

# Addressing Affirming Perspectives

**Big Idea:** Examine your understanding of sex according to Scripture, and extend grace and love to others.

We have a big job in front of us today.

Last week I spoke on same-sex sexuality. If you missed that, my sermon basically said two things:

- First: Marriage is by definition the union between two sexually different persons. Whenever the Bible mentions same-sex sexual relationships, it always prohibits them. The historic, multi-denominational, global church has agreed with these points for the last 2,000 years.
- Second: This is not just about an issue. It's about people, people made in the image of God. Churches – in particular, this church – should be places where we can step into the light and receive God's grace no matter who we are.

To [quote](#) an anonymous Christian who experiences same-sex attraction:

*What if the church were full of people who were loving and safe, willing to walk alongside people who struggle? What if there were people in the church who kept confidences, who took the time to be Jesus to those who struggle with homosexuality? What if the church were what God intended it to be?*

That's what I said last week.

## The Pushbacks

This week I want to examine, as carefully as I can, the best arguments against what I said last week. I want to represent, as fairly as I can, the arguments of those who take an affirming position, and then evaluate them briefly.

Why are we doing this today? One man writes:

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

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

What are the main arguments for an affirming position, and what would I say to them? We won't have time to look at every argument today, but I want to look at the most influential and the most persuasive.

Here are the top four pushbacks – two biblical ones and two more practical ones, and how to evaluate them.

## **The prohibition passages don't address loving, consensual relationships.**

According to this view, Scripture does prohibit some same-sex sexual practices, but not the kind we see today. Sometimes they refer to nonconsensual ones – for instance, pederasty, which is a sexual relationship between an adult man and a pubescent or adolescent boy. Some argue that the Scriptures are against men taking the passive role, or that some of these passages address “excess desire” – men whose sexual appetite was so ravenous that they slept with both women and men.

James Brownson summarizes this view:

*Whatever specific behaviors and relationships the Bible is condemning ... cannot be used to condemn committed same-sex unions today. These ancient texts are speaking against pagan practices, against pederasty and abuse, and against violations of commonly embraced standards of decency and “normality” that were part of the ancient world. As such, they cannot speak directly to committed, mutual, and loving same-sex unions in the contemporary church.*

Some go even farther and argue that same-sex orientation wasn't known in antiquity, so that Scripture can't possibly be speaking about the kind of loving, consensual relationships like we see today.

How do we evaluate this argument?

We can agree with a couple of things. One: exploitative relationships did exist in the past. We can also agree that Scripture is against these kinds of relationships.

The main thing to do is to look at the texts. Let's look at Leviticus. “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman” (Leviticus 18:22). “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination” (Leviticus 20:13). Leviticus

doesn't mention masters or slaves or prostitutes or rape or older men having sex with teenage boys. The language of Leviticus simply says that men shouldn't have sex with other men. It holds both partners responsible. There's nothing in this text or around this text that limits the prohibition to acts of exploitation.

Now let's look at Romans 1.

*For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; 27 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. (Romans 1:26-27)*

Pederasty was very common in the Roman world, and it would have been relevant to Paul's audience. But Paul doesn't mention pederasty. What he does mention is female same-sex sex, which was far more typically consensual than non-consensual.

Did Paul even know about consensual relations?

*Every kind of homosexual relationship was known in the first century, from lesbianism, to orgiastic behavior, to gender-malleable "marriage," to lifelong same-sex companionship. ([Kevin DeYoung](#))*

N.T. Wright, a leading scholar, says:

*...they knew a great deal about what people today would regard as longer-term, reasonably stable relations between two people of the same gender. This is not a modern invention, it's already there...*

The reality is that same-sex relationships have existed throughout history. While some of these relationships were exploitative, not all of them seem to have been. Many

scholars on both sides of the debate acknowledge that adult, consensual same-sex relations—even marriages – existed in the biblical world.

In addition to examining the texts themselves I would like to add that not all affirming scholars who want the church to change its view agree with this argument. For instance:

*Nowhere does Paul or any other Jewish writer of this period imply the least acceptance of same-sex relations under any circumstance. The idea that homosexuals might be redeemed by mutual devotion would have been wholly foreign to Paul or any other Jew or early Christian. (Louis Crompton)*

If you look at the evidence, and the language the Bible uses, we see that there's nothing in the biblical text that limits the same-sex prohibition to such acts of sexual exploitation. It seems to be talking about same-sex sexual practices categorically.

Here's the second pushback.

## **An ethical trajectory leads to including same-sex relationships into the definition of marriage.**

Here's the second pushback. Certain things were condemned in the Old Testament, but we see an ethical trajectory leading to acceptance. So, for instance, we see that slavery was allowed, albeit regulated, in the Old Testament, and increasingly deconstructed in the New Testament. You see passages that gut slavery from the inside-out like the book of Philemon or Galatians 3:28: "there is neither slave nor free."

