the resulting phrase “natural sexual function” is easily understood both by Paul’s original audience and by any unbiased person today. He is referring to the way God created human beings, male and female, and the sexual union that takes place between a man and a woman. This is what has been “exchanged” in the downward spiral of sinfulness. God created women with a natural function. When one rebels against God’s truth and exchanges it for a lie, that lie impacts everything in one’s life. The natural function is exchanged for that which is against nature, that is, unnatural, against the created order.¹⁶⁹

Contrary to White, Helminiak asserts that when Paul says that “women exchanged natural relations for unnatural and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another,”¹⁷⁰ he means that these men and women were engaging in sexual practices which were “beyond the regular, outside the ordinary, more than the usual, not the expected.”¹⁷¹ In other words, they were engaged in

¹⁶⁸ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 74.

¹⁶⁹ White and Neill, *The Same Sex Controversy*, 118.

¹⁷⁰ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 79.

¹⁷¹ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 79.

unconventional sexual practices but not necessarily homosexual practices. Helminiak further asserts that there is not any indication that those “practices were wrong or against God or contrary to the divine order of creation;”¹⁷² Paul is simply referring “to customs and social norms” which are not “ethically binding” but, rather, in Christ “such cultural considerations are ethically irrelevant.”¹⁷³ Helminiak concludes, “Typical or atypical, socially accepted or socially forbidden, *kata physin* or *para physin* -- these notions have no moral weight.”¹⁷⁴ Boswell goes so far as to boldly assert that there is “no clear condemnation of homosexual acts in the verses in question.”¹⁷⁵ Same-sex proponents see Romans 1:26-27 as alluding to socially unconventional sexual practices which do not rise to the level of being unethical or immoral – just out of the ordinary from regular social custom.

In response to Helminiak’s view, White counters:

The basis of Paul’s discussion in Romans 1, aside from establishing the very foundation upon which he intends to present the gospel for all people (and, it can be argued, for all time), gives us no hint that the author intends his words to be limited geographically or temporally. The concepts he presents reach back to creation itself, apply over and beyond all cultural boundaries, and speak to men and women at the very level of their existence, not merely their cultural climate. It is to completely remove the passage from its original context and purpose to say that it merely speaks to what is “unusual” and hence to be avoided for the sake of appearance. Human convention or social morality is not in Paul’s thinking here, for he grounds his words in God’s creative purpose and decree.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷² Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 79.

¹⁷³ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 86.

¹⁷⁴ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 86.

¹⁷⁵ Wold, *Out Of Order*, 181.

¹⁷⁶ White and Neill, *The Same Sex Controversy*, 134-135.

Same-sex proponents claim that Paul does not have lesbianism in view in Romans 1:26-27, as traditionalists assert. For example, Rogers contends that Paul is not discussing lesbianism; rather he believes Paul addresses “transgressions of gender role boundaries” which “cause ‘impurity,’ a violation of the Jewish purity code (Rom 1:24).”¹⁷⁷ Rogers believes that Paul describes women who have usurped their gender role and sought domination over men. This is exemplified, as Nissinen explains, as “women taking the man’s active role in sex,” which was viewed as “unnatural.”¹⁷⁸ As Rogers concludes, “The text does not say that women had sex with other women. They could have been condemned for taking the dominant position in heterosexual intercourse, or for engaging in non-procreative sexual acts with male partners. The issue is gender dominance, and in that culture women were to be passive and not active in sexual matters.”¹⁷⁹ Rogers further speculates that Paul’s use of “unnatural” may be talking “not about wrongly oriented desires, but about inordinate desires- going to excess, losing control.”¹⁸⁰ This loss of control is a sign of their idolatry in which God “then allows them to lose control in erotic passion, which brings them dishonor.”¹⁸¹

Helminiak offers a similar argument to Roger’s view. He suggests that Paul used the term *para physin* “in the popular sense that simply meant atypical or outside the

¹⁷⁷ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 75.

¹⁷⁸ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 75.

¹⁷⁹ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 75.

¹⁸⁰ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 75.

¹⁸¹ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 75-76.

ordinary.”¹⁸² He asserts, “Paul’s reference to female sexual relations that are ‘beyond the ordinary’ could mean many things.”¹⁸³ Helminiak suggests that it could mean “sex during menstruation, sex with an uncircumcised man, oral sex...or anything that would not be considered the standard way of having sex.”¹⁸⁴ Therefore he emphatically states that, “Romans 1:26 should not be cited as referring to lesbian sex;” because it “does not refer to female same sex acts but to some kind of heterosexual practices that were considered taboo, unusual or unclean, and perhaps, also non-procreative.”¹⁸⁵

In addition to their beliefs about lesbianism, pro-gay scholars advance arguments that differ from the traditional view. For example, Rogers sees a stoic influence in verses 26-27. He speculates that Paul’s uses “natural” to mean that, “sex was to be very controlled, avoiding passion.”¹⁸⁶ Rogers concludes that Paul “would be rightly understood to be talking not about wrongly oriented desires, but about inordinate desires--going to excess, losing control.”¹⁸⁷ This loss of control is a sign of idolatry in which God “then allows them to lose control in erotic passion, which brings them dishonor.”¹⁸⁸

Helminiak offers another viewpoint. He argues the words *atimia* and *aschemosyne* in verse 27, translated “degrading” and “shameful” respectively, do not

¹⁸² Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 87.

¹⁸³ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 87.

¹⁸⁴ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 87.

¹⁸⁵ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 89-90.

¹⁸⁶ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 75.

¹⁸⁷ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 75.

¹⁸⁸ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 76.

have any connotation of immorality or sinfulness. Instead, the words convey mere social disapproval; they make “no ethical condemnation of male-male sex.”¹⁸⁹ Same sex apologists offer arguments which view Paul’s use of “natural” as being morally or ethically neutral.

Scholars with a traditional view of marriage object that if homosexuality is morally neutral, then Paul would not mention it in Romans 1, a passage that focuses upon human idolatry and God’s judgment. Helminiak answers the objection by asserting that Paul uses homosexuality as a rhetorical device to “win the favor of both the Jewish and Gentile Christians.”¹⁹⁰ According to Helminiak, Jewish Christians viewed homosexuality as a purity issue, one which made them feel superior to their Roman brethren who were not as offended by homosexuality.¹⁹¹ Paul could then use their self-righteous attitude to demonstrate the grace of God to both Jew and Gentile. Helminiak outlines his argument as follows.¹⁹² Paul first gains the sympathy of the Jewish Christians by seeming to side with their prejudices. He next show that the Jewish Christians were as guilty as anyone else in breaking the Jewish Law. Paul then argues that in Christ the Jewish law was superseded and that, above all, purity issues in the law do not matter. This revelation would incline the Jewish Christians to better accept the Gentile Christians.

Paul finally rebukes the Gentile Christians sharply for any smugness they might by then be feeling. Thus, Helminiak asserts that the “mention of homogeneity, Gentile

¹⁸⁹ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 90-91.

¹⁹⁰ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 101.

¹⁹¹ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 102-103.

¹⁹² Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 103.

‘dirtiness,’ becomes a clever rhetorical ploy in Paul’s presentation of the ‘gospel of God’ (Romans 1:1).”¹⁹³ Using homosexuality as a vehicle to address the self-righteousness of both his Jewish and Gentile readers “completely explains the reference to male-male sex in Romans.”¹⁹⁴ Helminiak believes that Paul is not condemning homosexuality; instead, homosexuality is a means to an end for Paul to make a broader point. Helminiak concludes that Romans “does not consider homogenital acts to be sinful” and Paul “seems to have been deliberately unconcerned about them” and “teaches that in itself homogenital activity is ethically neutral.”¹⁹⁵

While Rogers and Helminiak attempt to reinterpret the traditional understanding of Paul’s meaning of “nature” or “natural,” Dan Via, who also supports same-sex unions, takes a different approach from his fellow scholars concerning Romans 1. While Rogers argues that Paul uses “natural” and “unexpected” to mean “out of the ordinary,” Via asserts that Paul means what conservative scholars affirm – that Paul’s uses “natural” to relate homosexual behavior to God’s created order and design for marriage. “Unnatural,” therefore, refers to homosexual acts that are contrary to that design. He echoes conservative scholars when he states that Paul “regards homosexuality as chosen – they exchanged natural for unnatural relations (1:26-27). And perhaps most importantly he regards same-sex relations as contrary to the order of the world as created by God.”¹⁹⁶

¹⁹³ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 103.

¹⁹⁴ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 104.

¹⁹⁵ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 104.

¹⁹⁶ Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality And The Bible*, under “New Testament,” Kindle.

Although Via acknowledges that conservative scholars rightly interpret Paul's use of the word "natural," he offers arguments which still support same-sex unions; these arguments are based on the concept of a fixed sexual orientation, human experience and the need for fairness or equality to be shown to committed same-sex couples. As he states, "There is, however, no a priori reason why a univocal position cannot be overridden if the countervailing biblical, theological and cultural considerations have sufficient strength."¹⁹⁷

In regards to sexual orientation, Via argues that Paul was unaware that men and women are born gay and thus, cannot choose their sexual preference anymore than heterosexuals can. Conservative scholar Soards agrees with Via's position and states, "neither Paul nor any other ancient person had a concept of 'sexual orientation;' for Paul, and his contemporaries, 'homosexual acts were willful actions of unbridled lust.'"¹⁹⁸ Via, therefore, argues against Paul's view that homosexuality is a choice; Via believes Paul was mistaken in claiming that homosexuals cannot choose their sexual preference or their sexual identity. He writes:

Paul seems to have agreed with the generally held belief of the ancient world that there is only one sexual nature, what we would call a heterosexual nature. His implied underlining principle is that if people choose to actualize their sexuality, their acts should be in accord with their nature or orientation. If Paul then could be confronted with the reality of homosexual orientation, consistency would require him to acknowledge the naturalness of homosexual acts.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality And The Bible*, under "Defense of the Traditional Position of Homosexuality," Kindle.

¹⁹⁸ Soards, *Scripture And Homosexuality*, 22.

¹⁹⁹ Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality And The Bible*, under "Homosexual Orientation," Kindle.

In other words, Via suggests that if Paul knew men and women were born with a biological or genetic predisposition to homosexuality, he would then have to conclude that people born gay are not acting unnaturally but very much according to their nature, which would not be morally wrong.

Some scholars counter Via's view, suggesting that Paul did not know about sexual orientation. White asserts that Paul, living in a Greco-Roman culture, would be very familiar with the concept of sexual orientation. He argues:

Paul came from Tarsus, a major city in the Roman empire. He was well trained, a learned man, familiar with Roman and Greek culture. He was obviously widely read in the literature of his day as well. Therefore, the assumption that he did not know of people who professed to be homosexual as their primary "orientation" is simply farfetched unless one is willing to say that in essence no one really "knew" about this until the past few decades or centuries. Furthermore, it is self-evident that the full outline of the modern homosexual view of orientation *was* known in the ancient world, despite the oft-repeated assertion that it was not.²⁰⁰

Contrary to White, Via asserts, "I do not believe that there is clear evidence that Paul had such knowledge. If, however, he did in fact know about and believe in some kind of homosexual nature or orientation, he could not *with logical consistency* have said that homosexual practice was against nature. He logically should have acknowledged the naturalness of it."²⁰¹ Thus, Via asserts that "Paul's interpretation of God's creative design is subject to critical reinterpretation."²⁰²

²⁰⁰ White and Neill, *The Same Sex Controversy*, 128.

²⁰¹ Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality And The Bible*, under "Homosexual Orientation," Kindle.

²⁰² Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality And The Bible*, under "Traditional Position Of Homosexuality," Kindle.

Via suggests that Paul was ignorant of what science claims to have discovered regarding homosexuality – that it is not chosen but innate. Via believes, therefore, that the church should view committed, homosexual relationships as natural, normative and permissible. Via questions the fairness of allowing committed, heterosexual couples the sexual freedom to fulfill their destiny while prohibiting Christian homosexuals the same privilege when, in essence, they could choose no other option. Concerning those who are homosexual, he writes:

His/her orientation is a destiny that both affords and limits freedom. This person cannot *not be* homosexual (there may be exceptions), but being gay offers various concrete possibilities to choose among in freedom for actualizing this destiny. Since the homosexual is for Christian faith as much a part of God's creation as the heterosexual, how can the homosexual destiny, which is as inalienable as the heterosexual destiny, not be regarded as a part of God's creative intent, just as the heterosexual destiny is so regarded? The orientation in both cases is inalienable. And why should the homosexual, in contrast to the heterosexual, be singled out as not having the moral freedom to actualize the only orientation he/she has?²⁰³

In his discussion, Via brings up the issue of fairness. He frames the issue as follows: if both heterosexuals and homosexuals are born with an innate sexual preference, why should only heterosexuals be allowed to pursue their sexual identity? Rogers asserts, "Paul's condemnation of immoral sexual behavior is not appropriately applied to contemporary gay or lesbian Christians who are not idolaters, who love God, and who seek to live in thankful obedience to God."²⁰⁴ Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott amplify Rogers' argument as they assert:

The key thoughts seem to be lust, "unnaturalness," and, in verse 28, a desire to avoid acknowledgement of God. But although the censure fits the idolatrous people with whom Paul was concerned here, it does not fit the case of a sincere

²⁰³ Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality And The Bible*, under "A Way Forward," Kindle.

²⁰⁴ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 76.

homosexual Christian. Such a person loves Jesus Christ and wants above all to acknowledge God in all of life, yet for some unknown reason feels drawn to someone of the same sex--*not* because of lust, but because of sincere, heartfelt love. Is it fair to describe that person as lustful or desirous of forgetting God's existence?²⁰⁵

Rogers laments that it is not fair or just to not allow Christian homosexuals to experience marriage the same way Christian heterosexual couples do. He writes:

As a church we deplore promiscuity among gay and lesbian people, while at the same time denying the right to marry to those who want to form stable families with the supportive recognition of the Christian community...The apostle Paul's and the Reformer Calvin's assumptions that a central reason for marriage was to provide an alternative to promiscuity should certainly apply in this kind of situation? Most people would not be very successful living a celibate life if that was simply assigned to them by society when they had no such calling from God.²⁰⁶

Michael Kirby, in *Five Uneasy Pieces*, echoes Rogers when he asserts, "We should feel uneasy about the translation of words that causes cruelty and unkindness to vulnerable minorities."²⁰⁷ Gregory Jenks offers a similar view when he states, in *Five Uneasy Pieces*, "Indiscriminate and promiscuous sexual activity -- no matter what genders are involved -- is clearly unacceptable, but sexual activity between persons of the same gender within a committed relationship may not be offensive to the contemporary Christian even if it would have offended believers of earlier times."²⁰⁸

Adding to the fairness argument, Via contends that since God permitted or "destined" some to be homosexual and since he wants all people to have an "abundant

²⁰⁵ White and Neil, *The Same Sex Controversy*, 136-137.

²⁰⁶ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 89.

²⁰⁷ Warner, *Five Uneasy Pieces*, Introduction, Kindle.

²⁰⁸ Warner, *Five Uneasy Pieces*, chap. 5, Kindle.

life,” therefore, gays should be permitted to do what comes naturally for them.

Questioning the validity of the traditional view, Via argues:

Should, then, the prohibitions against violating the complementarity of the male and female sex organs always and without exception take precedence over the intention of God that every human creature should be able to express in the fullest way the *only life* to which he or she has been *destined*? For some people homosexual orientation is an inalienable destiny. And from the standpoint of John’s Gospel, *all* human beings are God’s creatures through the Word (1:2-3,11), for whom God wants abundant life, an aspect of which is bodily (sexual) life. Should then homosexual orientation not be considered a different order of creation, the actualization of which in practice would be natural?²⁰⁹

Similarly, Rogers argues for same-sex unions based on his personal experience with same-sex couples “who manifest remarkable faithfulness in their commitment to a single parent, despite all of the roadblocks that society and the church put in their way.”²¹⁰ He describes his personal interaction with a lesbian couple who recently adopted a child:

I spoke with a lesbian couple, Cheryl and Debbie, after church. One was carrying an eight-week-old baby in her arms, and the other was carrying the child’s car seat. They looked like every set of new parents—radiant and happy. Despite conservative claims to the contrary, studies show no discernible difference in good adjustment between children raised by a male-female couple and those raised by a same-sex couple. Indeed, a few weeks after Cheryl and Debbie adopted their daughter, the agency called and asked if they would take a little boy—and they did.²¹¹

When considering the fairness question, White wonders, if the unified voice of scripture condemns homosexual practice of any kind, even in loving, committed

²⁰⁹ Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality And The Bible*, under “A Way Forward,” Kindle.

²¹⁰ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 102.

²¹¹ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 102.

relationships, then how can people claim that they love Christ but not do what he commands. White counters Mollenkott and Scanzoni by remarking that their assertion,

...assumes a particular biblical conclusion with its insertion of the idea of “Christian homosexuals” right from the start and, having done so, uses its conclusion to reinterpret the Scriptures. The term “Christian homosexual” as it is being used...is an oxymoron, just as using “Christian inventor of evil” (Romans 1:30) or “Christian who practices regular wickedness” (Roman 1:29) would violate all canons of logic and truth...Those who are suppressing the knowledge of God (a universal charge) express that rebellion in many ways, including homosexual behavior and all the other sinful activities listed in 1:28ff.²¹²

Via anticipates White’s objection and asserts that truly loving homosexuals allows them the right to express their sexuality through committed, consensual relationships. He suggests, “To seek and promote the good or advantage or ‘thing’ of the other person rather than our own advantage is Paul’s most concise and pointed definition of love (Rom 5:1-2; 1Cor 10:24,33; 13:5; Phil 2:4; 1Thess 5:15). Would this not have to mean seeking abundant bodily life for the homosexual since he/she has been given?”²¹³

Via also appeals to human experience. First, he questions Paul position that homosexuality hurt the individual; he writes,

Paul is so tightly bound to the Jewish (and some Greco-Roman) judgment of his time that homosexuality is sinful, and he so inseparably connects sin and injury that he assumed homosexuality is to be harmful. But that is an assumption that needs to be tested by experience and knowledge of our time. If it cannot be demonstrated that homosexual practices is harmful in itself – in mutual, consensual, committed relationship- then it cannot be shown, in Pauline terms, that it is sinful.²¹⁴

²¹² White and Neill, *The Same Sex Controversy*, 137.

²¹³ Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality And The Bible*, under “A Way Forward,” Kindle.

²¹⁴ Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality And The Bible*, under “Defense of the Traditional Position,” Kindle.

Via cites scientific studies which assert that there are “no significant differences between” homosexual and heterosexual persons “with regard to psychological health, criminality, dependability, or social responsibility.”²¹⁵ Via then concludes, “homosexuality in itself is not pathological...it also suggests that homosexual practice need not injure--deform the hearts – of those involved.”²¹⁶ Therefore, Via believes that homosexuals should pursue sexual fulfillment and seeks “to articulate a theological justification for homosexual practice in consensual loving relationships.”²¹⁷ He further argues, “we have to listen to the voice of experience. There are people today who understand themselves as Christian and who are practicing homosexuals who see no incompatibility and feel no tension between these two aspects of their lives.”²¹⁸

Echoing Via’s sentiments, Rogers believes, “Paul’s condemnation of immoral sexual behavior is not appropriately applied to contemporary gay or lesbian Christians who are not idolaters, who love God, and who seek to live in thankful obedience to God.”²¹⁹ He quotes New Testament professor Jeffrey Siker who says, “We know of gay and lesbian Christians who truly worship and serve one true God and yet still affirm in

²¹⁵ Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality And The Bible*, under “Homosexual Orientation,” Kindle.

²¹⁶ Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality And The Bible*, under “Homosexual Orientation,” Kindle.

