

Response by David Myers: Another Christian Perspective on Homosexuality and the Church

I thank the *Reformed Review* for inviting my response to its recent articles on same-sex unions and the ordination of gays and lesbians to church office. I will offer a quick synopsis of my own emerging perspective, and then some brief reflections on the three articles.

Although I once agreed with the position of the articles in the *Reformed Review*, my reading of psychological science, my revisiting of the biblical texts, and my engagement with real people's life stories have now drawn me to a different place. In the nine short chapters and an appendix of [*What God has Joined Together? A Christian Case for Gay Marriage*](#),¹ Letha Dawson Scanzoni and I together derive these ten conclusions:

- Our Reformed and ever-reforming faith tradition beckons us, with open minds, to discern and reconcile the truth in God's word and God's works.
- All humans have a deep "need to belong," to connect with others in close, intimate, enduring relationships.
- As one potent example of such relationships, marriage contributes to flourishing lives – to happier and healthier adults, and thriving children.
- Toxic forces, especially radical individualism and the media modeling of impulsive sexuality, are corroding marriage and the health of communities.
- Sexual orientation is a natural (largely biologically influenced) disposition, most clearly so for men.
- Sexual orientation is also an enduring disposition, which is seldom reversed by willpower, reparative therapy, or ex-gay ministry.
- Out of 31,103 Bible verses, only seven frequently quoted verses speak directly of same-sex behavior – and often in the context of idolatry, promiscuity, adultery, child exploitation, or violence. We infer that the Bible has nothing to say about an enduring sexual orientation, which is a modern concept, or about loving, long-term same-sex partnerships. (One of our goals was to familiarize readers with biblical scholarship that offers alternative interpretations to the familiar proof-texts used against gay and lesbian people.)

¹ For information and related links see www.davidmyers.org.

- The creation stories focus on human companionship, on the importance of *relationship* and the formation of new kinship units. Most of these will be heterosexual, but some, we now realize, may be homosexual.
- A Christian case for gay marriage arises from the human need to belong, from the biblical mandate for justice, from the benefits of a culture-wide norm of monogamy, and from a refutation of popular arguments against gay marriage.
- Although not part of our argument (and therefore in an appendix) we also note – for those who may wonder how history likely will judge us – that attitudes on this sexual issue are rapidly changing, and becoming more accepting of gay rights and relationships. Moreover, there is a large generation gap, with most older adults opposing gay marriage and most younger adults supporting it. Given that the forces driving the attitude changes are likely to continue, and given generational succession, it appears that the culture war over gay marriage and gay ordination will gradually be resolved in the years to come, much as were previous culture wars over minority and women’s rights. (Note: We report the attitude changes for information only. A social trend is not a justification for itself. Indeed, we contest some social trends, such as the increasing percentage of high school seniors who agree that “It is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married.”)

That, in a nutshell, is the essence of our marriage-supporting “Christian case for gay marriage.” Now to the differing but honest and well-articulated views expressed in this “Homosexuality and the Church” *Reformed Review* issue.

[James Brownson](#)² appreciates and wrestles with several competing perspectives: a) an “accommodating” position (“supportive grace” that encourages committed partnerships), b) a moderately conservative “pastoral concession” to the reality of enduring sexual orientation, while still regarding same-sex partnerships as outside God’s blessing, and c) a more rigorously conservative “consistent witness” that demands abstinence from gay and lesbian people. While exhibiting a pastoral sensitivity to the challenges of suppressing one’s longing for belonging and for intimacy, he also points to the “gift” of celibacy available to those called to what Robert Gagnon and Robert Van Voorst advocate for gays (but do not themselves practice): celibate abstinence. He hopes – and so do I – that the church’s tent will be large enough to include faithful Christians holding all three perspectives.

