



INTO THE

Light

HEALING
SEXUALITY
IN TODAY'S
CHURCH

Mark Dingley

I first heard Mark Ongley's heart about the subject of this book more than twenty years ago. We were serving in the same district of the Western Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church; over lunch we were discussing some of the more challenging subjects we were discovering about ministry. He expressed a deep desire to find a way to balance caring compassion and the truth of God's redeeming and reconciling love with persons locked in various kinds of sin and brokenness—especially in the area of sexuality. He spoke with grace and resolve. He always speaks with grace and resolve.

Into the Light: Healing Sexuality in Today's Church is the product of nearly twenty years of Mark's journey to minister grace and truth in our culture's most difficult conversation. He is, at heart, a person deeply in love with Jesus and in love with the people Jesus loves. He writes as a pastor sharing out of his own experience and study. He speaks with the authority of one who has dared to name sin while announcing grace in the midst of deep and caring relationships. His words are direct and simple to understand so that the energy of the reader can be spent discerning how they might be applied in their lives and contexts.

In a culture and a church that seems to be lost when it comes to God's best for the human sexual experience, *Into the Light* is a ray of hope. God's Word is true. The Holy Spirit is working. God's grace is real. Jesus is who he said he is—and does what he says he will do. And in these pages, Mark gives practical and hopeful advice about how the average pastor and follower of Jesus can be a part of what God is doing in his church and our world.

Jeff Greenway

Lead Pastor, Reynoldsburg United Methodist Church
Former President, Asbury Theological Seminary

This book bears the stamp of Mark Ongley's blessed gift of balancing genuine compassion for the sexually broken, a biblical conviction about the susceptibility of our sexuality to profound sinfulness, and the courage to address this delicate topic with candor and clarity that can lead to genuine healing and hope.

Eric Leonard

Park United Methodist Church
North East, Pennsylvania

Standing firmly with one foot in the Wesleyan tradition and another in frontline ministry, Mark Ongley has a heart for the hurting and the lost. His new book successfully cuts through the confusion of contemporary culture in order to offer the church a distinctly "Jesus way" to think about the difficulties surrounding conversations of sexuality and sexual behaviors and, more important, to minister to those wrestling with those issues. This book is a gift to all who take seriously ministry to the hurting in our broken world.

Keith H. Mcilwain

Pastor of Slippery Rock United Methodist Church
Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania

In today's society where the abuse, misuse, and misunderstanding of human sexuality often leads to inner-brokenness, shame, and disillusionment, it is vital that we forge an ethos and personal belief about sexuality that is congruent with our faith and Christian core values. In this masterfully written work, Dr. Mark Ongley candidly discusses the pertinent and sometimes controversial issues of sexuality from a biblical perspective that is relevant and highly informative. Mark's treatment of perhaps the most precious gift given to humanity is balanced, thorough, truthful, loving, and healing. *Into The Light* is a must-read for Christians and non-Christians alike.

Benjamin Franklin Jr.

Senior Pastor, Inner Healing Ministries Church
Adjunct Professor, Ashland Theological Seminary Ashland
Faculty Member, The McCreary Institute for African American Religious
Studies Cleveland, Ohio

I have observed the excellent fruit of Mark Ongley's ministry in the lives of those he has counseled. This much-needed book offers hope for healing the sexual brokenness that stalks every segment of society and the church.

Steve Cordle

Author of *The Church in Many Houses*
Founding and Senior Pastor, Crossroads Church
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Dr. Mark Ongley skillfully and carefully uncovers the sexuality elephant in the middle of our churches. While many would focus myopically on a particular dysfunction or sin, Dr. Ongley demonstrates that the challenges facing the church are more complex. Using Scripture, personal anecdotes, and his years of experience as a healer and counselor, Dr. Ongley encourages readers to walk with God on the path to recovery and wholeness. Those fatigued by the often-vitriolic responses to the changing perceptions of sexuality in our society will find in Dr. Ongley a pastoral heart and voice.

John Byron

Professor of New Testament
Ashland Theological Seminary

Mark Ongley has wrestled with the issues of human sexuality in his ministry, in counseling, and now in written form. *Into the Light* is a must-read for us in the church, a work for us to discern and pray over. We live in time when the church is being bombarded by so many views. Mark helps us focus in on the view of God. I highly recommend opening our hearts to his work and letting God use this to keep us focused in our ministry and the work of the church in an ever-changing world.

Rod Smith

Chippewa United Methodist Church
Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania

When it comes to addressing issues of sexuality the postmodern church has been silent, and part of the end result of this silence has been that “Everyone does what is right in their own eyes.” A direct result of this silence is that it has provided a breeding ground for sexual sin and sexual abuse. *Into the Light: Healing Sexuality in Today’s Church* dares to bring the issues of sexuality and sexual abuse to the forefront of the discussions that often start around the issue of homosexuality. While homosexuality has often been the scapegoat of any discussion on sexuality, Mark uses it as an entry point to discuss the real issues of sexual abuse and the need for healing. Mark provides the reader with enough information on the causes of sexual immorality and explains how the structures of inner healing may be used to bring healing and restoration. I fully endorse this book as a resource to equip anyone who is interested in sitting down at the table and beginning to discuss solutions for reversing the silence and bringing light to the issue of sexual abuse.

