

Review of *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church*

Peter J. Goeman
Assistant Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Languages
Shepherds Theological Seminary

On June 26, 2015, in the United States Supreme Court case *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the Supreme Court ruled that all states are required to affirm and recognize same-sex marriages. In the eyes of many, this court case became the final word on whether or not same-sex relationships should be accepted as good and right.

Although the cultural battle appears to be all but decided, the debate continues among churches. In recent years, some denominations and church leaders have come out in acceptance of same-sex relationships.¹ But, the question is far from settled in the pews.

One thing is certain. This is a question that cannot be ignored by churches. In the words of Al Mohler, “[T]here is no third way. A church or denomination will either believe and teach that same-sex behaviors and relationships are sinful, or it will affirm them. In short order, every single congregation in America will face the same decision — do we affirm same-sex relationships or not?”²

There has been a plethora of material published in recent years on the Bible and same-sex relationships. One of the more recent works (2016) is *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church*,³ edited by Preston Sprinkle. This book is part of Zondervan’s Counterpoints series, which deals with biblical or theological issues.

This book is a bit unique in that there are four authors, two arguing for each position. William Loader is a high-ranking scholar on sexuality in ancient Judaism and Christianity. He writes in support of same-sex relationships. Also in support of same-sex relationships, Megan DeFranza writes the second chapter from a more theological point of view. Arguing for the traditional view, Wesley Hill argues against the acceptance of same-sex relationships in the church. Interestingly, Wesley Hill is known for his struggle with same-sex attraction, thus making his position against the acceptance same-sex relationships quite fascinating. Finally, Stephen Holmes argues against same-sex relationships utilizing theological arguments rather than specific biblical passages.

¹ Dana Ford, “Presbyterians Vote to Allow Same-Sex Marriage,” News, *CNN*, last modified June 25, 2014, accessed November 30, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/06/19/us/presbyterian-church-same-sex-marriage/>; David P. Gushee, *Changing Our Mind* (Canton, MI: David Crumm Media, LLC, 2014); Elizabeth Dias, “Nashville Evangelical Church Comes Out for Marriage Equality,” *Time*, January 29, 2015, accessed January 3, 2016, <http://time.com/3687368/gracepointe-church-nashville-marriage-equality/>.

² Albert Mohler Jr., “Homosexuality as Dividing Line—The Inescapable Issue,” *AlbertMohler.Com*, September 24, 2014, accessed July 21, 2017, <http://www.albertmohler.com/2014/09/24/homosexuality-as-dividing-line-the-inescapable-issue/>.

³ Preston Sprinkle, ed., *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church*, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016).

In what follows, I will briefly summarize the main arguments and contributions of each author, while giving a brief evaluation. Then, I will close with a few observations and takeaways that I think are helpful in moving forward in the discussion of homosexuality and the church.

Summary of Arguments

William Loader

Surprisingly, although Loader is arguing *for* the acceptance of same-sex relationships in the church, he actually argues quite persuasively that the biblical writers were unanimously against homosexual relationships. For example, in his discussion of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, he writes, “Whatever rationale people might have brought to the prohibitions, these prohibitions were certainly understood subsequently as absolute and, as we shall see, extended also to same-sex relations between women.”⁴ Additionally, in his discussion of Genesis 1 and 2 he writes, “[T]he creation stories leave no room for notions of people being anything other than heterosexual and so imply that to depart from that order is sin.”⁵

In his discussion of NT passages, Loader acknowledges that the clearest testimony of what Paul thought about homosexual relationships is Romans 1. Throughout his discussion on Romans 1, Loader notes Paul’s dependence on Levitical law, as well the creation narrative. It is not a surprise then, that Loader claims Paul is adamantly against same-sex relationships. To summarize his view of Romans 1 he writes, “Paul sees both the action and the attitude, homosexual passion, as sin. It is not the case that he sees only the act as sin, nor that he sees it as a sin only when accompanied by excessive passion, as though moderate passion and its expression would be tolerable.”⁶

At this point, the reader may wonder how Loader can be supporting same-sex relationships when he is saying the Bible is against those relationships wholesale. The catch comes in Loader’s conclusion. Loader states that Paul, like his predecessors and contemporaries, had no idea of sexual orientation. Loader states that the weakness of the traditional view “is that this option does not take the reality of human experience seriously enough, especially the widely accepted reality that some people, a minority, including highly respected individuals, seem to be naturally attracted to those of their own sex.”⁷ In other words, since we who live in the 21st century now know about sexual orientation, we know better than Paul about how to think about these issues. In Loader’s words, “This is just one of many areas where it has been necessary to supplement first-century understandings of reality with twenty-first century understandings. To do so is not to show disrespect for biblical writers, but to stand alongside them in their commitment to truth and willingness to change as essential to their faith.”⁸

⁴ William Loader, “Homosexuality and the Bible,” in *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church*, ed. Preston Sprinkle, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 23.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 42.