My response: Rather than a “pastoral concession,” and rather than a “consistent witness” that ties “onto people’s backs loads that are heavy and hard to carry,” as Jesus said of the Pharisees (Matt. 23:4, TEV), why not offer a positive affirmation of monogamy? Why not stand up for healthy relationships that satisfy the human need to

² www.westernsem.edu/wtseminary/assets/Brownson%20aut05.pdf

belong within covenant partnerships? Rather than advocating a sexual double standard for straight people (marry or be celibate) and gay people (sorry, you must be celibate), why not proclaim a single Christian sexual ethic? Why not yoke sex with faithfulness? Why not seal love with commitment? Why not make a conservative, marriage-supporting positive argument: that the world would be a happier and healthier place if, *for all people*, sex, love, and marriage routinely went together?

Brownson mentions anecdotes suggesting that Freudian-influenced “reparative therapy” is, in some instances, “at least somewhat effective.” Most mental health organizations, along with the growing list of ex-ex-gay leaders, do not agree. For those who hold hope for therapeutic reorientation, one wonders: What failure rate would persuade you to advise someone, “It’s probably not worth risking the likely frustration, guilt, and despair. You’re probably better off accepting yourself, ‘just as I am,’ and allowing yourself to feel comfortable with who you are and whom you love.” And do we really want to risk the ill-fated marriages and associated suffering that so often result when churches “call gays and lesbians to the biblical standard of chastity in singleness and fidelity within heterosexual marriage”?

[Robert Gagnon](#),³ the foremost Christian antigay relationships expositor, offers a 58,466 word critical response to our 44,132 word book. Although our little book is mostly a synopsis of the science underlying the case for marriage and the emerging understanding of sexual orientation, most of his response focuses on our two short chapters concerning the biblical texts. He also objects to our engaging only two of his published articles. “They do not interact with my 500-page book . . . nor my 53-page essay and 7-page response . . . nor my 50-page essay.”

The biblical texts. Although I have cordially conversed in public forums with respected conservative psychologist colleagues such as Mark Yarhouse and Stanton Jones (whom Brownson and Gagnon approvingly cite), a point-for-point response to Gagnon’s book-length book review would be well beyond the bounds of my available time and biblical expertise. The review articulates the perspective found in Gagnon’s *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*. Readers interested in sharply critical reflections on Gagnon’s exegesis may wish to visit essays by his own professional peers – by biblical scholars [Walter Wink](#),⁴ [Holly Hearon](#),⁵ [Beth Johnson](#),⁶ [Edward Campbell](#),⁷ and [Jack Rogers](#).⁸ (See also a review by psychotherapist [Ralph Blair](#),⁹ of Evangelicals Concerned.)

³ www.westernsem.edu/wtseminary/assets/Gagnon1%20Aut05.pdf

⁴ www.christiancentury.org/downloads/cc-sg-001-01.pdf

⁵ www.covenantnetwork.org/bible/hearon.html.

⁶ www.covenantnetwork.org/bible/johnsonb.html

⁷ www.covenantnetwork.org/bible/campbellE.html

⁸ www.covenantnetwork.org/bible/JBR-Nat%20Law.pdf. For much more, including a “Christ-centered” reading of

These biblical scholars remind us that people who exposit Scripture are guided by their own assumptions and attitudes. Gagnon's critics, coming from different "pre-understandings," discern Scripture much differently from the way he does. As a social psychologist, I will leave the debate over the pertinent biblical texts to the biblical scholars. The Bible seems clear enough regarding its major themes (which are not at issue among those of us who stand in common faith to repeat the Apostles Creed). But the translation of its gender and sexual ethics from the context of two millennia and more ago to the world of today seems more subject to varying interpretations. The Bible is like the United States Constitution: It says many things clearly, and these form the agreed-upon foundation of our communal life, while leaving us to argue its implications for many other issues.