²¹⁷ Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality And The Bible*, under “Defense of the Traditional Position,” Kindle.

²¹⁸ Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality And The Bible*, under “A Way Forward,” Kindle.

²¹⁹ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 76.

positive ways their identity as gay and lesbian people. Paul knew of no homosexual Christians. We do.”²²⁰

Dale Martin, a New Testament scholar and professed gay Christian, also represents Via’s, Siker’s, and Rogers’ quest for fairness in the church for homosexual couples. Martin epitomizes the sense of injustice that some professing Christian homosexuals feel and their desire for the church to accept them. He forcefully argues that his experience and that of other gay men and women should trump the traditional, biblical view of homosexuality. Martin writes:

Any interpretation of scripture that hurts people, oppresses people, or destroys people cannot be the right interpretation, no matter how traditional, historical, or exegetically respectable. There can be no debate about the fact that the church’s stand on homosexuality has caused oppression, loneliness, self-hatred, violence, sickness, and suicide for millions of people. If the church wishes to continue with its traditional interpretation it must demonstrate, not just claim, that it is more loving to condemn homosexuality than to affirm homosexuals. Can the church show that same-sex loving relationships damage those involved in them? Can the church give compelling reasons to believe that it really would be better for all lesbian and gay Christians to live alone, without the joy of intimate touch, without hearing a lover’s voice when they go to sleep or awake? Is it really better for lesbian and gay teenagers to despise themselves and endlessly pray that their very personalities be reconstructed so that they may experience romance like their straight friends? Is it really more loving for the church to continue its worship of “heterosexual fulfillment” (a “nonbiblical” concept, by the way) while consigning thousands of its members to a life of either celibacy or endless psychological manipulations that masquerade as “healing”?²²¹

Martin argues that accepting gays within the church is the loving thing to do as Christians:

The burden of proof in the last twenty years has shifted. There are too many of us who are not sick, or inverted, or perverted, or even “effeminate,” but just have a

²²⁰ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 76.

²²¹ Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality And The Bible*, under “A Way Forward,” Kindle.

knack for falling in love with people of our own sex. When we have been damaged, it has not been due to our homosexuality but to your and our denial of it. The burden of proof now is not on us, to show that we are not sick, but rather on those who insist that we would be better off going back into the closet. What will “build the double love of God and or our neighbor?”²²²

Scholars such as Via suggest that contemporary scientific research, cultural norms and human experience can alter a traditional interpretation of Scripture. Via asserts, “but the Bible allows that in principle scientific understanding may be theologically germane. Moreover, the gospel calls on believers to be faithful in the particular culture in which they are played by God. Thus, the church should listen – critically and in light of its own theological horizon – to the best cultural voices.”²²³ Michael Kirby agrees with Via as he also asserts that “science today requires us to rethink the past Christian position.”²²⁴ Thus, for Via and Kirby, science and culture can trump biblical authority. This is what Via suggests in the conclusion to his argument for same-sex marriages. He writes:

...if we look at a number of biblical themes in the light of contemporary knowledge and experience, we can justifiably override the unconditional biblical condemnations of homosexual practice....why should not a new posture toward homosexuality be understood as a hitherto unrecognized and unacknowledged aspect of all the truth that comes in Jesus, a truth that illuminates an aspect of human existence hitherto constricted by both church and society? Were the church to take an accepting posture toward the moral justifiability of sexual practice in consensual, loving, faithful homosexual relationships, that would seem to gay and lesbian Christians like the dawning of the Age to Come, the qualitatively new future becoming a reality in the present.²²⁵

²²² Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality And The Bible*, under “A Way Forward,” Kindle.

²²³ Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality And The Bible*, under “Homosexual Orientation,” Kindle.

²²⁴ Warner, *Five Uneasy Pieces*, Introduction, Kindle.

²²⁵ Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality And The Bible*, under “A Way Forward,” Kindle.

In answering the arguments put forth by pro-gay scholars, Wold offers a concise summary of the traditional view regarding Romans 1:

An explanation of the term *nature* in the first chapter of Romans confirms that the apostle's thought is consistent with the levitical writer's view on homosexuality. The practice of same-gender sexual relations violates the natural order of creation and flouts the image of God in humanity. Homosexual relations deny validity to the opposite gender and thereby devalue the male-female bond established in creation. They also run counter to the procreative purpose of sexual intercourse upon which the human species depends on survival.²²⁶

Thus, Wold views Paul's argument as rooted in the creation order and design and would then, logically rule out any homosexual practice, even consensual, committed homosexual relationships.

Wold answers Boswell's argument that Paul is not describing homosexuals who have always experienced same-sex attraction in Romans 1: 26-27, but Paul addresses heterosexuals who engage in homosexual acts which, for them, is unnatural. Wold dismisses Boswell's argument by stating, "Scripture knows of no distinction between morally neutral homosexual inverters and immoral heterosexuals who commit homosexual acts. Paul, a firm supporter of the law, was no doubt aware that Leviticus 18:22 categorically included under divine punishment all acts between members of the same sex."²²⁷

Wold believes Boswell's view negates the image of God. Wold counters Boswell, saying:

Those who interpret Romans 1 along the lines of Boswell and Pronk ignore the importance of the image of God in the discussion. They ignore that Christ is the

²²⁶ Wold, *Out Of Order*, 177.

²²⁷ Wold, *Out Of Order*, 181-182.

image of the godhead bodily and that he is the pattern from which humanity is being recreated. Homosexuality compromises that image; in order for this image to be restored, the atoning work of Christ must effect reconciliation between the homosexual and God. That point is key to Paul's theology of reconciliation.²²⁸

He adds, "A natural function is assigned to both men and women, and it is clear from this passage that it is heterosexual."²²⁹ Thus, Wold again stresses the created order and argues against homosexuality as natural or normative of God's design for creation.

Scholar Richard Hays reiterates Wold when he states, "Though he offers no explicit reflection on the concept of "nature," it is clear that in this passage Paul identifies "nature" with the created order, on empirical observation of what ought to be, of the world as designed by God. Those who indulge in sexual practices *para physin* are defying the creator and demonstrating their own alienation from him."²³⁰

Soards also outlines his defense of the traditional view of Romans 1, which is based on God's design in creation. He writes:

Paul singles out homosexual intercourse for special attention because he regards it as providing a particularly graphic image of the way in which human fallenness distorts God's created order. God the creator made man and woman for each other to cleave together, to be fruitful and multiply. When human beings engage in homosexual activity, they enact an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual reality: the rejection of the Creator's design. They *embody* the spiritual condition of those who have "exchanged the truth about God for a lie."²³¹

As with Genesis 19, conservative scholars center the debate on Romans 1 upon the divinely ordained institution of marriage in Genesis 1 and 2. Conservative scholars take a

²²⁸ Wold, *Out Of Order*, 183.

²²⁹ Wold, *Out Of Order*, 184.

²³⁰ Wold, *Out Of Order*, 185.

²³¹ Soards, *Scripture And Homosexuality*, 21.

bird's eye view of scripture and see Genesis 1 and 2 as foundational to the view of appropriate sexuality – monogamous heterosexual couples in a “one flesh” covenant relationship. In Romans 1, Paul demonstrates how sin twists human sexuality. Though he argues for the opposite view, Via aptly summarizes several key arguments of scholars who defend traditional view of homosexuality. He writes:

The reasons why Christians should oppose homosexual practice are primarily two. The main reason is the revelatory authority...The second reason is that same-sex intercourse is contrary to nature. It is contrary to nature or the sense of God's design for the relationship of the sexes. This design is *revealed by God* and *attested in Scripture*. But it is manifested in the material creation – visibly and palpably – and is not distorted or corrupted by the fall. It is seen in the complementarity or compatibility of the male and female sex organs, which includes the anatomical fittedness of penis and vaginal receptacle, the procreative function, and the capacity for mutual and pleasurable stimulation. Same-sex intercourse violates the otherness or difference that belongs to sexual relations “God's creative intent.”²³²

Via asserts the importance of scripture's witness when he writes, “Scripture consistently and unconditionally condemns homosexuality and represents heterosexual marriage as the only justifiable expression of sexuality;”²³³ Scripture offers a unified voice and “the Bible's *unanimous* opposition to homosexual practice gives to this position a special force.”²³⁴

In regards to creation, Gagnon argues, “Homosexual practice is contrary to the will of God in that it is a violation, a transgression against God's creative design for the

²³² Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality And The Bible*, under “Defense Of The Traditional Position,” Kindle.

²³³ Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality And The Bible*, under “Defense Of The Traditional Position,” Kindle.

²³⁴ Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality And The Bible*, under “Defense Of The Traditional Position,” Kindle.

world.”²³⁵ Conservative scholar, Wold, echoes Via as he describes God’s design in creation, “The first and archetypal sexual relationship described in Genesis between Adam and Eve was heterosexual and was accompanied by a blessing of fertility (Gen 1:28);”²³⁶ Thus, Wold concludes, “The paradigm for marriage is between heterosexuals.”²³⁷

Scholar Mark Yarhouse agrees with Wold. In his book, *Homosexuality and the Christian*, Yarhouse affirms the traditional, biblical view of homosexuality by also stressing the importance Genesis 1 and 2 as the blueprint for marriage. He writes:

What is the nature of family relationships? What we see in Genesis is that God created heterosexual marriage as the foundation of the family. This is affirmed later in the New Testament by Jesus, Paul, and others...Genesis affirms that God created two sexes, male and female, and that he wanted sexual intimacy to be kept within heterosexual unions. Creation is particularly important because it reveals what life was like before the effects of the fall. It was a state that God said was good, and therefore Christians should look at the creation story as having important implications for sexuality and sexual behavior. Though God’s design and His stated pronouncements, Christians have understood that His is blessing monogamous, heterosexual unions.²³⁸

Helminiak opposes Yarhouse’s assertion that the creation account sets the norm for marriage and excludes same-sex marriage. Helminiak believes, “the story is only the vehicle for conveying the religious point” of the fallen state of humanity.²³⁹ He asserts, “Genesis is not a lesson on sexual orientation” and nothing in Genesis 1 and 2 “suggests

²³⁵ Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality And The Bible*, under “Defense Of The Traditional Position,” Kindle.

²³⁶ Wold, *Out Of Order*, 161.

²³⁷ Wold, *Out Of Order*, 162.

²³⁸ Mark Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And Christianity* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2010), 19.

²³⁹ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 121-122.

that heterosexuality, in contrast to homosexuality, was a concern to the author's mind."²⁴⁰

Helminiak further states that reading "that modern concern into the text is simply to misuse the Bible."²⁴¹

Rogers agrees with Helminiak and claims, "Genesis 1-2 contains no reference to homosexuality or marriage. These chapters were not written to answer the questions that are now being put to them."²⁴² In fact, Rogers argues that Genesis says nothing about contemporary marriage writing, "I think that the contemporary model of Christian marriage is a good one for heterosexual people; one man and one woman should marry for life and, if they choose, bear and care for children. This model is not found in Genesis, however. Moreover it took Western society many centuries to come to it, and even so, half of the heterosexual people in American society do not follow it."²⁴³

Rogers then purports that homosexual unions are equal and interchangeable with heterosexual marriage. He asserts that there is no difference when he writes, "many Christian gay and lesbian people have committed themselves to one lifelong partner. Many care for children, and some that I know have adopted children with special needs. They seem to have gotten the point of the contemporary Christian model of marriage and are living it out."²⁴⁴ It is unclear what Helminiak and Rogers suggest as Genesis 2's purpose. Moreover, if Genesis 2:23, 24 do not establish the one-flesh relationship of

²⁴⁰ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 122.

²⁴¹ Helminiak, *What The Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, 122.

²⁴² Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 82.

²⁴³ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 83.

²⁴⁴ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 83.

heterosexual union, Rogers fails to clarify where he forms his “contemporary Christian model of marriage.”²⁴⁵ Nonetheless, if Genesis 2 establishes heterosexual marriage as normative, then marriage by definition excludes homosexual unions and limits biblically sanctioned and blessed marriages to heterosexual marriages.

White stresses the exclusivity of heterosexual marriage in scripture when he says, “Every instance of marriage is heterosexual, because no homosexual union can be considered marriage.”²⁴⁶ He further remarks that the Lord Jesus “referred to marriage as that which occurs between one man and a woman, whether in response to a question or used in instruction (Matthew 22:23-30; Luke 16:18). Most important in this regard is the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ allowed the description of marriage as being between a man and his wife to stand uncontested (Matthew 19:10).”²⁴⁷ Soards concurs with White’s view and states:

In the context of hostile controversy Jesus spoke about marriage. He showed little interest in the legal issue of divorce; instead his remarks focused on God’s purposes in making humans in the form of males and females. Jesus’ statements explicitly concern marriage and human sexuality rather than divorce per se....Jesus translated the conversation to a new plane. Instead of debating the validity of divorce, he declared the absolute will of God, expressed in God’s purposeful creation and described in Genesis 1-2. Maleness and femaleness---that is, human sexuality---are the evidence of God’s intention that males and females enter into complimentary, creative sexual unions that bind them together in a divinely intended and designed new form of life.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁵ Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, And Homosexuality*, 83.

²⁴⁶ White and Neill, *Out of Order*, 181.

²⁴⁷ White and Neill, *Out of Order*, 181.

²⁴⁸ Soards, *Scripture And Homosexuality*, 28.

While gay advocates assert that scripture does not say anything about homosexuality, Soards counters their assumption. He argues, “While Jesus is not reported to have spoken about human sexuality or homosexual behavior, his one recorded statement about human sexuality reveals that he understood males and females to be created by God for mutual relations that unite and fulfill both male and female in a (permanent) complementary union.”²⁴⁹ Soards concludes,

Jesus’ teaching shows that he understood heterosexual union in the context of marriage to be the norm of divinely intended sexual behavior. Thus, judging from both Jesus’ words and actions, we may conclude that marital heterosexual unions and abstinence from sexual involvement are the options for human sexual behavior that accord with the will of God.²⁵⁰

Traditionalists also defend their position by pointing to the ability to procreate in heterosexual marriage. The Lord commands Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply in Genesis 1:28, and people can only naturally fulfill this command through heterosexual unions. Homosexual partners cannot have children except by legal adoption or through artificial insemination. The biblical command to multiply clearly demonstrates that heterosexual, monogamous unions are God’s purposeful design for creation. The command to be fruitful would therefore necessitate the exclusion of homosexual unions since such relationships by their very nature cannot produce offspring. As Yarhouse states, “heterosexual sex is the means by which new life is formed, and the Bible places this way of forming new life in the specific relationship of heterosexual marriage.”²⁵¹ White concurs with Yarhouse as he concludes,

²⁴⁹ Soards, *Scripture And Homosexuality*, 28.

²⁵⁰ Sords, *Scripture And Homosexuality*, 29.

A homosexual “marriage” is not a covenant ordained by God, it is not complementary (being the same), and it lacks the ability to produce children – it is a non-perpetuating entity. This fact can be seen from another angle: children are to have *parents* and in the Bible these are called “father and mother” ... Marriage is a covenant designed by God and, as such, God has set the terms of this institution that He has designed. According to His designation, marriage is to be between a man and a woman. No other alternatives are acceptable.²⁵²

Yarhouse asserts that Genesis supports a traditional view of marriage and that heterosexual marriage also serves an exclusive, God-ordained spiritual purpose. Heterosexual marriage is a relationship pregnant with theological meaning and significance that same-sex unions can never achieve. Yarhouse states that marriage is about more than companionship between two loving, committed adults and serves a bigger purpose than procreation. The one-flesh union in heterosexual matrimony teaches people about God and their relationship to him. He writes:

There is also something that sex in heterosexual marriage can teach us if we look at it as a symbol of something bigger than the act itself... In some ways our sexuality and the desire for completion in another reflects our yearning for transcendence, for something that is above or beyond the world we know. That alone is instructive. But we also learn in the Old Testament about the covenant, or promise, that God made with His people. God related to His people like a faithful husband to a wayward wife. He uses that image to convey something of how He feels when His people pursue other gods, when His people prefer idols. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ ushers in a new covenant. The husband-wife relationship is again used to illustrate the relationship between Jesus and the church, as the church is called the bride of Christ. For some reason God repeatedly uses marriage between a man and a woman as an object lesson; it tells us about God’s love for His people -- it tells us about Christ’s love for the church.²⁵³

In summary, the debate surrounding Romans 1 centers on the meaning of Paul’s use of “nature.” Those who support an interpretation which favors divinely sanctioned

²⁵¹ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christian*, 20.

²⁵² White and Neill, *The Same Sex Controversy*, 181.

²⁵³ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christian*, 20.

same-sex relationships believe Paul uses “natural” in several ways. One group of pro-gay scholars, represented by Helminiak and Rogers, see Paul using “unnatural” to refer to what is unexpected or socially unconventional. Other pro-gay scholars, such as Via, take Paul at his word but disagree with him; they view scientific findings and human experience as evidence which trump Paul’s teaching regarding homosexuality.

On the other side of the debate, traditionalists are uniform in their position that Paul uses “nature” in Romans 1:26, 27 to refer to God’s created order for human sexuality. Paul’s description of men and women who have gone against their natural function to do unnatural acts refers to homosexuality; thus, these scholars see all forms of homosexuality as contrary to God’s design for human sexuality, including relationships which are consensual, committed and loving.

This chapter has examined the current debate about homosexuality within the church. The arguments surrounding six of the most significant passages in that debate have been reviewed. Despite reading the same texts, both sides arrive at very different conclusions. Gay biblical scholarship insists scripture “nowhere condemns homosexuality as it is predominantly known and practiced today and that, as a matter of fact, a lifestyle of committed homosexuality is consistent with biblical morality.”²⁵⁴ Yet, those who support the traditional view of marriage see that the controversy really centers on the authority of scripture. As conservative scholar White states, “The same sex controversy is, at its core, a controversy over the authority and interpretation of the Bible.”²⁵⁵

²⁵⁴ White and Neill, *The Same Sex Controversy*, 15.

²⁵⁵ White and Neill, *The Same Sex Controversy*, 15.

Scholars who argue for traditional marriage see pro-homosexual arguments as a means of distorting or distracting from the clear, consistent teaching of scripture – that homosexual practice of any kind is sin. Whether pro-gay scholars argue from science, the personal experience of gays, or a new hermeneutic, the issue is the authority of scripture.

White writes,

The interpretive approach of those who advocate the acceptability of homosexuality from the teaching of the Bible challenge the authority of scripture at every point and on each passage. These revisionists point to the Law of God as found in Leviticus and say that those passages do not apply to the modern day. While speaking of allegiance to the Bible, they revise the clear teaching of the Bible with regard to homosexuality.²⁵⁶

White bluntly adds that revisionists, “seeking a way around the clear revelation of God’s will in those scriptures, seek to ameliorate the pressure brought to bear upon either their lifestyle or their unorthodox beliefs by undercutting the authority of the Word by muting the clarity of its voice.”²⁵⁷ Soards echoes White, “When the Bible speaks in a single voice...the ultimate decision we make is for or against the scriptures with the full awareness that a choice against the Bible means that we claim an authority higher than, ‘the witness without parallel.’”²⁵⁸

Some pro-gay scholars acknowledge they advocate as Soards warns. For example, Michael Bird and Sarah Harris quote Roman Catholic scholar Luke Timothy Johnson, who candidly admits that some pro-gay scholars do not adhere to the authority of

²⁵⁶ White and Neill, *The Same Sex Controversy*, 19.

²⁵⁷ White and Neill, *The Same Sex Controversy*, 130.

