

# **Inclusion and Diversity Study Group Seminar**

**Wilshire Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas**

## *About the study group*

In September 2015, Wilshire's deacon officers appointed an Inclusion and Diversity Study Group to give guidance to church leadership on a range of issues related to sexual orientation and the life of the church.

“Over the summer months, deacon officers have been working to respond to two related threads of inquiry that have come to our attention,” said Kathy Alverson, chairwoman of deacons. “The Deacon Nominating Committee has made a request to the deacon officers for guidance in its work, specifically asking to know if a member's sexual orientation should be a consideration in eligibility for deacon service. In addition, the senior pastor has asked for guidance on how the church should respond to the recent Supreme Court ruling legalizing same-sex marriage, believing this needs to be a deliberate and open decision process of the church. These two things, although separate in origin, have combined at this moment in time to require special study by the congregation, beginning with the deacons.”

Currently, there is no language in Wilshire's bylaws to provide any instruction—either pro or con—on these issues.

Senior Pastor George Mason noted that questions have been asked about what is meant by the emphasis on “inclusion” and “diversity” that ranked at the top of the Vision 20/20 member-input process in 2013. “It seems apparent that while we as a congregation highly valued these concepts, we do not all mean the same thing when we use the same words. The present moment seems like an appropriate time to answer this question,” he said.

The Inclusion and Diversity Study Group has been tasked with studying four questions: (1) What limitations, if any, should be placed on deacon service and other leadership roles in the church; (2) What limitations, if any, should be placed on ordination to the gospel ministry; (3) What limitations, if any, should be placed on marriages performed at Wilshire and/or officiated by Wilshire staff members; and (4) What limitations, if any, should be placed on family dedications performed at Wilshire.

This booklet contains manuscripts of a two-hour Information Seminar presented by the study group in the spring of 2016.

# Introduction

## James Perry

*James Perry serves as chairman of the Inclusion and Diversity Study Group. He previously served as chairman of the Personnel Committee and the Finance Committee and is an active deacon. James is director of Seekers Class. His wife, Lydia, is active with the children's ministry as a lay leader. James and Lydia live in Lakewood and have two sons: Blake (11) and Drew (9). Professionally, James is senior vice president and chief financial officer for Trinity Industries Inc. He graduated from Baylor University in 1993.*

A lot of hard work has been done by the Inclusion and Diversity Study Group over the last four months. We have met about a dozen times, with countless hours spent between meetings reading, studying and in prayer. We have studied the Scripture, read books and articles, heard from guest speakers with personal experiences, and had in-depth conversations among our study group.

Our group is made up of 19 diverse members of the church, selected by last year's deacon officers. George and Mark sit in on our sessions to provide us with theological perspective as well as a look into how other churches have faced these issues and what impact any decision—to make changes or not make changes—could have on Wilshire. They also offer helpful insight into the pastoral needs of the congregation past and present.

What follows is a summary of the work we have done. I want to emphasize that our study group has made no decisions on our recommendation back to the deacons. These sessions are an important part of that process.

We hope that you will come away with challenges to your thinking, wherever you are on these issues. We hope that you will spend more time with the Scripture that will be presented, read books from the bibliography, and especially that you will return for a dialogue roundtable.

I will note that while each presentation was written by one or two individuals, our entire study group has reviewed the materials and offered tremendous input to make sure it is well-balanced.

# The challenges of our cultural context

## Rob Banta

**Robert J. Banta** and his wife, Pam, have been members of Wilshire since 1990. They have three sons—Ryan, Blaine and Brad—all of whom are married, have children and live in the Dallas area. Rob teaches a Sunday School class, was ordained as a deacon in 2004 (currently inactive) and has served on a number of committees at Wilshire. Pam has been a teacher in the preschool area for many years. Professionally, Rob is a practicing attorney.

In the following presentations, you will hear, in summary fashion, what the Inclusion and Diversity Study Group has spent the past five months deliberating, studying and praying over. We have had a number of very well-attended meetings. Members of our group have read and reported on many of the books that are on the reading list that was circulated to the congregation, ranging from scholarly theological and scientific works to personal testimonies and experiences of pastors of congregations and LGBT Christians and their families. In addition, we have had guests from differing perspectives and with different stories appear and give personal testimonies. Our group has been diligent, conscientious, thoughtful and respectful of one another and our differing views.

Not an inconsiderable amount of meeting time has been spent reporting and discussing feedback that study group members are receiving from the congregation. Rest assured, we are getting feedback. In fact, Chairman James Perry believes that he has received an email from all but four church members, and two of those four are his own children. We have heard you, and believe it or not, we want to continue to hear from you. These sessions are intended to give you an opportunity to hear from us about what we have been doing.

On behalf of the study group, we ask for your prayers as we do our work, and we ask that you respect and trust the process. We are mindful of the gravity of our task, and the responsibility of serving weighs heavily on each of us. I know of no one who sought out a position in this group but all accepted the invitation to serve out of a sense of duty to God and God's church.

So, what has brought us to this point? Why is this an issue that calls for Wilshire Baptist Church to engage in this process? One of

the most common comments that we get is, “Why do we have to do anything? Why can’t we just keep on doing what we are doing?” Wilshire’s current official-unofficial practice can best be described as “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” We have gay and lesbian men and women among us. They have not made an issue of it, nor has the church. Very quietly and behind the scenes gay persons have been passed over for potential leadership positions just to avoid raising the issue. Families in our congregation have sought counselling and guidance from members of our ministerial staff on this issue.

Why is Wilshire’s current practice no longer viable? You may recall the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” terminology as the stated policy of the United States Armed Forces from the early 1990s. That was 25 years ago. In the intervening years, the culture has moved on to a much greater acceptance of LGBT men and women. In fact, the United States Supreme Court ruled in 2015 that it is legal for same-sex couples to marry. LGBT persons do not necessarily represent any greater percentage of the population than they once did, but because they are more accepted, they are more visible and more inclined to be open about who they are. In fact, they are no longer willing to be who they are in silence or to deny who they are in order to be accepted in the culture or in the church.

No one is suggesting that the church should follow the law of the land or the culture in determining its policies, but it is no longer viable in today’s world to ignore the subject as if it did not exist. If the Vision of Wilshire Baptist Church is to become a bold witness to the way of Christ in our time, then we, as a church, must engage the issues of our time. Participation in the life of the church by LGBT persons is one of those issues. Maintaining the credibility of our witness requires that we engage the subject.

While the LGBT population represents only a small segment of the population at large, they are among us, yes, even at Wilshire. The fundamental question before us is whether (and if the answer to that question is yes), how, may such persons participate in the life of the church. Questions of service on the staff and deacon ordination have been presented in the past and undoubtedly will be again. Given the Supreme Court decision, questions of same-sex marriage or dedication of children being raised by same-sex couples will undoubtedly present themselves. What will be the response of the church when a boy or girl announces to his or her parents that he or she thinks they may be homosexual, or a boy or girl learns that his or her best friend has made such an announcement. Those things have all happened and are happening at Wilshire. What if it were your son or daughter or your grandson or granddaughter? Will your church be a safe and healthy place to have that conversation and wrestle with what that means in a nur-

turing, loving Christian setting?

To this point, our study group has, for the most part, attempted to be neutral and objective in its deliberations. It is our intent that the presentations that you will hear today will reflect that objectivity. We have been in study mode. People were asked to serve on the group not to represent constituencies but to be representative of a variety of groups and demographics within the congregation, such as age, gender, single, married, Sunday School, music and others. Speaking for myself only, when asked if I would serve, no one inquired about my views on the subject, nor would anyone have had any way of knowing what my views were. When I agreed to serve, I had no idea who else had been asked or had agreed to be in the group. To my knowledge, no one else was selected because of his or her perceived views on the issues involved, but, as you would hope and expect, there is no question that there are differing viewpoints within the group. Some people, including myself, have been moved one way or the other by what we have studied. Some people have been moved little or not at all. All that is to say, in these respects, I would say that our group is a pretty representative cross section of the congregation. I sense that we will soon be moving out of the neutral zone, and as we transition into deliberation of the issues, there will be more of an effort to persuade members one way or the other. At some point, the group, will have decisions to make and a report to submit. I want to spend the rest of my time thinking about what that might look like.