Thomas W. Gilmore

Coordinator of Education

Ashland Theological Seminary, Cleveland Campus

Dr. Ongley brings his many years of experience ministering to wounded men and women to bear on an issue that needs to be brought into the light—sexual brokenness in its multiple forms. Acknowledging the emotive, even divisive nature of this topic, he lovingly invites the reader into a thoughtful conversation rather than a debate. He offers healing to the abused, insight to the befuddled, and wisdom to those who would love to tackle this difficult issue in the church together. This book feels like a means of grace and provides a vision of wholeness and holiness for all God’s children.

Paul W. Chilcote

Professor of Historical Theology and Wesleyan Studies

Ashland Theological Seminary

The topic of homosexuality and the church has been studied and debated so much recently, one might suspect there is little left to be said and that the discussion, where it stands today, has proverbially “generated more heat than light.” Pastor Mark Ongley’s book, *Into the Light*, significantly moves the topic forward by firmly situating the issue of homosexuality within the totality of the church’s teaching on all sexual matters. Deftly using the metaphor of the church addressing homosexuality as a dysfunctional family might address alcoholism in its midst with enabling and scapegoating, Pastor Ongley examines human sexuality by building a thorough, logical structure for explicating the Christian theology of sex that succeeds in being both compassionate and faithful to Holy Scripture. Readers of *Into the Light* will be enlightened by the biblical wisdom and inspired by the personal experiences recounted. The author has a pastor’s heart and a gift for using evocative images to relay complex ideas. Reading this book will be blessing for the laity and pastors.

Eric Ash

Mt. Olive Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod

Mark Ongley has a pastor's heart for healing the brokenhearted, especially those who are sexually broken. His deepest desire in this marvelous book is to equip churches to minister with integrity to people with sexual brokenness. He calls us to address these serious issues with authority and hope. Given the relative inattentiveness of the church to these issues today, this book is a must-read for every pastor serving people today.

Michael Mahoney

St. Paul Catholic Church and Gates Ministry
New Bern, North Carolina

The issues of sexual trauma and recovery have long been ignored by the church at large and remain steeped in darkness. As such, could there be a better title for Mark Ongley's thorough and balanced work than *Into the Light*?

I first met Mark Ongley more than ten years ago when he was a student in the doctoral class (Impact of Sexual Trauma and Recovery) that I was guest teaching at Ashland Seminary.

Even then Mark's insight, thoughtfulness, and inquisitiveness stood out. Since that time we have presented at conferences together, held weekend retreats, and always without exception I have seen God use him to bring reason and compassion into this arena so misunderstood by the church at large. I have used his materials often with my own clients in their recovery. Their comments tell me they felt "understood, validated, and not judged." Most of all his words offered hope for healing and change. If you are struggling in any of these areas, this book can set you on the right path and quite possibly get the church itself back on track to become the refuge of recovery it was designed to be. I do not feel I am being dramatic or overstating its impact when I say this book can change your life.

It is not just a book to read but is laid out like a workbook. It's designed to bring into awareness new levels of insight—for one to ponder, pray over—and then suggests concrete steps to take next.

I am both blessed and humbled to say that over the years Mark's and my relationship has developed in to a deep and lasting friendship. There are few I admire more in my field or to whom I turn to for advice, prayer, and encouragement along the way.

With some small measure of pride I can truly say: the student has surpassed the teacher.

Victoria Kepler Didato, MA, LPC, LSW, DAPA

Director Child Sexual Abuse Institute of Ohio

Author, *Treatment Issues for Sexual Abuse Survivors and Offenders*
and *One in Four*

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Mark Dugley



Seedbed

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To Lauri.
Thank you for chasing dreams with me.

CONTENTS

Foreword by Terry Wardle	xi
Acknowledgments	xv
Introduction	xvii

Cycle One: The Bare Essentials

1. Principle: The Elephant and the Scapegoat	5
2. Theology: Creation and God's Good Design	17
3. Application: The Violation of Abuse	33

Cycle Two: The Naked Reality

4. Principle: The Box, the Path, and the Circus	53
5. Theology: The Fall and Open-Eyed Blindness	71
6. Application: The Idolatry of Fantasy and Adultery	87

Cycle Three: The Beginnings of Modesty

7. Principle: All God's Children Got Monkeys	107
8. Theology: Restoration and Grace	123
9. Application: The Idolatry of Addiction and Aversion	143

Cycle Four: The Consummation of Hope

10. Principle: Jesus and Our Perversity	169
11. Theology: Making the Case for Boundaries	187
12. Application: Same-Sex Attraction and Other Variations	209

Epilogue: "When Will This Ever End?"	235
Resources	255
Notes	257
About the Author	266

FOREWORD

It was June 2015, the second day of a four-day seminar I was leading on emotional healing. There were, as often is the case, more than one hundred people in the room—pastors, physicians, counselors, and caregivers wanting to learn more about Christ-centered counseling and emotional healing. I was teaching on the nature and cause of dysfunctional behaviors in a person’s life. I had taught this four-day seminar on emotional healing at least fifty times before, and at least fifty times before I heard the same question that was asked that day.