Arguments about "what the Bible says" are widely used in religious bodies and legislatures to deprive homosexual persons of rights and privileges enjoyed by heterosexuals. So Scanzoni and I offer readers a brief synopsis of (a) the few verses that have been used to condemn the relationships of same-sex couples, and (b) some of the alternative interpretations that have been offered for these passages, which suggest that they do not speak to the issue of same-sex marriage. Gagnon disagrees with the alternative interpretations. But his disagreements should be primarily with his own professional colleagues, whose shoulders we stand upon, as well as with those who have critically reviewed his own work.

The influence of one's pre-understandings on biblical interpretation is no surprise to anyone familiar with psychological research. Our expectations and "mental sets" can powerfully predispose what we perceive and how we interpret the world around us. To believe is to see. For example, after presidential debates, partisans overwhelmingly perceive *their* candidate as having won. A 1995 Gallup Poll found that, after hearing much the same evidence, 78 percent of Blacks but only 42 percent of Whites approved O. J. Simpson's not guilty verdict. "We hear and apprehend only what we already half know," said Thoreau. As I conclude in my social psychology text (without having biblical interpretation in mind), "There is an objective reality out there, but we view it through the spectacles of our beliefs, attitudes, and values. This is one reason our beliefs are so important; they shape our interpretation of everything else."

If the Bible actually has little if anything directly to say about sexual orientation and loving, committed, same-sex partnerships, and if faithful Christians such as Gagnon and his biblical scholar critics disagree about the biblical texts, then, many people

Scripture and a critique of Robert Gagnon's writings, see Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006).

⁹ www.ecinc.org/Reviews/rvFall_2002.htm

wonder, why is the church so preoccupied with this issue? Why not a preoccupation with, say, justice, the poor, and our stewardship of the creation, about which the Bible has so much to say? In his homily to the 2006 National Prayer Breakfast, humanitarian rock star Bono beckoned his audience to align their priorities with the Bible's: "It's not a coincidence that in the Scriptures, poverty is mentioned more than 2,100 times. It's not an accident. That's a lot of air time, 2,100 times." As I work on this essay, my daily lectionary reading brings up this week's Psalm (41), which begins: "Happy are those who consider the poor." Is that what the church is considering? And as individual followers of Jesus, do we have on our mental radar the priorities that Jesus had on his?

University of Virginia social psychologist [Jonathan Haidt](#)¹⁰ suggests an explanation for the church's current preoccupation. Often, his research shows, the rationalist idea that we reason our way to moral judgments has it backwards. Instead, we make instant gut-level moral judgments and then seek rationalizations for our feelings. Many people, he finds, will feel instant disgust over an objectively harmless but degrading behavior, such as scrubbing a toilet with the flag, and will then mentally scramble to construct moral reasons that support their moral intuition. First come the feelings, then the rationalization.

Recent studies have similarly found that prejudice arises less from cerebral justifications than from automatic, gut-level reactions which seek justification. Reason is often the slave of passion. Moral reasoning therefore aims to convince others of what we intuitively feel, which in times past has led people to find in the Bible ample support for the subordination of African-Americans and of women. Haidt's research also helps us understand why surveys find that people with gay friends come to have more accepting feelings, and also to have more supportive opinions about gay rights and gay marriage. (As empathy replaces disgust, one's rationalizations change.) And no wonder men (who, more than women, feel disgust over same-sex relationships) write most of the antigay tracts.

To be sure, I have not substantively responded to Robert Gagnon's exhaustive textual analysis in his book and book review, from which I surely have things to learn. Moreover, he would surely wish to remind me that, unlike the Bible's mixed commentary on slavery and the subordination of women, the Bible is uniform in its condemnation of same-sex behavior. But "for 300 years," notes [Jack Rogers](#)¹¹ response to Gagnon, "most good, intelligent, and devout Christians were convinced that African-Americans and women were severely restricted. When the general culture holds a worldview that includes such assumptions (based on natural law), it is easy for Christians to argue that the Bible is uniformly opposed to allowing leadership in the

¹⁰ faculty.virginia.edu/haidtlab/articles/haidt.joseph.intuitive-ethics.pdf

¹¹ <http://www.covenantnetwork.org/bible/JBR-Nat%20Law.pdf>

church for blacks, women, and divorcés. For 300 years, most people believed that the Bible was utterly clear and spoke uniformly on these matters, as well.”