Earlier I said that the fundamental question was whether and how LGBT persons may participate in the life of the church. Underlying that question is the theological and moral question of whether same-sex relationships and behavior are inherently sinful. As Christian people, we turn to the Bible for guidance. Shortly, you will hear Mark Wingfield discuss the Biblical texts that are most frequently cited as addressing the subject of same-sex relationships. You will also hear brief summaries of the so-called "traditional" view (that is, the view that the church has historically taken) and certain other views that have been variously called, among other names, the progressive or revisionist view, but probably best described as alternative or non-traditional views. Those who hold the traditional view, relying primarily on a literal interpretation of the texts, tend to believe that the Bible expressly condemns all same-sex relationships and behavior and that it is rather simply a settled matter. Those who hold alternative or non-traditional views have interpreted the same and other Biblical texts in ways that support different conclusions. Later speakers will outline for us broad categories into which the most commonly held views fall. As a study group, we have tried to give credence only to views that are ground-

ed in Scripture.

I once found myself as a young lawyer in a negotiation having to defend a provision in a set of loan documents that I had prepared. When the provision was challenged, because I didn't really know why the provision was in the document, the only response that I could think of—we always do it that way—did not impress my more seasoned adversary. He made me do my homework and explain the purpose for the provision and justify its place in the document. Similarly, is it valid to subscribe to the church's traditional view on same-sex relationships *solely* because it is the church's traditional view? On the other hand, if one studies the matter with an honestly open mind, considers alternative views and concludes that the church's traditional view is the better reasoned position supported by a plausible interpretation of Scripture, that conclusion is worthy of respect. By the same token, we tend to discredit alternative or non-traditional views that are not based in the Bible, but do give credit and respect to those alternative or non-traditional views that are substantiated by a reasoned analysis and interpretation of Scripture.

That is the nature of the debate we are having. Intelligent, passionate, well-intentioned Christian people (Biblical scholars, pastors and lay people, including your fellow Wilshire members) have differing views on the ultimate question of whether same-sex relationships are inherently sinful, and each can claim scriptural interpretations that support their respective views. Let me go out on a limb here and say that this will be the case whether we debate the matter for six months or six years. This is truly a subject about which reasonable minds can and do differ.

My question to you is: How is that different than any number of other theological questions that we face in our life together in this community of faith? Do you see eye to eye with the pastor on all theological issues, with all members of your Bible study or even members of your own family? I doubt it. I've been teaching a Sunday School class in this church for 20 years. Not all class members agree with me or each other on all issues. I have at least one member who doesn't agree with much of anything I have to say, but she keeps coming, mainly, I think, because she considers it her mission in life to save me despite my erroneous beliefs. We often joke in our class that when we have all of the questions of our faith answered, we will disband as a class. We've come close a couple of times, but, as of today, we are still meeting.

So, where does that leave us? We still need to make a decision as to whether and how LGBT persons will participate in the life of Wilshire Baptist Church. We as a congregation need to find a way forward that, despite our honest differences of opinion on some of the underlying

issues, allows us to function as a unified community of faith and fulfill our mission to build a community of faith shaped by the Spirit of Jesus Christ to the best of our ability. The Scripture in worship a few weeks back was from 1 Corinthians 13, where Paul tells us, “. . . now, we see through a glass darkly.” When we claim to know the mind of God on any subject, we should do so with great humility. When we first started, one church member told me that “this shouldn’t really take very long, just do the right thing.” What that person really meant was, “Do what I think is the right thing.” If every church member were to approach this subject with that attitude, we may *not* find a way forward. But, I offer you a challenge and an invitation. Are you willing to listen, think critically and honestly consider a viewpoint different from your own? No matter where you stand on this issue, can you acknowledge that your view may not be the only way to view the matter and that the differing view of your fellow Wilshire member may have at least enough merit to warrant your thoughtful consideration? If we can all approach this issue in that spirit of humility, we *will* find a way forward.

Now, we’re going to give you some things to think about.

## ***What the Bible says about homosexuality***

**Mark Wingfield**

*Mark Wingfield and his wife, Alison, chose Wilshire as their family’s church home long before Mark joined the church staff. They have raised two sons here from first grade forward; the twins are now 23. Mark became associate pastor at Wilshire in January 2004, after a 21-year career in denominational journalism. He has been an adult Sunday School teacher for more than 30 years and writes curriculum for several national publishers. He serves the Inclusion and Diversity Study Group as a staff liaison and as recording secretary.*

What follows in the next moments is a particularly focused Bible study. And that is for a reason: The study group, where I serve as a staff liaison and recording secretary, has approached its task first by seeking to understand what the Bible says about homosexuality. Before any cultural or scientific or medical observations, before any personal opinions or experiences, the group began with



the Bible.

What I have been asked to do on behalf of the group is to use my experience as a Bible teacher to give you just the facts of the several ways Christians who revere the Bible read and interpret these relevant biblical texts. My goal here is to succinctly summarize the many chapters in many books that have been read by the group to gain biblical understanding.

Please note this important caveat: It is not my goal to persuade anyone to move from one view to another. This presentation has been read and edited by the group, then reread and re-edited to scrub out any appearance of bias. However, it does intentionally present more than one view, and that in itself might have the feel of bias to some who hold strongly to one view or another. Please hear again this plea from the study group: We want to foster understanding and information. In our Baptist tradition and polity, you are free to understand God's Spirit in interpreting the Bible for yourself. But that always has been predicated upon a thirst for knowledge and greater understanding. And so our goal today is to better understand each other.

If you were raised in a Baptist church like me—present every time the doors were open from birth to this day—perhaps you share my experience of not recalling a single Sunday School lesson or sermon about the sordid details of what the Bible says about homosexuality. Instead, there must have been hints and whispers, because we all seem to think we know what the Bible says.

Let's dig in, and I encourage you to follow along with the hand-out provided. Let's read and think about what the biblical passages *say* and then ponder what these verses *mean*, both in their original context and for us today.

## The Old Testament

Within the Old Testament, there are four passages most frequently cited as giving direct reference to same-sex relationships. The first two are remarkably similar, although appearing in different books and happening at different times to different people. It is likely that you may have read or heard only the first of these near-parallel accounts, which is the story of Sodom. It is found in Genesis 19:1–11.

Time does not permit us to read the entire story today, but I hope you will read it carefully on your own. The gist is that Lot, Abraham's relative, was living in Sodom when two "angels" came to visit him. He begged them to spend the night in the safety of his house, and upon nightfall "the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house" and demand-

ed that Lot turn over his houseguests for their sexual appetites. Lot offered the men his two virgin daughters instead, but that wouldn't do, and Lot barely escaped harm himself.

A similar story is told in Judges 19:16–30 but is located in the village of Gibeah. This story is gorier than the Genesis story, because the guest's concubine is “wantonly raped” and “abused ... all through the night until the morning.” The guest then takes his concubine home on a donkey, only to cut her into 12 pieces, limb by limb, and send her parts throughout all the territory of Israel as a warning.

Biblical scholarship would demand that we ask why there are two such similar stories told in different places and from different times within the Bible. But that is a journey we do not have time to take today. So let's focus for the moment on the Genesis story, because this is where we get the word “sodomy,” a synonym for homosexual and other kinds of taboo sexual acts, particularly oral and anal sex.

The concept of sexuality in the Old Testament presents challenges to modern-day Christians because of the patriarchal culture, the commonness of men taking multiple wives and keeping concubines. Reading texts such as these requires thoughtful consideration of cultural norms across time.

Many who have held a “traditional” interpretation of the Bible see the story of Sodom as being about homosexuality: The men of Sodom are wicked because they want to have male-on-male sex with the visiting angels. This was true of the translators of the King James Bible, who applied the word “Sodomites” to certain New Testament passages, which we'll hear more about in a moment.

Other modern interpreters—including many conservative evangelicals who believe the Bible condemns homosexuality—read the sin of Sodom as being something other than homosexuality. These stories recorded in Genesis and Judges are viewed by them as more about hospitality and justice than about homosexuality as a sexual lifestyle. The larger part of both stories, according to this view, is the need for hosts to protect their guests, which aligns with what we know of ancient Middle Eastern concepts of hospitality.

We are challenged to read these texts from the standpoint of the male-dominant culture of the time, in which femininity was perceived as weakness. Thus, for a male to be put in the position of a female was to be demeaned in the most extreme manner. And for another clue to interpretation, look to Ezekiel 16:49, which refers to the sin of Sodom not as one of sexual immorality but rather of justice: “This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.”<sup>1</sup>

So to summarize, there are at least three ways to look at the Genesis and Judges passages: (1) They mean what the traditional interpretation has been, that the men of Sodom (and Gibeah) are given as examples to us of the evil of homosexual sex; (2) These passages are not about homosexuality but rather hospitality, but that doesn't take away from other more clear condemnations of homosexuality later in the Bible; and (3) These passages are not about homosexuality but rather hospitality, and that is part of a larger translation or interpretation problem within the Bible.