“Terry, what is your position on homosexuality?” The question, sooner or later, always comes. The person asking seldom, if ever, is wanting to learn something about the topic of homosexuality. It is, instead, a litmus test, an effort to see if I stand where they do on this increasingly controversial topic. The majority of people asking that question are looking for the one-sentence sound bite that will determine whether they will be open to anything else I might have to say on emotional healing, or write me off as a heretic.

Each time the question is asked the tension and anxiety level in the room immediately increases. Some people are anticipating a potential disagreement and debate, possibly even an argument. That makes them nervous. Others are feeling uncomfortable that this may open the discussion up to the broader, and I might add, more important conversation about sexual abuse and dysfunction. Most people want to keep a lid on that emotional tsunami. Eye contact often ceases and people lower their heads, hoping it will all pass quickly and not get personal. Yet the topic of sexuality is

always personal, invariably emotionally charged, and desperately needs to be brought out of the closet and into open discussion, especially in the church.

I met Mark Ongley in the fall of 2001. He was taking a doctoral course I was teaching, one of several students wanting to learn more about ministry, leadership, and the transforming power of Christ. As I often do, I spent some time praying over the men and women in the class, asking the Lord to shape a word that was specifically for them.

I didn't know Mark well. Yet I sensed that the Lord was about to do a deep work in his life, and that he would soon be moving into some unknown, yet very important territory for ministry. And so I said out loud what I sensed the Lord was speaking in my heart. "Mark, I am not sure if this fits or not. You decide. But I sense the Lord telling me that you have been a preacher and a teacher. Now you are a healer."

Mark soon switched tracks on his doctoral program and began to study in the formational counseling program I developed. The curriculum focuses on the intersection of Christian counseling, spiritual direction, and emotional healing. For four years Mark made this the focal point of his education. Simultaneously, the Lord was opening Mark to a new and very much unanticipated specialty: ministering to men and women wounded and abused by sexual brokenness. Much like Jesus, people began to seek Mark out "by night," looking for someone who would tenderly and confidentially position them for the transforming touch of Jesus Christ.

Soon, because of his anointing, gifting, and increased understanding of sexual brokenness, Mark became a sought-after caregiver and teacher around the issues of sexual understanding and health. This book, *Into the Light: Healing Sexuality in Today's Church*, represents the depth and breadth of Mark's ministry around this topic.

This book is, in truth, a perfect reflection of the DNA of Mark Ongley. Mark treats the topic of sexuality with:

- **Gentleness.** There is no pushing or shoving found in these pages. Instead, the reader is invited into a loving conversation around a controversial subject.
- **Compassion.** This book is written from the perspective of a wounded healer. There is a deep empathy toward the reader's own story, a subjective engagement that welcomes the reader to walk with Jesus on a journey of understanding and transformation.
- **Clarity.** The topic of sexuality is huge, complex, and multifaceted, and most certainly not without emotional engagement. Yet with that being said, the reader will find a well-marked path with the wisdom of a gifted and trustworthy guide and simple-yet-profound illustrations that open the reader to new levels of understanding.
- **Research.** Mark has written a book that includes some of the best available research on the topic of sexuality. He has integrated insights from theologians, practitioners, behavioral scientists, and wounded healers. This book is far from myopic, instead pulling together divergent disciplines into a well-developed resource.
- **Biblical Insight.** *Into the Light* is rooted and grounded in the Word. It is biblical in the very best sense, opening the reader to a full-orbed understanding of what Scripture presents about this topic of sexuality. It is faithful to the teachings of the Bible, all the while inviting the reader into a grace-filled encounter with Christ.
- **Transformational Principles.** This book, so much like Mark Ongley, will sneak up on the reader in ways that bring deep and lasting change. It will position the reader for transformational engagements with the Lord—many subtle, others quite revolutionary.

This resource is a treasure, in the way it is written and in the content it contains. It holds value for the person on a journey to wholeness as well as for any caregiver wanting to help people encounter the healing power and freedom available through Jesus Christ. I could not recommend it more!

Terry Wardle
Professor of Practical Theology
Ashland Theological Seminary

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required . . .” (Luke 12:48). Each time I happen upon this verse, I sigh. So very much has been given to me! God has blessed me with a rich heritage, a wonderful upbringing by godly parents, and a thorough education. It is difficult to imagine myself writing a book without these distinct advantages afforded to me by the grace of God.