²⁵⁸ Soards, *Scripture And Homosexuality*, 72.

scripture in the debate but have another guiding principle as their authority. Johnson frankly states:

I have little patience with efforts to make Scripture say something other than what it says, through appeals to linguistic or cultural subtleties. The exegetical situation is straightforward: we know what the text says. But what are we to *do* with what the text says?...I think it important to state that we do, in fact, reject the straightforward commands of Scripture, and appeal instead to another authority when we declare that same-sex unions can be holy and good. We appeal explicitly to the weight of our own experience and the experience thousands of others have witnessed to, which tells us that to claim our own sexual orientation is in fact to accept the way in which God created us.²⁵⁹

Thus, the permissibility of same sex marriages and scripture's authority are at stake in this debate. Those who support same sex unions offer arguments that undermine a clear authority and confidence in scripture. Those who support a traditional position see the scripture's message as unadulterated and crystal clear – that human sexuality fulfills God's purposes in heterosexual marriage which he established from the foundation of the world.

Christian Counseling

The purpose of this study was to discover how Christian parents of gay, adult children desire for their pastors to support them. In light of this study's purpose, Christian counseling resources for parents of gay, adult children were reviewed in order to examine what particular issues face Christian parents who have a gay, adult son or daughter and what kinds of counsel professionals offer. For the purposes of this study, only counseling resources from a faith-based perspective were reviewed since most Christian parents seeking pastoral care would expect counsel from an evangelical perspective.

²⁵⁹ Bird and Preece, *Sexegesis*, 103.

From the counseling literature reviewed, there are three main areas of concern for the Christian parent whose adult child identifies as homosexual. First, the emotional distress parents experience when they discover their child is gay. Second, the questions parents have about causation and how their child came to have a same-sex orientation. Third, the negotiations parents navigate in how they balance loving their child while remaining true to their biblical convictions.

Emotions

Based upon the literature, Christian parents who learn that their adult son or daughter is gay undergo deep emotional distress and turmoil that “may include shock, denial, guilt, shame, disgust, confusion, loss, anger, sadness, betrayal, mistrust, numbness, fear and grief.”²⁶⁰ For example, Barbara Johnson, author of *Where Does a Mother Go to Resign?* describes her reaction when she found out her son was gay,

I threw myself down on the bed and a terrible roaring sob burst from me...I was alone in the house, and for several terrifying minutes sobs from fear, shock and disbelief shook me. Flashing in my mind was this wonderful son who was so bubbly and happy--such a joy to have around. Thinking of him entwined with some other male brought heaves of heavy sobbing from deep wounds of agony.²⁶¹

For many Christian parents, “the discovery of a loved one’s homosexuality is the emotional equivalent of being hit over the head with a baseball bat.”²⁶² When her son announced he was gay, Ann Mobley was “in a state of shock, disbelief and denial.”²⁶³

²⁶⁰ Richard Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents, A Plan for Family Healing* (Downers Groves, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 37.

²⁶¹ Anita Worthen and Bob Davies, *Someone I Love Is Gay: How Family And Friends Can Respond* (Downers Groves, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 23.

²⁶² Worthen and Davies, *Someone I Love Is Gay*, 25-26.

²⁶³ Mobley, *If I Tell You I’m Gay Will You Still Love Me?*, chap. 1, Kindle.

Worthen and Davies suggest that the emotional pain is so great that, “(a)ll kinds of stress-related symptoms may appear: nausea, migraines, sleeplessness, lack of appetite and disinterest in marital intimacy.”²⁶⁴

The literature reveals a common theme; that Christian parents experience a loss that feels like a death. Ann Mobley reflects on her experience:

In many ways, discovering your child is gay is initially a lot like a death in the family: the sense of unreality and numbness, the relentless pain, the shattered dreams, the loss of extended family through that child – all of which I experienced when my older son Nat was killed. But there is a major difference. This is a pain and loss often suffered in isolation, as there is no obituary notice, no friends gathering around to give comfort, no cards and notes of condolences, no flowers...because this is a loss that is difficult to share with others. You can hardly articulate the loss to yourself; how can you bear to put it into words to others?²⁶⁵

Barbara Johnson offers a similar reflection: “Finding out about a gay child is agony...It’s almost like having a death in the family. But when someone dies you can bury that person and move on with your life. With homosexuality, the pain seems never-ending.”²⁶⁶ For many the revelation is a death of dreams and aspirations for their child and family. Psychotherapist Richard Cohen notes, “In all likelihood, this is not what you dreamed of or wished for your child’s future. The revelation of her homosexuality might well involve the loss of your dreams for her marriage and your grandchildren.”²⁶⁷

Author and counselor Joe Dallas has also observed this sense of loss in the parents he has counseled. He writes,

²⁶⁴ Worthen and Davies, *Someone I Love Is Gay*, 26.

²⁶⁵ Mobley, *If I Tell You I’m Gay Will You Still Love Me?*, chap. 2, Kindle.

²⁶⁶ Worthen and Davies, *Someone I Love Is Gay*, 22.

²⁶⁷ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 38.

When listening to people describe their feelings about a homosexual loved one, death is the word I hear most often. Of course, words like shock, fear, and confusion are used as well, but the phrase ‘it feels like he died’ comes up more than any other... When homosexuality hits home, I’ve come to believe, there *is* a death involved...it’s the death of assumptions.²⁶⁸

He defines these assumptions as, “the assumption our son or daughter will carry out our tradition, both religious and relational, expires when we learn our child has feelings we never assumed he or she would feel, and now holds beliefs we never imagined a member of our family would hold.”²⁶⁹ Dallas observed how grieving parents go through the five stages of grief similar to those purported by Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross who studied the emotional stages of those who were dying: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.²⁷⁰

Like Dallas, Cohen sees a similarity between Kubler-Ross’ study and the emotional phases of Christian parents who grieve over their gay son or daughter. He defines them as follows. First, parents experience denial and often think, “this can’t be happening to me/us/him/her.” Second, parents will often feel anger and question why this happened when they did their best. Third, parents bargain with God, thinking they can do something to change their child. In the fourth phase, depression sets in as parents see the new reality is true, it is too painful, and dreams are lost. Fifth, parents reach a place of acceptance, and begin to ask questions such as, what now? “What can I do to assist their child? How can they take care of themselves in the process?”²⁷¹

²⁶⁸ Dallas, *When Homosexuality Hits Home*, 23.

²⁶⁹ Dallas, *When Homosexuality Hits Home*, 24.

²⁷⁰ Dallas, *When Homosexuality Hits Home*, 25.

Cohen offers this counsel to parents:

You will revisit these stages over and over again. It is important to keep expressing your feelings and thoughts to your spouse, friends, and loved ones as well as to yourself and God. The more you are able to express yourself, the more quickly you will pass through the five stages. As the saying goes, “You must feel and be real in order to heal.” Feelings that are buried alive never really die. If left unexpressed, they get repressed, which further complicates the situation.²⁷²

Worthen and Davies concur with Cohen and Dallas as they have observed,

“Grief--often overwhelming and crippling--is the most common emotion reaction to the discovery of a loved one’s homosexuality.”²⁷³ Worthen and Davis have also observed,

“Some family members, especially men, react by denying that any problem even exists.

This can be caused by ignorance of homosexuality, or it can be a symptom of hoping for the best in a bad situation...Denial is a form of instinctive protection, a way of coping with something too distressing to acknowledge.”²⁷⁴

Like Dallas, Worthern and Davis define grief as a sense of loss over various assumptions:

Loss of security. Even though your friend or relative has probably been aware of homosexual feelings for years, this is a new revelation to you. Suddenly you feel like you are talking to a stranger, as this unfamiliar aspect of their personality is revealed. The sense of betrayal can be devastating. *Loss of control.* Suddenly life seems totally out of control. Your daughter has rejected Christianity, including the core moral values you have taught her since birth. Loss of future dreams. Before this discovery, the future may have seemed so bright and certain. Now you wonder what will happen to your family, your marriage, your children, your friends. Perhaps your son represented your one chance to experience the joy of being a grandmother. You always dreamed of your daughter’s being the star of a

²⁷¹ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 39.

²⁷² Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 39.

²⁷³ Worthen and Davies, *Someone I Love Is Gay*, 23.

²⁷⁴ Worthen and Davies, *Someone I Love Is Gay*, 27-28.

huge “white gown” wedding in your family’s church....Your dreams have crashed on the hard rock of reality.²⁷⁵

Along with grief, counselors observe that Christian parents with adult, gay children also “carry a lot of shame.”²⁷⁶ As Worthen and Davis suggest,

Despite the huge gains that have been made in terms of pro-gay activism, the majority of people in our society still disapprove of homosexuality. And parents share the stigma of their child’s sexual behavior. This is especially true for parents who are members of a conservative Christian church. In many churches homosexuality is right up there with the biggest sins imaginable—or so it feels to parents who have just discovered this situation within their family.²⁷⁷

This was Ann Mobley’s experience who divulges, “Feelings of guilt and shame consumed me. Where had my husband and I failed as parents? ...My feelings of failure as a Christian parent were like a healing weight of condemnation on my back, for I concluded that if others knew about Dan, they, too, would view me as a very poor Christian parent.”²⁷⁸

Mobley reflects what Cohen asserts, “There may be a tendency to be obsessed with thoughts such as, *What if _____ finds out? What if she says, “You must have been a lousy parent. Why else would you have a child who is gay?”*”²⁷⁹ He advises parents, “You will need to choose carefully those with whom you share about your child’s SSA,

²⁷⁵ Worthen and Davies, *Someone I Love Is Gay*, 25.

²⁷⁶ Worthen and Davies, *Someone I Love Is Gay*, 43.

²⁷⁷ Worthen and Davies, *Someone I Love Is Gay*, 43.

²⁷⁸ Mobley, *If I Tell You I’m Gay, Will You Still Love Me?*, chap. 5, Kindle.

²⁷⁹ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 50.

because there is so much judgment and rejection by those who should be the most loving and understanding. Sadly this is especially true in the religious community.”²⁸⁰

The shame Christian parents experience often results in isolation. Parents cut themselves off from social interaction; they go into hiding. Cohen quips, “It has been said, ‘When the child “comes out,” the parents go in the closet.’”²⁸¹ A deep sense of shame can lead to isolation. Yarhouse writes, “Having an adult child who identifies as gay is the kind of challenging situation that for some Christians is especially isolating. There may be family shame around admitting that an adult child experiences same-sex attraction or is making choices about identity and behavior” and may lead to “isolation away from much-needed social support that could help them during this difficult time.”²⁸²

Ann Mobley’s experience this isolation and reveals her desire to hide her situation from others:

I certainly didn’t intend to tell anyone what I had learned about my son...I could not tell anyone about Dan. Then the realization hit me: Dan and I had changed places. He can come “out of the closet,” but I was going in. By revealing his secret life to me, he had found relief from his burden, but now it was my dark secret to carry. I had picked up the millstone, and it was one I could not ask others to help me carry.²⁸³

Cohen also has found similar reactions in his counseling experience. He concludes:

Almost every SSA family member has said words like these: I am afraid of telling other family members and friends about our child’s homosexuality. I am afraid that when they find out, their opinion of our son and our family will change. Then

²⁸⁰ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 50.

²⁸¹ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 49.

²⁸² Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christian*, 131.

²⁸³ Mobley, *If I Tell You I’m Gay, Will You Still Love Me?*, chap. 2, Kindle.

the concept that our child is gay will be fixed in their minds, and the possibility of his coming out of homosexuality will become less and less.²⁸⁴

Worthen and Davies concur, stating, “Knowing of our loved one’s homosexuality can put us into an extremely awkward situation...Some parents conclude that the awkward questions are avoided most easily by staying away from the people--such as friends at church--who have a tendency to ask them.”²⁸⁵ They warn parents that such isolation is detrimental to the healing process and assert, “As we focus on this one issue, we may stop doing other things that could actually help us move through the pain. Our obsession with our loved ones cuts us from other meaningful relationships.”²⁸⁶

Related to feelings of shame, the counseling literature uniformly discussed the feelings of guilt that many Christian parents experience when they learn their child is gay. One mother describes her sense of self-blame:

I will never forget the day I came right out and asked him if he was gay. My heart broke when he said yes. From that day forward my mind was consumed with nothing else. I began to go over every little detail of his life. What did I do to cause this to happen? What could I have done to prevent this? I blamed myself for all of it. Our relationship had changed from best friends to what seemed like enemies.²⁸⁷

While the authors acknowledged parents’ struggle with guilt, they offered counsel to assuage their self-blame for their adult child’s SSA. For example, Cohen offers this counsel:

²⁸⁴ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 47.

²⁸⁵ Worthen and Davies, *Someone I Love Is Gay*, 32.

²⁸⁶ Worthen and Davies, *Someone I Love Is Gay*, 33.

²⁸⁷ Dallas and Heche, *The Complete Christian Guide To Understanding Homosexuality*, 321.

While you are dealing with your child's SSA, you may find yourself burdened with guilt. "It's all my fault" is a natural reaction, but it simply isn't true. You can be sure that there are many potential causes for your child's SSA. An important point to realize and remember is this: It is not parenting that creates SSA in men or women. It is the child's temperament combined with his perception of the parenting and other social influences that make all the difference. Perception becomes reality.²⁸⁸

He reiterates this point, "Initially you may blame yourself and/or your spouse for your child's SSA. Don't waste another minute: stop the blame game, because it does not help you, your spouse or your child."²⁸⁹

Worthen and Davies offer similar counsel while acknowledging that that parenting may have some role in a child's same-sex orientation. They advise: "*I caused my child's homosexuality*' This statement is totally false and is probably the biggest lie you will have to stand against. *No one person has the power to cause another's homosexuality*. At worst, a parent-child relationship may be *one factor* in a whole complex group of influences."²⁹⁰

Both Cohen, Worthen and Davies advise parents to own whatever mistakes they might have made in the past and seek forgiveness. Worthen and Davies state that, "Avoiding the truth does not resolve guilt. So what is the solution? Boldly facing the truth, then walking through the guilt to repentance and forgiveness. This of course can be a deeply painful process. It can be very harmful, for example, to hear your gay loved one's true feelings about his or her upbringing."²⁹¹ Cohen echoes Worthen and Davies as

²⁸⁸ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 39-40.

²⁸⁹ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 44.

²⁹⁰ Worthen and Davies, *Someone I Love Is Gay*, 43-44.

²⁹¹ Worthen and Davies, *Someone I Love Is Gay*, 48.

he offers his advice to parents: “The only thing that will change the situation is taking personal responsibility for past mistakes, which means apologizing, making amends and creating a loving attachment between you, your spouse and your child.”²⁹²

Dallas reflects Cohen’s views when he advises parents to own whatever mistakes they made but realize that those mistakes did not make their child homosexual. He writes:

If you can see where you’re guilty of mistakes or wrongdoing as a parent, admit it and take responsibility for it. You may have apologies or explanations to make to your son or daughter, and now would be a good time to make them. But it’s wrong to assume whatever mistakes you made *created* your son’s or daughter’s sexual preference. You may--or may not have--contributed to it. Your influence is limited; so limited that you could not, even if you wanted to, have caused your loved one’s homosexuality.²⁹³

Similarly, Heche advises, “needless self-blame is one thing we want to avoid.

Take responsibility when you know you’ve done something wrong, but don’t go scrambling to try and figure out what *unknown* thing you may have done.”²⁹⁴ Yarhouse also discourages parents from blaming themselves but for a different reason than Cohen, Heche, Worthen and Davies. He encourages parents not to blame themselves as it detracts from really hearing what their child has to say. He explains:

It is hard for parents to listen when they are reviewing in their minds the decisions that made that, looking back, they may feel have contributed to homosexuality. It is very common for parents to wonder if they caused their adult child’s experience of same-sex attraction. From the parent’s perspective, this might include not being involved enough in their son or daughter’s early childhood, strained parent-child relationships in adolescence, or allowing or encouraging certain activities, such as sports for girls or drama for boys. If this is something you as apparent are worried about, you are not alone. But the point here is that the more parents focus on this

²⁹² Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 44.

²⁹³ Dallas, *When Homosexuality Hits Home*, 75.

²⁹⁴ Dallas and Heche, *The Complete Christian Guide To Understanding Homosexuality*, 323.

the less they are able to listen to their adult child. This may lead your adult child to conclude that you've already filled in the history, conveying to them that you don't feel the need to listen.²⁹⁵

Parents should reframe from blaming themselves, and furthermore, Cohen warns against parents blaming the other spouse. He cautions that it may be "tempting to blame your spouse or other people for your child's same-sex attraction" but when "spouses blame one another for past events, they create further distance between themselves, which invariably ends up being counterproductive in their efforts to restore their SSA child."²⁹⁶

Finally, Worthen and Davies remind parents that their child is an adult and responsible for his or her own actions and behavior. Parents, therefore, should not be burdened unnecessarily with self-blame. They write,

One important principle has freed many family members from a sense of false guilt: Remember who is responsible for your loved one's life. *You cannot control your loved one's choices--only your reaction to their choices.* You cannot be guilty for things which you have no control. And you have no control over the moral choices of your adult children.²⁹⁷

In the literature review, many authors offered advice to parents on dealing with their adverse emotions. For example, Heche writes, "Christian parents who find out about their child's homosexuality should take steps to get help for themselves, by way of support and education, to help them deal with their own emotions and questions."²⁹⁸ Yarhouse encourages parents to be unified in their response to their son or daughter. He

²⁹⁵ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christian*, 122.

²⁹⁶ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 51.

²⁹⁷ Worthen and Davies, *Someone I Love Is Gay*, 50.

²⁹⁸ Dallas and Heche, *The Complete Christian Guide To Understanding Homosexuality*, 329.

warns against the tendency “for parents to polarize when an adult child announces a gay identity. Remember that polarization happens when each parent almost becomes a caricature of a set of real and strong emotions that both parents likely feel. It is most common for this to take the form of anger from one parent and love from the other.”²⁹⁹ He further explains that the “parent who expresses love for the family is often feeling protective of the adult child, frequently in response to the other parent who is expressing anger.”³⁰⁰ To avoid this situation, he advises that spouses take “active steps toward each other during this difficult time.”³⁰¹ He further counsels that, “It is important to take care of yourself. Remember that grief is a common response for many couples, and one or more partner may struggle with depression. Self-care involves having a framework or structure in place that is good for you. It includes diet and nutrition, regular exercise, social support, and spiritual disciplines, such as corporate worship, reading Scripture, and prayer.”³⁰²

Cohen encourages parents to realize that the emotions they are feeling are the same emotions their son or daughter felt growing up with a same sex attraction; this should encourage sympathy for the son or daughter. He writes, “Realize that you are entering your child’s world. You are feeling and experiencing what your son or daughter has already been going through, perhaps for years: confusion, hurt, denial, pain, anger,

²⁹⁹ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christians*, 129.

³⁰⁰ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christians*, 130.

³⁰¹ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christians*, 130.

³⁰² Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christians*, 130-131.

shock, guilt, shame and betrayal. In short, the question you continually ask yourself is, ‘Why me?’”³⁰³

In order for parents to express their deep feelings appropriately, many counsel them to join a support group or to develop a strong network of trusted family and friends who will lend a listening ear. Cohen advises parents to “(a)sk for support from your family, friends and your spiritual community...Attend support groups for parents...Take care of yourself. Take care of your relationship with your spouse (if you are married). Keep things in balance while seeking God’s comfort and guidance.”³⁰⁴ He adds that parents should not “manage things on your own. We exist in relationships and parents should find others with whom to share their feelings.”³⁰⁵ (He urges parents to create “a supportive community around yourself, your spouse (if you have one) and your SSA child” of relatives, pastor and trusted friends.³⁰⁶

In addition to guilt, shame and isolation, some parents struggle with anger towards God. Mobley describes her feelings:

During those times, I even struggled with my attitude toward God. One night, I found myself again in a black hole of despondency. I didn’t know where to turn for answers; the future looked like a long, lonely, black road with no end in sight. Emotionally and mentally, I was in total despair and cried to the Lord, “Lord, I can’t do this. I can’t walk down this black road. Dan’s all the family I’ve got left. You’re asking too much of me; you’ve gone too far this time, God.”³⁰⁷

³⁰³ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 26-27.