Some people say the same thing applies to women: that some of the Old Testament Scriptures seem hard to understand, maybe even a little patriarchal, but that the New Testament moves to a more elevated view of women. I would argue that the He-

brew Scriptures, rightly understood, present a very high view of women right from the beginning, but that's the argument.

Some push this argument a little farther and say that Old Testament laws no longer apply. They say they serve a God of love, not a God of judgment.

But here's the issue with this argument: the Bible is consistent in its treatment of marriage and same-sex relationships from beginning to end. An affirming scholar says, "Whenever homosexual intercourse is mentioned in Scripture, it is condemned" (Pim Pronk).

It is also wrong to pit the New Testament God against an Old Testament one. God is God from the beginning to end of Scripture. There is no trajectory to accepting same-sex practices or changing the Bible's sexual ethic. If anything, the Bible augments its vision for marriage and sexuality. It moves towards a stricter ethic, as we see in the Sermon on the Mount, not a more expanded one.

The third argument is probably the most common, and perhaps the most persuasive.

## **The non-affirming view is harmful to LGBT+ people.**

Matthew Vines writes:

*Condemning same-sex relationships is harmful to LGBT people. Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount that good trees bear good fruit (Matthew 7:15-20), but the church's rejection of same-sex relationships has caused tremendous, needless suffering to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people.*

In other words, a non-affirming view is bad fruit, he argues.

You can feel the weight of this argument, can't you? Especially when you consider the number of suicides among youth identifying as gay. Christopher Yuan, author of [Holy Sexuality](#), writes:

*Our response should be grave concern, deep compassion, and vigilant action. To our shame, evangelical Christians have often ignored this or brushed it off—even with an attitude that such deaths are somehow deserved. Such a glib response does not reflect the gospel truth that everyone is created in God's image and in need of his saving grace.*

We should also not minimize the cost of calling gay people to celibacy. Scott Sauls, a pastor in Nashville, [nails it](#):

*If I am going to have anything meaningful to contribute to this discussion, it must begin with a recognition that temporary celibacy pales in comparison with what many same-sex-attracted people feel is a lifelong prison sentence of suppressing libido and romantic feelings. For those who are not same-sex attracted, this conversation needs to begin with compassion and maintain compassion as its foundation. We must never presume to understand what it is like to walk in shoes we will never wear.*

It just doesn't feel fair, it doesn't feel loving.

How do we evaluate this argument?

**First, we should start by asking if what the Bible says is true before we ask if it's harmful.** We can't determine ethics based on a subjective sense of what we feel is harmful. It doesn't mean that we're unfeeling; it just means we start here. For instance, Jesus says a lot of things that may seem harmful at first glance: love your enemies; take up your cross; give your money to the poor. "Jesus had a fondness for saying

hard things ... Dying to self is the duty of every follower of Christ" (Kevin DeYoung). We have to ask if it's true. If it is true, then we have to do the work, to ask God for his understanding of how this truth brings us life and freedom in Christ, even when it doesn't feel fair, even when it feels unloving.

**Second, we should separate the non-affirming view from its distortions.**

Matthew Vines says, "Condemning same-sex relationships is harmful to LGBT people." If by condemning he means things like shaming or dehumanizing LGBT+ people, parents kicking gay kids out of their house, or forcing people into reparative therapy, then I agree with him. I'm against those things too. Unfortunately these behaviors have often been present in the church, and they are not helpful responses. We have to own these, and repent of them if we've done those things.

But none of that is the non-affirming view. The non-affirming view says that marriage is between sexually different people, that sex difference is part of what marriage is, and that all sexual activity belongs within that covenant bond. A biblical ethic includes things like loving others, focusing on our sins before we focus on the sins of others, radically loving those who fall short, and showing kindness and care to others. That's still less than affirming people may want, but I'm not sure it's harmful. As Christians we're called to love others, give them grace, and pray for them. Those things should characterize our relationship with others, including the LGBT+ community.

**Third, we should be careful in describing the causes of suffering.** It's common to say that non-affirming people are to blame. Christopher Yuan writes, "Currently there's no scientific evidence that the biblical stance on sexuality actually causes suicidality among gays. We just don't yet know." Even in countries with open attitudes to homosexuality, and little judgment, the suicide rate is higher. We just don't know why.

**Finally, we should be careful about making too much of sex or even our desire for happiness.** All of us can make this mistake. A lot of people think you need to



be married to be fulfilled, or that a life without sex is deficient. Some say that celibacy is dehumanizing and cruel.