A trail of teachers shaped, instructed, and encouraged me, but Stephen Hemenway was the one who inspired me to be a writer. And without the teaching, training, and mentoring of Terry Wardle, I would have so very much less to write about. His mark upon my life is indelible.

Ashes to Life Ministries, the church I am so privileged to pastor, has been gracious and supportive when writing deadlines have swamped my schedule. And over the years numerous friends have prayed much for this book to be written: Wayne Ten Roberts, Vicky Didato, and Don Blystone especially stand out. Heather Escontrias and Eric Leonard read over parts of the book, offering advice and encouragement.

Getting the attention of a publisher was like trying to flag down an airliner. They never circled back for a second look. How very grateful I am God booked my flight with Seedbed Publishing. From takeoff to landing, Andrew Miller and his team have graciously guided me through the process, lavishing encouragement all along the way.

As for the many victims of sexual abuse that God has led my way, how grateful I am that they allowed me into the delicate

memories of their past. Their stories have changed me and have brought an edgy realism to this book. Their names, however, have been changed for privacy's sake.

My family is my treasure. Thank you, Lauri, for sharing your life and love. Thanks also to Sarah and Ruth for helping me to not take myself so seriously!

Yes, much will be required from one so richly blessed. Who is equal to paying such a debt? But thanks be to God. Where sin abounds, his grace much more abounds!

INTRODUCTION

Shame keeps people in the closet. And yet true healing for our deepest issues is found most readily when our sorrows and scars come out into the light.

When my daughters were ages eight and three, we were inside the house playing hide-and-seek. I counted out loud as they ran to hide. The younger one kept saying, “Sarah! Sarah!” And I could hear the exasperation of the older one: “Stop following me, Ruth! Find your own place to hide!” Despite the loud countdown, their chatter made their hiding place quite obvious.

Walking into the bedroom, I played dumb. “Where are those girls? I thought they came into this bedroom!”

The youngest cried out, “We’re in the closet!”

“Ruthie, be quiet!” soon followed.

Eventually they both came out to warm hugs from Dad.

I think that is a wonderful picture of each of us. We have things hidden in our closet that we hope to God no one ever finds. And yet there’s still a small part of us that calls out, “I’m here in the closet!” We want to be found, accepted, and embraced, no matter what the closet holds. Few of us will step out, however, unless we know the Father’s arms will fully welcome us.

And isn’t this also true of the church? Parading about in our Sunday best, few would guess what clutters the closets within us. Some of our stuff, no doubt, has spilled out in proper places. But the darkest corners within usually hide our sexual secrets and sorrows. Few would even dare crack open their door within the local church.

Statistics tell us church closets are little different than those found elsewhere. Diana Russell's landmark work on incest found the prevalence among religious families differed little from secular ones, with only Jewish families faring slightly better.¹ Thus when you look around the pews on a Sunday morning, you can safely assume that incest of one form or another has happened in about 10 percent of the homes. Likely 30 percent or more of the women seated on a Sunday have been sexually abused. And with the advent of Internet porn and social media, the number of those involved with porn, emotional adultery, and sexual addiction is continuing to grow.

But again, the *last* place many would open their closet door is among God's people. We can barely talk about the subject of sex unless, of course, we are arguing or fretting about homosexuality.

Hence, the purpose of this book is to serve as a key and a flashlight to begin calling forth the little children who long to be embraced. Whether the context is a Sunday school class, Bible study, women's group, or men's breakfast, the purpose is to begin a biblically grounded and theologically informed discussion of this beautiful gift of sexuality. Discussion questions close each chapter to help move the conversation in a profitable and wholesome direction.

The layout of the book may seem strange. Typically a book on a subject such as this begins with a theological section and ends with a practical application of the principles. But that simply won't work with closet cleaning. The issues of sexuality are so delicate and, for some, so painful that a group can't launch into a thirteen-week discussion of sexual brokenness without having some time to stick their heads out of the closet to catch some fresh air.

And so what you will find are three-week cycles: principles, theology, and applications. This cycle gradually moves you through the material. The principles ought to become part of the language and DNA of your church. Elephants and Scapegoats; the Box, Path,

and Circus; and talking of one's monkeys can become the framework for a safe discussion on all things sexual. Cycle by cycle, you will also establish a theology of sexuality that will bring balance to thorny issues such as homosexuality. Practical suggestions for how to help people process the delicate issues of abuse, addiction, aversion, adultery, and same-sex attraction will provide a way of welcoming people to crack open the doors of shame and to slowly step out into the light.

As for homosexuality, some of you may have already flipped to that chapter to see where I stand. After all, when we speak of coming out of the closet, we typically call to mind yet another singer, actor, or athlete who has identified themselves as gay or lesbian. While special attention is given to that subject at the end of the book, I have refused to make it a dominant theme because there are so many other sexual issues in the closet besides same-sex attraction. In fact, it is our fixation upon that one issue that has so fractured and fissured our culture and church. The truth is, however, we all have some brokenness to own.