The next two Old Testament passages are found in Leviticus. This is the book that is chock full of rules and regulations for the Hebrew people. The two passages in question are single sentences each. Leviticus 18:22 says, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." Leviticus 20:13 says, "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them."

The traditional and widespread reading of these passages is that they are explicitly clear and mean exactly what they say. There is no room or need for further interpretation. And no doubt, that has been the majority view throughout Christian history—although modern Christians have not advocated the death penalty in such cases. And yet, biblical scholars today are split in their interpretations, with even some conservative scholars arguing that the face-value reading is not the best reading.

Both Leviticus passages are part of the Old Testament "Holiness Code," which extends from chapters 17 through 26. This code for living was given to separate the Children of Israel from their pagan neighbors. It contains hundreds of rules.

One common theme of the Holiness Code was the requirement to keep things separate. For example, fields could not be sown with two kinds of seed, and garments could not be made of two different materials (see Lev. 19:19). This theme was intended to demonstrate the need for separation from the surrounding culture. The Children of Israel were to live out a vivid picture of what it meant to be separated out as God's people.

There are at least two ways to understand the Holiness Code in a modern Christian context: One is that prohibitions against idolatry and sexual immorality are carried over into the New Testament view, while other prohibitions no longer apply to the Christian community. A second view would agree that prohibitions against idolatry and sexual immorality are carried over into the New Testament era but would disagree about what constitutes sexual immorality based only on an understanding of sexual orientation. Jill and Jared will discuss this in more detail later.

Also, some will suggest that male gender superiority continues

to be a factor in this context. Read carefully the laws of Leviticus and notice where the death penalty is prescribed for odd things that all tie in to maintaining the superior role of adult males: children who curse parents, adultery as the unlawful use of a man's property, etc. Some modern scholars therefore read the Levitical admonitions against a man lying with a man "as with a woman" as being concerned with making one of the men ritually unclean by penetration. The word *toevah*, translated as "abomination," may refer to becoming ritually unclean, the same as a man lying with a woman during her menstruation, which is forbidden.

To summarize: For Christians of both the views I've just outlined, the hardest part of the Exodus passages is understanding the Holiness Code in a Christian context. There are many aspects of the Levitical code that even the most conservative Christians would not see as binding on them today. But there are other parts of this Levitical code that a majority of modern Christians might easily believe still to be relevant today. How are we to know the difference?

## The New Testament

For Christians, the New Testament holds greater authority than the Old Testament, and so we turn now to see what the New Testament might teach us.

Like me, you may have grown up carrying a "red-letter" edition of the Bible. These special Bibles show every word attributed to Jesus in red type for emphasis. And that makes sense on several levels, because historic Christianity has placed a higher value on what Jesus said and taught than on what others, even the Apostle Paul, wrote or taught. And so, turning to the New Testament, we might first ask, "What did Jesus say about homosexuality?" In the strictest sense, Jesus said absolutely nothing about homosexuality. We cannot turn to a red-letter verse that either approves or disapproves of same-sex relationships in the way we might hope. Instead, the three most frequently cited New Testament passages mentioning homosexuality all are attributed to Paul.

Let's look first at 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 and 1 Timothy 1:9–11.

The 1 Corinthians passage says: "Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes (*malakos* in Greek), sodomites (*arsenokoitai* in Greek), thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God."

The 1 Timothy passage says: "This means understanding that

the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites (*arsenokoitais* in Greek), slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.”

In the traditional view, sex between people of the same gender falls clearly within a set of behaviors that are not indicative of those who will inherit the kingdom of God. Same-sex behavior is viewed as similar to other things that are sinful but for which repentance and forgiveness may be sought.

A different view is that everything in the New Testament that condemns same-sex behavior then continues to apply to Christian same-sex behavior today. In this view, New Testament condemnations of same-sex behavior include pederasty, male prostitution and excessive lust that is contrary to one’s created nature—not the expression of same-sex affection by those with such an orientation.

These differences of opinion are illustrated in disagreement about the words used in the original Greek here. The Apostle Paul uses the Greek word *arsenokoitai* here for the first time found in Greek or Jewish literature, so there is no context from which to draw an easy comparison. It appears to be a compound word drawing together “man” and “lying with or sleeping with.” From this put-together Greek word, various English translations have embellished with different emphases: “abusers of themselves with mankind” (KJV); “sexual perverts” (RSV); “sodomites” (NKJV, NAB, NRSV); “who are guilty of homosexual perversion” (CEV); “practicing homosexuals” (NAB, 1st ed.).

The word “sodomites” in English was introduced in the King James Bible in 1611. It is found in neither the Hebrew or the Greek editions of the text. And on a similar note, the word “homosexual” was not used in English literature until the 19th century. This word did not appear in an English translation of the Bible until the mid-20th century. Taken together, these facts lead adherents of one viewpoint to suggest that Paul actually was talking about the known ancient practices of cultic prostitution or male pederasty (an adult male having sex with a younger boy) or about temple prostitutes, a common issue in his time.

Traditional biblical scholars, however, see *arsenokoitai* as Paul’s allusion to the Levitical Code, meaning a clear reference to same-sex relations. Do not get hung up on the word “sodomites,” they argue, but instead understand that the intent is to describe same-sex relations by any name.

The second word in question, *malakos*, is easier to translate

and means “soft,” often used to refer to effeminacy. According to a traditional view, this remains a fitting description especially of a male who engages in sexual acts with another male.

Other interpreters note that there was another commonly used word that Paul could have chosen here for “homosexuals,” if that was exactly what he meant. That word is *paiderasste*. They also point out that elsewhere in the New Testament, *malakos* is translated as “soft” or “fine,” in reference to clothing. See Matthew 11:8 and Luke 7:25.

So was Paul referring to “male prostitutes,” as the NRSV suggests? Or was he referring to someone lacking virility or manliness? There are several ways to translate this, all in keeping with the primary literal translation, “soft.”

To quickly review before we move on: Christians of good will and sincere faith come to different conclusions about these Pauline passages, with the argument largely hinging on interpretation of two key words, *arsenokoitai* and *malakos*. The weight of history falls on the side of reading these passages as specifically condemning same-sex relations, but modern scholarship increasingly questions that reading. So here is a case where we have to read and pray and seek divine discernment.

And that brings us now to Romans 1:26–27, which is the single most challenging text to address for those who desire a more progressive view. Even some scholars who dismiss every other biblical text as not relevant to the modern debate over homosexuality see this text as prohibitive. It says: “For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.”

Christians traditionally have interpreted this passage as explicitly prohibitive of same-sex relations, and we can see why. We do not have the same difficulty interpreting here the words “intercourse” or “women” or “men.” These are clear in their translations.

What gets contested is the larger point Paul is making in Romans. Some biblical scholars see Paul here linking sexual immorality to idolatry. By this account, the “degrading passions” listed are the result of idolatry. Some traditionalists would agree, to a point, but quickly note that from their view, same-sex behavior is itself a form of idolatry.

Additionally, Paul makes an argument based on the natural order of creation. There are different views on what he means by this. For example, elsewhere Paul uses a similar appeal to nature to justify his position on the proper length of men’s and women’s hair

and the need for women to wear head coverings (1 Cor. 11:2–16). Which leads some to ask why Christians want to enforce one of the prohibitions but not the others. As with the Old Testament laws, however, traditionalists counter that some of the prohibitions are cultural and others are not. The sexual prohibitions, again, are of a more serious nature.

Advocates of a non-traditional view also note that arguing from nature was a common rhetorical device in Paul's day. It would be similar today to saying, "The conventional wisdom is . . ." The words in Greek are *physis*, meaning "nature," and *para physin*, meaning "against nature." Look to Romans 11:13–24 for further understanding of these words. There, Paul says God acted "contrary to nature" by grafting Gentiles into the tree of God's people, the Jews. Thus, the reading of "against nature" may mean "unconventional" in both cases. The question is whether, since God has shown adaptability, we also should be adaptable in our understanding of what has been considered "conventional."