We shouldn't be heartless about this. We should recognize that singleness and celibacy can be enormously painful at times. But we also shouldn't see it as catastrophic. As [Richard Hays](#) says, "Sexual gratification is not a sacred right, and celibacy is not a fate worse than death."

One same-sex attracted man who's committed to celibacy says:

*My life isn't a "life of misery," and I'm not "doomed to celibacy," or a life of heart-breaking loneliness. I reject the representation of a life striving for celibacy as miserable, and part of my mission in life is to debunk all of the dreary, droopy tropes out there of what celibacy is all about.*

God promises us life to the full but he does not promise us a flourishing sex life, nor do we need to have sex in order to flourish. God may call some of us to celibacy. He may call others of us to prison or even to martyrdom. He will give us grace for all of this and more. Jesus said:

*Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. (Mark 10:29-30)*

"Whatever we leave behind, Jesus will replace in greater measure. We will never leave more than we receive. It will never be a bad deal to follow Jesus no matter what the cost." (Sam Allberry)

One final pushback before we move to one word of application:

## **People are born gay, so it's unloving and ungodly to ask them to live against who God created them to be.**

Three quick responses to this.

**Gay people don't choose their attractions.** From talking to gay people, it really does seem that their same-sex attraction was not chosen and, in many cases, was unwanted. We need to understand this. Let's agree with affirming people on this point.

**Theologically, inborn desires don't justify behavior.** Biblical Christianity teaches that people are born with sinful natures and desires, which affect every part of our beings. Justin Lee, who is on the affirming side, says, "Just because an attraction or drive is biological doesn't mean it's okay to act on ... We all have inborn tendencies to sin in any number of ways."

"This doesn't mean that all of our desires and passions are wrong. But it does mean that some of them very well could be, and we need God's revelation to sort out which ones are right and which ones are sin." ([Preston Sprinkle](#))

**Finally, scientific evidence doesn't say people are simply born gay.** Most scientists say that orientation is a complex blend of nature and nurture. They don't say that people are simply "born that way." The "born that way" narrative comes from popular culture and not science. The American Psychological Association says, "No findings have emerged that permit scientists to conclude that sexual orientation is determined by any particular factor or factors. Many think that nature and nurture both play complex roles."

As the [Digital Leaders Forum](#), put out by [The Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender](#) says:

*The more that scientists study sexuality, the more they find how much we don't know, how much we thought we knew, how much of our older understandings*

*needs to be corrected and modified in light of fresh studies, and how messy and complicated and diverse our conclusions are.*

*It is simply wrong to think that we've recently discovered this thing called sexual orientation, as if it's like discovering that the earth is round and not flat and we can therefore rearrange our sexual ethic in light of this undisputed fact.*

## The Application

Okay. That's been a lot. We need to wrap up.

We've only scratched the surface today. If you want to dig deeper, probably the most accessible book on the affirming side is [God and the Gay Christian](#) by Matthew Vines. And the most helpful book I've seen on the non-affirming side – the most helpful book I've read overall on this subject – is [People to Be Loved](#) by Preston Sprinkle. I can also give you a link to [a sermon by Jon Tyson](#) that I found really helpful.

Let me close with one quick comment.

Why are people shifting to a more affirming position? I think there are a few reasons. Our society has moved in this direction. It's hard not to become affirming. Another reason is that we know and have relationships with LGBT+ people, and we don't want them to be mistreated or unloved.

On that we can agree. The greatest apologetic for truth is love. We need love and truth. As we saw last week, we don't need to change our views. We need to change our posture. We need to see others as made in God's image, and ourselves as people who need God's grace as much as anyone else.

I love how Jackie Hill Perry [puts it](#):

*What the gay community needs to hear is not that God will make them straight, but that Christ can make them his. In this age, they may never be "straight" (for lack of better words), but they can be holy (1 Corinthians 1:30). We must remind others (and ourselves) that Christ is ultimately calling them to himself – to know Christ, love Christ, serve Christ, honor Christ, and exalt Christ forever. When he is the aim of their repentance, and the object of their faith, they are made right with God the Father, and given the power by the Holy Spirit to deny all sin – sexual and otherwise...*

*God has not come mainly to make same-sex attracted men and women completely straight, or to get them hitched. Christ has come to make us right with God. And in making us right with God, he is satisfying us in God. That news is good for a reason. For it proclaims to the world that Jesus has come so that all sinners, gay and straight, can be forgiven of their sins to love God and enjoy him forever.*

Lord, fill us with grace and truth. Help us to think biblically about this issue. And help us to love people the way you call us to. May we all run to the cross and find the grace we need. In Jesus' name, Amen.