So, yes, I hold to the traditional view of same-sex attraction and you will find a reasoned explanation as to why I hold that view. The chapters on theology build a case for God's design being heterosexual, monogamous, and covenantal. But homosexuality is not the only issue for which we need to develop a theology of sexuality. Christian couples are bringing pornography into their bedrooms to create more zing. Is that okay? Several of my counselees have defended their frequenting of nudist colonies. Does the Garden of Eden really give them a pass on this? The fictional series *Fifty Shades of Grey* has attempted to normalize the Bondage Dominance Submission Masochism (BDSM) movement to the degree that one counselee asked me, "Where does the Bible even address this?" And, believe it or not, polygamy is making a comeback. When the Supreme Court struck down the Defense of Marriage Act, which defined marriage as being between one man and one woman,

pro-polygamists began taking their issue to the courts. For all of these reasons and more, we need a warm and robust theology to guide us in this increasingly disoriented and sex-crazed culture.

So if you believe differently on this one issue of homosexuality, don't discard this book. There is *so much more* for us to consider about the pervasive brokenness within each congregation. We desperately need to broaden the conversation!

As you begin to work through this material, a word of caution: because closet matters are so delicate, they sometimes create a lot of pain when brought into the light. Yes, this book provides some details on how to minister to those with deep brokenness, but you should already have in mind people with expertise who can step in if necessary. Is there a faith-based counselor who can be called upon? What resources might be in your area? Included at the end of this book is a list of print resources that contains possible places to turn.

As mentioned earlier, I have counseled someone involved in BDSM. No, this isn't a person who parades in Goth makeup and leather pants. In fact, she might be sitting beside you this Sunday in church!

Even though being tied up and mildly tortured may seem twisted, she finds that her BDSM sessions meet some very deep longings in her heart. Stripping off her clothes and allowing them to tie her to the table has actually made her feel more comfortable with her body. And those who participate with her have become her closest friends. They value and affirm her more than anyone in her church ever has. As an example, for her birthday they threw an amazing party. The church folks? Not even a card.

She feels trapped, however. If she turns from this activity, as she knows God wants her to do, who will help her bear the loss? Who will provide the care, affirmation, and support that is lavished upon her by her BDSM friends? She has already reached out to several Christians, asking that they simply walk with her through this time and prayerfully encourage her as she attempts to get free. They have

pretty much shrugged their shoulders, saying, “I have no idea how to help you. Find a counselor!”

The suffering of sexual brokenness is best endured when people know our story and share the painful journey toward healing. But before we start the storytelling, we need to know it is safe to come out of the closet. My prayer is that this book will equip the church to be the loving arms of the Father, welcoming his children into his healing light.

INTO THE
Light

CYCLE ONE

The Bare Essentials

CHAPTER 1

PRINCIPLE:

The Elephant and the Scapegoat

Can it get any worse? Local congregations and entire denominations are fracturing over the issue of homosexuality. Anger abounds. A seismic shift in popular opinion has recently shaken the cultural landscape as the Supreme Court has ruled that states can no longer ban gay marriage. Stinging testimonies of gays and lesbians wounded by the church spur some to cry out, “Injustice!” And those who hold to the traditional view of homosexuality are increasingly seen as hand-wringing relics from a Puritanical past, clinging to a misinformed view of sexuality.

Yes, I believe it can get worse—but it can also eventually get better. That is my hope. The path forward begins by learning to aim at the true enemy. At present, it seems we are aiming at one another

and shooting our wounded. A look at World War II history will illustrate what I mean.

Not-So-Friendly Fire

D-Day, Battle of the Bulge, Pearl Harbor, Midway, Iwo Jima, Nagasaki, and Hiroshima—for many of us as Americans, there are images and emotions attached to each of these World War II references. And yet that worldwide war had another front just as desperate and difficult. Chiang Kai-shek, commander of the Nationalist Army of China, was continually faced with a dilemma. Should he focus his resources on defeating the cancerous Communist forces led by Mao Zedong? Or should he actually join the efforts of Mao's Red Army in defeating the marauding masses of the Japanese invaders? Seeing Communism as the greater long-term threat, he spent most of his efforts fighting his fellow Chinese. In the end, this led to disaster and exile.

Mao's efforts, however, won over the hearts of the people as he tore into the Japanese while at the same time exchanging blows with Chiang's forces. As the people sided with Mao, Communism took over the land. The Nationalist government had to leave the mainland and fortify the island of Taiwan, where to this day it has remained isolated and ineffective. And while Americans are more at one ideologically with Chiang and the Nationalists, we have come to realize Chiang's choice destined him to defeat, exile, and great ruin. Focusing efforts on the wrong foe was calamitous. The lesson for us? Choosing war with the wrong party can lead to disaster and division.