⁷ Ibid., 43.

⁸ Ibid., 45.

Loader's understanding of the text of Scripture is largely fair and honest. However, he runs into a major problem in application. He speaks in his conclusion about the need to engage *both* Scripture *and* experience.⁹ Yet, it is experience which takes precedence in his ethical paradigm. This is not congruent with a belief in the sufficiency of Scripture.

In order to demonstrate that his pragmatic approach is acceptable, Loader lists a variety of examples where the church has operated this way.¹⁰ For two of these examples in particular, divorce and the role of women, he claims that Scripture says one thing, but the church does another. My brief response to that line of reasoning is simply that the church should not be departing from the biblical commands concerning divorce and the roles of women. Simply because some churches have deviated on the issues of divorce and the roles of women does not legitimize further deviation.

Megan DeFranza

In her chapter, DeFranza tells of her progression on the issue of same-sex relationships. Growing up she had assumed those relationships were wrong, but through her study of the passages that dealt with same-sex relationships she felt that the issue was not so clear-cut.

In contrast to Loader, DeFranza argues against the traditional interpretation of specific texts that deal with sexuality. In what I think is a major omission, DeFranza does not discuss Genesis 2, a passage that many believe is foundational for understanding the roles of male and female. However, in her discussion of Genesis 1 she claims the creation account is to be read as a broad categorical description "rather than the exclusive model for all humankind."¹¹ However, this loose reading of the creation account is problematic since the narrator specifically states that the creation narrative is the foundation for the marriage relationship (Gen 2:24). The creation narrative was clearly intended to be understood as the backdrop for understanding the marriage model.¹²

In talking briefly about the Levitical prohibitions, DeFranza acknowledges in her essay that Paul may have been reliant upon these texts for his views on homosexuality, but she casts doubt on whether we can know the true meaning of the Levitical prohibitions.¹³ Although a full response is not possible in this review, I would point readers to my dissertation which argues that

⁹ Ibid., 46.

¹⁰ Ibid., 47.

¹¹ Megan K. DeFranza, "Journeying from the Bible to Christian Ethics in Search of Common Ground," in *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church*, ed. Preston Sprinkle, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 71.

¹² On a similar point, see Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 13. "As far as the Old Testament is concerned, despite modern scholars' doubts about their historical reliability, there is no doubt that most of the Old Testament narratives claim to be historical and were read that way by their first readers. Because these accounts profess to be dealing with the historical origins and later experiences of the nation, they were doubtless perceived by their readers as having intrinsic authority."

¹³ DeFranza, "Journeying from the Bible to Christian Ethics in Search of Common Ground," 73–74.

the natural reading of the text makes most sense despite various recent attempts at a revisionist understanding.¹⁴

One of DeFranza's main arguments worth noting is that the Levitical prohibitions may be tied to the shame-honor culture of the ancients. Thus, for DeFranza, the Levitical prohibitions may exist due to the ancient notion of it being shameful to be penetrated. One of the problems with this theory is that Leviticus 20:13 clearly spells out the death penalty for both participants (not just the passive partner). The implication of both active and passive being punished is that avoiding shame is not the issue.

DeFranza's discussion on NT passages includes 1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:10, and of course Romans 1. She utilizes typical revisionist arguments that are found in other works.¹⁵ It is beyond my purposes to examine her arguments here. I would simply acknowledge that she provides a good introduction to the typical revisionist arguments one would read in commentaries on these passages.¹⁶

The essay by DeFranza does have one particularly startling part. She argues that the metaphor of marriage found in Scripture is based on the assumption that men are superior and women are inferior.¹⁷ She argues that this is why the marriage metaphor is used of Christ and the Church. Since Christ is superior to the Church, he is therefore owed obedience. Similarly, since the ancients thought the husband was superior and owed obedience, the ancient form of marriage made a perfect example of Christ and the Church. She goes on to argue that, "Contemporary Christian marriage is not 'biblical marriage' of the Old or New Testament. The biblical teaching of the image of God in all people has come to supersede ancient patterns of marriage."¹⁸ In other words, since we have evolved on our views of marriage, marriage is no longer a picture of Christ and the Church.

