

## *Introduction and Overview*

The church is stuck on the question of homosexuality. In many North American denominations, despite vote after vote and debate after debate, questions remain, tempers flare, and peace and clarity seem continually elusive. In the last two decades, no issue has been more polarizing or contentious, particularly for mainline churches. Even though a major focus of this debate within the church in North America has come down to whether openly gay or lesbian Christians in committed relationships may be ordained to positions of church leadership, the fundamental question is not one of church polity. At bottom — at least for most churches of the Reformation — the question has to do with Scripture and ethics. What is the moral vision regarding gender and sexuality that Scripture commends? How flexible and adaptable is that vision in different cultures and contexts? And where do gay and lesbian people, gender identities, and marriage fit within that vision in the context of post-Christian North American society, where divorce rates are high, sexual promiscuity is common, AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections are a powerful threat, and where too many pregnancies end in abortion, and too many babies will never have two parents?

These larger questions and problems regarding gender and sexuality in North American culture illuminate why the question of homosexuality has become so polarizing. Traditionalists on the homosexuality question believe that the church must read the “plain sense” of Scripture clearly on this issue.<sup>1</sup> And they generally believe that Scripture plainly and clearly re-

1. It is not easy to know how to designate various parties in the homosexuality debate. To speak of the debate as taking place between “conservatives” and “liberals” doesn’t quite

gards all same-sex erotic behavior to be immoral.<sup>2</sup> How, they ask, will the church find the strength to bear witness in word and deed to all of Scripture's other teachings regarding sexuality in a context where the larger culture increasingly ignores the biblical vision for sexuality and marriage and experiences deep brokenness as a result? In this context, then, the question of the ethics of homosexuality becomes for many traditionalists a "line in the sand" that will determine whether the church as a whole will lose its capacity to speak a clear word from God to its surrounding culture.

For revisionist Christians, however, this attempt to draw a "line in the sand" is fundamentally misguided. They see deliberations over the ethics of homosexuality as an opportunity for the church to consecrate same-sex unions, drawing gay and lesbian persons into a biblical and traditional vision of faithful, committed unions that can stand as a witness against the prevailing patterns of promiscuity, divorce, and brokenness that characterize so much sexual experience in the wider North American culture.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, from the perspective of revisionists who want the church to have a greater openness to gays and lesbians, the broader concern expressed by traditionalists regarding sexual confusion and brokenness in

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do justice to the fact that some who identify themselves as theological conservatives also argue for a greater openness in the church's position toward gay and lesbian people (and I would include myself in this camp). In this book I use the words "traditionalists" and "revisionists" to describe contrasting approaches to the church's "traditional" teaching on homosexuality, which has generally been negative and restrictive. For some contrasting moments in the tradition, see, for example, John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Villard Books, 1994).

2. See, for example, John R. W. Stott, *Same-Sex Partnerships? A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: F. H. Revell, 1998); Stanley J. Grenz, *Welcoming But Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998); Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001); William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001); Thomas E. Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow? Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995); Marion L. Soards, *Scripture and Homosexuality: Biblical Authority and the Church Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995).

3. See, for example, David G. Myers and Letha Scanzoni, *What God Has Joined Together: A Christian Case for Gay Marriage* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005); William Stacy Johnson, *A Time to Embrace: Same-Gender Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); Eugene F. Rogers, *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999); Jack Bartlett Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

North American culture often has the character of scapegoating. They note that drawing a line in the sand on the question of homosexuality will do nothing, in itself, to lower the divorce rate, reduce abortions, and heal the brokenness of heterosexuals who have difficulty living moral lives.<sup>4</sup> They observe how easy it is for many churches to take such a strong position on this issue, when the only gay or lesbian people who may have any contact with those churches are deeply closeted. In light of some recent research indicating that the overall divorce rate among Christians differs little from the prevailing divorce rate in North America, revisionists wonder whether gay and lesbian people are being forced to pay the price for a church that has lost its way and its voice in addressing our current context effectively.<sup>5</sup>

Such polarization is easy to document; finding a way forward is more difficult. Even if we bracket out the larger problems facing the church's teaching on sexuality in our culture, even if traditionalists and revisionists work extremely hard at listening to each other and understanding each other, deep differences remain. These deeper divisions are hermeneutical in character: they arise from different ways of interpreting biblical texts and applying them to contemporary life.<sup>6</sup>

### The Necessity of Interpretation

These deeper differences are the focus of this book: they are not so much disagreements about what the biblical text *says* (though such disagreements do occur at a few points, and I will explore them when they occur), but primarily disagreements about what the biblical text *means* for Christians today. They are disagreements over how Scripture is to be interpreted.