Another quick recap before we move on: For those with a progressive view, the Romans 1 passage is by far the most challenging of all the biblical passages to address. There are biblical scholars who dismiss every other text as not prohibitive of loving same-sex commitments as we might know them today and yet cannot get around the Romans passage. The counterpoint is to say that "contrary to nature" does not mean "unnatural" but rather "unconventional" or even "against the nature of the way a person was made by God."

### **A final word about marriage and becoming "one flesh"**

Apart from the seven biblical passages that are most often cited as direct references to homosexuality, there are other passages that get cited as indirectly condemning same-sex relations, often in the context of marriage. At least one of these does fall in the "red-letter" portion of the New Testament, as recorded in Matthew 19:3–9, which tells the story of the Pharisees coming to test Jesus by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?" To which Jesus answers by quoting from Genesis: "Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?'"

We find a similar appeal by Paul in Ephesians 5:21–33, where at the end of a long discourse on wives and husbands being subject to one another and to the Lord, Paul quotes Genesis: "For this reason

a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.”

From a traditional point of view, Jesus’ reference to the creation story and appeal to being made “male and female” is a clear statement identifying marriage as exclusively between male and female. They find this male-female duality threaded throughout the Bible and therefore indicative of the way God intended creation to function. For this viewpoint, the “one flesh” language becomes extremely important in defining Christian marriage and more.

An alternate reading sees the “one flesh” reference teaching us that their complementarity is first their likeness as human partners, as compared to the prior creation of the animals.

Their complementarity may include their anatomical difference but is fundamentally about their being different persons rather than different genders. You will hear more about this later from Jill and Jared.

Once again, to summarize this section: The “one flesh” language of Genesis 2 is important in a traditional view of creation and marriage because of the complementary nature of male and female anatomy that is a sign and symbol to us of God’s good plan for creation and means for procreation. From another view, “one flesh” also refers to Adam and Eve being created as human companions for each other, apart from the animals who were not suitable companions for them, and not just to male-female companionship.

## Conclusion

We’re at the end of a whirlwind survey of the Bible, and by this point, you may be saying, “Well, that’s all a lot of hard work to think about these different interpretations.” And that is, in fact, the point. Reading and interpreting and understanding the Bible requires our full attention, our full mental capacity and our full devotion. And it requires the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>1</sup> We also find references to Sodom in Isa. 10:1–17, Isa. 3:9, Jer. 23:14, Ezek. 16:49, and Zeph. 2:8–11. In these passages, Sodom is singled out as a model for greed, injustice, inhospitality, abuse of wealth, abuse of the poor, and general wickedness. Jesus also references Sodom and Gomorrah in Matt. 10:14–15 when he says those who reject the welcome of his disciples will be “worse than” Sodom and Gomorrah, an apparent reference to arrogance and lack of hospitality.



# What we know about genetics and sexuality

## Gail Brookshire

*Gail S. Brookshire has a master of science degree in medical genetics and counseling from the Sarah Lawrence College Human Genetics program. Gail is board certified by the American Board of Medical Genetics and the American Board of Genetic Counseling. She has 32 years of experience as a genetic counselor in the Pediatric Genetics and Metabolism Division at Children's Medical Center of Dallas. She has been a member of the Children's Medical Center Ethics Committee for 15 years. A Wilshire member for almost 40 years, Gail met and married her husband, Steve, and reared their son, Andy, here.*

Throughout history, people have shown an interest in the wide variety among humankind and nature as a whole. I've always wondered why someone would have bothered to record in Genesis that Esau came out of the womb "red and hairy." I assume that must have been unusual enough to be noteworthy.

As the centuries went by, people's curiosity led to more scientific research. In the mid-1800s, Augustinian monk Gregor Mendel started taking notes on his pea plants, which eventually led in 1953 to Watson and Crick's unraveling of the structure of DNA: the genetic code behind this beautiful variety observed in mankind and throughout nature.

Since our curiosity about what make us "us" continues, it was to be expected that questions would arise about why some people are attracted to members of their own sex while the majority are attracted to the opposite sex, or why some people experience differences in gender identity. There remain many unanswered questions as to why this would be so but research has indicated it is likely a combination of genetic, hormonal and other factors. Many think that nature and nurture both play complex roles.

Gay men are the most studied subset of people who identify as LGB or T, primarily because they tend to identify more clearly as distinctly gay or distinctly straight as compared to women whose sexual orientation and identity tend to be more fluid. Studies estimate that approximately 3.5 to 5 percent of people identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual and 0.3 percent as transgender. So, based on current census data, there are approximately 11 million Ameri-

cans under the umbrella of the LGBT description.

Like many aspects of human behavior, there are probably several underlying causes for differences in sexual identity. Multiple influences are weighted differently in different people, leading to a wide range of outcomes given the diversity among this population.

As with most studies related to genetics, the analysis started by looking at families. When large numbers of families were grouped together, it became clear early on that a person who is lesbian or gay is more likely to have family members who are also lesbian or gay as compared to the general population.

Interest spread to studies of siblings, including identical and fraternal twins. A large broad-based study in 2000 showed 32 percent concordance (meaning both twins are gay or lesbian) in identical twins and 15 percent concordance among fraternal and non-twin siblings. This was, respectively, 10 times and 5 times the 3 percent occurrence rate in the large group of study participants.. Based on this evidence, researchers concluded that there is a significant genetic basis for homosexual orientation but that other factors also play a role.

A significant paper looking specifically at gene variation between gay and straight men was published in 1993, when techniques were just being developed to survey the genome in very broad ways. Dean Hamer from the National Institutes of Health presented a study that identified a region of the X chromosome that was different in a group of gay men from the same region in their straight brothers. It was a preliminary hint of a possible genetic link to homosexuality. Popular media outlets created controversy by misstating the study's findings but Hamer's conclusion then, which he continues to state, was this: There is no "master" gene, no single gene, for homosexuality but it likely arises from a complex interaction of multiple genes and other, as yet unconfirmed, factors.

Additional studies using newer technology were published in 2005 and 2012 reporting significant evidence of differences between gay and straight men in four chromosomal regions, one of which was the same X chromosome region as previously reported. The authors concluded, much as Hamer did years before, that there is no one "gay gene." To quote the authors of the 2005 paper, "Sexual orientation is a complex trait, so it's not surprising that we found several DNA regions involved in its expression. Our study helps to establish that genes play an important role in determining whether a man is gay or heterosexual."

Just last October a paper was presented at the American Society of Human Genetics meeting demonstrating variations, not in the genes themselves, but in "switches" that turn genes on and off

in different parts of the body and during different stages of development. These researchers from UCLA found nine regions that were significantly different between gay and straight brothers.

This complex multigene interaction should not come as a surprise. For example, it is estimated that there are 16 genes involved in determining eye color and 424 in determining height, both fairly straightforward traits.

While the exact mechanism of the genetic effect isn't known, there is a thought that there are genes for attraction to men that are generally activated in women and vice versa, which support the survival of our species. In some people, those genes are activated in atypical patterns.

In addition to genetic variation, there are clear examples of physiological variants that lead to gender identity and sexual orientation differences. For example, females with increased prenatal exposure to androgens and males with an extra X chromosome often experience gender nonconforming behavior and same-sex attraction. Brain imaging has shown structural differences between transgender and other individuals. And gay men are more likely to be born after older brothers. Each additional older brother increases the odds of a man being gay by 33 percent. It has been proposed that male fetuses provoke a maternal immune reaction that becomes stronger with each successive male fetus. This effect holds even if the younger child is reared apart from his biological family. (This pattern has not been observed in lesbian women.)

Sexuality is biological, psychological, cultural, social and spiritual. It would be an oversimplification to say that biology is the only factor in its development. But we are called to consider all these things as we enter into relationship with people whose experiences of sexual orientation and identity differ from the heterosexual majority. How will we engage in relationship with people for whom same-sex attraction or differing gender identity is part of their reality—however that reality came to be?

Dr. Mark Yarhouse received his doctorate in clinical psychology from Wheaton College. He has extensive expertise counseling transgender persons and he suggests that there are three general frameworks through which Christians conceptualize gender identity, roles and relationships.

One perspective sees the sacred integrity of maleness or femaleness as foundational and assumes expected roles and relationships are the only ways to function faithfully in light of God's creation.

Another point of view is to accept that these gender differences are nonmoral realities. They arise because we live in a fallen world and these realities for some may not be the way it's supposed to be but they just happen ... in the same way one might think of a

physical or developmental disability. This view generally instills a sense of compassion in response to a person experiencing same-sex attraction or identity differences.

A third way to think about these gender differences is to see them as part of the diversity of God's creation with persons experiencing them fully acceptable in their identity as part of the community where they can know meaning and purpose.