It becomes clear from her essay that she does not understand evangelical complementarianism,¹⁹ nor does she allow that biblical marriage can be rooted in divinely

¹⁴ Peter J. Goeman, "The Law and Homosexuality: Should Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 Influence the Church's Understanding of Homosexuality?" (Ph.D. Dissertation, The Master's Seminary, 2017), 80–142.

¹⁵ For example, see Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships* (New York: Convergent Books, 2014); James V. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

¹⁶ As a starting point for dealing with her arguments, see the response chapters by Wesley Hill and William Loader. Also, see the information available in the following sources: S. Donald Fortson III and Rollin G. Grams, *Unchanging Witness: The Consistent Christian Teaching on Homosexuality in Scripture and Tradition* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2016); James White and Jeff Niell, *The Same Sex Controversy: Defending and Clarifying the Bible's Message about Homosexuality* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2002); James B. DeYoung, "The Source and NT Meaning of ΑΡΣΕΝΟΚΟΙΤΑΙ with Implications for Christian Ethics and Ministry," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 3, no. 2 (Fall 1992): 191–215.

¹⁷ DeFranza, "Journeying from the Bible to Christian Ethics in Search of Common Ground," 88–89.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁹ Non-complementarians will often refer to complementarianism as patriarchy. However, proponents define complementarianism as the divinely ordained, complementing functions that males and females have in marriage and the church. Complementarians will often point to the Trinity as an example of persons who are equal in essence, and yet have functional differences. For a complete discussion on complementarianism and various biblical passages that deal with this issue, see John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991).

ordained roles of male and female. She seems to see any distinction in the roles of male and female as an outdated byproduct of ancient patriarchy.

Overall, DeFranza provides a good survey of some of the common arguments utilized to reinterpret the traditional renderings of passages used in the discussion of homosexuality. However, due to the nature of the essay, she is prohibited from going into detail as much as some single author volumes. If someone were looking for a good introduction to revisionist arguments, her essay would be a good starting point.

Wesley Hill

As noted earlier, Hill is an interesting case since he admittedly struggles with same-sex attraction. However, he believes it is God's call for those who, like himself, struggle with same-sex attraction to live a celibate life. Thus, his arguments, although matching with the traditional view, have an added amount of authenticity to them when coming from his pen.

Hill argues that, due to their canonical placement and prominence in the Gospels, the Genesis creation narratives should "retain pride of place in any effort to describe a canonical biblical theology of marriage."²⁰ He notes that the creation narratives do not allow a separation of the idea of procreation from marriage, thus implying that homosexual relationships cannot fulfill God's plan for marriage.²¹ He also argues that Levitical prohibitions against homosexuality are the clearest prohibitions against homosexuality in all of Scripture.²² Concerning the Levitical prohibitions, Hill agrees with the observations made by Loader earlier, that those texts are likely echoing the principles laid out in the Genesis creation narratives.²³

One dissatisfaction I had with Hill's discussion of the Levitical prohibitions is a failure to discuss the unique contribution of Leviticus 20:13.²⁴ Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are not identical, and the fact that Leviticus 20:13 mandates the death penalty for both the active and passive participant demonstrates that this is not a shame-honor issue. Although other cultures of the ancient world had toleration for certain homosexual acts, the Law of Moses made no such concession.²⁵ The Law was outlawing *any* homosexual act.

²⁰ Wesley Hill, "Christ, Scripture, and Spiritual Friendship," in *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church*, ed. Preston Sprinkle, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 128.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 130.

²³ *Ibid.*, 132–33.

²⁴ Granted, this may have been due to factors outside of his control. It could be an editorial decision or page limitations.

²⁵ For more on this issue, see Fortson III and Grams, *Unchanging Witness*, 223–34; Gordon J. Wenham, "The Old Testament Attitude to Homosexuality," *Expository Times* 102, no. 12 (September 1991): 359–63; Harry A. Hoffner, "Incest, Sodomy and Bestiality in the Ancient Near East," in *Orient and Occident: Essays Presented to Cyrus H. Gordon on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Harry A. Hoffner (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1973), 81–90. Wenham notes, for example, that in Hittite Law 189 if a man violates his son it is a capital crime, but it seems clear from context that the crime is due to incest and not due to the homosexual act per se (Wenham, "The Old Testament Attitude to Homosexuality," 361; cf. Hoffner, "Incest, Sodomy and Bestiality in the Ancient Near East," 85). There seems to be no evidence from the Hittite laws that homosexuality was illegal, though bestiality and incest were illegal. On the other hand, from the Egyptians there appears to be tomb depictions

Hill's discussion of NT texts is admirable, and provides a good introduction to the main arguments for the traditional interpretations of those passages. Hill's unique contribution comes at the end of his essay where he talks in detail about how our culture has sexualized same-sex friendships to the detriment of the church. As such, often it is difficult to have a close bond with someone of the same sex. On this point Hill raises an important point. The church needs to grow in its ability to foster deep relationships among those of the same sex. Some people don't even know what that looks like, sadly.