³⁰⁴ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 27.

³⁰⁵ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 47.

³⁰⁶ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 47.

³⁰⁷ Mobley, *If I Tell You I’m Gay, Will You Still Love Me?*, chap. 2, Kindle.

Yarhouse counsels that anger “toward God is often really confusion. Parents feel confused about what is going on and where God is in their circumstances. This is not unusual.”³⁰⁸ He encourages struggling parents “to turn toward God--to be honest about what (they) feel and about (their) worries and concerns for (their) son or daughter, for the future, for the different family relationships, and so on.”³⁰⁹ He acknowledges that, he has “seen God respond to the honest questions parents ask, but sometimes this means sitting in pain and letting God attend to us in time. I can’t say this is necessarily why God allows these difficult circumstances, but I do believe God will be present with us, providing us with what we need and often surprising us with His grace and mercy.”³¹⁰

Instead of anger, some of the counselors offer a different perspective to encourage faith in God, rather than doubt in his goodness. Cohen reminds the parent that, “Sometimes difficult things happen so that the glory of God may be revealed in and through us.”³¹¹ He advises parents to pray for their child and get others to pray for their child.³¹² Worthen and Davis echo Cohen as they suggest, “We have had to trust God in a whole new way because we have come face-to-face with a problem that we cannot fix ourselves.”³¹³ This was Mobley’s experience as well. She writes, “Just as (the Lord) had done in past painful situations, he would use this to draw me closer to himself and teach

³⁰⁸ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And the Christian*, 131-132.

³⁰⁹ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And the Christian*, 132.

³¹⁰ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And the Christian*, 132.

³¹¹ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 60.

³¹² Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 61.

³¹³ Worthen and Davies, *Someone I Love Is Gay*, 35.

me to know him in a deeper way. The Lord reminded me of how he, in a redemptive way, used my other times of painful loss to equip me to minister to others who were hurting. In that same way, he would use this difficult time to prepare me to help others who would walk down this same dark road.”³¹⁴ Mobley saw her situation with her gay son as an opportunity for the Lord to change her own heart. She reveals that the Lord “first began to deal with issues and sinful attitudes in my own heart. He lay bare my deep prejudices and pride. He showed me that I did not understand his heart in this issue, that I needed to know his love in a deeper, experiential way, and then learn how to walk in that love on this new journey.”³¹⁵

Various authors encouraged their readers to reach a place of acceptance of their situation and limitations and to rely on God’s grace and power to work through their family dilemma. Rather than draw away from God in anger and despair, Mobley humbly accepted her reality and, instead, used it to draw closer to the Lord. She writes, “So much of what God would do in the future went back to that moment, to my decision not to draw away from God in rebellion but to bow in submission.”³¹⁶ Worthen and Davies offer a similar view when they counsel: “We acknowledge that things will never be quite the same again. Life has changed forever. We will never view our loved one with the same eyes of innocence again. Although this fact is painful, we must accept it and grapple with

³¹⁴ Mobley, *If I Tell You I’m Gay, Will You Still Love Me?*, chap. 1, Kindle.

³¹⁵ Mobley, *If I Tell You I’m Gay, Will You Still Love Me?*, chap. 5, Kindle.

³¹⁶ Mobley, *If I Tell You I’m Gay, Will You Still Love Me?*, chap. 3, Kindle.

its implications.”³¹⁷ They add, “Moving through grief includes accepting responsibility for our past mistakes and seeking wisdom for doing the right thing now.”³¹⁸ And they offer hope, stating, “You cannot change the past--but you can change the impact of the past. It’s never too late to begin laying a new foundation for your future relationship with your loved one.”³¹⁹

Dallas aptly and eloquently summarizes the Christian parents’ journey from denial, shock, and dismay to a trusting confidence in God,

So what happens when homosexuality hits home? First you cry. Then you argue with your loved one, perhaps even shout a bit. You question; you agonize; you rage. You try to understand the person you love, perhaps never reaching appoint of full understanding, but trying all the same. You negotiate, renegotiate, and finally come to some sort of terms by which the two of you can still have a relationship.

Then you draw close to God---hopefully, closer than ever. In doing so, you strengthen your relationship with Him, and others as well. You lean on friends, listen to mentors, rest a bit, and try finding a way to relax and even have a bit of fun.

You still grieve and you still wait, but finally, you also accept. You’re able to accept because, being closer to God than ever, your faith and patience have been strengthened. So you learn to enjoy your homosexual loved one without ever approving of homosexuality, and in doing so, your confidence grows to the point where you, having committed this beloved person to God, can say with more confidence than ever: “I know who I believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed--the person I love and who God loves even more—unto Him.”³²⁰

³¹⁷ Worthen and Davies, *Someone I Love Is Gay*, 36.

³¹⁸ Worthen and Davies, *Someone I Love Is Gay*, 36-37.

³¹⁹ Worthen and Davies, *Someone I Love Is Gay*, 50.

³²⁰ Dallas, *When Homosexuality Hits Home*, 46.

Causation

According to the literature reviewed, Christian parents commonly wonder about the causation of homosexuality. How their son or daughter, raised in a Christian home, can embrace a homosexual identity perplexes parents. They want to know how and, in particular, if they caused it in some way. As Mobley states, “When parents first learn of their child’s gay identity and same sex behavior, the most immediate and disturbing question seems to be, ‘How could my child be gay?’ That was certainly my foremost thought...What had gone wrong?”³²¹

Of the counseling literature reviewed, none of the authors purported that a gene exists which determines a homosexual identity. Rather, they cite references that demonstrate how a complex web of different factors, that include inborn traits and environment, form a person’s sexual identity. Sexual identity results from nature and nurture, and current scientific research does not support the premise that people are born gay.

For example, Cohen asserts, “*There is no compelling evidence that anyone is determined from birth to have SSA.* There is no conclusive scientific data that proves there is a simple biological or genetic cause for homosexuality. Scientific research indicates that although biological and genetic factors may play a part, homosexual desires stem from the complex influences along with these factors.”³²² Dr. Mark Yarhouse agrees and writes, “we don’t know for sure what causes homosexuality. We can imagine that it is a host of factors probably contribute, and that those contributions likely vary in

³²¹ Mobley, *If I Tell You I’m Gay, Will You Still Love Me?*, chap. 5, Kindle.

³²² Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 70.

significance from person to person.”³²³ He adds, “There appear to be many factors that may contribute to same-sex attraction or a homosexual orientation, and these factors are probably weighted differently for different people.”³²⁴

Yarhouse comes to his conclusion by citing the American Psychological Association that summarized the current research regarding the etiology of homosexuality as follows,

There is no consensus among scientists about the exact reasons that an individual develops a heterosexual, bisexual, gay, or lesbian orientation. Although much research has examined the possible genetic, hormonal, developmental, social, and cultural influences on sexual orientation, no findings 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; most people experience little or no sense of choice about their sexual orientation.³²⁵

While all of the literature reviewed acknowledged that many factors are involved in influencing sexual orientation, much of the literature stressed the parent-child relationship and same-sex peer rejection as prominent factors in determining same-sex attraction. The strongest proponent of this causal link is Cohen who details the parent-child relational and social factors which, he argues, lead to homosexuality. He describes these as follows:

There are many contributing factors that can result in homosexual desires. Some of the causes of SSA may be disrupted attachment between father and son or mother and daughter (this may strictly be the child’s perception, not the parent’s failure), overattachment to the opposite –sex parent, hypersensitivity, lack of bonding with the same-sex peers, sibling wounds, cultural wounds, name-calling, sexual abuse and body image wounds. There is never one thing alone that causes

³²³ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christian*, 79.

³²⁴ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christian*, 80.

³²⁵ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christian*, 79.

SSA. A combination of several variables leads to homosexual desires in men and women.³²⁶

Cohen believes that at the root:

...same-sex attraction is not really about sex at all. SSA has to do with a sense of not belonging, not fitting in, feeling on the outside, being somehow different. A boy feels “less than” and unlike the other guys; he may have been called “faggot,” “queer,” “sissy,” or “gay” at school. A girl feels different too and doesn’t think she belongs with other girls. She may have been called “dyke,” “lesbian,” “tomboy” or “gay.” Same-sex attraction is about internalized emotions of detachment and is created over years of confusion and pain.³²⁷

Those with SSA have a “need for gender identification. Since there was insufficient bonding with their same-sex parent and/or same-sex peers, they seek to join with members of the same gender in order to internalize their missing sense of masculinity or femininity.”³²⁸ Cohen further argues, “In spite of current cultural messages to the contrary, over eight years of scientific research show that women and men who experience SSA are stuck in an early stage of psychosexual development because of hurts and deficits.”³²⁹

Cohen asserts that those with same sex attraction have a strong internal desire for affirmation and affection from their same-sex parent or peers; left unmet, these normal desires become sexualized at puberty. Cohen writes: “During puberty, what were once emotional desires for same-sex bonding now become sexually inflamed yearnings. The emotional need for nonsexual intimacy with the same-sex parent and/or same-sex peers suddenly becomes eroticized. However intense the desire may feel, it is important to

³²⁶ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 19.

³²⁷ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 16.

³²⁸ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 20.

³²⁹ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 16.

remember that the basis for all SSA is conflicted emotional need, not sexual attractions.”³³⁰

Cohen adds that there is a “[f]ear of intimacy with members of the opposite sex. There may be over attachment between mother and son or father and daughter or an abusive relationship with a member of the opposite sex. Either will preclude healthy heterosexual desires.”³³¹ Since homosexual orientation is not innate but primarily due to relational difficulties, he believes that if the emotional “wounds are healed and if the unmet love needs are fulfilled in healthy same-sex relationships, the person will experience the fullness of his own gender identity and opposite desires will ensue.”³³²

Regardless of the cause, counselors stress the need for parents to recognize that their son or daughter did not choose to be attracted to their own sex. Yarhouse writes, “I don’t think people choose to experience same-sex attraction...Most people...who experience same-sex attraction simply find themselves experiencing attraction to the same sex.”³³³ Counselors, like Yarhouse, emphasize to Christian parents the need to demonstrate compassion and understanding to their son or daughter. As Mobley advises, “Learning all you can from a Christian perspective about the homosexual condition will help you know and understand the pain that is in your child’s life. The more I learned about some of the factors that can contribute to the development of same sex attractions

³³⁰ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 20.

³³¹ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 20.

³³² Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 71.

³³³ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christian*, 78.

and the pain that my son had experienced, the more my heart began to melt and my compassion grew for my son.”³³⁴

Negotiation

In addition to the issues of emotional toil and causation, the counseling literature uniformly addressed the subject of negotiation. Various counselors offer parents advice on how to maintain the delicate balance between maintaining a relationship with their gay, adult child and holding to their convictions. First, the literature reviewed stressed the importance of loving unconditionally. As Mobley writes, “Being able to show love and acceptance to my son instead of condemnation and rejection was keeping the door of communication open between us.”³³⁵ Her views reflect much of the Christian counsel offered in the literature:

Love your child unconditionally. As I shared earlier, God can give you the ability to love your child with his love. Communicate that unconditional love regularly to your child in ways that he or she can understand. Assure him or her of your care. He or she is still your child; that has not changed. What has changed is what you now know about him or her. He or she needs to know that your love is not based on his or her acceptable or unacceptable behavior but on the fact that he or she is your child.³³⁶

While accepting your child is paramount, Mobley cautions, “Unconditional love does not mean condoning wrong and sinful behavior. You can accept your child without accepting his or her unacceptable behavior;” she encourages parents to still “(s)tand true to biblical truths regarding sin. But understand that homosexuality is not the greatest sin nor is it the only sin the Bible calls ‘an abomination.’...It is the *sin* that is an abomination

³³⁴ Mobley, *If I Tell You I’m Gay, Will You Still Love Me?*, chap. 5, Kindle.

³³⁵ Mobley, *If I Tell You I’m Gay, Will You Still Love Me?*, chap. 5, Kindle.

³³⁶ Mobley, *If I Tell You I’m Gay, Will You Still Love Me?*, chap. 5, Kindle.

to God, not the *person* committing the sin.”³³⁷ She highlights the difficult dilemma many Christian parents face in maintaining a positive relationship with their child. She describes the tightrope walk: “It was important for me to not compromise the Bible’s unambiguous characterizations of same-sex behavior as sinful, yet at the same time unmistakably show the love of God toward people engaged in homosexual practice.”³³⁸

Mobley asserts that the difficulty in loving the child, but hating the sin is that a gay adult son or daughter’s identity is defined by their sexual orientation. Establishing her viewpoint, she quotes Randy Thomas, former staff member of Exodus International:

You are dealing with a subculture that identifies as “gay.” They are identifying themselves by homosexuality. To say that you hate homosexuality but love homosexuals doesn’t make sense to those whose primary identity lies with their sexuality... The underlying difference that “hate the sin, love the sinner” completely misses is that the Christian sees homosexuality as a condition to overcome whereas the gay-identified person sees homosexuality as an innate identity he or she has embraced.³³⁹

Cohen also supports loving a gay son or daughter unconditionally:

Probably the most important thing to remember as you begin to reach out to your SSA child is that your love must be unconditional. If you give the impression either directly or indirectly that you hope, by loving your child more, that he will “change,” leaving homosexuality behind, your best efforts will almost certainly be rejected. If you indicate that bringing about change is your intention, your efforts will look like cynical manipulation to your child. Please keep in mind that love must be offered unconditionally.³⁴⁰

Cohen encourages parents (especially the same-sex parent) to engage fully with their son or daughter in order to repair any parent-child relational damage that may have

³³⁷ Mobley, *If I Tell You I’m Gay, Will You Still Love Me?*, chap. 5, Kindle.

³³⁸ Mobley, *If I Tell You I’m Gay, Will You Still Love Me?*, chap. 4, Kindle.

³³⁹ Mobley, *If I Tell You I’m Gay, Will You Still Love Me?*, chap. 4, Kindle.

³⁴⁰ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 22-23.

influenced the child towards a same-sex attraction. He states his counseling objectives and strategy as follows:

SSA represents a person's detachment from his sense of being masculine or her sense of being feminine. If secure attachment can be established between your child and the same-sex parent as well as with gender-secure, same-sex role models, and healthy boundaries established with your child and the opposite-sex parent, he will then be on the right track toward potential healing of his gender identity. When a man feels his masculinity, he will be attracted to the opposite, a woman. When a woman feels her femininity, she will be attracted to the opposite, a man.³⁴¹

Cohen encourages the same-gender parent to deepen his or her relationship with their gay son or daughter so as to assist them to embrace their true gender identity. Thus, he advises parents to:

Join with your child. Grieve with and for her. Listen, listen and listen. Be Mr. or Ms. KYMS (Keep your Mouth Shut). Travel back in time with her to find out what she went through. This will demand much time, touch and talk.

Establish trust, do things together and attend meetings of their choice. Love, praise, stroke, hold, cherish, and provide the unmet needs for love. This is particularly important for the same-sex parent to do. ...Fathers, get more involved in your son's life. Mothers, do the same with your daughter...It is important to demonstrate your love and care by "joining" in his world, seeing from their point of view. It does not mean that you condone the behavior or lifestyle. It means you love your child and want to understand her perspective.³⁴²

Yarhouse seems to disagree with Cohen's assertion that mending the parent-child relationship will ease same-sex attraction in the child or change his orientation. Instead he asserts: "I don't think we have particularly compelling reasons to believe that improving the parent-child relationship today will resolve the homosexuality for the adult child. Parents who wish to improve their relationship with their child should do so simply on

³⁴¹ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 33.

³⁴² Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 27-28.

the basis of it being the right thing to do rather than with the view that it will solve the riddle of homosexuality.”³⁴³

Perhaps Cohen’s approach is better suited for those who struggle with same sex attraction and are still actively engaged in their parent’s life and under their guidance. As Yarhouse points out, adults with same sex attraction “who talk to their parents about being gay are much more likely to make a declaration than request assistance.”³⁴⁴

Cohen’s therapeutic approach is unique among the counseling literature, both in terms of strategy and in advice on how parents should declare their view of homosexuality. Cohen counsels parents to state their “beliefs regarding homosexuality one time and one time only;” he cautions parents to “not repeat them over and over again. If (they) continue to hammer away on morals and values, (they) will further distance (their) already-detached child and lose valuable ground” and warns that “constant negativity will only reinforce your child’s sense of ‘not belonging’ with you and will further distance her from a loving God.”³⁴⁵

Mobley offers similar advice, but less dogmatic, when she states, “Don’t preach to your son/daughter about the wrongness of homosexual behavior every time they walk in the door.”³⁴⁶ Heche concurs with Mobley and suggests, “While it is important to be clear in our positions, endless arguing over the rightness or wrongness of homosexuality tends to do more harm than good to families. At some point it can be advisable to ‘agree

³⁴³ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christian*, 124.

³⁴⁴ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christian*, 120.

³⁴⁵ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 28 . I don’t see any emphasis in the quote above.

³⁴⁶ Mobley, *If I Tell You I’m Gay, Will You Still Love Me?*, chap. 5, Kindle.

to disagree' and not let this issue become a wedge between parents and child."³⁴⁷ Heche advises that if a parent's discussion about homosexuality becomes fruitless and causes further division, then parents should "call a moratorium on it" and "find some other things to discuss when you're together."³⁴⁸ Dallas also agrees and counsels parents not to "beat a dead horse by repeating every time you see your son or daughter, what the Bible says and why you disapprove of homosexuality. That's unnecessary. But make certain you've clarified, once and for all, where you stand."³⁴⁹

In terms of parent-child communication, Yarhouse offers another perspective and additional counsel. He encourages parents to listen actively in order "to set a tone of mutual respect."³⁵⁰ He believes that good listening will win the right to be heard. As he writes, "The more you model good listening and extend that to your adult child, the more you can expect your child to extend the same courtesy to you. The alternative leads to both you and your child becoming entrenched in your positions."³⁵¹

Yarhouse acknowledges that listening can initially be difficult for a Christian parent as he states:

When an adult child announces a gay identity, parents often struggle with many questions about how best to respond. There are many obstacles to listening, and overcoming these obstacles is an important place to begin. The more you are able to listen, the more you can come to a genuine understanding of your adult child's

³⁴⁷ Dallas and Heche, *The Complete Christian Guide To Understanding Homosexuality*, 329.

³⁴⁸ Dallas and Heche, *The Complete Christian Guide To Understanding Homosexuality*, 327.

³⁴⁹ Dallas, *When Homosexuality Hits Home*, 82.

³⁵⁰ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christian*, 121.

³⁵¹ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christian*, 122.

experiences. Listening also lays a foundation for future discussions in which you might share your understanding, beliefs, and values.³⁵²

Like the other authors, Yarhouse believes that Christian parents should communicate their convictions regarding homosexuality. However, he adds that parents “gain the right to share (their) views by listening first;” he acknowledges how difficult but increasingly important sharing their convictions may be “as our culture moves away from a consensus on homosexuality. Beliefs and values that were once held in common are not any longer.”³⁵³

When a Christian parent speaks regarding their convictions regarding same-sex relationships, Yarhouse counsels,

I think it is always more helpful to talk positively about what you believe than speak negatively about what you oppose. Even if asked about homosexuality directly, I would encourage parents to step back into a discussion that provides a context for what you believe. This might mean talking about a Christian view of sex and marriage rather than a discussion of Leviticus 22:18.³⁵⁴

Yarhouse cautions parents against venting anger when talking with their gay son or daughter,

If parents want changes to come in their adult children, getting angry, saying harsh words, or rebuking them is probably not the best way to go about it. That is not how change occurs. Indeed, my experience is that anger will only further entrench a person in the position they have taken. There is an important role here for the Holy Spirit, softening a person’s heart so that they can be open to other ways of experiencing their own lives and the decisions they are making.³⁵⁵

³⁵² Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christian*, 134.