It may be helpful to further explore this distinction between what a text

4. See esp. Myers and Scanzoni, *What God Has Joined Together*, pp. 23-36.

5. See the statistics gathered by George Barna at: <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/15-familykids/42-new-marriage-and-divorce-statistics-released>. Yet these issues are complex, and other studies indicate that those who attend church more frequently — or who are married in a religious ceremony — tend to have lower divorce rates overall. See Margaret L. Vaaler, Christopher G. Ellison, and Daniel A. Powers, "Religious Influences on the Risk of Marital Dissolution," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 71 (Nov. 2009).

6. Note, for example, the work done by two Mennonites who disagree on this issue, but are together committed to peacemaking: Ted Grimsrud and Mark Nation, *Reasoning Together: A Conversation on Homosexuality* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2008).

says and what it means. Most Christians agree that Gentile Christians today are not required by Scripture to observe the kosher laws regarding clean and unclean foods that are found in the Old Testament. The reason is that such laws are explicitly eliminated for Gentiles in the New Testament because of the epoch-changing work of Christ and the leading of the Spirit in the early church (see Acts 10, 15; Rom. 14:14; Galatians). So in this case, what a specific passage such as Leviticus 11 or Deuteronomy 14 *means* for Christians today depends on its place in the larger witness of Scripture as a whole — a larger witness that clearly relativizes the applicability of these passages for Gentile Christians.

Other examples can be adduced that, though slightly more controversial, still generate wide assent among Christians. Many Christians, for example, do not believe that Scripture requires them to kiss each other as a Christian form of greeting, despite the fact that in five separate New Testament passages Christians are commanded to “Greet one another with a holy kiss” (see Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26; 1 Pet. 5:14). In the ancient Mediterranean world, this cultural practice was the norm both inside and outside the church (and continues today). But other cultures find other ways of expressing the warmth, intimacy, and affection embodied in the scriptural commendation of a “holy kiss.”<sup>7</sup> In these cultures, a literal obedience to what these texts *say*, coming as it does from an alien culture, would probably create more disharmony and discomfort than it would express warmth, intimacy, and affection. Rather, many Christians intuitively grasp what they believe the text *means*. They sense that a deeper principle is at stake here in this exhortation to a holy kiss: not simply the external behavior of pressing one’s lips against another’s cheek or lips, but a call to those forms of greeting that convey warmth and close relationships. In this case, it is cultural diversity — a diversity brought on by the mission of the church set forth in the New Testament — that provides a framework for interpreting specific biblical passages and discerning the particular ways they are to be applied in differing contexts.

This brings us to the heart of the deeper controversy. Most thoughtful

7. Yet one should be cautious about oversimplifying the meaning of gestures such as the “holy kiss.” For an extensive discussion of the wide range of meanings acquired by the “holy kiss” in the early church, see Michael Philip Penn, *Kissing Christians: Ritual and Community in the Late Ancient Church*, Divinations (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005). The gesture cannot simply be reduced to its transcultural significance without some loss of meaning and nuance.

Christians on both sides of the homosexuality debate are not biblical literalists who take every single statement or command of Scripture at face value. Rather, most acknowledge that there are central texts, which articulate major themes of Scripture as a whole, and there are peripheral texts, which articulate subsidiary — and sometimes culturally particular — themes that are less relevant to every time or place. There are Scripture passages that lay out broad, general principles, and there are biblical texts that make specific exceptions to those broad principles.

