

IN ALL THINGS CHARITY/A SERIES

HOMOSEXUALITY
GUIDANCE FOR COMMUNITY CONVERSATION
AND THE CHURCH

HOWARD A. SNYDER

About the “In All Things Charity” Series

John Wesley is often credited with the saying, “In essentials unity. In non-essentials liberty. In all things charity.”

As the world becomes more religiously pluralistic and societies and cultures grow more contentious and divided it will behoove the church to gain clarity in its discernment of the distinction between essentials and non-essentials. We must not shrink back from boldly articulating the core truths of the Christian faith. At the same time, we must grow in the quality of our character as our very conversations witness to the gospel in the presence of a watching world. Said simply, our relationships within the church are the barometer of our witness to the world.

Jesus minced no words when he told his disciples that the authenticity of their association with him would be known only by the quality of their love for one another. Later in prayer he would connect the loving unity of the church to the believability of the gospel. See John 17.

The Apostle Paul, in the celebrated thirteenth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthian Church, in essence tells us the absence of charity, or love, signals failure.

As a publisher, Seedbed does not want to steer clear of the difficult subjects of our time. Nor do we want to agitate the church with unnecessary controversy. For this reason, Seedbed created the “In All Things Charity” series. The series will contain books across a range of challenging issues. For the series we are selecting authors whom we believe embody the variety of character which enables them to demonstrate confidence in their point of view with truthful love in their approach.

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HOWARD A. SNYDER

Homosexuality and the Church: Guidance for Community Conversation

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SOWING FOR A GREAT AWAKENING

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Foreword

One of the foundational problems with the contemporary discussion on same-sex marriage is that the church has lost the debate before the first exchange of ideas takes place. This is because the underlying presuppositions of the dialogue are never properly disclosed. For example, the actual biblical teaching regarding marriage is utterly incomprehensible to the wider culture. If you read Christian interactions about same-sex marriage, it is clear that the church has largely abandoned the notion that there is a divine design to marriage. In short, we have a priori accepted the culture's view of marriage: namely, that it is a legal arrangement that allows two people to fulfill each other's emotional and sexual needs and desires. Personal choice and autonomous notions of personal fulfillment are just a few of the values that fit neatly within the larger utilitarian framework of the

modern understanding of marriage. Today, marriage has become commodified along with the rest of the culture, as even social relationships are often reduced to measurable economic and emotional exchange units.

In contrast, the Scriptures posit a covenantal view of marriage that is unitive, becoming cocreators with God, modeling the redemptive, sacrificial self-donation of God Himself, and ultimately designed to reflect the Trinity itself. Much of this is lost in the modern debate.

In this reflection, Dr. Howard Snyder has brought considerable clarity to the ongoing conversation about the church's response to same-sex marriage. This reflection is highly pastoral, seeking to listen, as well as respond, in a way that is faithful to the teaching of Scripture and pastorally sensitive to those who may disagree. This piece originated as a blog and continues in that mode as it seeks to interact with various responders in the true spirit of pastoral care and honest dialogue. But Snyder also seeks to address the whole question within the larger biblical, historical, and theological framework, which is essential if we are to have this discussion, inside the church, on proper grounds. I commend this reflection. It will help us all to be more faithful witnesses to God's design for marriage.

Timothy C. Tennent, PhD
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Introduction

Let's start with Jesus. That's the best place to start in a book about homosexuality and the church.

What Jesus Did

One day a Pharisee invited Jesus to dinner. As Jesus and other guests were reclining and dining, “a woman of the city” quietly and boldly walked into the all-male gathering and stood behind Jesus, at his feet. The Pharisees recognized the woman; she was a “sinner.” She held a white translucent perfume vase, and she was weeping.

The woman knelt behind Jesus. Tears dropped on his feet as she kissed them, then dried them with her long hair. She spread perfumed ointment on both feet and sat there, crying.

Jesus' host was aghast. "Jesus should know better," he thought. "He's letting a sinner touch him!"

Jesus looked at his host and distracted him with a story about a man who was forgiven of a big debt he couldn't pay. The forgiven debtor was immensely relieved and grateful.

Jesus made his point. "Look at this woman," he said. "She treated me better than you have. Her many sins are forgiven, for she has come to me in great love."

Then Jesus told the woman, "Your faith has saved you; your sins are forgiven. Go in peace" (Luke 7:36–50).

On another day Jesus arrived early at the Jerusalem temple to teach. Already a crowd was waiting. Jesus sat down and began.

But he was interrupted. Some Jewish officials walked up with a woman in tow. "Look at this!" they said. "This woman was caught in the very act of adultery! Should we stone her, as the law says?" They were, of course, trying to trap Jesus; the woman was their pawn.