³⁵³ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christian*, 125.

³⁵⁴ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christian*, 124-125.

³⁵⁵ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christian*, 127.

Yarhouse also suggests that parents talk with humility about their own struggles and growth in their spiritual journey to encourage their child to consider his or her own spiritual commitment:

In sharing what you believe, you may find it constructive to talk about choices you have made in response to God's call on your life. This might mean talking about how God has worked in you, providing direction and guidance in the decisions that have shaped you, helping you develop your own sense of spiritual maturity. After all, this is what you want for your adult child---a personal, vibrant relationship with God through Christ.... You can share what God is doing in your life and how the choices you have made have been in response to God's leading.³⁵⁶

Yarhouse also cautions Christian parents not to assume that their son or daughter does “not have a personal relationship with Christ, even in the context of choices they are making;” he offers that, “We really don't know how the Holy Spirit is working in their lives at this moment.”³⁵⁷

The counseling literature stressed the importance of loving children with same sex attraction unconditionally, communicating effectively with them, and navigating conflict with them well. As parents seek to keep a relationship with their child while remaining true to their core convictions, conflict can be difficult to navigate. Heche aptly describes parents' dilemma as she writes, “When an *adult* son or daughter announces their homosexuality, the parents will have to recognize their limitations. Their goal should be to preserve the relationship as much as possible, without compromising their own integrity. In most cases this is possible.”³⁵⁸

³⁵⁶ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christian*, 126.

³⁵⁷ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christian*, 126.

³⁵⁸ Dallas and Heche, *The Complete Christian Guide To Understanding Homosexuality*, 328.

As they work through various family issues Christian parents “will need to decide what boundaries need to be set, especially during family gatherings, and regarding what they will or will not continue to discuss or debate. They need to discuss these boundaries with their children, and, in some cases, negotiate them and come to some mutually agreed on terms for maintaining their relationship.”³⁵⁹

The common issues that require negotiation and boundary setting include: telling other family members, relating to the child’s partner, hosting the child and his/her partner, attending a child’s same-sex wedding/commitment ceremony. For the purpose of this study, awareness of these family issues will help pastors when counseling a Christian parent

With regards to telling other family members, Heche offers this helpful advice, “Your adult son or daughter should be the one who is told about his/her homosexuality, and should assume the responsibility to tell them in his/her own time. An exception would be underage children. You should be the one to decide under what terms they should be told, and by whom.”³⁶⁰

When Christian parent consider establishing a relationship with his child’s same-sex partner, both Mobley and Cohen enthusiastically encourage parents to extend themselves to their child’s partner. Mobley advises parents to show unconditional love to their son or daughter’s partner as a means of demonstrating Christ’s love for them. She writes, “Ask God to help you also love your child’s partner. His or her partner is someone

³⁵⁹ Dallas and Heche, *The Complete Christian Guide To Understanding Homosexuality*, 329.

³⁶⁰ Dallas and Heche, *The Complete Christian Guide To Understanding Homosexuality*, 326-327.

he or she cares about and is significant to him or her. But more importantly, he or she is someone who needs to see Christ's love demonstrated through you."³⁶¹ Similarly, Cohen states, "If your child has a same-sex girlfriend or boyfriend, my advice is that you go out of your way to meet, embrace, and love this person. This is someone else's son or daughter. All SSA kids are wounded and looking for love. I know this may be one of the most difficult things for you to do."³⁶²

Heche takes a similar approach to engaging with a child's same-sex partner. Like Mobley and Cohen, she sees no dilemma for parents in hosting a gay "son or daughter and their partner, even if their relationship is outside God's will;" she asserts, "To be with them is not to make a statement of approval, no more than Jesus socializing with sinners meant He approved of their sin. He loved them and enjoyed them as people without in any way compromising, and we can do the same."³⁶³ However, she cautions that it "doesn't mean in all cases it's the best thing to do."³⁶⁴ She believes that if "there will be too much tension, or that (the parents) really can't handle meeting"³⁶⁵ the partner, then she advises that a parent does not have to put themselves in that situation.

Another issue for parents in regards to their child's partner is allowing them to stay overnight. Will the parent permit them to sleep in the same room or will he suggest

³⁶¹ Mobley, *If I Tell You I'm Gay, Will You Still Love Me?*, chap. 5, Kindle.

³⁶² Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 187.

³⁶³ Dallas and Heche, *The Complete Christian Guide To Understanding Homosexuality*, 325.

³⁶⁴ Dallas and Heche, *The Complete Christian Guide To Understanding Homosexuality*, 325.

³⁶⁵ Dallas and Heche, *The Complete Christian Guide To Understanding Homosexuality*, 325.

they sleep separately or stay overnight somewhere else? To answer that dilemma, Cohen advises that, “(t)he key here is being consistent with your standard of values. Would you allow your son to bring a girlfriend home and have her sleep in his bed? If not, then you would be inconsistent if you allowed his boyfriend to do the same. Maintain the same standard with either a boyfriend or girlfriend.”³⁶⁶ Heche echoes Cohen as she offers this counsel:

One thing you can reasonably ask is that they not sleep together in your home, which may mean asking them to either room elsewhere, or for both of them to stay in separate rooms. He may refuse; he may even find the idea absurd. But remind him that you’re only asking that he respect the beliefs you hold in your home, and that you would not ask him to host anything in his home that he didn’t believe in, either.³⁶⁷

Another issue is displays of affection between the parent’s child and his or her partner. Will the parents mind if they hug or kiss or hold hands in front of them or other family members who may object to their relationship? Heche’s counsel in this situation is to establish boundaries in advance. She advises that at family get-togethers, parents “may want their son or daughter to attend with their partner, but (they) may also want to let them know (their) feelings about physical affection between them. To them, perhaps, holding hands or embracing in (their) family’s company may seem reasonable, but to (the parent) it probably won’t;” she counsels parents “to discuss this in advance, and come to an understanding of what is or isn’t a workable approach.”³⁶⁸

³⁶⁶ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 190.

³⁶⁷ Dallas and Heche, *The Complete Christian Guide To Understanding Homosexuality*, 325-326.

³⁶⁸ Dallas and Heche, *The Complete Christian Guide To Understanding Homosexuality*, 327.

With same-sex marriage becoming legal in many states, another looming issue for Christian parents is whether or not they will attend their gay son or daughter's wedding.

Heche advises against attending. She writes:

I think in most cases, it's best to keep that relationship in good working order, spend time together and basically "agree to disagree." But it's another thing to go to a same-sex wedding ceremony, because attending a wedding is a way of saying, "I bless, approve of, and support this union." It's not just socializing; it's affirming...sometimes we have to let someone we love know that they're asking us to do something that violates our conscience.³⁶⁹

On the other hand, Cohen recommends that parents, "[p]ray deeply and ask God for guidance;" they should take "time to make up your mind" and "not make a quick emotional decision;" he cautions that a parent's "behavior greatly affects [the] child's life" and a parent should examine "this issue from many angles."³⁷⁰ Whatever parents decide, Cohen offers suggestions in how to communicate their conviction to their child. If parents decide to attend, they might say:

Son, you know that, based on our values, we do not approve of homosexuality. However, we love and accept you as you are today. We know that you are very happy with your partner, and therefore we are happy for you. That is why we choose to attend your commitment ceremony. Please know how much we love you both. We will always stand by you, no matter what. And please know this is very difficult for us. It is not what we had envisioned for your life. But we love you, Son, and no matter how difficult it is for us, we will stand by with you and for you, now and forever.³⁷¹

If parents feel they cannot go, Cohen suggests communicating this way:

I suggest that you lovingly share your truth with your child. Let her know that it is about you, not her--that the limitation is on your side, not hers. You may say something like this: "We cannot attend the commitment ceremony. As much as

³⁶⁹ Dallas and Heche, *The Complete Christian Guide To Understanding Homosexuality*, 325.

³⁷⁰ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 190.

³⁷¹ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 189.

we love you both, it is simply too difficult for us to endorse this ceremony. We believe in you. However, we do not believe that two people of the same gender are meant to live as a married couple. We hope you will understand.”³⁷²

In establishing boundaries for these issues, Dallas offers a useful framework for parents to decide what limitations they need to set, based on their conscience and comfort level. Dallas defines the principle of conscience as: “I cannot participate in something I don’t believe in, nor can I directly or indirectly encourage another person to sin, since that makes me a partaker of his sin.”³⁷³ He describes the principle of comfort as: “I have the liberty to say no to something I’m uncomfortable with, even if I don’t feel the situation, not the homosexuality, is inherently wrong.”³⁷⁴

Dallas suggests that, if parents’ consciences are violated or they feel too uncomfortable in a situation involving their gay child, then they should either abstain or seek an alternative.³⁷⁵ These principles of conscience and comfort provide a framework for Christian parents to decide what they will participate in regarding the various family and social situations that arise.

In establishing boundaries, Yarhouse also echoes Dallas when he asserts that a parent extends himself “as far as (he) can while reserving the right to uphold a boundary that is symbolic to (him).”³⁷⁶ Like Dallas, Yarhouse also believes that:

...parents set some limits based upon their beliefs and values. This will often be expressed through what they do and do not allow at family gatherings, holidays,

³⁷² Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 189.

³⁷³ Dallas, *When Homosexuality Hits Home*, 138.

³⁷⁴ Dallas, *When Homosexuality Hits Home*, 139.

³⁷⁵ Dallas, *When Homosexuality Hits Home*, 138-140.

³⁷⁶ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christian*, 128.

and other events. Keep in mind that these events are symbolic, both for you as parents and for your adult child. For parents, limits are typically set around whether their adult child and his or her partner will stay with them, whether they will celebrate birthdays or holidays together, whether they will share a meal at the parents' house together, and so on.³⁷⁷

Yet, Yarhouse cautions that the boundaries parents establish also have symbolic meaning for the child as well and therefore, should be done prudently, with some consideration for the adult son or daughter. He advises:

Limit-setting is symbolic; it means something to everyone involved. That doesn't mean you shouldn't set limits based on what you think is right or feel you can handle, but it does mean that you are not the only person to consider. Your adult child is affected by what is decided. Good, clear communication is essential here, and even that may not guarantee that all conflicts will be resolved. Although there are no guarantees, adult children are more likely to accept your limits if they understand your reasoning, even if they disagree with you.³⁷⁸

Coming mostly from an evangelical Christian perspective, the literature reviewed addressed the spiritual dynamics of a parent's struggle with having a child who embraces a same-sex identity. The counselors offer hope for grieving parents, reminding them that the Lord is sovereign, loving and in control. For example, Heche offers this advice to encourage Christian parents,

After we've said our piece to our son or daughter, established whatever boundaries we may need to put in place, apologized for whatever wrongs we may have done, and determined to keep our relationship with them intact even as we disagree, we're still left with some unmovable facts: We love our child; we can't make our child think, believe, or feel what we want him to think, believe or feel; but even though we know we can't change what is, it still hurts to see someone we love outside of God's will...But God is still at work in that loved one!³⁷⁹

³⁷⁷ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christian*, 128.

³⁷⁸ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christian*, 129.

³⁷⁹ Dallas and Heche, *The Complete Christian Guide To Understanding Homosexuality*, 327.

Heche encourages parents to discuss spiritual truths with their child by asking relevant questions which “can be a very useful way of opening up dialogue that’s redemptive, and that helps both parties better understand each other.”³⁸⁰ Heche reminds Christian parents that they “may still have influence in their adult child’s life, but that influence is limited. Christian parents with a homosexual son or daughter should be especially prayerful that the Holy Spirit will do the work in their child’s conscience that they themselves cannot do.”³⁸¹

Yarhouse also stresses that it is God’s word that convicts and changes hearts; while the parents cannot change their son or daughter, the Holy Spirit can. He writes, “In my experience, young adults who have been able to respond positively to the Scriptures and the Christian sexual ethic have felt genuinely convinced by the Holy Spirit. They are convinced that they should say no to what they experience as a natural desire and longing for connection in favor of saying yes to a personally fulfilling life in Christ.”³⁸²

For children who struggle with same sex attraction who turn to the Lord, Yarhouse argues for parents to be understanding and compassionate, realizing what choice their child has made:

In order to empathize with your child, it is important you understand that this desire feels natural and it is a genuine longing for connection with another. Your child’s sexual behavior feels to them like an expression of their sexuality, and as a Christian we do believe that sexuality is important to what it means to be a

³⁸⁰ Dallas and Heche, *The Complete Christian Guide To Understanding Homosexuality*, 329.

³⁸¹ Dallas and Heche, *The Complete Christian Guide To Understanding Homosexuality*, 329.

³⁸² Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christian*, 126-127.

person. So this leaves the same-sex attracted adult with a genuine dilemma-- saying no to one thing in order to say yes to something else that is less tangible.³⁸³

Despite the family difficulties and conflicts that may arise, Heche offers hope to hurting parents, "God is still very much at work in the life of the prodigal, even when his parents are unable to do more than watch and pray."³⁸⁴

Lastly, counselors advise parents that their situation "is a marathon, not a sprint."³⁸⁵ Parents cannot change their child, and there are no quick fixes for their unique family situation. Pastors must minister to parents for the long haul by giving emotional support, encouragement, and prayer as parents navigate the deep waters of maintaining a relationship with their gay son or daughter. Yarhouse encourages parents "to take a long view, to move past the immediate reaction they have today, and to think about the kind of relationship they want to have with their adult child, recognizing that where they are now may not be the last word on sexual identity and relationships."³⁸⁶ For Yarhouse, taking the long view means, "(t)aking care of yourself and your marriage, keeping lines of communication open with your child, and being honest and transparent about your own life;" he encourages parents "to stay connected in order to be someone your child can come to," and he does not believe that, "this outcome--the work of the Holy Spirit in a

³⁸³ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christian*, 127.

³⁸⁴ Dallas and Heche, *The Complete Christian Guide To Understanding Homosexuality*, 329.

³⁸⁵ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 50.

³⁸⁶ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christian*, 133.

person's life—can be manipulated or orchestrated; rather, real relationships are characterized by empathy and support, as well as honesty and integrity.”³⁸⁷

Summary of Literature Review

This study reviewed both the biblical/theological framework and the current Christian counseling literature for parents who have a gay son or daughter. Gleaning from the fruitful amount of material, pastors who shepherd Christian parents with an adult gay child are presented with a challenging and unique ministry situation. Pastors will need to shepherd the parents through the traumatic deep valley of emotional turmoil; ministers will also need to give the couple informed and wise counsel regarding the nature of homosexuality and how the couple can navigate the often treacherous waters of family issues that may arise following the announcement that their child is gay. These pastors will need to help guide the parents to a place of acceptance in which they agree to disagree and find a way to walk that delicate balance between loving their son or daughter without violating their conscience by remaining true to their religious convictions.

³⁸⁷ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christian*, 133-134.

Chapter Three

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to discover how Christian parents of gay adult children desire to be supported by their pastors. Two areas of literature have been identified as central to the issue of homosexuality for Christian families: literature dealing with the current biblical debate within the church concerning homosexual practice and current counseling materials available for Christian parents of adult gay children. These significant resources provide a foundation to the three research questions that will guide this study:

1. What unique counseling issues do evangelical parents of gay adult children face?
2. What types of pastoral support do these parents desire in light of having gay adult children?
3. What pastoral support strategies did the parents find helpful?

This study assumed that those parents who hold to a traditional biblical view regarding homosexuality will face family conflict due to their beliefs. These parents deal with issues which may require pastoral support and guidance. Their issues, thoughts, and feelings provide a rich tapestry of experience which may help pastors better understand their unique situation. Learning from them and gleaning from their family trial, pastors will be better equipped to minister to others in similar situations. Therefore, the research design of this study utilized a qualitative approach as a method for discovering the issues faced by those parents.

Design of the Study

In *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, Sharan B.

Merriam states the intent of the qualitative research method. She writes, “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world.”³⁸⁸ In this study, the qualitative research method enabled the researcher to delve into the unique experiences, insights, and emotional conflict of Christian parents of adult gay children, providing an opportunity to better understand their particular issues and family situation.

Merriam identifies four key characteristics of the nature of qualitative research: “the focus is on process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive.”³⁸⁹ These characteristics are the optimum for this particular study.

Christian parents with a gay child have unique issues within the Christian community. They face challenges which are multi-faceted as they navigate the turbulent waters of family conflict in attempting to love their child without condoning his or her behavior while also overcoming feelings of shame, guilt, or embarrassment. By using the quantitative research method, the researcher can explore in depth the parent’s thoughts and feelings, leading to data that is, according to Merriam, “richly descriptive.”

Participant Sample Selection

The researcher individually interviewed seven Christian parents whose adult child has “come out” at least ten years ago. The reason for the extended length of time was to

³⁸⁸ Sharan Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide To Design And Implementation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2009), 13.

³⁸⁹ Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 14.

discover how these parents have coped over time, what family issues have developed, and whether those issues have been resolved. The participants were determined by asking evangelical Christian parents who have an adult gay child and live in the local area of the researcher to participate in this study. The parents chosen for the study included those who hold to a traditional, biblical view of homosexuality and whose child has “come out” within a significant period of time so that the parents will have had the opportunity to address issues resulting from their child’s same-sex orientation. Letters of introduction were sent to prospective participants, giving them information about the nature of the study and seeking their permission to be interviewed for it. A “Research Participant Consent Form” provided by Covenant Theological Seminary was given to the participants to ensure their anonymity and to protect confidentiality.

Data Collection

Individual parents were interviewed in the parents’ home or in a neutral setting to ensure confidentiality and freedom to speak openly. The interviews lasted between an hour and an hour and a half and were recorded using a digital recorder. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, which, according to Merriam, is based on “flexibly worded” questions, which “allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic.”³⁹⁰ The advantage of this format was that it allowed the researcher some flexibility to adapt and respond in order to get to the most helpful information. The interviews were transcribed for further analysis. The researcher used the following protocol questions.

³⁹⁰ Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 90.

Protocol Questions

1. Tell me how you found out that your child is gay.

Probe: What was that like?

Probe: What thoughts or feelings did you have?

2. What issues arose following your child's announcement?

Probe: How did those issues affect your relationship with your son/daughter?

Probe: How did he/she respond to you?

3. What kind of pastoral support did you feel you needed at the time?

Probe: What did you seek out?

Probe: Where did you go for help?

Probe: What was it like?

4. Of the support you received, what were some things you found beneficial?

Probe: Why?

5. If you could recommend anything to pastors who have parents in their church going through this situation, what would you say to them? What would you want them to know about your needs?

Data Analysis

The study used the constant comparative method to analyze the interview data. As the researcher sought to discover the unique counseling issues of evangelical parents with gay adult children, the constant comparative method was helpful in looking at common themes and issues that arose during the interviews.

Researcher Position

The researcher is an ordained pastor in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) who holds to a traditional, evangelical Christian worldview. He believes that the Bible is inerrant, and he holds to the historic understanding that homosexual activity is contrary to the teachings of scripture. The researcher looked for participants who also held to such a view in order to better understand how pastors in the evangelical church can help those parents who also follow a traditional understanding of scripture regarding homosexuality. While the researcher's worldview may color the study's findings, the use of the qualitative research method and data collection, along with a peer review, enabled the study to be as objective as possible.