As a congregation, we represent some mix of these perspectives. As we consider together how to think about these issues, I find it interesting that Dr. Yarhouse proposes that Christians seek to draw on the best of all three points of view: sacredness of creation, compassion and community. The first represents a genuine concern for the integrity and sacredness of gender and the potential ways in which maleness and femaleness represent something instructive for the church and something for which we should have high regard. The second offers compassion and empathy, realizing that differing gender identity or sexual orientation is not the result of willful disobedience. The third offers the opportunity for the church to provide community and meaning-making to persons in these situations.

So, to summarize, while there remain many unanswered questions, genes and other biological processes have a significant influence on the development of minority sexual identities. It is our responsibility to faithfully discern how this information, along with our experience, tradition and study of Scripture will inform our understanding.

We at Wilshire are praying, studying and considering what we believe to be God's leading as we determine how lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people will be involved in the life of our congregation. I invite us all to enter into meaningful dialogue with each other on this topic ... dialogue that should be entered into with great humility.

## ***What we know about adolescent sexuality***

**Rhonda Walton**

*Rhonda Walton, M.D., has been a board-certified pediatrician for 30 years. She was in private pediatric practice in Waxahachie for 21 years. She left private practice about nine years ago to work in the City Square Community Health Services Clinic, a charity clinic in Fair*

*Park, where the majority of her patients are immigrant adolescents. Rhonda has been married to Jim Walton for 35 years. She has four adult sons and an adult daughter (whom she adopted from Bulgaria at the age of 16). Rhonda currently serves on the Dallas County Medical Society's Access to Care and Vulnerable Populations Committee and Children's Medical Center's Health and Wellness Alliance for Children. At Wilshire, Rhonda serves on the Missions Committee and a resident lay support team.*

We've been asked to present information that is accepted by the medical establishment regarding normal adolescent sexuality formation and to share some information that *might* be helpful in counseling adolescents and their families during a time of intense change and development and, occasionally, a time of confusion and vulnerability. Ideally, adolescence is a time when children separate in a healthy way from their parents and develop autonomy. Becoming aware of and understanding sexual feelings is a normal and important developmental task of adolescence.

### **When does sexual orientation “begin” for teenagers?**

Studies show that core attractions, which ultimately lead to adult sexual orientation, emerge between middle childhood and early adolescence. (Experience of gender identity occurs much earlier.) Feelings of romantic, emotional and sexual attraction typically emerge prior to any actual sexual experience. Teens can be completely celibate and still be aware of and confused by their emerging sexual feelings.

Sometimes adolescents have same-sex feelings, thoughts or experiences that may initially cause significant confusion about their orientation. Typically, that confusion subsides over time, with outcomes that are different for each individual. Up to 26 percent of 12-year-old students express uncertainty about their sexual orientation as compared to only 5 percent of 17 year olds.

So, labeling as “homosexual” an adolescent who may have had same-sex experiences or who expresses confusion about their sexual attractions can be premature and counterproductive.

Sexual orientation, especially in adolescents, is *not* synonymous with sexual activity or behavior. Some adolescents may engage in same-sex behavior, but not identify as LGBT, because they are uncertain about their feelings or because they fear the stigma associated with a non-heterosexual orientation. Some young people report that they experience same-sex attraction but either remain celibate or engage in heterosexual activity for varying lengths of time, sometimes many years, before engaging in same-sex behavior

or disclosing their feelings to their family or friends.

## **What causes same-sex attraction, and can it be changed?**

Scientific research has been unable to conclude that sexual orientation is determined by any well-defined genetic, hormonal, social or cultural determinant, but is instead a complicated, multifactorial outcome. Many people believe that both “nature and nurture” play a role, but it *is* important to note that most LGBT individuals report that they have never felt an experience of choice regarding their orientation.

It is also important to note that there is *no* scientific evidence that abnormal or abusive parenting, parental indifference, sexual abuse or any other specific negative childhood life event leads to same sex attraction. Nor is there evidence that specific parental actions or characteristics prevent it.

An article published in 1983 by Elizabeth Moberly entitled “Homosexuality: A New Christian Ethic,” espouses the theory that same-sex attraction is rooted in dysfunctional parent-child relationships, specifically a deeply dysfunctional relationship with the same-sex parent. Many organizations that previously advocated for “reparative therapy” relied heavily on Moberly’s model to support the idea that sexual orientation can be treated or “repaired.”

Currently, all major mental health associations and medical societies, including the American Psychiatric Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics, have published policy statements expressing that they do *not* endorse those therapies that claim to “repair” non-heterosexual orientation. There is no conclusive scientific evidence that this therapy is safe or effective, and it is now generally held that “conversion” or “reparative” therapy may cause significant harm by increasing internalized stigma, frustration, confusion and depression.

## **What are the known health risks that may be experienced by sexual minority youth, and what factors might be causative or protective?**

Just *identifying* as an LGBT teenager is *not* considered to be a high-risk behavior in medical and psychiatric literature; however, research has rapidly expanded, and much has been published recently about the effects of reported negative perceptions, parental rejection and discrimination on sexual minority teenagers.

There are many studies that report significant health disparities between LGBT teens and their heterosexual counterparts. They suffer significantly higher rates of depression and are more than

twice as likely to have considered suicide. Suicide is the leading cause of death among LGBT youth, who are estimated to account for up to 30 percent of youth suicide annually. Sexual minority youth experience higher incidents of bullying, harassment, violence, injury and homicide.

Studies also show higher rates of tobacco, alcohol and illegal drug abuse among sexual minority youth, along with higher rates of HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted infections, eating disorders and homelessness. LGBT youth are thought to make up approximately 40 percent of all homeless teens, although they represent only 3 to 5 percent of teens in general.

Interestingly, girls who identify as lesbian have a significantly *higher* rate of pregnancy than their exclusively heterosexual peers, due to higher rates of earlier sexual initiation, a greater number of partners and less contraceptive use.

However, many sexual minority youth appear to experience *no* greater level of physical or mental health risks. Increased health risks are actually associated with *reported* experiences of bias, rejection and discrimination in their environment. Protective factors against depression and suicidal ideation have been shown to include family connectedness, relationships with caring adults and perception of school safety.

Of note, family-related research has largely been based on reports of LGBT youth themselves, and rarely on reports from other family members. As an example, in a study asking youth about substance abuse, they were also asked whether they perceived reactions to their LGBT identity from various people (including family, coaches, teachers and friends) to be accepting, neutral or rejecting. The number of perceived “rejecting” reactions was found to predict substance abuse.

An additional and more recent risk factor for all adolescents is their growing reliance on the Internet as a source of information, support and social networking. LGBT youth who feel disenfranchised, confused or ashamed are particularly likely to seek information and support from strangers on the Internet if they have no connection to a supportive adult whom they trust. The likelihood of accessing misinformation or, even worse, the possibility of a predatory social connection is significant. Again, family connectedness and relationships with caring adults seem influential and protective.

## **Does talking about sexuality with our youth encourage experimentation?**

There is a common misconception that talking about sexual topics with teens may pique their curiosity or give the impression

that sexual behaviors are condoned. However, there are studies that indicate that adolescents whose parents or other respected adults talk openly with them about sex in general are actually more responsible in their sexual behavior. Conversations in this space may be uncomfortable, but they are very important.

## Concluding thoughts

Our youth are trying to determine who they are and how to *be* in a complicated world. Adolescents can be described paradoxically as “trying to be unique . . . just like everyone else.” The task of guiding them along the journey is an important one for the church, and it needs to be approached with a great deal of openness, prayer and unconditional love.

How then can we, as the body of Christ, include and support them in a way that tethers them to our community and helps them to develop into healthy, stable adults?

- We can provide a safe place for them to discuss and explore their thoughts and feelings, however diverse.
- We can provide the opportunity for healthy connections with adults who *model* relationship behavior that is affirming, mutual, committed and empowering, *not* manipulative, oppressive or exploitive.
- We can, with unconditional love and acceptance, demonstrate that we will walk alongside them through whatever they’re experiencing.
- We can nurture the Holy Spirit inside of them, who alone can ultimately change the path they may take.
- We can consistently reaffirm to them that their identity in Christ supercedes any identity they have acquired by human assignment.