Let’s look at some rather obvious examples. In Genesis 34, the sons of Jacob murder all the males of the city of Shechem in retaliation for the rape of their sister Dinah. Most Christians would argue that this behavior cannot serve as a precedent for Christians today, since Scripture elsewhere clearly rejects such retaliatory and escalating use of violence.<sup>8</sup> In Genesis 38, Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah, plays a prostitute and incestuously sleeps with her father-in-law (cf. Lev. 18:10) because Judah failed to provide a husband for her according to the law of levirate marriage after her husband (Judah’s son) had died (cf. Deut. 25:5-10). Despite the fact that Judah declares that Tamar was “more righteous” than he (Gen. 38:26), and despite the fact that Tamar is explicitly listed in the genealogy of Jesus himself (Matt. 1:3), Christians recognize that her behavior recounted in Genesis 38 arose under extreme circumstances and is not an example for others to imitate. All these judgments are *hermeneutical* (i.e., interpretive) judgments that arise from the attempt to situate specific passages within the larger movement of Scripture as a whole.

These hermeneutical principles apply not only in the “difficult” or marginal passages we have just explored in Genesis 34 and 38; the same principles apply even in passages that are central and foundational to the biblical witness. Consider, for example, the way the Heidelberg Catechism, an important confessional and teaching document from the Reformation period, explains the meaning of the sixth commandment, “Thou shalt not kill” (Exod. 20:13 [KJV]):

I am not to belittle, insult, hate, or kill my neighbor — not by my thoughts, my words, my look or gesture, and certainly not by actual deeds — and I am not to be party to this in others; rather, I am to put away all desire for revenge. I am not to harm or recklessly endanger

8. See Gen. 49:5-7 for an explicit renunciation of this behavior within the Genesis narrative itself.

myself, either. Prevention of murder is also why government is armed with the sword.<sup>9</sup>

The Catechism's exposition moves well beyond a strictly literal application to one that includes the literal meaning, but also extends much further as well (and also creates some room for exceptions in the government's use of the "sword"). John Calvin, in his commentary on the sixth commandment, takes this line of discussion even further:

God not only forbids us to be murderers, but also prescribes that everyone should study faithfully to defend the life of his neighbor, and practically to declare that it is dear to him. . . . There are, consequently, two parts in the Commandment, — first, that we should not vex, or oppress, or be at enmity with any; and secondly, that we should not only live at peace with men, without exciting quarrels, but also should aid, as far as we can, the miserable who are unjustly oppressed, and should endeavour to resist the wicked, lest they should injure men as they list.<sup>10</sup>

Here we see the Catechism, along with the wider Reformation tradition, making explicit a number of forms of moral logic that it regards as implicit in the command not to kill: what the text means as well as what it says. The exposition recognizes, for example, that the commandment presupposes a deep and profound value placed on all human life. This implies that, not only must I not kill my neighbor, but I also must not "belittle, insult, or hate" my neighbor. Calvin extends the same notion even further: he calls for constructive resistance to oppression and injustice. This fuller exposition clearly goes far beyond the literal meaning of the words "thou shalt not kill"; it is grounded in the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5:21-24, which itself is grounded in the deep value of human life found in texts such as Genesis 9:6: "Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind." Here we see, early in Genesis, that the prohibition of murder is grounded in the fact that humans are created in God's image: they bear an intrinsic value

9. Christian Reformed Church, *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1987), 52, Lord's Day 40, Q&A #105.

10. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses: Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, trans. Charles William Bingham, vol. 3, Calvin's Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), p. 21.

that must be respected in all circumstances and that grants them an inherent dignity, which must not be taken away.

This example from the Heidelberg Catechism and John Calvin shows clearly that the *meaning* of Scripture for Christians today must be not be drawn from just one passage but from the way any particular passage of Scripture is located within the larger themes and movements of Scripture as a whole. We must discern the deeper and more comprehensive moral logic that undergirds the specific commands, prohibitions, and examples of the biblical text. We do not interpret rightly any single passage of Scripture until we locate the text within this larger fabric of meaning in Scripture as a whole. This is necessary for two reasons: first, this kind of exposition, building on underlying values, allows the extension of core principles of biblical commands or prohibitions into new terrain not directly addressed by the literal commandment. Second, this exploration of underlying values can assist us in addressing exceptions and unusual circumstances that are not easily addressed by the literal commandment (such as why, and under what circumstances, if at all, lethal force might be justified in attempting to preserve the lives of persons).