Study Limitations

Since the sampling of interviewees was limited to seven participants, the quantitative data received may not be representative of all parents in a similar situation. Furthermore, due to limitations of time, expense, and travel, the participants are from the local region of the researcher, and therefore the findings may not be universal. However, the rich, descriptive data should help the evangelical church better understand the unique needs and challenges facing Christian parents in this particular family dilemma and provide a springboard for further study on this sensitive, controversial issue facing today's church.

Chapter Four

Findings

The purpose of this study was to learn what kinds of pastoral help evangelical Christian parents desire and require when they learn their adult child is homosexual. From interviewing a total of seven Christian parents who have adult children who are gay, the researcher discerned three significant areas which were common to the parents: emotional upheaval, negotiating issues, and supportive resources.

Emotional Upheaval

Grief

Most of the parents interviewed expressed a deep and profound sense of grief and loss. One father, Mr. Bradford, described himself as being “devastated by it. A lot of tears.” The Bradfords felt a profound sense of loss, like a death in the family. Their son struggled with same-sex attraction for years and had intensive, professional counseling, only to embrace his homosexual orientation in his late twenties. Mrs. Bradford recalls, “I don’t know that I could absorb any more pain...I cried and couldn’t stop crying.” Mr. Bradford lamented that when there is a death, “...[t]here’s closure. It may take a person a year to get past the actual burial...but eventually you get back to living. But, with a child with a situation like this you’re still grieving ten or fifteen years later.”

Another mother, Mrs. Howard, whose daughter came out as a lesbian after graduating from college, expressed how the news was like the death of her dreams for her daughter. She revealed her pain and deep disappointment as she remarked,

I can't believe this is going to happen because that means she won't get married and have children. She won't give me grandchildren, and so it was very much like a death because I think every parent just thinks, "Well my child is going to grow up just like I did, and they're going to find a spouse and they're going to get married and then have a family and they're going to live happily ever after." That's sort of what parents think, you know, and then when suddenly, when that doesn't happen because of this – it is like a death.

She added that she "probably grieved more over (her daughter) than any other of my parents' deaths or anything like that." She explained how she thought, "[M]aybe it was the shock of it, too"; it was just terrible grief." It was the "realization of how her (daughter's) life (was) going to be" and that she wouldn't be a grandmother. Mrs. Howard continued by saying,

[T]he whole realization brought me a lot of grieving. In fact, I found myself at night [thinking] I had never grieved like this and I have never grieved like it since. At night I would just go to sleep and I'd wake up in the middle of the night and I'd be crying and I would be like, "Where is this coming from?" and since then I've lost my mother and my father and of course you grieve about that, but I never had grief in the same way.

In terms of grief, it was informative to observe how the parents' emotional reactions reflected Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' study on the five stages of grief. As mentioned in the previous chapter, counselor Joe Dallas observed how parents go through these five stages of grief, similar to those purported by Dr Kubler-Ross: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.³⁹¹ Similar to Dallas, Cohen also sees a similarity between Kubler-Ross' study and the emotional phases of Christian parents who grieve over their gay son or daughter. He defines them as follows:

1. Denial: "This can't be happening to me/us/him/her."
2. Anger: "Why did this happen? I did my best."
3. Bargaining: "Please God, if we do_____, change him/her."

³⁹¹ Dallas, *When Homosexuality Hite Home*, 25.

4. Depression: “It’s true, and I can’t stand this. It’s too painful. I want my child to marry and have children. My dreams are lost.”

5. Acceptance: “Okay, this is true. What now? What can I do to assist him/her? How can I take care of myself in the process?”³⁹²

What these authors purported was also true of the parents interviewed for this study. All the parents experienced several of the grieving stages – with the exception of bargaining (which was not mentioned by any parent). Four of the parents expressed a sense of denial. They did not want to believe that their son or daughter was homosexual. When her child confessed to having same-sex attraction as a teenager, one mother retorted, “You can’t be gay. You’re a Christian.” Another mother suspected her child was gay, but she “would always just push it down and think, “No, that just can’t be.” When she would discuss it with her husband, he would have a similar reaction, saying, “No, I don’t think so. No, he just hasn’t met the right person yet.” Another father pointedly admitted his initial reaction was “...[d]enial...[He] didn’t want to believe it.” He even recognized that he “went through...the stages of grief - denial and having to work through it in [his] head.”

Related to the five stages of grief, two of the parents expressed feelings of anger. One father’s reaction “was intense anger and anger with [his son] for turning his back and walking away from what he’d been taught, what [his parents] felt he acknowledged having accepted Christ as Lord and Savior at a young age.” A mother “went through a phase of being very angry with God.” Not only did she cry, she “would say ‘Why?’ a lot,” questioning God’s sovereignty in allowing this to happen to her son.

³⁹² Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 39.

Two of the mothers expressed a deep sense of depression. One was prescribed medication to help lift her spirits because she “was depressed and down and therefore could not help anybody in the family.” Another parent had to take prescription tranquilizers to ease their anxiety. Along with depression, many of the parents expressed a sense of disappointment. One mother said, “I invested so much in (my child) and I was like, ‘How do you do this?’”

Besides these expressions of grief and sadness, some parents also expressed fear, guilt, and shame. Mr. Wilkes’s daughter pursued a lesbian relationship later in life after she was divorced from her husband. Mr. Wilkes was concerned how his grandchild would turn out, being raised by a lesbian mother. Would his grandchild embrace homosexuality after being raised by a gay couple?

While it was most likely a concern of all the parents, two explicitly mentioned how concerned they were for their child’s salvation. They were fearful that their child’s earlier profession of faith was false since they had turned away from their professed faith when they embraced homosexuality.

Also, the majority of parents expressed a profound sense of guilt. Upon learning his son was gay, Mr. Woods lamented, “[I was] thinking I was a terrible father. What did I do wrong? How did I cause this? How did I fail my [child]?” Mrs. Bradford expressed similar thoughts as she shared her anguish, “You keep turning it around and turning it over until there’s hardly anything left of your head or your heart. And you do think, ‘What went wrong? What did we miss? What could we have done earlier?’” Mr. Howard echoed a similar refrain when he confessed, “Of course right away you start thinking ‘What did I do wrong?’ and all that kind of stuff. So you’re trying to accept some of the

blame and then seeking solutions.” Mrs. Woods dealt with self-blame and guilt by examining her son’s formative years to see how she may have caused his SSA. She remarked,

I felt like I caused it. What did I do? What could I have done? I even went back to the point of when I carried him. What did I do wrong? How could I have missed this? What did I do to cause it? So, like I said, I tried to own the behavior, and I just wanted to be able to fix that behavior. That was my first thought that came through... (My son) was always a nice boy, a sweater boy, always neat and tidy, and I don’t know if I micromanaged, then I started thinking, owning it, and thinking, “Did I micromanage (my son)?.... Did I spend too much time doing crafts and stuff with (my son)?” ...I was kind of like, “Wait a minute, what caused this?” I even went back to when I was carrying him and I was thinking, “What did I do that may have caused that?” You know, “What did I do while he was growing up that caused it?” Now, knowing full well that he was different in terms of - he was more fine motor, he would like to do the jewelry or to do some of those things. Sports was not his thing...He was more creative.

While self-blame and guilt were common, one father’s comments are representative of several parents, who looked for causes but could not find any clear reason why their child became attracted to the same sex. He admitted that,

...as a parent it was like we did something wrong and we take that burden of guilt upon ourselves and I think that’s hard for anybody. You continually question, “What did I do wrong? What should have I done differently? How could this have been avoided?” And there are no answers. I don’t think anybody can give you an answer, because we don’t understand the brain enough to know what happens to what where’s that tipping point between heterosexual behavior and homosexual behavior....

The Bradfords were aided by their counselor, who helped them to understand that they did not cause their child’s homosexual behavior. The counselor told them, “You have got to get past that...that is a lie straight from hell, and you’ve got to move beyond that.”

Not only did the parents interviewed blame themselves, several parents also acknowledged that they in some way blamed their spouse. Mrs. Woods admitted, “...[O]f course we want to blame each other. I wanted him to own it, but he wouldn’t own any of

it. I said, ‘Can you at least own some of it. I am owning it all. I don’t want to own it all.’ We were in it together. We caused this together.” However, she understands now that they did not cause their child’s SSA.

Along with the guilt and blame came a desire to keep their family situation secret, private. All of the parents were reluctant to tell others about their son or daughter. Mrs. Howard remarked that she thought if others found out, “it might be a reflection on (her) not having parented well,” and she was also concerned about her child’s reputation. She “did not want people to think badly of her.” One parent remarked, “You want to go hide. You don’t want to tell anybody,” while another admitted to feeling embarrassed by having a gay child.

Along with negative reactions, parents also expressed a sense of hope that their child would one day desire to change, no longer pursue their homosexual desires, and return to their parents’ faith. Mr. Wilkes shared, “I just hope and pray that my daughter will some day realize (her sin) and ask forgiveness for her life.” Mr. Howard voiced a similar concern as he remarked that he and his wife pray “that the Lord will someday rescue her. Even if she doesn’t lose the attraction, that she will have a desire to be pure and celibate.” Another responded by stating that they “hope that someday (their son) will realize the error of his ways and turn around.” Mrs. Woods summarized what many felt: “I keep hoping for the day that I’ll be able to see a change in (my son)... I would hope in my lifetime I would see a difference, but yet, I understand the need for companionship, but the companionship that would be suitable in the Lord’s eyes. Not companionship male to male.”

Acceptance

Finally, after many years of emotional struggle, all of the parents have reached a stage of acceptance. Acceptance does not imply that the parents have changed their convictions regarding homosexuality. They still do not condone their child's desire to pursue same-sex relationships; however, they have reached an uneasy peace about their family situation – a perspective woven from the following threads.

Agreeing to Disagree

A family truce has been called, whether actually negotiated or left unspoken, in which the parents have agreed not to continue to share their convictions with their child. They have made their convictions clear – they do not accept their child's behavior – and see no need to continually bring up the subject of homosexuality. As Mr. Wilkes stated, “[Y]ou make it known that you don't agree with it, but you don't jam it down their throats.” Mrs. Howard succinctly describes the verbal ceasefire: “[Her daughter] does come to all the family gatherings, and everybody in the family accepts her, and we don't talk about this. We never have discussions about it. We just accept her for who she is and she joins in the family affairs.” Parents mention the delicate high wire act they continue to walk in attempting to unconditionally “love the person and not tolerate the actions, the activity.” As Mrs. Howard describes it, “We tried to assure [our daughter] that we loved her” while still making clear their religious beliefs.

Ending the Blame Game

The interview subjects found a certain measure of peace in the realization that they did not directly cause their child's homosexuality. They may never fully understand what brought it about, but they know enough to know they are not responsible for their

adult child's actions. As Mrs. Woods commented, "[T]here isn't anything I could do that would have changed the situation." They also accept that they cannot control or change their child by their own will or power. As Mr. Bradford realized, "really there's not much you can do." He recognized that for any change to happen, it "has to come from within that individual." and further observed, "It's probably no different than if you're an alcoholic; you've got to admit there is a problem before you can deal with the problem."

Growing Spiritually

Most of the parents commented on how they have grown spiritually through this family crisis and conflict. While deeply painful, their complex and difficult family situation has brought them into a deeper fellowship with the Lord as they have sought his guidance, comfort, and strength through prayer and study. For example, one parent remarked how she has grown in her appreciation and understanding of God's grace. While she sees her child's behavior as sinful, she has also become more aware of her own sin and need for God's grace and cleansing from sin. Mrs. Woods remarked, "I have to reach out in love to where [my son] is. I've got to meet him where he is. It's just like the Lord meets us everyday where we are. But, it took a lot of years and a lot of growing and on a good day, that's where I'll be."

Parents have also grown in their trust in the Lord and his sovereignty. They view their situation as part of God's permissive will in which he has allowed the situation to occur for reasons they may never fully grasp. Mrs. Woods framed this view clearly when she observed, "[T]he Lord needed us to experience this and whether it's to help somebody else along the way, I don't know." Several also admitted that the situation

brought them closer as a couple; as Mrs. Woods revealed, “if we hadn’t gone through this experience, we’d still be where we were (before) and not have grown as husband and wife.”

Listening Rather Than Reacting

One parent mentioned a new awareness of listening first and then reacting, which reflected what author Mark Yarhouse encourages parents to do in his book, *Homosexuality and the Christian: A Guide for Parents, Pastors, and Friends*. He states, “The more you are able to listen, the more you can come to a genuine understanding of your adult child’s experiences. Listening also lays a foundation for future discussions in which you might share your understanding, beliefs, and values.”³⁹³ Mrs. Woods remarked,

I’ve since learned to try not to react but just to listen to the information. It’s like if [her child and his partner] talk about adopting or whatever, and I try to say, “I’m not going to let that rent any space in my head until I absolutely have to” because why would I let that take the joy out of my life, because that’s really not what the Lord wants me to do. But I’ve matured through that, not that I don’t fall back in that, but that’s what I go through.... I’ve learned through this process to not say a whole lot as a parent, just kind of respond as needed...I try not to impose. I try to listen more.

No Longer in the Closet

The parents interviewed no longer feel a deep-seated embarrassment in revealing their family situation to others. They have “come out of the closet,” no longer afraid to disclose their son or daughter’s orientation. As one parent commented, “I don’t broadcast [that my child is gay], but I don’t hide it anymore.” However, most remain discreet about who they tell, so as not to harm the reputation of their son or daughter. Mr. Howard stated this viewpoint well:

³⁹³ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christian*, 134.

We started realizing, “Hey, there’s a lot more people in this church than us that actually are dealing with this issue and we need to be open about it.” So, I think we matured and started being more open. We don’t go around besmirching [our child’s] reputation, but we have no problem in telling people that we have these problems in our family....We seem to have adopted the attitude that if you don’t share your problems, then the other people won’t share their problems with you, and you won’t be able to comfort each other. So you need to be more open about that, and it’s a shame that there’s that attitude in the church.

Comforting Others

Related to the parents’ “coming out,” all of the parents have reached a place in their journey where they are ready to walk alongside others who are dealing with the same situation, to offer them a listening ear and an encouraging word. They desire to comfort others with the same comfort they have received.³⁹⁴ A number of the parents mentioned this desire to help others in several different ways. Mr. Woods simply mentioned that he “would be willing to meet with others” to help them as he has been helped. Mrs. Bradford spoke of her willingness to offer a listening ear to a hurting parent when she remarked, “I will listen. I may not have anything concrete to say to you, but I will listen.” Another parent, Mrs. Woods, echoed the same theme as she commented,

...[As] time went on I realized, like everything else we go through in life, the Lord allows certain people the ability to talk about certain situations they’ve been in so [others] won’t have to experience that. Your experience can be helpful to them and I realized if...if we could talk about [my experience], we’d be willing to do that.

Ministry for the Long Haul

Many of the parents recognized that their family situation is an ongoing challenge. There are no quick fixes, no guarantees. The emotional turmoil does subside over time, but its residual effect remains. Mrs. Bradford asked a close friend who shared the same family struggle, “Will it always hurt this much?” Her friend responded, “No it

³⁹⁴ 2 Corinthians 1:4.

won't, but it will always hurt." The parents realized in loving and relating to their gay children over this conflicting situation, they are in it for the long haul. Their ministry to their child is a marathon, not a sprint. Mr. Howard found a quiet resolve in the realization that this issue is just one of many that people face; he remarked, "So we want to keep being a blessing to our daughter and anybody else who is struggling with this because it's not the end of the world. It's just another problem you have to deal with in this broken world." Mr. Howard's wife eloquently reiterated the need to take a long view in relating to their child, balancing reality with the hope that things will change:

It's a day-by-day thing, and it's not something that you're probably going to cure or change, and I think in the beginning I had that hope that there was going to be some kind of a change, That this was not going to be a permanent thing that she was going to be heterosexual one of these days, and after twenty some years, I don't think that way anymore. I have accepted that this in the way it is, and I pray about it every day and ask God to change her thinking –that she won't be attracted to the same sex. I ask him to change her thinking, and that's the only thing I can have any hope about is going in prayer about it.

Negotiating Issues

In the midst of a riptide of emotions, Christian parents with adult gay children also find themselves navigating through the murky waters of demonstrating unconditional love while not condoning their child's pursuit of same-sex relationships. What will they accept? What will they not condone? Below are some of the significant issues facing Christian parents with adult gay children gleaned from interviewing parents.

Rejection and Estrangement

All of the parents interviewed revealed that their relationship with their gay child had experienced a period of difficulty and strain. On both sides, there was the potential for rejection and estrangement, to sever all ties. One parent said that their initial reaction to their child's desire to pursue a homosexual relationship was "to cut off all contact with

him” and end “the relationship with him.” However, through the counsel of a friend who said, “I think you need to just see him, talk to him, and not cut him off,” he reconsidered and came to the conviction that, “[h]e is our son and regardless we still have to love him.”

Two of the families experienced a level of estrangement for a period of time. Mr. Wilkes commented, “We drifted apart for a good many years, and we would get together, but it was like talking to an estranged friend rather than talking to my daughter most of the time...there was definitely some strain there over the years.” Mr. Howard admitted, that “for roughly over a year... [they] had no contact with” their daughter. Despite seasons of strain and times of conflict, all the parents interviewed have striven to maintain a relationship with their gay adult child while making clear their convictions regarding their child’s behavior. Mr. Howard eloquently stated their dilemma, “How do we still love and support her?...It’s a very difficult goal that we have;...we’re always looking for a way that we can be loving towards her but not accepting [of] her behavior.”

This is the crux of their dilemma. How do Christian parents demonstrate love without appearing to accept that which goes against their convictions? These are difficult waters to navigate, and several issues arose that were common to the parents interviewed – issues that required making decisions which could potentially damage the relationship while also negotiating boundaries that reflected the parents’ convictions. These common issues were: meeting with the child’s partner, staying over at the parents’ home, telling other family members and dealing with their reactions, and attending their child’s commitment ceremony or wedding.

The Issue of Partners

All of the parents whose child had a partner met with the partner, establishing a relationship in varying degrees. For most, making a connection with their son or daughter's partner was a difficult decision. For example, one couple resisted the idea of meeting their child's partner. The father's first response was, "I'm not going to do it." The mother said, "I cannot do that. I cannot lay my eyes [on the partner]." However, under counsel, they changed their minds and met with the couple and established an amicable relationship. Mr. Wilkes rarely sees his daughter's partner and remarked on the difficult relationship due to the tension between them, stating that, "holidays are probably worse in our situation because of the partner," who can be militant and combative.

Of the couples interviewed, only the Howards had a child who never had a committed relationship of which the parents were aware. They were fairly certain that they would not engage with their daughter's partner, "if she had a permanent relationship or a potential marriage situation." Mrs. Howard's words typify the struggle of Christian parents as they navigate this issue:

We've never had any interactions with any partners or any thoughts of partners. We had thought about how would we handle it if she had a partner and wanted to bring her to our affairs, family gatherings, and I'm not sure how I would accept it. I really am not sure.... It's just been something we haven't talked about and I haven't gone there, and I don't know what I'm going to do if she came and she had a partner that she wanted to bring. I have mixed feelings about it because it might be an opportunity to witness to the partner, and so should I reject that or should I not reject it? I don't know how I would deal with it.

Related to the issue of meeting their son or daughter's companion is the concern over hosting the couple in their home. Will they allow them to sleep in the same room? This issue was only a factor for a few families, as most of the adult children had homes of their own in the area. For the few for whom it was a concern, they did not allow their

child and his or her partner to stay overnight in the same room. For example, the Woods family established this boundary, which was respected by their son even though it caused some consternation. When their son and his partner wanted to visit for the holidays, Mrs. Woods told them, “You’re welcome to stay but you can’t sleep together.” According to the Woods family, this decision was “another dagger” and it “caused trouble,” but the parents were “trying to uphold a standard by saying, ‘No, we’re not going to have that.’” He and his partner stayed elsewhere.