## *A range of views within today’s church*

**Kile Brown**

*Kile Brown and his wife, Leigh Ann, joined Wilshire in 1997 after moving from Savannah, Ga. Their two daughters, Chelsea and Alison, have grown up at Wilshire and both are students at Baylor University. Their son, Blake, is currently involved in the Wilshire student ministry and attends Lake Highlands Freshman Center. Kile has taught seventh grade Sunday School for 11 years, was the*



*chairman for Sean Allen's lay advisory committee and has served as a deacon and on several committees. Professionally, Kile has a broad background in leadership, operations, sales and new business development predominantly with cutting-edge communications technologies. He is a 1992 graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point and a former Army Captain.*

Congratulations! You've made it through much of the theological foundation of our topic. That is to say, we've looked at same-sex attraction through the lenses of Scripture, tradition, science and experience. You've already seen how the variance of each person's interpretation of these four factors produce an array of viewpoints.

In an effort to simplify these varying viewpoints, we have segmented them into four views. There will likely be some overlap between one view and another. We don't presume to know how people will identify with these views. Steven Covey stated that to be understood we should first seek to understand. The purpose of this information is to not only provide common views with which you may identify, but to also help you understand how our brothers and sisters within Wilshire might interpret Scripture and view same-sex attraction differently from ourselves. We want to emphasize that while each person will have his or her own view, we also want to be respectful of the views and interpretations of others.

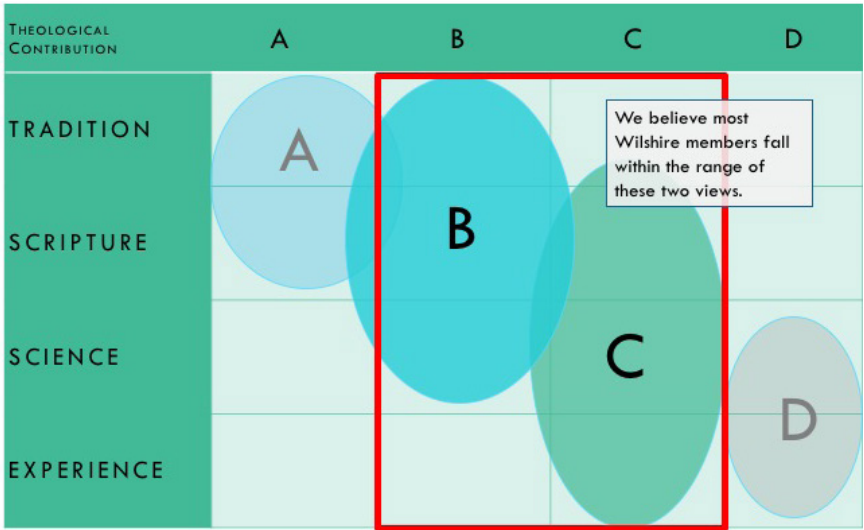
I will introduce the four viewpoints. Our theological groundwork with regard to Scripture, tradition, science and experience warrants more time on two of the four. We'll cover those in greater detail, but I want to cover the complete range of views briefly. For ease of reference, we'll call these viewpoints A, B, C and D. The graphic in Figure 1 visually depicts these four views in a static way, but they may be more dynamic than a visual can depict.

## **Viewpoint A**

Our first viewpoint, call it A, is that same-sex attraction is disordered desire and must be changed if one is to experience salvation and inclusion in the church. What does this mean?

Simply, same-sex attraction can be changed and *must* be changed to experience salvation and inclusion in the church. This view includes a handful of underlying beliefs about same-sex attraction. First, it sees the cause of same-sex attraction as most likely environmental, which may be the product of psychological factors or experiences of abuse. It also believes that same-sex attraction can be corrected or cured.

How is this accomplished? There are a host of methods and



**Table 1**

therapies, from prayer to reparative therapy, some which can be physically and emotionally intense and even abusive. The success of these treatments will result in either a life of celibacy or heterosexual marriage. This view of same-sex attraction might be compared to a widely accepted view of alcoholism. Imagine an alcoholic who has successfully gone through a treatment program, 12-step or otherwise, and is now in recovery.

The benefit of experience with regard to this viewpoint is significant. As was mentioned in the preceding sessions, we know that bad parenting or abusive same-sex parental relationships do not cause same-sex attraction.

We also have seen reparative therapy at work for a number of years. These ex-gay programs, some of which started as long ago as the 1970s, have finally reached their own conclusion that they have been ineffective. Exodus International was one of the most promoted and visible ex-gay programs in the world. John Paulk, president of Exodus in the late 1990s through 2001, confessed, “I do not believe that reparative therapy changes sexual orientation; in fact, it does great harm to many people.” Exodus closed its doors in 2013.

While many of these programs are well intended, the foundational basis for their re-programming is wishful thinking, not proven science or peer-reviewed medicine. Drew cited the medical associations that have repudiated these practices as harmful. Even Russell Moore, who serves as president of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, denounced reparative therapy at a 2014 conference as “severely counterproductive.”

## Viewpoint B

A differing viewpoint, B, is that while same-sex attraction is not sinful in and of itself, it must be controlled by spiritual discipline. This allows the person to experience the fullness of abundant life in Christ by the enabling power of God's grace, and thereby also fully participate in the church, which maintains a sexual ethic for everyone of celibacy before marriage and faithfulness in marriage being defined as one man and one woman in a one-flesh relationship. We will come back to this view in greater detail.

## Viewpoint C

Another view, C, asserts that same-sex attraction is a mystery of human experience beyond our ability fully to explain. It is only addressed in the Bible as sinful when it is assumed to be a violation of rightful sexual ethics of marriage between one man and one woman, and thus is a violation of nature due to the excess of lust where a person goes beyond rightly created nature and seeks sexual fulfillment with someone of the same sex. While the Bible does not address same-sex orientation, we nevertheless recognize it as a reality today for some people. This position says that unbounded lust and promiscuity should be constrained by a sexual ethic that calls for celibacy before marriage and faithfulness in marriage, allowing for same-sex marriage as a means by which desire may be fulfilled in committed *agape* love that keeps covenant relationships. We'll cover this view more as well.

## Viewpoint D

And last, D is the view that same-sex attraction should lead to fulfillment in whatever way the individual wishes without boundaries imposed by the church. This view includes polyamory—the practice of having more than one open romantic relationship at a time. Viewpoint D includes sexual behavior that is outside of marriage.

We are confident that viewpoint D is contrary to what the Bible instructs with regard to a respectful and monogamous relationship within the covenant of marriage and is therefore not in keeping with Wilshire's interpretation of Scripture or Jesus' example for our lives.

One of our study group members, Drew Bird, expressed it nicely, "Sexual activity is not a requirement for spiritual fulfillment." Thankfully, we have been blessed with being so much more than our sexuality.

Before we move on to viewpoints B and C, it is helpful to be

aware of a phrase that is widely misused: “gay lifestyle.” A number of people associate this phrase with promiscuous activity by those with same-sex attraction. But we don’t condone this behavior for those with opposite-sex attraction either. And yet, we manage not to say, “straight lifestyle.” I encourage you not to think of “same-sex attraction” and “gay lifestyle” interchangeably.

And now we move on to viewpoints B and C—both rooted in biblical interpretations and where we believe most of our congregation will fall.

## Viewpoint B

### Jill Allor

*Jill Allor and her husband, Russ, joined Wilshire in 2012. They have two daughters, Laura (14) and Helena (12). Jill and Russ are members of Journey Class, where Jill teaches in rotation. She has been active in the Baptist church all her life. A former elementary school teacher, she earned a doctorate in education from Vanderbilt University in 1992 and is now a professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning at SMU. She conducts research in the area of early literacy for students with and without disabilities.*

Kile just described four general viewpoints. Our group recognizes that these viewpoints overlap and even within each viewpoint there is disagreement. I’m going to describe the second of the four viewpoints, which, in essence, represents the historical teaching of the broader Christian church.

This view includes two primary teachings that have been held by the Christian church for approximately 2,000 years. First, Scripture teaches that Christian marriage is designed by God to be between one man and one woman. Second, Scripture teaches that homosexual behavior is sinful. I’m going to describe some common reasons for these two beliefs. Then I will discuss just a couple of issues that have been raised that question these beliefs and provide a brief response to them. Keep in mind that our goal is to provide an overview, so I won’t be going into a lot of detail.