### Imagination and Biblical Interpretation

It is relatively easy for most people to understand the broad principles outlined above. They make sense to us because we have been taught over the centuries to read the Bible in these ways. But it is not always easy to clearly discern the various forms of underlying moral logic that give shape to the biblical witness when we are in a new cross-cultural context and are forced to come up with answers to questions that no one has ever asked before. We can see, already in the New Testament, how the early church struggled with these issues when Gentiles began receiving the Spirit and coming to faith in Jesus. Should the Jewish disciples of Jesus require these Gentiles to become circumcised and to eat kosher food, as other converts to Judaism were expected to do in that day? This was not an easy question, and it disrupted the life of the church for some time, requiring the "apostolic council" of Acts 15 to come to some resolution. Paul's letter to the Galatians shows the contentiousness of the same issue in another context, and Paul's continued treatment of the question in texts such as Romans 14:14 reveals that the issue continued to be contentious quite a while after the apostolic council had offered its ruling to the

larger church. It was not easy for early Jewish Christians to let go of their ways of reading their Hebrew Bible texts that required circumcision and kosher observance of all of God's people.

In order for those early Christians to discern this deeper pattern in Scripture, they had to rekindle their imaginations to read and put together a range of biblical texts in a different way, discerning a different and deeper set of interconnections, analogies, and resonances in the Bible as a whole. In this context, "imagination" does not connote the conjuring up of images or beliefs that have no grounding in reality; rather, it refers here to the ability to see the deeper meanings and patterns that emerge in the context of cross-cultural engagements. Early Christians spoke of this as the leading of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28). Yet the dynamics of the discussion leading up to Acts 15 make it clear that this leading was not simply a supernatural "voice from the blue," but that it involved history, experience, wisdom, debate, and judicious assessment of a variety of forms of evidence, stories, and experiences. When the apostle James declared, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us," he was not elevating human wisdom to an equivalent status with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but instead underscoring the way the Spirit works through these complex human processes of constructing patterns of discernment, meaning, and vision.<sup>11</sup>

The same discipline was required when Galileo called into question the earth-centered structure of the cosmos that people had always imagined — a structure of the cosmos that they saw reflected in Scripture itself. Suddenly, a whole range of texts needed to be reread, and some passages assumed to be literal in their description of the sun moving around the earth had to be read in different ways. The same dynamics can be seen in the nineteenth-century debate over slavery and the twentieth-century debate concerning women in leadership in the church. In each of these cases, the Bible was not simply discarded when it didn't cohere with changes happening in society. Instead, the changes happening in society and across cultures caused people to go back to the biblical texts and read them with fresh eyes — looking more deeply and searching for different underlying values and forms of moral logic that they had not seen so clearly before.

I believe that something akin to this pattern is happening in the present debate concerning homosexuality. The church's experience with gay and

11. For a discussion of the relevance of these issues to the question of homosexuality, see D. Heim, M. L. Stackhouse, L. T. Johnson, and D. M. McCarthy, "Homosexuality, Marriage and the Church: A Conversation," *Christian Century*, July 1-8, 1998.

lesbian people is raising questions that have never been asked before and confronting people with dilemmas they have never faced before. Many of these questions are arising in fresh ways simply because our culture is becoming more direct and frank in its discussion of sexual issues. What was previously relegated to the silence of "the closet" and to euphemistic speech is now being discussed more directly and openly. And with this greater directness and openness of speech comes the need to face questions that the church has not faced so directly and explicitly before. In particular, in this new context the church is faced with gay and lesbian Christians who exhibit many gifts and fruits of the Spirit and who seek to live in deep obedience to Christ. Many of these gay and lesbian Christians seek, not to suppress their sexual orientation, but rather to sanctify it, thus drawing intimate gay and lesbian relationships into the sanctifying work of the Spirit. In this new context, what had seemed like adequate solutions in general, when specific cases were barely discussed, has become more problematic as the church deals with cases that don't seem to fit within the old paradigms.

Something like this has happened in my own life. Five years before I began writing this book, I had already been engaged in studying the issues related to homosexuality, and I had done some teaching and writing on the subject. At that time I took a moderate, traditionalist position on the issues. But then something happened that altered my life in major ways: my eighteen-year-old son told my wife and me that he believed he was gay. I wish I could say that, since I had always been such a thoughtful and empathic scholar, when I was faced with this case in my own family, I would simply find the conclusions I had already arrived at in my prior study on this subject to be adequate. But I must confess — to my regret and embarrassment — that this was not the case. I realized, in fact, that my former work had stayed at a level of abstraction that wasn't helpful when it came to the concrete and specific questions I faced with my son. Indeed, the answers that I thought I had found seemed neither helpful nor relevant in the case of my son.