Telling Family Members

Another issue that arose which caused conflict for one family was telling their son’s sibling. The Bradfords told their son’s sibling, and that “infuriated” him. Their son remarked, “It was my news to tell [my sibling], not yours.” Mrs. Bradford admitted that in retrospect, their son “was justified in feeling provoked” with them.

Further areas of family conflict include the reaction of the immediate family members and extended family. For those family members who were Christians, there was a wide spectrum of reaction – from anger and rejection to loving and caring without condoning. For example, within one family, a sibling was very angry with the gay brother as he saw how his pursuit of same sex relationships was hurting his parents. Those who were non-Christian family members were either nonplussed by the situation, seeing nothing morally wrong with it, or encouraging and overtly supportive. This situation caused friction within the family system, as extended family members could not understand why the parents were so upset. Mr. Bradford remarked, “They just didn’t understand where we were. They were more accepting. They have a [secular] worldview

instead of a Christian worldview and it didn't cause any severe problems. They just don't understand why we [are] so upset about it."

Attending the Commitment Ceremony or Wedding

For many, the most disconcerting decision was whether to attend their child's wedding or commitment ceremony. Mrs. Howard eloquently expressed the dilemma Christian parents wrestle with in this intense issue. She explains,

I do know one thing, that since this marriage all became legal in our state, and I've asked myself this question over and over again, what if she ever came and said she wanted to marry someone, would I go to the wedding? And I know in my heart that I cannot go to the wedding, and it would be very difficult because I don't want to reject her, but at the same time, I think God comes first, and I don't think that God supports any marriage between the same sex, and so, therefore I could not go to support a marriage.

Though it was difficult, one couple decided to attend their child's wedding in order to keep their relationship with him. Their son's counselor had advised him that, should his parents disapprove of his marriage, he should reject them and end the relationship. The son was angry that his parents were not excited about his engagement and could not understand why they seemed shocked and disturbed by it. Tension ensued, and the parents decided to clear the air by informing the son that they loved him but did not approve of his wedding. They debated going, but under the advice of their pastor decided to go to show love and support to their son. It was a stressful day; the father remarked that "it was very difficult." He felt "like such a hypocrite with just putting on a fake smile," and he remarked, "Inside you're going, 'No, this can't be happening.'"

Another couple faced with the same issue decided to attend because the father sensed that if they did not, the son would be so hurt that it would end their relationship.

Yet, Mr. Wilkes decided not to attend his daughter's same sex union. While this caused some friction, it did not end the relationship.

Supportive Resources

One of the objectives of this study is to discover what ministry resources are helpful to Christian parents of adult gay children so that pastors will be better equipped to spiritually shepherd families in this situation. From the information gathered in the interviews, the researcher noted four areas of support which were beneficial to the parents interviewed: pastoral involvement, para-church organizations, support of family and friends, and support groups.

Pastoral Involvement

At some point in their painful journey, all of the parents sought pastoral counsel. Two couples went immediately to their pastor for support and counsel. One father commented, "We immediately contacted the church" because he and his wife felt "it was moral...there was a religious issue," and it "was the only thing that I would have thought to do." He added, "We knew we needed help, and we didn't know where to get any. We knew also it was going to have to be from a Christian point of view, so where else [but the church]?" The other couple went immediately to their pastor because the revelation of their child's sexual orientation came about through another crisis of which the pastor was made aware. Other parents went to seek pastoral support later in their situation; they dealt with it privately before revealing their family conflict to their minister.

One couple sought help from another pastor who was a trained counselor, rather than going to the pastor of their home church. They reasoned that the pastor who was also a counselor was better equipped to handle their family situation. Additionally, going for

counseling at another church, which was also neutral ground, afforded them some anonymity and privacy, which they desired..Their time with the counselor/pastor was of great benefit to them, as he helped them to see that they were not responsible for their adult child's choices and were not the cause of their child's homosexuality. He also guided them through the scriptures and assured them that they "were not responsible for the choices of an adult child."

The other families who spoke with their pastor about their family situation found it to be beneficial. Their pastors listened compassionately, prayed with them, offered them scripture and/or other resources. Two of the pastors met with the parents' child to offer counsel. Yet, the pastors felt ill-equipped to handle the situation, and so the parents were referred to para-church ministries.

It is interesting to note that the pastoral counseling, though comforting and supportive, was not enough for the parents who sought answers to the cause of their child's homosexual attraction, wanted to know if they were responsible for it, and wondered how they should now relate to their child.

Para-Church Organizations

All of the parents interviewed received significant help, counsel, and information through various para-church organizations which specialize in helping those struggling with SSA and their families. Whether they attended a seminar sponsored by the organization, or had counseling from a representative, each family received comfort, helpful information, and support. They either found the organization by themselves or were referred to one by their pastor. The information and counsel served as a useful addition to the support they were receiving from their pastor.

Mrs. Howard's experience crystallizes the valuable support many of the parents received from para-church organizations:

[Talking to the organization's representative] was sort of like going to a pastor. ...[H]e had all the time in the world to spend with us. [He said] "I'm not going to rush you, sit down and let's talk." And so he tried to explain to us about what homosexuality was all about because he was an ex-gay himself. So that made it very easy I think for him to be able to talk to us, and then he prayed with us, and that was very meaningful, just to be able to spend this time talking to someone who was genuinely interested and cared about us and prayed with us. So just that understanding factor was so comforting rather than going to a pastor who would maybe be sort of preachy about it. Saying you know, "This is wrong..."

Support of Family and Friends

In addition to pastoral counseling and para-church organizations, another arm of support came from family and close friends who provided a less formal but just as vital ministry to the grieving parents. Two parents made special note of the loving support they had received. Mr. Wilkes remarked that he "talked with some Christian friends and shared with them – close friends and let my heart down." Another parent added that "having a few close friends inquire and pray for you is very comforting."

Support Groups

All parents interviewed had attended at least one support group for parents of gay children. The parents found their time in a support group to be very beneficial for a variety of reasons. Judging from their responses, a support group was one of the most effective means of ministering to these parents.

One reason the support groups were helpful was because they provided the "camaraderie of other people that are going through the same difficulty." The attendees learned "there are others in like situations that you can talk with either at the meeting, share what's going on or call and pray for them or visa versa and build a relationship."

Mr. Woods mentioned that he felt less isolated and alone as he remarked, “The more you talk about it and you see people that are dealing with the same thing, the more I felt normal....Like, ‘Okay, I’m not the only one that is really struggling with this.’”

In addition to the relational support, the support groups offered counsel and help by parents who were further along in their journey. Mrs. Woods commented on their importance, “They can help you through it. You know you’re going to survive it.” Mr. Woods was impressed to find other Christians whom he respected “battling with the same issues,” and when he heard “them talk about it,” he appreciated that they shared the same struggle. Likewise, Mr. Wilkes mentioned how those who were “farther along in the process” provided a good model on “how do I carve out a relationship with my son or daughter?” and “of not accepting [their behavior] but living with it.” The support group for Mr. Bradford was effective as it provided opportunity to listen to others who “understand this better than” he did. For him, it was “just those little things [that] help you. It’s nothing where you take a big step. It’s slow – a step at a time and understanding.”

In addition to receiving support and counsel, another benefit was the opportunity to help others. When a younger couple joined their group, an older couple offered them support, and the father remarked, “I hope that we were able to minister to them and let them know that it’s tough but keep loving him. That was the one thing we tried to pass on, I think.”

The value of a support group is encapsulated in the testimony of Mrs. Howard, who commented,

I think the support groups are very, very helpful especially in the beginning when you first learn that you have this problem, and you don’t know where to turn, and

when you can get into a support group with all other people who are walking in your shoes, especially Christian people. I mean, [I] should emphasize “Christian” because I have never heard of any other, and I wouldn’t want to be in any other group, but when you’re in a Christian support group and here is all these other Christians that are walking in your shoes, you had no idea and they’ve been where you’ve been, a lot of them for a lot longer have been in this, and it is so helpful because they know exactly what you’re talking about. They know exactly how you’re feeling, and they can when a flare up or something happens with the child, you can go right to them and say, “I have to tell you about what just happened and what took place,” and they can give you all kinds of input. [They might say] “Maybe you should try this or maybe you should do that.” You know and you can get a lot of good input just from a group of parents like that....I recommend a Christian group because you don’t want to go to any secular ones, because there are those parent support groups out there in the secular world that are going to tell you that your child is doing just fine in that world, and to not ever say anything against it.

A Unique Family Situation for the Christian Pastor

The three areas detailed above – emotional upheaval, negotiating issues, and supportive resources – highlight the unique ministry situation facing evangelical Christian pastors who have in their congregations parents who discover their adult child is homosexual. The parents interviewed had a sense that their family situation differed from other problems families face. One father expressed that learning his child was gay “was an emotionally different situation in that kind of sin and we just could not understand it...didn’t understand how to deal with it.” He added that, “it is just such a unique situation...when it happens to you, you’re lost. Most people are blindsided by these things. They don’t know where it came from, how it happened and so I was lost. I was like, ‘Okay, so what do I do?’” A mother offered a similar sentiment when she remarked, “I don’t think anybody is really equipped to handle it until you have to actually experience it and go through it with somebody else kind of holding your hand through the process.”

This situation differs from other family issues for several reasons which include, but are not limited to, the following topics.

Grief, A Sense of Loss

As noted above, one of the elements that make it a unique ministry situation is the emotional upheaval that ensues – in particular, the sense of grief and loss. Parents must forego some of the cherished assumptions and dreams they had for their children, such as grandchildren or the continuing of their legacy through a traditional nuclear family.

Causation, Guilt, and Cure

Parents can readily discern the origin of other family issues such as alcoholism or drug addiction. Yet, for the Christian parent with a gay adult son or daughter, explanations are elusive. The causes of homosexuality are as complex as human sexuality and parents looking for clear answers are confronted with just more questions. Mrs. Howard aptly described the dilemma of not finding any sense of closure:

I read lots and lots of books, always looking for the cause but I can't say that I ever got any great answers because I don't know that anybody knows the cause other than it's sin... I was always looking for that cause and reading helped. I tried to find out what book is going to give me the answer and I can't tell you that I ever found an answer.

With a lack of clear understanding of what brought about their child's homosexuality, second-guessing and guilt are common place. A mother remarked, "I couldn't figure out what went wrong and it doesn't mean anything has gone wrong in your family, in your parenting, but it's a pretty difficult thing to get past." One father commented that he and his wife were "in denial." They thought they "could fix this and [their son] was just mixed up, and this was something he had just decided, but it wasn't."

Mr. Woods' remark highlights another aspect that makes this family issue unique. He and his wife thought their son had a condition that they "could fix." Mr. Woods added, "our first reaction was, 'How do we change him?... How are we going to help him?' But he didn't want to be helped." To their son, his orientation was not a choice. It was his identity. Therefore, Christian parents wrestle with a thorny problem. Their adult gay son or daughter does not view their sexual orientation as a condition that needs treatment; it is who they are as a person. This makes the parents' situation more difficult than with other issues, such as drug addiction. As one mother noted, "When their child is a prodigal in terms of drugs and alcohol, they can pay, they can assist for treatment, for rehab. They can seek venues for helping their child and hopefully that works. The child has to be a participant, too - but you can't do that with this. You just can't do that." Another mother repeated the same refrain,

It's a situation that is different from any other kind of situation with your children. Your children might get into drugs and so that's something that you can really do something about. You can treat that, you can cure that, you can do something about it. This is unique in that there's not a treatment out there. There's not a pill that you can take that's going to get rid of this. It's a very different kind of situation.

Negotiating Issues

Furthermore, as noted above, a Christian parent with a gay adult child must make difficult decisions, balancing their conscience with care for their child. Will they meet the partner? Will they attend the wedding? What would normally be joyous family occasions – the engagement announcement, the big wedding day – become a springboard for strife and sadness.

Swimming Against the Tide

Finally, Christian parents may find themselves misunderstood, denigrated, and demeaned as they stand on their convictions. With other family struggles – such as addiction or abuse – contemporary culture would be sympathetic. Yet, when Christian parents attempt to live out their faith in response to their child’s homosexuality, they find themselves swimming against the cultural tide that says, “Your child is okay. You’re not.” One mother remarked, “The scriptures convince me not to listen to the world...we got the world out there that’s going crazy – that’s telling us that this is okay.” The culture might say their family issue is no cause for concern, but as one father remarked, “It’s a big deal when it happens to a Christian parent.”

For these Christian parents, it has been a journey fraught with grief, guilt, and continuing struggle. As Mrs. Bradford painfully admitted, “It’s a lonely journey.” Yet, they have found strength and even hope in their faith, in which they entrust themselves and their children to God.

Chapter Five

Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to investigate the kinds of pastoral care Christian parents require when they find their adult child is homosexual. Having interviewed Christian parents who walked this journey, several pastoral issues emerge which make shepherding these parents a challenging ministry opportunity. These issues include the emotional turmoil parents experience, the family issues they navigate, and the ministry resources they need to gain understanding and maintain a constructive relationship with their child. These particular issues highlight the unique character of ministering to Christian parents with an adult homosexual child.

A Unique Ministry

The emotional turmoil Christian parents experience as they react to the news of their child's same-sex attraction makes this a unique ministry. While other family issues such as adultery or addiction involve distress, sadness, anger and grief, Christian parents of an adult, homosexual children have an extra emotional dimension that makes this family situation especially painful. A deep, profound sense of loss accompanies the knowledge of a child's homosexuality. The loss functions much like a death – the demise of a dream. Joe Dallas observed this sense of loss in the parents he counsels. He writes:

When listening to people describe their feelings about a homosexual loved one, *death* is the word I hear most often. Of course, words like *shock*, *fear*, and *confusion* are used as well, but the phrase “it feels like he died” comes up more

than any other...When homosexuality hits home, I've come to believe, there *is* a death involved....it's the death of assumptions.³⁹⁵

With the news of a son or daughter's homosexuality comes the realization that certain cherished assumptions, held for years, will not occur – the dream of a son's wedding to a Christian woman dies; the hopes for grandchildren through tradition procreation and the continuation of a family legacy are painfully shattered. As long as the child continues to pursue same-sex relationships, parents have no chance for the dream to be resurrected. Mrs. Howard spoke of her deep sense of loss:

I can't believe this is going to happen because that means she won't get married and have children. She won't give me grandchildren and so it was very much like a death because I think every parent just thinks, well my child is going to grow up just like I did, and they're going to find a spouse and they're going to get married and then have a family and they're going to live happily ever after. That's sort of what parents think, you know and then when suddenly when that doesn't happen because of this - it is like a death.

Furthermore, it is a funeral without closure. As Mr. Bradford lamented, with a death, "There's closure. It may take a person a year to get past the actual burial...but eventually you get back to living. But with a child with a situation like this you're still grieving ten or fifteen years later." While the emotional pain eases over time, it never abates completely. The parents are continually reminded that their son or daughter is out of accord with their strongly held convictions every time they interact with their child – even if their child's homosexuality is not discussed, it still looms large in the mind of the parents. It is the "elephant in the room" everyone sees but ignores. Unlike a funeral where friends and family rally around the bereaved, this death is a lonely journey. Often parents are too ashamed to tell others, initially, and so they suffer in silence and isolation.

³⁹⁵ Dallas, *When Homosexuality Hits Home*, 23.

In addition to the loss of dreams, there is the realization that they cannot change their son or daughter. Parents have no quick fixes to alter their child's sexual orientation. In fact, by the time adults come out and announce their homosexual orientation, they may have spent years battling their desires. Their children's decision to embrace their same-sex attraction is a declaration of who they are as people. To those with same-sex attractions, their homosexual desires are not a choice but an intrinsic part of their identity. They are gay and feel that they have always been so. Therefore, the idea of parents trying to change them is extremely problematic. If a son or daughter was an alcohol or addicted to painkillers, the parents might be able to encourage their child to go into a substance abuse rehabilitation program. Yet, for the Christian parent whose child embraces a gay identity, no such option is available if the child does not struggle with his or her orientation. As Mrs. Bradford noted, "when their child is a prodigal in terms of drugs and alcohol (the parents) can pay, they can assist for treatment, for rehab. They can seek venues for helping their child and hopefully that works. The child has to be a participant too - but you can't do that with this. You just can't do that." Mrs. Howard echoed the same idea,

It's a situation that is different from any other kind of situation with your children. Your children might get into drugs and so that's something that you can really do something about. You can treat that. You can cure that. You can do something about it. This is unique in that there's not a treatment out there. There's not a pill that you can take that's going to get rid of this. It's a very different kind of situation.

In addition to the emotional stress and grief parents suffer, they must also navigate uncharted waters with their child steering a path fraught with potential relational damage. They balance demonstrating love to their adult child while remaining true to their convictions. Complex family issues arise after children come out and

uniquely challenge pastors as they guide parents through murky waters. For example, a Christian couple may have a son who is living with his girlfriend, against their biblical values. The situation would distress the parents, similar to the distress a Christian parent would have if a gay son was living with another man. However, should their straight son decide to marry his live-in girlfriend, his decision would alleviate the parents' distress since their relationship would be legitimized through matrimony. Yet, should a gay son become engaged, the moral dilemma intensifies as the parents have to decide whether they will go to the wedding – a ceremony which they would gladly attend if their son was straight.

Thus, many family circumstances confront Christian parents with adult gay children and require them to walk a tightrope, balancing between compassion and conviction. Do these parents stand on conviction and risk losing their child because they do not go to their child's wedding? Do they go against their conscience in order to maintain contact with their children by allowing them and their partner to stay at their home? How do they extend grace to their children while maintaining the truth of their religious beliefs? How do they speak the truth in love when their children will most likely reject it and scorn them?³⁹⁶ These are some of the unique issues facing Christian parents with adult gay children – issues that their pastors can help with their wisdom, sensitivity and guidance.

In order to navigate the various issues Christian parents may face, they will need resources that specifically address their situation. Christian parents generally want to know what caused their child to be gay. Therefore, pastors will need to know of the

³⁹⁶ Ephesians 4:15.

current research regarding the nature of sexual identity. Pastors may need to have several books in their library on the nature of homosexuality and what causes it.

In addition to the question of causation, parents may be unsure what scripture says about homosexuality. They may have questions regarding the veracity of pro-gay theology. Pastors will also need to be aware of the current theological debate in order to competently answer their questions.

These two areas – causation and the biblical debate regarding homosexuality – again highlight the unique ministry needs of parents who have adult homosexual children. For example, parents might not be as curious about what caused their daughter's drug addiction; the reason might be obvious – peer pressure or emotional or physical pain. Yet a parent will wonder what caused her son's same-sex attraction and will question whether or not she was responsible for it. Furthermore, a parent would not need a discussion on the biblical position regarding alcoholism or sexual addiction. A pro-alcoholic or pro-pornography theology does not exist. The position within Christendom regarding sexual addiction and drug and alcohol abuse is fairly unified. Yet, the debate over homosexuality rages within the church and a parent will want to know which side is being true to the scriptures.

Finally, the current cultural tide makes this family struggle unique. Christian parents may feel like they are swimming against the stream of popular cultural norms which increasingly view homosexual relationships as normal and natural and therefore, moral. The pressure from other family members and friends who celebrate their child's same sex attraction can be very distressing and can potentially damage family

relationships. Pastors need to be aware of these pitfalls in order to effectively shepherd these hurting parents who desire to be faithful both to their Lord and in loving their child.