Science and sexual orientation. Gagnon also takes Letha Scanzoni and me to task, albeit more briefly, for our understanding of sexual orientation as a natural and enduring disposition. As James Brownson recognizes, conceding a naturally disposed sexual orientation creates pastoral dilemmas. To avoid them, Gagnon disputes our evidence of biological influences on sexual orientation and our skepticism of claims of sexual reorientation.

Scanzoni and I are hardly alone in our reading of the pertinent research (which I have also digested in my introductory psychology texts, without any significant protest from the book’s reviewers and adopters at both secular and Christian institutions). Shortly after I drafted our chapter on the scientific exploration of sexual orientation, the American Psychological Association filed an [amicus brief](#)¹² in a New Jersey court case, offering a research synopsis that substantially parallels our own. On its own [website](#),¹³ the Association acknowledges that sexual orientation may have multiple causes, but adds that “biology, including genetic or inborn hormonal factors, play a significant role in a person’s sexuality.” “Is sexual orientation a choice?,” the Association rhetorically asks. “No, human beings cannot choose to be either straight or gay.” “Can therapy change sexual orientation? No. . . . Homosexuality . . . is not changeable.” Using different words, the national psychiatric, pediatric, and social work associations have concurred.

Since our book went to press, new data have further strengthened the conclusion that sexual orientation is a natural disposition. For example, when exposed to male sex-related odors, gay men’s brains react similarly to straight women’s. When exposed to male and female faces, lesbian’s brains respond like straight men’s, and gay men’s brains respond like straight women’s. Another recent experiment confirms that, with the manipulation of a single gene, fruit flies will display same-sex attraction. These new discoveries add to a dozen other you-never-would-have-guessed revelations of gay-straight differences in things ranging from brain centers to fingerprint patterns to skill at mentally rotating geometric figures.¹⁴

The Bible and science: “Special” and “general” revelation. These findings raise a fundamental issue: How should the church respond when scientific inquiry points to a different conclusion than what we have presumed to be Scriptural teaching? Gagnon’s

¹² http://www.lambdalegal.org/binary-data/LAMBDA_PDF/pdf/320.pdf

¹³ www.apa.org/pubinfo/answers.html

¹⁴ For more information on the biology of sexual orientation, see Glenn Wilson and Qazi Rahman, *Born Gay? The Psychobiology of Sex Orientation* (Chester Springs, PA: Peter Owen Publishers, 2005).

“Scripturalist” position ranks “Scripture above all the other interpretive factors. The question of homosexual practice is so important in ecclesiastical circles precisely because it threatens to reconfigure that long-standing hermeneutical ranking.” But haven’t we ever-Reforming people often revised our interpretations and understandings? To our ancestors the integrity and priority of Scripture was at stake in the battles over Copernicus’s dethroning the earth as the center of creation, in the cultural debates over interracial marriage and the equality of women, and in the debate over evolution versus young-earth creation versus intelligent design. Yesterday’s reading of Scripture notwithstanding, more and more evangelicals (even those supporting intelligent design) have

come to acknowledge that the earth is billions of years old and that, as the Discovery Institute's website acknowledges, "living things are related by common ancestry."

"Faith seeks understanding," said Augustine. And part of that understanding comes from our worshiping God with our minds, as we seek to read the book of nature (for which God is ultimately the author, we believe) and to reconcile it with biblical insights. In contrast with Gagnon's "Scripturalist" perspective, "general revelation promotes a proper understanding of special revelation," as well as vice versa, observed Christian Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof.¹⁵ (My other books on psychology and faith relate general and special revelation mostly by documenting the extent to which psychological science *confirms* biblically-rooted understanding about such things as the power and perils of pride, the interplay between belief and action, and unity of mind and body.)