Denominational church families have been doing much the same as we have debated the issue of homosexuality for forty years. We have had a war waging among us that is repulsive to the younger generation and is sapping the life out of the church in general. In my own corner of the kingdom, this caustic debate dominates center

stage within the United Methodist Church. Despite the many admirable accomplishments and pronouncements at our legislative assemblies, the eye-catching headlines flashed by the media are always related to the war of words over homosexuality. Could it be, like Chiang Kai-shek, we have become locked in battle with the wrong ideological foe? And are we also heading for disaster and division?

David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons served the kingdom well by publishing *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity . . . and Why It Matters*. Since the 1990s, church leaders have bemoaned the fact that young adults are *staying away* from church in droves. Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group, set about the task of discovering why. What are the perceptions this generation has of the church—the very church in which many of them have been raised? While the entire study is instructive, one finding should rock our world: the number-one perception of this unchurched generation is that the church is “anti-homosexual.”¹

For those of us who love the church and know all of the work we have done to help the poor and alleviate suffering, that one finding is shocking. Anti-homosexual? That’s the foremost impression the church has made? Of course there are many reasons for this perception, which go far beyond the bounds of any one denomination. Doubtless at the top of the list are the cantankerous and disgusting protests staged by Westboro Baptist Church that cry out that God hates homosexuals. We could also include the pronouncements by high-profile figures that HIV is a punishment from God, or that Hurricane Katrina was an act of God’s wrath because of homosexuality. But certainly the broader contribution to this distorted image are the denominational clashes of ideological titans who wrangle over position statements, posture with disruptive protests, and celebrate over vote tallies.

We who are Evangelicals are quick to quote Jude 3, declaring that we are contending “for the faith that was once for all entrusted

to the saints.” Our Social Justice brothers and sisters are equally convinced they are proclaiming “release to the captives . . . to let the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18). Back and forth we wrangle and wrestle while a common foe devastates the cultural landscape.

Finding our way out of the mess we’re in will become clearer when we retrace our steps on the path we’ve tread, discovering who this common foe actually is. Allow me to illustrate with a parable.

Tough Times for the Tifflebaums

Once upon a time there lived a family in great distress called the Tifflebaums. Not the distress that follows a crisis, but the type that accompanies the ongoing agitation of having an alcoholic parent. Lex Tifflebaum had made countless resolutions and sundry half-hearted attempts, but continued to fall into mindless stupors that complicated life for all in the Tifflebaum house.

For the onlooker, it might appear that no one paid for Lex’s lapses quite like his wife, Tiffany. When Lex was smashed he often became abusive, but Tiffany made sure his outrage and antics were confined to the bedroom—not that it kept it from the kids, really. All three knew well the weekly scenario. It had played out more times than they could even begin to count. Returning home well after supper, Dad’s shouting would begin at the door. Mom would walk him to the bedroom, shushing him all the way. The door would close softly, but the shouting would soon begin full force. The kids had learned to comfort each other, leaning mostly on Biff, the oldest brother. He had taken upon himself the role of parent—finding the snacks, making sure homework got done, turning up the TV to drown out the racket, and making sure everyone stayed in line until the bickering subsided and Mom was able to return. Rarely did they talk about Dad or his issue with the bottle. There was an unofficial “no-talk rule.” Actually there was a “no-feel rule” as well; they could not express themselves in any manner. On the

rare occasion when the kids spoke up, Tiffany was quick to relate the latest promise from their dad that this would not happen again.

Money was tight for the Tifflebaums. Frequently Lex would miss work or arrive late, but Tiffany did her best to cover for him, calling in to report he was “sick” or out for a doctor visit. Nonetheless, she could not keep him from losing job after job, with the household income usually sliding downhill. As the kids grew older, Tiffany took on work outside the home, handing chores over to the eldest. Biff rose to the occasion, taking charge of his younger siblings and even consoling his mom from time to time. Though barely twelve, he was the little man of the house.

As time went on, and Lex’s lapses continued to take them lower, the younger kids also found their way of dealing with life in the Tifflebaum house. The youngest was Marsha, who felt lost in the shuffle. She began to retreat into video games, TV dramas, and Internet chats. Friends were few and she rarely saw them face-to-face. And certainly she would never have anyone over to the house.

Teddy, the middle child, feeling quite left out, sought for attention by a different route. Though in the end it would bring much pain, he knew his mom would rescue him. Sometimes his behavior at school forced her to leave work early to meet him in the principal’s office. Whether it was fights with the kids or spats with the teachers, a regular cycle began to unfold month by month. Teddy’s grades began to tank as year by year he barely squeaked by. In seventh grade, to Tiffany’s horror, a plastic baggie of marijuana was found in his backpack. While she tried to put the best face on the discovery by making him promise to never use any drugs ever again, the rest of the family would not let it slide.