I’ll start with the belief that Scripture teaches that Christian marriage is designed by God to be between one man and one woman. Genesis 1:27–28 emphasizes that God created both man and woman in God’s image, that God blessed them, and told them to be

fruitful and multiply. Genesis 2:20–25 describes how Eve was made from Adam, that she was pronounced by Adam as “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh,” that man leaves his mother and father and “cleaves” to his wife, that they become one flesh, and that they were naked and unashamed. The argument is that Eve is “suitable” (v. 20) to the man because she is similar to Adam—bone of my bones—and also because she is different. In Genesis 1 they are commanded to be fruitful and in Genesis 2 they are cleaving together and naked. They are both created in the image of God, yet their differences from one another allow them to be fruitful and multiply. The differences are referred to as “gender complementarity.”

In the New Testament, Jesus quotes from Genesis 2:24 when he speaks to the seriousness of divorce, supporting the intention that marriage is a lifelong union of a man and a woman. Paul uses the “one flesh” phrase in 1 Corinthians in a sexual context as he warns the Corinthians against being “joined” to a prostitute. On a much broader level, the church is referred to in the New Testament as the bride of Christ. And in Ephesians, Paul again references the “one flesh” and “cleaving” terminology as he emphasizes that husbands are to love their wives just as Christ loves the church.

As Richard Hays in *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* explains, the moral teaching tradition of the Christian church has also been that homosexual behavior is contrary to the will of God (Hays, 397). It’s only been within the last 30 years that serious questions have been raised about this teaching. Although there are only a few biblical texts that speak to homosexual behavior, they all express unqualified disapproval (Hays, 389). Mark has already spoken about each of these texts, but I will summarize very briefly here. As Mark pointed out, even many conservative scholars do not believe the Sodom and Gomorrah story presents a clear case against homosexuality. Leviticus 18 and 20, on the other hand, very clearly identify homosexual behavior as a serious sin, specifically a man lying with a man as with a woman. In the New Testament, the Romans 1 passage is the most specific and clear. I’ll touch on it a bit more in just a moment. The passages in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy both use the Greek words about which scholars have argued, as Mark discussed. One interpretation is that Paul’s use of the term *arsenokoitai* is specifically linked to the Holiness Code and reaffirms the Leviticus verses that condemned homosexual behavior (Hays, 382).

To summarize what I have presented thus far, two positions that have been held by Christians for approximately 2,000 years are that marriage is between one man and one woman and that homosexual behavior is outside of God’s will. I have focused on explaining the general agreement within this broad view. In this next

section, I'm going to provide some brief responses to questions or issues that are being raised about these teachings. I will limit these to just two issues.

One issue that questions the historic beliefs of the church is that there are only a few passages that explicitly refer to homosexuality. A number of responses can be made to this issue. One response is that there are more than just a few texts that refer to marriage, and these consistently refer to a man and a woman. Another response is that there is widespread agreement that the few texts that are written about homosexual behavior are unequivocal and unambiguous; in all cases, they clearly view homosexual behavior as sin. Some scholars argue that the Bible says relatively little about homosexuality because ancient Jews and Christians agreed that homosexual behavior was a sin and, therefore, it was not a topic that needed much explanation. Simply put, this was not a controversial issue when Scripture was written.

To elaborate on this point, theologians agree that in Romans 1, Paul is using homosexual behavior to illustrate a larger point about the gravity of human fallenness and how it distorts God's good created intention. In other words, the reason he used the example of homosexuality was because it was a particularly vivid sin; early Christians would have agreed it was a sin. Paul goes on to say, though, that we are all equally condemned. He says in Romans 2:1 as the culmination of his argument: "Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things." I feel the need to pause there and let that point sink in. We all must take our own sin seriously. All types of sin are taken very seriously in Scripture, not just sexual sin or homosexual sin.

A second issue raised that questions historic beliefs is that the Bible is not referring to loving, committed, monogamous, covenantal same-sex unions, since the ancient world had no concept of sexual orientation. This is referred to as the "cultural distance" argument. As you have heard from Mark, this argument is complicated and requires understanding of both the context of ancient times and a deep analysis of Scripture. Scholars agree that in ancient times homosexual practices included extreme promiscuity, master-slave relationships and pederasty (that is, older men having dominating sexual relationships with younger adolescents). At least some scholars, however, argue that long-term, loving homosexual relationships did exist in ancient times. For example, in an article on lesbianism in antiquity, Bernadette Brooten, a professor at Brandeis University, who is a lesbian herself, discusses how ancient people tried to explain causes of sexual orientation through astrol-

ogy or biology. She concludes her article by asking how Christians should respond and whether we agree with Paul that such love is unnatural.

In an interview in 2004 with the *National Catholic Reporter*, N. T. Wright states: “As a classicist, I have to say that when I read Plato’s *Symposium*, or when I read the accounts from the early Roman empire of the practice of homosexuality, then it seems to me they knew just as much about it as we do. In particular, a point which is often missed, 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 in Plato. The idea that in Paul’s [day] it was always a matter of exploitation of younger men by older men or whatever . . . of course there was plenty of that then, as there is today, but it was by no means the only thing. They knew about the whole range of options there . . . I think we have been conned . . . into thinking that this is all a new phenomena.”

Later in that same interview, Wright is asked if a Christian morality faithful to Scripture cannot approve of homosexual conduct. His response was “Correct. That is consonant with what I’ve said and written elsewhere.” To rephrase, Wright is saying that his opinion is that a faithful interpretation of Scripture cannot approve of homosexual conduct.

In conclusion, the view I have been describing argues that if you look at the totality of Scripture, the message is clear and consistent. Marriage is always seen as between one man and one woman. Sexual behavior outside of marriage is sinful and serious. Sexual behavior between two people of the same sex is viewed with that same negativity, and marriage between two people of the same sex is not supported in any way within Scripture. This view recognizes that some people, for reasons we do not understand, experience same-sex attraction. Although this view does not allow for homosexual behavior, it does not condemn those who experience same-sex attraction.

I’d like to end with a couple of final thoughts. Our identity as Christians first and foremost emanates from the fact that we are children of God. We are of great worth to God regardless of our marital status. Paul actually holds a life of singleness and celibacy up as an ideal. As he says in 1 Corinthians 7, it is good for the unmarried and the widows to remain unmarried. This is because one who is unmarried can be focused on the things of the Lord.

The primary importance of our relationship with God is further illustrated in Matthew 22 when Jesus is asked the trick question about a woman who had been the wife of seven brothers. Jesus responded by saying to them, “You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures

nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God: I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.” Jesus’ response indicates that marriage is temporal and our relationship with God should be given the highest priority.

Jared will now share about the third viewpoint. But please remember that the viewpoint I have shared and the one about to be shared both hold Holy Scripture in high esteem. Those of us across this wide spectrum of beliefs who all value Holy Scripture share the belief that God’s rules are there to protect us, not to control us or limit us. His love for us is good, I mean really good, in the deepest sense of the word. As George dedicates babies, he emphasizes that we pray that baby will have a good life, not an easy life. Christians do not want people to experience the consequences of sin; instead, we want people to experience the joy of living in God’s goodness. When considering this topic, each of us needs to look into our own lives with the deepest of humility, knowing how far we all far short of the goodness of God.

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## **Viewpoint C**

### **Jared Jagers**

*Jared Jagers and his wife, Hannah, moved to Dallas in 2013 shortly after their wedding and Jared’s completion of graduate school. He holds a master’s degree in religious studies from East Texas Baptist University. Jared and Hannah have been members of Wilshire since February 2014 and are active in Labyrinth Class. Jared is a full-time seminary student at Brite Divinity School at TCU in Fort Worth. Jared’s professional passions lie in pastoral and educational*



*ministry, and he also is an avid reader, runner, rock climber  
and coffee drinker.*

I'm going to present to you the perspective that we're calling "C," which considers same-sex attraction a mystery of human experience. This perspective admits our limitations for fully understanding sexuality, but it also tends to view same-sex attraction as something that is beyond one's simple choice. Because one presumably does not choose to be gay or lesbian, this perspective would not consider it a sin to experience same-sex attraction.

Those who hold to perspective C believe that all people should be held to a common standard regardless of their sexual orientation, which includes celibacy as a spiritual discipline before marriage and faithfulness in marriage.<sup>1</sup> This means that gay and lesbian people who are not gifted with celibacy may seek fulfillment of their love in a committed, covenant relationship. This perspective considers it inappropriate to require lifelong celibacy of those who experience persistent same-sex attraction but who do not have celibacy as a spiritual gift, since that gift is not endowed on all people and should not therefore be assumed to be endowed on all gay or lesbian people.<sup>2</sup>

Perspective C does *not* reject biblical authority for the life of Christians, but instead seeks to examine Holy Scripture and Christian tradition alongside our experiences and scientific understanding to discern the Christian response to LGBT persons. While there are some who would toss out the biblical account by simply saying that the Bible's view of same-sex relations simply isn't binding in 2016, that perspective of Scripture is not typical of viewpoint C that I am describing.