Although some on the religious right still contest the rising tide of sexual orientation research, more and more evangelicals are conceding that sexual orientation appears not to be a moral choice. And there are more studies on the horizon. One is a five-year, \$2.5 million National Institutes of Health-funded study of DNA from a thousand families with two or more gay brothers, in search of genes that influence sexual orientation.¹⁶ We now have a much better understanding of sexual orientation than we did a couple decades ago, and within the next decade or two we surely will have an even better understanding. With a scientific train bearing down, the church therefore might best not handcuff itself to the tracks of yesterday's understandings.

Is sexual orientation socially constructed? Gagnon is troubled by our assumption that the increasing cultural acceptance of same-sex relationships appears not to be affecting the population rates of sexual orientation and same-sex relationships. Large cities have a higher proportion of gay men than do rural areas, which is partly if not entirely due to migration. He notes that urban adolescents more often report a same-sex experience — possibly, the researchers whom he quotes note, because urban contexts offer "increased opportunities for and fewer negative sanctions against same-gender sexuality" (and possibly also because of urban areas' greater pool of any genes that might influence sexual orientation).¹⁷ But does an adolescent same-sex experience cause or predispose a same-sex orientation? Same-sex behavior is also more frequent in sex-segregated environments such as the prisons that house many young men, but without appearing to alter sexual orientation.

¹⁵ In *Manual of Reformed Doctrine*, quoted by D. Oppewal, "General and Special Revelation in Conversation," *The Banner*, February, 2006, pp. 36-37.

¹⁶ A curious irony: some people who contest any genetic influence on sexual orientation also contest stem cell research (with the seeming assumption that "DNA is destiny" —that the coiled molecules in those few embryonic cells define the essence of who we are).

¹⁷ E. O. Laumann, J. H. Gagnon, R. T. Michael, & S. Michaels, *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 308).

Will gay and lesbian people's coming out, combined with visibly greater tolerance for same-sex relationships, lead to more homosexuality? It's a reasonable question and a widespread concern. It's also an empirical question. Given what we are learning about the enduring nature of sexual orientation and the difficulty of reorientation, Scanzoni and I expect not. If the population rate of homosexuality were, say, to rise to approach 10 percent, then this would disconfirm our understanding and would cause me to rethink my position. Question: If the population rate does *not* change, is Robert Gagnon prepared to rethink his position?

To put our contrasting presumptions to the test, I have just harvested the available data from the National Opinion Research Center's periodic General Social Survey of the United States.¹⁸ In 1988, when the question was first asked with procedures that assured anonymity, 97 percent of sexually active males reported having exclusively female partners during the previous year. In 2004, the most recent year for which data are available, the result was still 97 percent. (Among sexually active females, 99 percent in 2004 reported having exclusively male partners during the previous year.)

Narcissism? Gagnon believes that homosexuality represents "sexual narcissism." I gather that, for him, loving someone of the same sex is the moral equivalent of self-love. He contends that we complete ourselves when we acknowledge our incompleteness and couple with those who differ. "But isn't sexual complementarity a bit more complicated than tinker toys?" responds [Ralph Blair](#).¹⁹ If we complete ourselves by coupling with those who differ, should people be advised to avoid celibate vocations and to seek mates of a different cultural heritage, religion, and social class? And are there any data confirming that narcissism and underdeveloped care for others varies with sexual orientation? None that I can find. In responding to the General Social Survey, gay men were slightly *more* likely to report having "done volunteer work for a charity." Without disputing the stresses that can accompany being a homosexual person in antigay environments, America's major mental health associations, representing nearly half a million professionals, now reject the assumption that homosexuality is intrinsically a pathology that needs a cure.²⁰

¹⁸ The University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center has conducted the federally supported "General Social Survey" annually or biennially for the last several decades, and asked about the sex of sexual partners since 1988 (with respondents sealing and depositing their answers in ways that guarantee the privacy of their answers, even from the interviewer).