Stephen R. Holmes

Holmes writes to defend the traditional view of marriage from a theological point of view. In contrast to DeFranza (the other theological author), he does not refer to Scripture in making his main arguments. Rather, his chief mode of argumentation is to logically work through Augustine's three-fold view of marriage (children, faithfulness, and sacrament).²⁶

In doing so, I believe Holmes adopts a questionable approach to the issue. For example, he states the following:

Let me note that my argument so far has made no reference at all to the famous handful of biblical texts that speak directly about same-sex relations. If we understand sexual ethics the way the church, almost universally, has done for the past fifteen hundred years, then *these texts are just not very significant for the ethical debate....* If these texts had never been in Scripture, the church would still face the same struggle with same-sex marriage, because our understanding of marriage is built on procreation and otherness.²⁷

Perhaps he is arguing that the biblical definition of marriage and roles within marriage preempt the need to specifically address deviant sexual practices, such as homosexuality. However, in my mind this seems to deprioritize the value and sufficiency of Scripture. Certainly, there is a place for a positive case to be made about what marriage is—a complementary relationship with procreative abilities. However, discussions of deviations from that standard are certainly important, as Scripture itself makes abundantly clear.

in Egypt that may suggest consensual, adult, homosexual relationships (Greg Reeder, "Same-Sex Desire, Conjugal Constructs, and the Tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep," *World Archaeology* 32, no. 2 (October 2000): 193–208; Fortson III and Grams, *Unchanging Witness*, 233–34. Additionally, in Middle Assyrian laws A19–20, the law punished accusations of passive homosexual acts, but did not use language of being the active partner (cf. Wenham, "The Old Testament Attitude to Homosexuality," 361–62.).

Although there is not an abundance of evidence, the evidence we do have seems to indicate there was considerations of different kinds of homosexual acts. Thus, in light of these ANE references to Homosexuality, Fortson and Grams state the following: "If the ancient Near East differentiated between various types of homosexual acts, then unspecified laws against homosexuality, as we have in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, should be understood to forbid any sort of homosexual practice—otherwise authors would have been expected to specify which acts were intended," Fortson and Grams, *Unchanging Witness*, 223.

²⁶ Stephen R. Holmes, "Listening to the Past and Reflecting on the Present," in *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church*, ed. Preston Sprinkle, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 171.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 175 (emphasis mine).

After making the case that marriage is founded on procreation and complementarity, Holmes is sadly left with this statement: “What if an Augustinian theology of marriage is just wrong? If it is, all my arguments here are irrelevant.”²⁸ This demonstrates the fragility of Holmes’ argument. He has argued logically without support of exegetical texts. Although I agree with many of his conclusions, I also believe the methodology that he utilized is inferior to a careful textual approach with sensitivity to Scripture. As Christians, we need to realize that the method matters as much as the result.

I don’t want to be unfair to Holmes, because he clearly states at the beginning of his essay that he intentionally left out the exegetical work because he was assigned the task to write a theological essay. But, my response is that theology, when properly done, cannot be divorced from exegetical work. Although I would agree with many of Holmes’ conclusions, I could not use his essay as an example of how to argue against homosexuality because I cannot agree with his methodology.

Holmes concludes his essay in what the editor of the volume describes as, “One of the most unpredictable moments in this book.”²⁹ In his conclusion, Holmes argues that although same-sex relationships are wrong, there should be pastoral accommodation made for gay couples, similar to how churches cater to divorced congregants.³⁰

Although space prohibits a full discussion of this suggestion by Holmes, I would say in passing that the sin of homosexuality differs in large degree from the sin of divorce (which is not always a sin, cf. Matt 5:31–32) and from polygamy. Homosexuality is a continual sinful pattern of life which defies the Creator’s plan for marriage as a complementarian institution (man and woman). As such, refusal to repent and change from that lifestyle is simply the continuing of sin.