For example, I had made a sharp distinction in my earlier thinking between homosexual *orientation* (which my denomination had declared was not necessarily sinful) and homosexual *behavior* (which, I had believed, was forbidden by Scripture).<sup>12</sup> But in my son's case, the issue was not sex-

12. "The homosexual must be accepted in his homosexuality. If this is not the case he is left with the choice of leaving the fellowship, wearing the mask of heterosexuality, or being contemptuously condemned. Most choose the mask" ("Christian Pastoral Care for the Ho-

ual activity; he was simply trying to understand his own emotional makeup and disposition. The traditionalist treatment of sexual orientation seemed shallow and unhelpful to my wife and me when we looked at our son. We found the neo-Freudian explanations for the familial origins of male homosexuality (absent father, dominant mother) to make little sense in the dynamics of our household. Moreover — and this was perhaps the most important thing — our own son’s resolute good humor and good will, his natural leadership abilities and good grades in school, his physical strength and quickness (a black belt in Tae Kwon Do), and his easygoing nature all seemed clearly and self-evidently to say, “There is nothing wrong here!” Or to put it a bit more precisely, we considered him a normal and healthy high school senior, someone in need of the grace of God, as we all are, but not deeply troubled (apart from his anxiety about talking to us about his sexual orientation).

I did not change my mind right away. I told my son that there were many things I didn’t understand, and that I was going to have to do a lot more thinking and praying and studying. I told him I loved him, and I urged him, regardless of his sexual orientation, to be faithful, wise, and loving in the use of his body. I spent some subsequent time in depression, grieving the loss of the heterosexual future for my son that I had dreamed of. Then slowly, over several years, along with many conversations with my son, my wife, and many others, I returned to the literature to try to sort out the issues more deeply, to determine how we could best support and encourage our son — and to discover how I might better serve the church as a biblical theologian. I decided, from the beginning, that I wanted to discern, as deeply as I could, what the most central and truest message of Scripture was for my son. If my study brought me to the conclusion that my son should remain celibate, I was prepared to make that my prayer. But if my study led me to different conclusions, I was also prepared to follow those lines of inquiry as clearly and as consistently as I could. The goal was not to justify a certain conclusion; rather, it was to discern, as best I could, the truth. This book is one of the results of that effort.

But here is the point I want to make from this personal story: that dramatic shock to my life forced me to reimagine how Scripture speaks about

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homosexual,” reprinted in James I. Cook and Reformed Church in America, Commission on Theology, *The Church Speaks: Papers of the Commission on Theology, Reformed Church in America, 1959-1984*, Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, 15 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985], p. 262).

homosexuality. The texts had not changed, but my assumptions about what they were self-evidently saying was put to the test. My core Reformed commitment to the centrality of Scripture had not changed; but I needed to confront the equally Reformed conviction that the church must always be reforming itself according to the Word of God. This principle assumes that what Scripture *seems* to say is not always identical to how it truly should inform Christian faith and practice. I have been forced to dig more deeply, to reread texts that seemed clear, and those that have always seemed puzzling, in an effort to find new patterns and configurations in which both the texts themselves, and a range of human experience, might cohere more fully. I have found some of the exegesis in traditionalist positions to be lacking (as well as some of the exegesis in revisionist positions). I have made many new discoveries as well. I believe that this is the essential exercise that the church must always engage in when it encounters new questions and new problems. We go back and read the old texts again, and we discover more there than we thought we knew.

Ultimately, however, this rereading of the biblical text is not something done by individuals in isolation. Rather, it is an exercise of the whole church. This book is thus not an attempt to give a “final word” on homosexuality and gay or lesbian relationships for the whole church, arising from my own limited experience. Nor is it merely a personal manifesto, expressing a private attempt to seek coherence between the personal experience of a few people and the biblical text. Rather, it is an invitation to the whole church to enter into a deeper conversation about sexual ethics in the hope that the collective imagination of the church may be deepened and widened to see the Bible in new ways, and to embrace its message more deeply in a new context. Ultimately, the church must engage these issues corporately, for two reasons. On the one hand, corporate discernment protects the church from erroneous readings of the text that may be well-intentioned but misleading. This means that this book cannot be held above such careful examination either. On the other hand, corporate readings are necessary to avoid the fracturing of the church that comes from the loss of commonly embraced and shared readings of the Scripture.