¹⁹ www.ecinc.org/Reviews/rvFall_2002.htm

²⁰ Gagnon may argue that he is not talking about "sexual narcissism" in the standard way psychologists and psychiatrists use the term, which is a person's using someone for one's own sexual gratification without regard to the other—hardly a description of the reciprocal self-giving and mutuality in a committed same-sex union akin to marriage. Instead, Gagnon has appropriated the term "sexual narcissism" for his own specific purpose in arguing for an essential male and female nature that requires its opposite to complete a whole. Scanzoni and I do not believe that is what the Bible teaches.

Male promiscuity. Gagnon and Scanzoni and I agree on what he calls the “disproportionately high rates of nonmonogamous patterns of behavior” among males, relative to females. Males, whether straight or gay, similarly desire more partners than do females. For Gagnon, this means that gay male unions are at greater risk for infidelity. I concur. But readers may wish to ask themselves: given that men (whether straight or gay) express more desire for multiple partners, is marriage (with its public commitment, covenantal vows, social support, and legal obligations) the problem? Or is it a partial answer to the problem of male infidelity? And is anyone stunned that gay “relationships” are less enduring than straight *marriages*? Cohabitation and other heterosexual nonmarital relationships are similarly more fragile than marriages. That fact forms part of the case for marriage, which curbs promiscuity.

[Robert Van Voorst](#)²¹ writes that the Reformed Church in America’s “dialogue is long overdue.” But then he leaves little doubt where he hopes that dialogue will take us, which, he says, should be away from the stance of the Episcopal Church and toward the marriage-for-straight-folks-only stance of the Evangelical Covenant Church.

In the clash between Gagnon and his biblical scholar critics such as Walter Wink and Jack Rogers, Van Voorst²² sides with Gagnon, whom he considers “the world’s leading expert on the topic of the Bible and homosexuality,” and whose opposition to *What God has Joined Together?* Van Voorst regards as “the most incisive, up-to-date treatment of scholarship on the biblical witness to homosexuality available anywhere.” Van Voorst regards it as a “hard fact” that the Bible condemns all forms of same-sex intimacy, even, one infers, between those in loving, committed, civil unions or marriages. Never mind that other biblical scholars, such as those one can link to above, arrive at quite different conclusions, as did the Reformed Church’s own [Theological Commission](#)²³ when, in 1978, it concluded that “Scripture does not refer to the problem of homosexual acts which emerge in accord with one’s conscious, sexual orientation and not against it. . . . The church must learn to deal differently with persons who are homosexual by constitution and not by choice.”

Fuller Seminary ethicist Lewis Smedes concurred with this sentiment. In *Sex for Christians*, he observed that “Homosexuality is a burden that homosexual people are called to bear, and bear as morally as possible, even though they never chose to bear it.” Six months before his death, Smedes wrote me that he now wished his next sentence

²¹ www.westernsem.edu/wtseminary/assets/Van%20Voorst%20Aut05.pdf

²² www.westernsem.edu/wtseminary/assets/Introduction%20aut05.pdf, p. 34.

²³ rca.org/images/synod/homosexuality/1978theologyreport.pdf.

had been “something like this: ‘It is a burden most obediently and creatively borne in a committed love-partnership with another.’”

Those of us who support a culture-wide pro-monogamy norm can take heart that more and more people see the welcoming of gay people into monogamy – into marriage – as a positive trend, while also seeing declines in teen pregnancy and increases in teen abstinence as another positive trend. Marriage nevertheless *is* in trouble. With the marriage rate having declined, with most first marriages preceded by cohabitation, with most first-born children conceived outside of marriage, and with pornography bigger business than professional football, there is surely a need to refocus on the family. Alas, rather than focus on getting and keeping people married, the church is diverting its energy into keeping gay people *un*married. One is reminded of senior devil Screwtape’s advice on how to corrupt: “The game is to have them all running about with fire extinguishers whenever there is a flood.”