Key Takeaways and Important Considerations

Having summarized the main arguments and contributions of the four authors, I want to give six key takeaways that apply not only to this volume, but other future dialogues on homosexuality and the church.

First, these kinds of discussions can take place with civility. Each author in this volume was very congenial and civil in his or her essays and responses. That needs to mark these kinds of discussions. Although it is okay to be passionate about one’s beliefs, it is a mark of maturity to be able to interact with people we passionately disagree with and be able to do so with kindness (Col 3:12).

²⁸ Ibid., 193.

²⁹ Preston Sprinkle, “Conclusion: Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church,” in *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church*, ed. Preston Sprinkle, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 224.

³⁰ Holmes, “Listening to the Past and Reflecting on the Present,” 190. Holmes also draws a comparison with certain churches that allow for polygamous relationships in Africa.

Second, there needs to be a proper understanding of the relationship between experience and Scripture. Some of the authors in this volume have elevated experience to a place that is essentially greater than or equal to Scripture. However, Christians throughout history have acknowledged that experience must take a back seat to the authority of Scripture. Although we do not minimize personal experience, Scripture is the *norma normans non normata*, that is, “the norm of norms which cannot be normed.”

Third, many proponents of the acceptance of homosexuality emphasize modern notions of sexual orientation. One of the central arguments used is that Christians of the past (including Jesus and the Apostles) did not know about sexual orientation, so they spoke and wrote out of ignorance of such matters. Thus, now that we know some people are attracted to the same sex without a conscious choice, we must adjust our sexual ethics.

In brief response, it is actually debatable whether or not the ancients were aware of a concept of sexual orientation. The evidence seems to indicate that they were aware of exclusive attraction to the same sex.³¹ Also, this line of reasoning minimizes the divine nature of Scripture, which is inspired by an omniscient God. Jesus, being God in the flesh, would undoubtedly have been aware of the concept of sexual orientation since He is the Creator of all humanity and knows all things.

Fourth, OT Sources are often minimized in this debate. This shows up in DeFranza’s chapter, where she notes that the NT takes priority for most scholars.³² A pleasant surprise were the chapters by Loader and Hill, where they argued persuasively for the importance of the Levitical prohibitions against homosexuality and their influence on Paul specifically. It is important to acknowledge that teaching of Scripture is unified from Old to New Testament. Additionally, we do a great disservice when we neglect the influence of the OT on the NT writers, like Paul.

Fifth, homosexual advocates must attack complementarianism. This is, in my opinion, a most important observation. This point shows up in both Loader and DeFranza’s essay.³³ The argument attacks complementarianism as an example of the need to move beyond what the Bible says and embrace a new ethic. Roles and distinctions between men and women must be removed so that there is an absolute sameness involved. However, complementarianism is exactly one of the reasons homosexual relationships are abhorrent in Scripture. The marriage relationship is a unique covenantal bond between one man and one woman who both embrace different roles in

³¹ For example, see Preston M. Sprinkle, “Romans 1 and Homosexuality: A Critical Review of James Brownson’s Bible, Gender, Sexuality,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 24, no. 4 (2014): 515–28; Fortson III and Grams, *Unchanging Witness*, 298–301.

³² DeFranza, “Journeying from the Bible to Christian Ethics in Search of Common Ground,” 75. This is a common argument put forward by pro-homosexual advocates, for example, Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, 273. “It is simply inadequate, from a Christian perspective, to attempt to build an ethic based on the prohibitions of Leviticus alone. This is important material to reflect on, but *it cannot stand at the center of a responsible Christian moral position on committed gay or lesbian relationships*” (emphasis added).

³³ Loader, “Homosexuality and the Bible,” 47; DeFranza, “Journeying from the Bible to Christian Ethics in Search of Common Ground,” 88–89. This argument shows up elsewhere with frequency. For example, see Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, 57–84; Vines, *God and the Gay Christian*, 141–43.

life, functioning as one flesh to the honor and glory of God. In order to embrace homosexual relationships, complementarianism has to be one of the first things to go.³⁴

Lastly, we must be ready for appropriate pastoral application on these issues. Gone are the days where homosexuality was only thought of in passing, if at all. The issue of homosexuality has exploded into cultural relevancy. It is now an issue that every church will interact with on some level. The church needs to be ready with love and with answers. We cannot afford to be unprepared.

³⁴ David W. Jones, "Egalitarianism and Homosexuality: Connected or Autonomous Ideologies?" *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 8, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 5–19. Jones notes the similarity between Egalitarians and pro-homosexual proponents. Both seek to erase gender distinctions.