Marsha emerged from her shell long enough to scorch him with scolding. *Didn’t he realize Mom had enough trouble without him adding to her stress?* Dad piped in with a stiff warning of painful punishment should it ever happen again. But no one was more

belligerent than Biff; he was irate. Had Teddy only heeded his warnings and followed his example, this would never have happened. Punishment was most certainly called for, and if Mom and Dad did not oblige, he would be happy to step in. *If the baggie had been discovered at the school, what shame he would have brought on the family! They had plenty of problems without him stirring up such trouble.*

While in other families such a scene may have been sufficient to correct the straying one, this was not the case with Teddy Tifflebaum. His grades sank lower and he began running with the wrong crowd. When Teddy's best buddy was arrested for vandalism, brother Biff sounded the alarm. Something needed to be done! It was just a matter of time before Teddy would find himself with a record.

While Tiffany assured the family that Teddy had promised to try harder, Dad sided with Biff. Boot camp for bad boys might be an option, or maybe a counselor could straighten him out. The latter was more convenient, and so became the agreed-upon course of action.

The counselor was quick to see what is likely already plain to you, the reader. The real problem in the family was Lex, not Teddy. The unreformed alcoholic dad, whose behavior had been enabled by the rescuing mom, had set in motion dynamics typical for this kind of dysfunctional family. With no one providing parental care, Biff was forced to grow up early and to take on that role. And as is typical for the youngest child, Marsha was lost in the morass and found dysfunctional ways of escaping the pain. Then arose the "scapegoat," as is usually the case. Finding little nurturing coming his way, Teddy decided painful attention was better than none at all, and so began to get in trouble.

At this point, Biff assumed the role of hero, seeing the misbehavior in black-and-white terms. He was quick to channel the family anger toward the wayward sibling, calling for swift action to save the day. And yet all this time the "elephant in the room," that is, the alcoholic dad, was spared the consequences of his errant behavior.

Unpacking the Parable

Organizations, corporations, and yes, even denominations, can adopt similar patterns of relating. Robert Kuyper once identified this dynamic within his own denomination, stating that the “scapegoat” for decades has been homosexuality. Like Biff, the eldest child, Evangelicals have taken up the role of hero and enforcer. Seeing the issue in black-and-white terms, they have largely blamed the Scapegoat for the problems in the denominational family and culture at large. While certainly meaning well, they have unwittingly wounded scores of believers who either struggle with same-sex attraction or love someone who does. Those from the Social Justice arm of the church have worn the mantle of the rescuing mother. Having long believed that homosexuals have been treated unjustly, they have rushed to their defense with fervor. Casting the issue as a civil rights matter, they have advocated vigorously for the ordination and marriage of homosexuals within the church.²

But what is the “elephant in the room”? What is the alcoholic dad in this scenario? It is the runaway Sexual Revolution that the church in general has never known how to handle. While self-avowed and practicing homosexuals have received the brunt of prophetic pronouncements and pulpit-pounding, little has been done to address the other more prominent problems that have resulted from the Sexual Revolution: sexual abuse, sexual addiction, adultery, and sexual aversion. In fact, the church generally has found it very difficult to talk about sexuality in any terms at all other than, “Just say ‘No!’” And in this way we have been very *unbiblical*. While we have splashed barrels of ink on pages about the six passages of Scripture addressing the practice of homosexuality, precious little has been done to discuss the amazing wealth and breadth of wisdom the Bible shares concerning God’s creation of us as sexual beings.

Our inability to discuss sexuality is a *cultural* inhibition, not a biblical one. The Scriptures are very forthright in describing God's design for our sexuality and in addressing the brokenness that results when his design is ignored. The deviant dalliances of David, Solomon, Samson, and others are not glossed over. And even the issue of withholding sexual intimacy from a spouse is candidly addressed by Paul.

In his excellent book *The Meaning of Sex*, ethicist Dennis Hollinger traces the history of the church's view of sexuality down through the centuries. The roots of our inhibitions stretch back to the influence Greek philosophy exerted upon the ancient worldview. For Plato, the material world was essentially evil and obscured the "ideal world" beyond this life. This general theme led to asceticism, which seeped into Christian spiritual practice and eventually translated into a view of sexual pleasure as something detrimental to one's spiritual life. Intercourse was encouraged only for the purpose of procreation and was otherwise to be avoided. Ironically, the only Christian tradition that was able to strip itself free of asceticism was that of the Puritans. Yes, the Puritans! Other than that brief parenthesis in history, God's people have looked dimly upon sexual pleasure and have found addressing issues of sexuality complicated and somewhat embarrassing.³

And so in Western culture, Christians have been tight-lipped on all things sexual for quite some time. And as secular culture has become incredibly flippant and indiscreet in speaking of sexuality, the church, by and large, still cannot bring the discussion to the table without being cutesy or condemnatory. To their credit, seminaries are now calling for classes on sexuality to be taught. Not long ago I had the privilege of teaching one such class as an adjunct professor at Ashland Theological Seminary. But we Protestants are about forty years late in responding to this revolution that has ripped our culture apart.