Emotional Turmoil

Pastors need to recognize and anticipate the tidal wave of emotional turmoil the parents may undergo. All of the parents interviewed expressed shock and a profound sense of grief. A few expressed anger and denial. Some became severely depressed, requiring medication. Many viewed their child's coming out as a funeral – a death of their dreams and assumptions they had for their son and daughter.

A significant part of ministry to these parents includes offering a listening ear and a comforting presence. Many of the parents interviewed expressed how important it was for someone to listen attentively without being judgmental toward them as parents. Helping parents deal with raw emotions can allow them to vent negative feelings in a safe place and in an appropriate manner. Pastors can act as an emotional buffer, allowing parents to express their negative feelings rather than take them out on their son or daughter.

When counseling parents, it may be prudent to meet in their home or a neutral location to ensure privacy. Parents naturally react with shame and hiding, and pastors should ensure confidentiality so that the couple feels comfortable and can talk freely. As one parent commented, “it was easier to go to a neutral meeting place rather than to go to a pastor's office right in our home church where other people (could see us)...because I do have to say gossip is alive and well.”

Parents will also question how their son or daughter became homosexual. Part of their concern is to discern if they had any role in the same-sex attraction. The pastor will

need to have resources available that will answer their concerns. As stated in Chapter Two, no conclusive evidence shows that homosexuality is an inborn, genetic condition. The American Psychological Association summarizes the current research regarding the etiology of homosexuality as follows:

There is no consensus among scientists about the exact reasons that an individual develops a heterosexual, bisexual, gay, or lesbian orientation. Although much research has examined the possible genetic, hormonal, developmental, social, and cultural influences on sexual orientation, no findings 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; most people experience little or no sense of choice about their sexual orientation.³⁹⁷

Richard Cohen reflects these findings in offering parents counsel:

While you are dealing with your child's SSA, you may find yourself burdened with guilt. "It's all my fault" is a natural reaction, but it simply isn't true. You can be sure that there are many potential causes for your child's SSA. An important point to realize and remember is this: It is not parenting that creates SSA in men or women. It is the child's temperament combined with his perception of the parenting and other social influences that make all the difference. Perception becomes reality.³⁹⁸

Worthen and Davies offer similar counsel. They advise: "I caused my child's homosexuality." This statement is totally false and is probably the biggest lie you will have to stand against. No one person has the power to cause another's homosexuality. At worst, a parent-child relationship may be *one factor* in a whole complex group of influences."³⁹⁹

These experts note that many factors come into play as people's sexual identity emerge – both nature and nurture contribute to a person's sexual orientation. This

³⁹⁷ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality And The Christian*, 79.

³⁹⁸ Cohen, *Gay Children, Straight Parents*, 39-40.

³⁹⁹ Worthen and Davies, *Someone I Love Is Gay*, 43-44.

information can encourage Christian parents who can have some assurance their parenting did not cause their child's homosexual behavior. Also, the pastor can make clear that adult children are responsible for their own behavior and the decision to act upon their same sex attractions. This may help alleviate the unnecessary guilt and blame that so many of the parents interviewed experienced. With the exception of one parent whose daughter embraced lesbianism after being married, all the parents interviewed expressed a profound sense of guilt and at times blamed themselves for their child's homosexuality.

Helping parents deal with their self-blame will also guard against the inclination to blame each other. A mother might fault the father for not relationally connecting with his sensitive son and the father might accuse the mother of being too possessive and clinging to their boy. Such accusations only add to an already stressful situation and damage the parents' relationship with each other precisely when they need each other the most. As Mrs. Woods admitted, "Of course we want to blame each other. I wanted him to own it but he wouldn't own any of it. I said, 'Can you at least own some of it. I am owning it all. I don't want to own it all. We were in it together. We caused this together.'"

Furthermore, parents may hope for change; yet, for any change to occur, it has to originate from the child. Parents need to reach a place of acceptance where they demonstrate love for their child and pray that their child will desire to change; only the Holy Spirit can bring about the change needed but change can occur.⁴⁰⁰

⁴⁰⁰ 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.

Scripturally, the pastor will need to be aware of the biblical debate concerning homosexuality. If the children embrace pro-gay theology and convey their views to their parents, the parents may be confused as to what the Bible says about homosexuality. The pastor will need to evaluate both sides of the debate and be able to give an apology for the traditional evangelical view.

Navigating Issues

Pastors can shepherd parents effectively by helping them think through the issues that will inevitably arise: What will we do if my son wants to bring his boyfriend over for Christmas? Will I allow my daughter and her partner to spend the night? Should we go to our son's wedding? Do we allow our daughter and her partner to display affection in front of us? Do we tell other family members or let our son? The pastor can help guide the parents through these deep waters and help them navigate acceptable boundaries in an effort to demonstrate love for their child while remaining true to their convictions.

Pastors should employ Joe Dallas' framework of conscience and comfort as reviewed in Chapter Two. Dallas offers a useful tool for parents to decide what limitations they need to set which are based on their conscience and comfort level. Dallas defines the principle of conscience as, "I cannot participate in something I don't believe in, nor can I directly or indirectly encourage another person to sin, since that makes me a partaker of his sin."⁴⁰¹ He describes the principle of comfort as, "I have the liberty to say no to something I'm uncomfortable with, even if I don't feel the situation, not the homosexuality, is inherently wrong."⁴⁰²

⁴⁰¹ Dallas and Heche, *The Complete Christian Guide To Understanding Homosexuality*, 138.

Dallas suggests that if something violates parents' consciences or they feel too uncomfortable in a situation involving their gay child, then they should either abstain or seek an alternative. These principles of conscience and comfort provide a helpful guideline for Christian parents to decide what they will participate in regarding the various family and social situations that arise.

All the parents interviewed had reached a truce with their gay child; they agree to disagree with their son or daughter over the issue of homosexuality. They have stated their beliefs and no longer feel it necessary to rehash what the child has come to understand – that they love their child, but cannot condone as morally acceptable their child's decision to act upon his or her homosexual orientation. The manner in which parents express their biblical convictions is imperative. Pastors can help the family express their beliefs in a manner that is loving, grace-centered, and Gospel-focused; pastors can encourage parents to state “the truth in love,”⁴⁰³ as one fellow sinner to another, rather than in harsh judgment. The parents can defend the biblical position in a way that balances the admonitions against homosexuality with the proactive, positive message about the Lord's intended design for human sexuality. As Mr. Wilkes aptly stated, “It's how you respond that I think is as important as what you respond (and) the scripture references that show where it's wrong, should be pointed out in a loving way.”

Another aspect of helping parents entails offering counsel regarding family members. The potential estrangement and conflict with their child extends to other family members; pastors may need to counsel as to how to resolve family disputes between

⁴⁰² Dallas and Heche, *The Complete Christian Guide To Understanding Homosexuality*, 139.

⁴⁰³ Ephesians 4:15.

siblings and extended family over the issue of their child's homosexuality. How will they as a family treat their gay relative? Mr. Wilkes fittingly stated the important part a pastor plays in counseling parents, "The pastor needs to think how it affects the rest of the family....I guess one of the things the pastor needs to really try to give an understanding that this is a problem and this is going to hurt the family and you need to try to work together in love and reach out to the person and show love rather than showing disgust or disdain."

Resources

From the interviews, parents found several resources helpful. Para-church organizations such as Harvest USA and Regeneration reach out to people struggling with same-sex attraction and their families; many books deal with homosexuality from a Christian worldview; and Christian support groups have formed for parents with gay children.

All of the parents interviewed had some contact with a para-church organization that ministers to people struggling with same-sex attraction and their families. They either attended a conference or received personal counseling. All had favorable views of the organizations and a few found them more knowledgeable than their pastors. As Mr. Howard commented, "Most churches don't have that (kind of) ministry and they have no concept about what to do and how to help parents and families with this situation;" he further commented that having a para-church organization "in a pastor's tool kit would be helpful." Based on their experience, pastors should be aware of any such counseling groups in their area and make personal contact with these ministries before sending parents to them.

If a para-church counseling group is not available locally, pastors could connect the parents with another couple in the local faith community who has gone through this issue in their family and can offer them additional counsel and emotional support. Pastors may need to contact other evangelical churches or a para-church organization to see if there are any other couples willing to offer counsel and advice, either by phone or in person.

All of the parents interviewed mentioned the support group as an effective ministry tool. A Christian support group for parents with gay children offered parents a safe haven, where they could openly share their struggles without fear of judgment; with fellow strugglers, they found camaraderie, understanding, prayer support, and counsel from other parents who had been down the same road and were further along in their journey. They were not alone and could find the help they needed from other Christian parents who knew exactly what they were experiencing. As Mr. Woods remarked on the importance of a support group, “The people that are dealing with it are going to know more than the pastor because you’ve walked those miles.”

Pastors might consider starting a support group in their own congregation. The impetus could originate from their church or several local churches hosting a para-church organization, like Harvest USA, for a conference that focuses on sexual issues such as addiction to pornography and homosexuality. The para-church organization would then encourage participants to join a newly formed support group as a follow-up to the conference. Several support groups could be offered if there was enough interest, focusing on a particular issue –same-sex attraction, parents of gay children, and

pornography addiction. This kind of conference would not only serve the local congregation but the broader community as well.

When starting a support group or seeking an effective one, the parents interviewed offered their insights into what made their support groups valuable and what could have made them more effective. For example, several mentioned that the support group they attended was rooted in scripture; the pastor leading it offered helpful devotions that were encouraging. Others mentioned the prayer support they received as a vital element of the group. Other parents mentioned the counseling support they received; they gained helpful advice from other parents who had dealt with navigating family issues. Finally, a few parents mentioned the helpful resources – books, newsletters, et cetera – that are available.

Many parents faced monotony in their groups. After a period of time, the groups seemed to run their course as people had little new information to share or issues to discuss. Several parents commented on the need to have new people join the group in order to maintain a sense of vibrancy and purpose and to avoid it from becoming inward and repetitive. Several parents interviewed were in a group that disbanded because they had reached a plateau. As Mr. Wilkes described it:

The group dissolved, and it dissolved because we were hearing the same thing. The group wasn't growing and getting new people, so you felt that we were talking (about) the same thing and we could do that without coming to meetings. You could share with the others when you see them and you could call them so there wasn't the need for the monthly meeting.

He further commented about the need for new people to keep things fresh and to allow more experienced parents to minister to parents who recently learned of their child's homosexuality. Mr. Wilkes states,

I think you need some people seeking, that want to learn so we could share with them because we all had pretty much come to the place of knowing that there's nothing we can do but pray and share and encourage and if you're hearing the same thing each time from the same people it doesn't feed you that much.

One way to keep new people involved in the group may be to let other evangelical churches know about it. Mr. Wilkes added, "Maybe there should have been more outreach to other churches that we're meeting...I think it needed to be kept vital and the only way to do that is to have some new (people)."

Others offered different solutions to a support group that has lost its vitality. Mr. Howard commented, "The problem is that you need to be there for the new [development] but once you're all familiar with one another...you don't need as often to be together." Instead of meeting as a formal support group, he suggested the group should shift gears and meet more informally, such as "just fellowship, dinner together, calling each other just to check up on each other" but when a new couple arrives the group would meet formally again to "share their troubles and comfort the new ones, offer to love and support." Mr. Woods suggested an alternative. Once the participants had reached a level of healing and acceptance, rather than continue with the group, they should disband it. The leader could start a completely new group but ask the members of the former group to "come in as a resource" as a "guest couple" who would feel "comfortable talking about it" to the new group.

Counseling Objectives

Acceptance

One of the counseling goals for parents of adult, gay children is helping them reach a place of acceptance which was defined in Chapter Four as agreeing to disagree, avoiding self-blame and blaming each other, growing spiritually, listening rather than

reacting, ministering to others, and gaining perspective for the long term. Guiding parents to a place of acceptance may be time intensive at first as they work through the initial shock and negative emotions that may arise when they learn of their child's homosexuality.

Along with reaching a state of acceptance, pastors will also need to assist parents with navigating the various issues that may arise. This aspect of pastoral counseling may be less time intensive once the parents have worked through their initial response to the revelation that their child is gay. Pastors may only need to meet on an as-needed basis, acting as a sounding board for the couple's decisions regarding what boundaries they may establish with their child. Mrs. Howard aptly stated the need for pastors to listen and guide parents through various decisions. She remarked,

I think to me the most important thing would be that (the pastor) would just be there for me and that he could be a sounding board for me and then to give me spiritual guidance. You know that you could say to him, "Well...you know if she gets married, I don't know whether to go to that wedding or not." Just to have someone to talk to and be able to tell me scripturally why maybe this wouldn't be a good idea or something.

Encouragement

Their children may not change but the parents certainly will. All the parents interviewed had found a silver lining in their grey cloud of despair. Many expressed a deepening sense of the Lord's presence through prayer; they needed the Lord's grace, wisdom and strength to persevere and pursue a relationship with their child. One couple mentioned how the counseling they received aided their marriage. Several parents noted how they have grown in their appreciation of God's grace in their lives. They have seen their own need for the Lord's forgiveness and mercy as their family situation had revealed the depth of their own sinful hearts. Speaking of the need for Christians to be

more transparent about their problems, Mr. Howard remarked, “We need to know that we’re not a bunch of saints in the sense of not doing anything wrong. We’re only saints because of the righteousness of Christ.”

These parents have been broken-hearted, and in their brokenness, they have found a profound sense of the Lord’s grace and mercy. Many have seen how God made them more useful for his kingdom. One parent shared this quote from Oswald Chambers to illustrate the sense of purpose in their emotional pain, “If we are going to be made into wine, we will have to be crushed; you cannot drink grapes. Grapes become wine only when they have been squeezed.”

Long-Term Ministry

Ministry to Christian parents with adult gay children is not a sprint but a long journey in which pastors will walk side-by-side with a grieving couple for a significant period of time. Ministers will shepherd parents through the initial shock and the various negative emotions and damaging thoughts that may occur. The pastor will offer comfort, prayer, biblical counsel and a listening ear that will allow the couple to vent their emotions in a healthy way. In the months and even years following their child’s announcement, ministers will help guide the couple as they navigate various family issues that may arise. Pastors will help them establish appropriate boundaries that balance their unconditional love for their child with their commitment to their convictions. Ministers will play an important role as parents learn to extend grace to their child while remaining true to their conscience. Pastors will help parents reach a place of acceptance, where they learn to trust in the Lord’s sovereignty and find hope, comfort and encouragement in a relationship with their Savior.

A Larger Perspective, A Broader Ministry

Ministry to Christian parents entails more than personal or family counseling; it includes shepherding the congregation as a whole through teaching, preaching, and equipping so that parents can meet the challenges of living their faith in the midst of family conflict and in contemporary culture.

As pastors disciple through the ministry of the word, Christian parents are better prepared to handle the family issue of a gay son or daughter. The parents interviewed recommended useful topics for teaching from the pulpit such as the sovereignty of God. Knowing that the Lord is in control, that he is not caught off guard by their family situation, and that he is using it for his glory and positive purposes comforts and encourages parents. As one mother remarked on the importance of being taught God's sovereignty, "I still struggle but it is there and the scripture is clear and I'm so grateful for the amount of teaching that I have had. I'm very grateful. This would have been a lot harder without it."

Parents also encouraged pastors to preach on humanity's fallen nature. Some parents expressed the importance of understanding people's fallen nature in which sin distorts their hearts and minds, and everyone falls short of the glory of God.⁴⁰⁴ Everyone wrestles with particular sins and, ultimately, no sin is any less grievous any other sin.

Pastors also equip parents and others with teaching that focuses on a positive, biblical view of human sexuality which emphasizes God's intended design for relationships – the monogamous, committed sexual union of a man and woman in marriage. Due to the fall, humanity distorts God's creation by various sexual aberrations

⁴⁰⁴ Romans 3:24.

such as sex before marriage, adultery, bestiality, incest, lustful coveting, pornography and homosexuality. Homosexual practice mirrors heterosexual intercourse in which a man penetrates another – simulating heterosexuality but distorting what God had intended. A pastor needs to support the traditional interpretation of the verses dealing with homosexuality, and offer a positive view of human sexuality as God intended.

Finally, parents recommend that pastors emphasize everyone's need for God's grace. Since everyone is a sinner saved by grace alone, pastors must emphasize how God's grace fights against an attitude of self-righteousness. Grace softens hearts and allows people to freely share their own personal struggles as well as family struggles without fear of being judged or ostracized. Several parents commented on the need for the church community to be a safe place, where they could share their emotional burden without feeling stigmatized or condemned as a bad parent. Mr. Howard expressed this viewpoint aptly when he remarked, "I'd like the church to acknowledge that we're a bunch of sinners and that we need to seek help and counsel and love one another and not be critical but to understand and forgive and encourage their brothers and sisters." Sadly, several parents hid their child's sexual orientation because they feared their church's gossip and shame. One parent, who was hurt by gossip in the church, longed for a community in which people could be supportive and sensitive. He longs for a church that would be respectful and understanding of the emotional turmoil the parents were under instead of using it as an occasion to gossip amongst themselves. He suggested that the pastor should, "let (the parents) know, you're not the first ones and let them know that you want to support them knowing that the (church family) wants to support you and not ostracize you because you have this child."

Furthermore, grace-centered teaching involves emphasizing dependence on Christ through the struggles that confront parents. Mr. Howard expressed this need as he remarked, “(The pastor needs to) give people the hope that they need to be dependent upon the Lord to get through all these problems and so it just needs to be more focused on people equipped to not only understand who God is, but what God desires for us and how to face the troubles in life.”

Ministry to Christian parents with adult gay children is a unique, challenging opportunity in which pastors need to be equipped to shepherd hurting parents as they work through emotional pain and family issues that will ensue. The minister will need to be aware of the current research regarding the causes of homosexuality and the biblical debate surrounding the morality of homosexual relationships. Pastors will also have to be aware of outside resources such as books, conferences and para-church organizations that will supplement and strengthen their counseling ministry. Most of all, pastors will offer parents comfort through a compassionate heart and a listening ear when they need help and feel at a loss. Being well equipped, the pastor will know how to respond when a parent says, “Help Pastor! My son is gay!”

Suggestions for Further Research

Further research could examine the following topics: Pastoral care for Christian parents and their teen who struggles with same-sex attraction; effective strategies for reaching the homosexual community with the gospel; how the church can communicate the compassionate of Christ and uphold the word of Christ; effective pastoral counseling for the adult who struggles with same-sex attraction; fruitful methods for encouraging a congregation to be a safe place in which families can feel comfortable revealing their

struggles and seek help; an evangelical Christian response to the legalization of same-sex marriages.

Conclusion

This study examined the unique pastoral needs of Christian parents who discover their adult child is homosexual. Ministry to these parents is challenging as their issue involves much emotional turmoil including shock, denial, despair, anger and a profound sense of loss. Parents with an adult gay son or daughter also have many questions that require specialized knowledge that pastors need such as the current biblical debate surrounding homosexuality as well as its causation.

The research also highlighted various effective resources that parents found helpful – resources which pastors could offer to struggling parents. The most effective resources included para-church organizations that specialize in ministering to those who struggle with same-sex attraction and their families, and Christian support-groups for parents with gay children. These resources, partnered with pastoral counseling, can aid parents in achieving a sense of acceptance in which they gain a clear perspective in ministering to their child. Parents can reach that delicate balance between loving their children without condoning their behavior. Parents must recognize that they cannot change or control their child and learned to navigate and negotiate divisive issues without compromising their conscience. Parents will grown in their understanding of God's grace and sovereignty as they lean upon and trust in him to guide them through a deep valley in which they find their hope in him.

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