Jesus didn't look at them or the woman. Instead, he bent over and with his finger wrote words in the dust. The accusers insisted that Jesus make a judgment.

Jesus straightened up and looked at the men. "OK," he said. "Let the sinless ones among you start the stoning."

Sudden silence. Then the men began slinking away. The woman stood alone before Jesus. "Well," he said,

“where are your accusers? Is no one left to throw a stone?”

“No one, Sir,” she said.

“Well, I won’t either. Go home, but don’t sin anymore” (John 8:1–11).

A final incident: Jesus was resting at the well just outside the Samaritan town of Sychar while his disciples went off to buy some lunch. A woman walked up to the well and began to draw some water, carefully avoiding Jesus.

Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink!”

The woman looked at him. “You’re a Jewish man; I’m a Samaritan woman! How can you ask me for a drink?”

Jesus said, “If you knew who I am, you would ask me for a drink! I would give you fresh, flowing water.”

“What?” she said. “You don’t even have a pail, and the well is deep! Where can you get flowing water? You think you’re greater than our ancestor Jacob who dug this well?”

Jesus said he had water that would be “a spring gushing up to eternal life.”

“Give me some!”

Jesus replied, “First go get your husband.” When the woman said she didn’t have one, Jesus said, “Right. Actually you’ve had five, and you’re not married to the man you’re living with right now.”

Ouch! She changed the subject. “So, you’re a prophet. We worship right here, but you Jews say we have to go to Jerusalem.”

Jesus said, “It’s not a question of here or there. God wants people to worship him from the heart—wherever. Right now.”

The woman paused. “Well,” she said, “I know Messiah is coming. . . .”

Jesus said, “I’m the one.”

Just then Jesus’ disciples returned and were dumbfounded to find Jesus carrying on with a Samaritan woman. But she hurried back to the city, forgetting her water jar. “Come and see the amazing man I just met!” she told everyone she saw. “Is this the Messiah?”

A crowd of people streamed out to the well. Many heard for themselves, and believed: “This is truly the Savior of the world!” (John 4:7–42).

The Point

None of these stories mention homosexuality. Adultery and promiscuity, yes, but not homosexuality.

Yet these stories offer a key insight and larger principle. Transposed to today, they could just as well be about encounters with homosexual persons. The stories teach us three things.

First: Unchained love for the other, the outcast, the discriminated-against, the different. Love demonstrated in actions, not just attitudes. Readiness to talk; to converse; to relate one-to-one. Jesus speaks lovingly to all three women. Everyone was surprised, including them!

Second: In these encounters, Jesus takes the side of “the other” rather than the condemners and excluders.

Third: In none of these encounters does Jesus endorse ungodly behavior. To the woman caught in adultery: “Go, and sin no more.” To the “woman of the city”: “Your sins are forgiven.” To the Samaritan woman Jesus clearly implies: Worship God in spirit and truth, and put your private life in order.

What unites these three points is character—the holy Trinitarian loving character of God, made earthy and visible in Jesus.

Here is the principle: *Unrestricted love without compromise on moral or doctrinal truth as revealed in Scripture.*

Fade to Today

If we begin with Jesus, we should begin here whenever we engage questions of sexual ethics, including same-sex attraction and behavior.

Public opinion about homosexuality has shifted dramatically over the past decade, especially in the

United States. Should the Church of Jesus Christ fall in line?

Christian views and practices actually vary a lot from church to church and from place to place. Yet historically the Christian Church has largely agreed that homosexual practice is inconsistent with faithful Christian practice. This has been the Christian consensus since New Testament days.

What about today?

Jeff Chu raises the issue sharply in his book, *Does Jesus Really Love Me? A Gay Christian's Pilgrimage in Search of God in America*. Through interviews and stories, Chu displays the range of viewpoints among Christians in the United States. Much of it is painful reading. Chu shows how unkind and un-understanding sincere Christians can be.¹

Yet what strikes me about Chu's book is an unstated assumption. Chu seems truly offended by the very idea that there could be a Christian counterculture that disagrees with the growing national consensus and lovingly opposes homosexual practice out of loyalty to Jesus Christ.

So, what is at stake here? Does homosexuality involve core issues of Christian belief? Or is homosexuality essentially a question of human rights and individual freedom—the current hotspot in the long battle that

progressively has opened freedom to slaves and sought equality for women and other victims of discrimination?

Popular opinion has already answered the question: Yes, it's the current civil rights issue. If so, given U.S. commitment to equal rights, the issue is settled.

But biblical Christians have a broader lens. We affirm the equality of all humans created in God's image. We ought to work to end oppression and injustice; we ought to help everyone enjoy the full freedom of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And we must, above all else, be loyal to Jesus and his teachings.