Of course, there are important questions to address regarding the Scapegoat of homosexuality. Realistically, the church at large is years away from reaching a consensus on this controversial subject. But can we not, as the body of Christ, learn to hold this one issue in tension as we join our efforts to rein in the rampaging Elephant and minister to those wounded and limping in its wake? Yes, that is asking a lot from both sides. And perhaps it is too late to hope that two sides, so bitterly divided and heavily invested, could agree to disagree and allow the other to practice their convictions. The final chapter of this book will consider if this is even possible without dividing congregations and denominational assets.

However, as the parable portrays, perspective is the missing element. We are fixated on the wrong issue. What about human trafficking, healing of sexual abuse, and ministry to the sexually addicted and sexually averse? These neglected matters affect perhaps 70 percent of our culture. Believers from the Evangelical and Social Justice camps and all other kingdom folks are needed to address these issues. And as the body comes together to bring healing, grace, justice, and freedom, we will live out before our culture the love of the Savior.

This is not to ignore or dismiss the pain of the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) community and their sympathizers. For many of them, their deepest wounds have been caused by church people. In fact, Andrew Marin has found that gays and lesbians are more likely to have been wounded by the church than to have been sexually abused.⁴ Generally speaking, Evangelicals have treated this one behavior as more abhorrent than any other sin. And we have been slow to speak up when injustices have occurred within the church and culture for fear that our intervention might be interpreted as approval of homosexual behavior. Certainly these wrongs need to be righted and everyone should be able to unite to address these injustices.

But there are other issues! Masses of people carry pain they feel no freedom to voice within the local church. More than 30 percent of women and nearly 20 percent of men live lives marred and crippled by sexual abuse. Who will speak for them? And as stated earlier, Internet access to porn and social media sites has accelerated sexual addiction, adultery, and use of porn. Will the church do more than shame people into accountability groups? And the greatest silence is among those in marriages jolted by sexual aversion. No one in the church seems willing to even bring up this delicate issue.

Every tradition within the universal church is needed to rope in the Elephant. The prophetic courage of the social activists can call our nation to account. Evangelicals can be tapped for their zeal for the lost and hurting. Those from the Holiness and Incarnational traditions can contribute with their wisdom regarding proper boundaries in holy living. And the charismatics have much to teach us about the workings of the Spirit to bring healing to the broken. We could cooperate on these issues that are prevalent and, in some cases, largely unaddressed. We could if we weren't so distracted.

Everyone is apparently too busy to cooperate on the larger issues of sexuality. Churches have committee meetings, Bible studies, prayer breakfasts, potlucks, ladies' meetings, bake sales, rummage sales . . . pretty important stuff. And it seems local church leaders like to paddle their own canoes rather than get on board with others to attack Elephants. However, churches obviously find plenty of time, money, and newsprint to spar over homosexual concerns. When it comes to *that* issue, the zeal seems almost inexhaustible.

As a young man, I spent a year in Taiwan as a short-term missionary. It was a remarkable year of immersion in Chinese culture, learning new ways of thinking from an incredibly generous people. Even at that time, more than forty years after Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists escaped the mainland to set up their government in exile, there were still a few isolated voices calling

for the retaking of the homeland. Most knew, however, that such a plan was foolhardy and wildly unrealistic. The Nationalists had long ago made the mistake of warring against ideological countrymen instead of uniting to oppose the greater menace of Japanese Imperialism. It was far too late to change course.

More than forty years have passed since the Western church began sparring over homosexuality, ignoring the Elephant issues assaulting our culture. Is it too late to untie the boxing gloves and join forces against the dominant sexual issues that confront us?

It is never too late to begin doing the right thing. An Elephant needs to be corralled. Some of us need to stop our crusades either for or against the Scapegoat. The time has come for the church to be equipped to address issues of sexuality intelligently and to minister to the sexually broken effectively. That is certainly the aim of this book. As you read its content and discuss it with others, you will gain some guiding principles to keep you out of the ditches of the ideological debate. A sound theology of sexuality will be presented to provide some guardrails for our discussion. And you will hopefully get a glimpse of how the Elephant has jostled and jolted its victims, including those attracted to the same sex.

And so the first principle to fully embed within our thinking is that of the Elephant and the Scapegoat. We can no longer afford to ignore the Elephant in the room and continue to fuss and fume about the Scapegoat issue of homosexuality. Are you ready to move forward? Then the next step is to understand God's good design of our sexuality as described in the story of creation.

But first, consider if God would have you pray the following prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, great head of the church, what a mess we have made! Forgive us for making a Scapegoat of one issue while ignoring our own sexual issues. Help us as a local church, and help me as a member of your body, to learn to