### The Methodology of This Book

In order to cultivate a wider capacity to read biblical texts in fresh ways, I do not begin this book with a direct study of the passages that seem to

speak explicitly to same-gender erotic relationships. Instead, I begin with the points where the conversation about homosexuality seems most stuck and problematic — both on the traditionalist and on the revisionist sides of the debate. Unless we confront more directly what is not working in present assumptions, the debate cannot move forward. Consequently, in the second and third chapters I will explore in more detail some central problems, first with the traditionalist case, and then with the revisionist case. The overall goal of the discussion is to explain why further work is needed — and to show where the focus of this further work should lie.

After this review of the present state of the conversation, I turn in the central section of the book to four very broad forms of moral logic that are critical for understanding what Scripture has to say about sexuality in general: patriarchy, the “one-flesh” bond of marriage, procreation, and celibacy. My aim is to gain a broad understanding of the recurring key themes, motifs, and arguments that shape the Bible’s discussion of sexuality and marriage — broadly considered. After covering this wide canvas, I conclude each chapter with a brief exploration of the implications of that chapter’s discussion for one or more aspects of the current debate within the church concerning gay and lesbian relationships.

With this broad picture in place, I turn in the next four chapters to other forms of moral logic that are critical in the debate over homosexuality and same-sex unions. In these four chapters, the focus is not on those *positive* elements that comprise a comprehensive biblical vision, but instead on the *negative* texts that mark the boundaries of acceptable sexual practice in Scripture. The four topics addressed in these chapters all come from the central New Testament text in the debate on homosexuality, Romans 1:24-27: lust, purity, honor/shame, and natural law. Again, in each case, I begin each chapter with a broad biblical survey of relevant material and conclude by drawing out the implications of the study for the interpretation of Romans 1:24-27 in particular, and for the debate about gay and lesbian unions in general.

In the last chapter of this book I summarize some of the main points of the study, and then return to the texts that speak more specifically to same-sex relations in Scripture: the Sodom and Gomorrah story in Genesis 19 and its parallel in Judges 19; the prohibitions of same-sex relations in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13; and the New Testament texts that are central to the debate: Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9, and 1 Timothy 1:10. This book will have covered many issues that pertain to these texts in the preceding chapters, but a more consolidated and integrated perspective will emerge in this last chapter.

In all of this, my hope is to reinvigorate the imagination of the church in the midst of this controversy, not to leave the witness of Scripture behind, but to see and embrace it more deeply and freshly, so that we may discover its wisdom in the presence of new questions and information that the church has not considered before. I want to invite readers to take a closer look at a wider range of texts than have ordinarily been reviewed as part of this debate. Issues of sexuality in Scripture are complicated — not only issues related to homosexuality and gay unions, but a wide range of issues on the meaning of marriage and celibacy, the significance of procreation, the acceptable place of divorce in the church, the roles of men and women, and so on. In the face of such complexity, the temptation is either to revert to simple answers from the past or to avoid the particularity of the biblical texts and simply focus on broad principles such as justice and love. Neither approach will help us move beyond the current impasse in the church. But with a wider capacity to imagine the coherence of biblical teaching on sexuality in fresh ways, the church just may find a way forward in this controversy that is both more faithful to Scripture and also more effective in guiding men and women today (gay, lesbian, and straight) into the fullness of life in Christ. That is my hope and goal in this book.

### Summing Up

- In the midst of polarized and polarizing debates, it is important to ask, not only what a text *says*, but what it *means*. This entails determining the moral logic that shapes biblical prohibitions or commands — discerning why a text says what it does and clarifying its underlying values and assumptions.
- Determining this underlying moral logic is particularly important when interpreting Scripture in cross-cultural contexts.
- At numerous points in the history of Christian interpretation of Scripture, the church has needed to exercise its imagination to discern a wider and more encompassing form of moral logic underlying biblical commands and prohibitions.
- This book seeks to accomplish such an exercise with a renewed and widened imagination regarding the moral logic underlying Scripture’s discussion of same-sex intimate relationships.