In the next few minutes, I want to explain to you *why* this perspective seeks to reconsider the biblical account and the teachings of the church against same-sex relationships. I will explain the general perspective toward the Bible on this issue. Second, I will address the difference between ancient and contemporary same-sex relationships. Third, I will address the concept of gender complementarity. Finally, I will explain perspectives on a few key biblical texts.

Now, many of you in the room likely have shared the same beliefs I have had in assuming that the Bible is clear on this matter and that "homosexuality" is universally condemned as sinful. For those who hold position C, the traditional reading of Scripture cannot remain fully satisfactory in light of experience and reason. So are they simply forcing the Bible to agree with them, or picking and choosing passages that only suit their view? Some would condemn this viewpoint saying that the only reason to think that the biblical

account is ambiguous or unclear is because those advocating this view are looking for that to be true.

One explanation could be that there are many cases where a straightforward reading of the Bible doesn't seem to jive with our experience of people and of reality. When the author of Philemon recommends that a slave return to his master after running away, many of us would say, "Hold on a second; it doesn't seem that we could universally apply a straightforward reading of that passage to our time. That would assume that slavery is still an acceptable social institution. Perhaps that made sense in Paul's context, but we couldn't apply that in a different context."

Viewpoint C likewise considers one's experience of a gay or lesbian child, parent, friend, or loved one, then reads passages condemning "homosexuality," and says, "Hold on; that doesn't seem to match the people that I know; it doesn't seem that we can apply that directly today. Perhaps that made sense in Paul's context, but that can't be applied today to all same-sex relationships."

In other words, they can't read the passage in a traditional way without profound dissonance between their experience of a loved one who is gifted by God's grace and the idea that God considers that person an abomination. Reason and experience as sources of Christian authority lead the Christian to reexamine the Bible and Christian tradition to discern why they don't seem to coincide.

Second, this perspective finds that most of the Bible's condemnations of same-sex relations are in regard to its being an excess of lust or abusive sexual activity. It's important to note that perspective C would agree that these condemnations should still hold today.

The majority of same-sex relationships in ancient times involved (at the very least) an inappropriate power dynamic. A common example is that of a Greek philosopher who would have sexual encounters with his younger, male students. Other examples like an older nobleman with a pubescent boy, or a master with his servants or slaves, are similar in that they are generally considered less than consensual because of the power dynamic of the two persons involved. Other scholars argue that it was assumed that all people were naturally heterosexual, but they may at times have become so overcome by lustful desire that they sought sexual experiences with their own sex as well.

You heard the viewpoint that the Bible is clear and that the biblical authors would have been aware of long-term, loving same-sex relationships. Those holding perspective C offer the opposite claim that the Bible is silent about this topic largely because same-sex relationships in ancient times were of a different nature than what we are contemplating in our time. That is, the Bible refers

to something different than we do when discussing loving same-sex relationships, since same-sex orientation was not imagined by biblical authors.

Third, the complementarity argument you have heard referred to, in which two people are joined together as “one flesh,” does not need to be restricted to gender complementarity. View C suggests that complementarity is fundamentally about two people being different human beings; it is not based solely on them having different anatomy. It is a relational complementarity rather than a sexual or biological complementarity.<sup>3</sup> For example, my relationship with my wife (Hannah) is not based on the fact that our anatomy complements each other, but on the fact that Jared complements Hannah, and vice versa.

Finally, this perspective finds, with some who hold the traditional view, that the Old Testament passages are not definitive. Richard B. Hays, New Testament Professor and Dean of Duke Divinity School, probably falls in perspective B but believes that the creation texts and the Sodom story in Genesis do *not* actually address same-sex relationships, and so they are not sufficient in themselves to build the case against same-sex relationships. He believes the Leviticus prohibitions are important, however, because the New Testament authors didn’t contradict those rules. But he acknowledges that Leviticus also does *not* settle the matter, because Christians have disregarded many sexual and purity requirements of the Old Testament since the earliest centuries after Christ.<sup>4</sup> He looks instead primarily to the New Testament for the basis of his more traditional stance.

Regarding the argument that Paul in Romans 1 means that all LGBT people are doing something unnatural as a result of their sin, perspective C would argue that Paul is assuming that heterosexual people were having same-sex encounters which were therefore contrary to their nature. If there is, as this position assumes, such a thing as same-sex orientation, it would therefore be more unnatural for a gay or lesbian individual to have a sexual encounter with a person of the opposite sex than to live according to their orientation.

Because they would say the Bible is agnostic on this point, we as the people of God have to “walk by the Spirit,” as Paul says,<sup>5</sup> and discern the Christian response in light of the overall narrative of Jesus and the gospel. Instead of finding specific texts to tell us what to do, we have to take into account Jesus’ teachings and moral example, biblical values and Christian principles. For this perspective, Jesus’ spending time with sinners and radical inclusion of those whom the religious authorities of his day consistently rejected show us that the faithful response would be to fully accept and love the minority of Christians

among us who experience same-sex orientation.

The book of Acts offers an example to follow as the church determined to include the Gentiles in light of new information following the resurrection of Christ. The early church saw the genuine faith of the unclean Gentiles and determined at the Jerusalem council that they should be included in the church. It was a contentious decision and we can imagine that not everyone agreed. However, we don't wait to act until all the questions are answered; we seek to act out the love of Jesus and trust God that our love is a faithful response.

Let me conclude with a few bullet points to state this position explicitly and concisely:

- Same-sex attraction is not a sin and may be viewed as part of the mysterious and beautiful diversity of creation.<sup>6</sup>
- The Bible is not clear in its ethical admonitions regarding same-sex relationships as we know them in the 21st century, so Christians have to discern an ethic without pointing to proof-texts.
- Gay and lesbian Christians should be held to the same sexual standards as straight Christians; therefore:
- Faithful Christians with same-sex attraction should consider whether they have the gift of celibacy in singleness, but if they believe their love for another person of the same sex might best be fulfilled in the covenant relationship of marriage, the church should consider this as an equally plausible means of glorifying God as a response of human love in the same way heterosexual married couples may. As Jill stated in regard to the position she presented, this third perspective also wants people to experience the joy of living in God's goodness. For this position, the church would best exemplify its faith convictions through accepting LGBT persons into the body of Christ and allowing for their spiritual and personal fulfillment. They ought not suffer limitations to service within the church or be restricted from privileges of membership only on account of their sexual or gender identity.

Our hope in presenting these two perspectives that lie between the more extreme A and D positions is that wherever Wilshire ends up falling on this spectrum in regard to church policy, we will still be able to respect one another and maintain our vibrant fellowship with diversity of opinion, as we do now. Having begun this conversation about LGBT people, no matter what decision we make will require humility, grace and immense love for one another. As the IDSG, we pray for a beneficial and God-honoring outcome to this process and are willing to put in the difficult work to make that happen. We thank you for joining us in it.

## Notes

1. Celibacy is a spiritual gift that is upheld as the ideal for Christian life by Paul and by Jesus, although marriage is frequently more celebrated in our churches today. See Matt. 19:10-12 and 1 Cor. 7.

2. As Walter Wink points out, 1 Tim. 4:1-3 includes mandatory celibacy among false teachings. See his comments in "Homosexuality in the Bible," in *Homosexuality and the Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches* edited by Walter Wink (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 41.

3. A clear representation of this viewpoint is James V. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2013), 85-109.

4. Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 381-82.

5. See Galatians 5.

6. For a well-written and inspiring essay on this matter of diversity, see Richard Rohr, "Where the Gospel Leads Us," in *Homosexuality and the Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches* edited by Walter Wink (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 85-88.

# *The Inclusion and Diversity Study Group*

James Perry, chairman  
Jill Allor  
Rob Banta  
Drew Bird  
Gail Brookshire  
Kile Brown  
Barry Buchanan  
Lillie Campbell  
Diana Early  
Rebecca Francis  
Gary E. Griffith  
Mary Ann Hill  
Jared Jagers  
Mary Lu Spreier  
Henry Stone  
Don Tittle  
Rhonda Walton  
Wendy Warden  
Paula Woodbury  
Mark Wingfield, staff liaison  
George Mason, staff liaison



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