What then about homosexuality, and homosexual practice?

The Shape of the Argument

I addressed this question in a blog on Asbury Seminary's online *Seedbed* site in September 2012. The piece sparked lots of comments. As a result, I have now expanded the original short article into this longer essay, with additional points and clarifications in light of feedback received.

I personally struggle with the many issues surrounding homosexuality. How are we to understand these issues as faithful Jesus followers? How do we express gospel truth and love—both, not one or the other—in relating to people for whom this is a matter of crucial, often wrenching, personal concern?

I have come to believe that homosexuality is indeed a key issue for Christian faith and witness. It is more than a question of rights and freedom. It involves fundamental issues of Christian doctrine, as I will explain. Note that by *homosexuality* I mean not only same-sex attraction or relationships, but also a range of related issues.

I discuss this matter not to create controversy nor to oppose those with other views. I write mainly to help those who, like myself, want to think the matter through faithfully, scripturally, and lovingly. In fact, I felt I needed to ponder this for myself and come to my own settled view—which includes leaving space for aspects of this matter which remain unresolved (for example, the role of genetic factors).

Throughout the discussion, I am assuming the important distinction between *preference* and *practice*. Our concern here (as John Stott phrased it) “is homosexual practice (for which a person is responsible) and not homosexual orientation or preference (for which he or she is not responsible).”²

I divide the discussion into five short sections. First, I give four key reasons why homosexual practice is incompatible with faithful Christian discipleship. Second, I discuss the question of homosexual practice in relation to essential Christian doctrine. Third, I offer a biblical case study that clarifies the fundamental issues of biblical interpretation (hermeneutics) involved. Fourth, I ask

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whether people in committed same-sex relationships can at the same time be faithful Christian disciples. Finally, I respond to a range of questions raised by my original blog and subsequently, in question-and-answer form.

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[Section One]

Four Key Biblical and Theological Considerations

Here are four reasons that the acceptance or nonacceptance of homosexual practice is a key issue for Christian faith.

1. The Witness of Scripture

What does the Bible teach? For Christians, this and Jesus' own example is the starting point.

In his book *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*, biblical scholar William J. Webb makes a crucial point. Webb carefully examines the “direction of movement” within the

Bible on a range of issues “as a criterion for interpreting biblical truth today.”¹ His particular test cases, as his title indicates, are slavery, women, and homosexuality.

Regarding slaves and women, Webb shows that the trajectory of biblical revelation is consistently toward greater freedom: less restriction and discrimination. As he puts it, biblical texts dealing with women and slaves gradually become “generally ‘less restrictive’ or [show a] ‘softening’ relative to the broader culture.” But in contrast “the homosexuality texts are ‘more restrictive’ or [demonstrate] ‘hardening’ relative to the surrounding environment.” Other sound principles of interpretation confirm this, he notes.²

In other words: the Bible reveals a “trajectory” toward greater freedom (less restriction) for women and slaves—both within Scripture and in relation to the surrounding culture. In contrast, no such trajectory is found in the case of homosexual practice. In all the Bible, both Old Testament and New, homosexual practice is forbidden and viewed as sin.

Webb states this more explicitly in the book’s conclusion: “*the homosexual texts are in a different category than the women and slavery texts.* The former are almost entirely transcultural in nature, while the latter are heavily bound by culture.” In other words, homosexuality involves a more basic issue than mere cultural considerations.

This insight provides a decisive answer “to homosexual advocates who say the cultural dimensions of the women and slavery texts should lead to the acceptance of homosexuality.” Analysis of the entire Bible reveals a “fundamental difference between the women’s issue and the homosexuality issue.”³

So homosexuality is fundamentally different from the issues of slavery and women’s roles. Homosexuality goes to the very heart of human identity. Thus from the Christian perspective, it is not, at heart, a civil rights issue.⁴

Within civil society, however, things are different. The rights of homosexuals *is* a legitimate issue. But the Bible (and the church) holds to a different and higher standard of moral behavior, by definition, than does a modern civil society, which is by law neutral and “secular” with regard to religion.

The point: same-sex unions in the church and in civil society are two quite different matters. There is no reason Christians should think that the standards and morality of civil society should be those of the Christian community! In fact, the Bible consistently teaches just the opposite. For we are followers of Jesus Christ, not of the ways of the present age or “the basic principles of the world” (Gal. 4:3 NIV).⁵

The early Christians understood this very well. They said Jesus, not Caesar, was king. A different drummer. A different Shepherd. A different King and community.

Christians know from Scripture that homosexual relations (whether committed or promiscuous) are a result of the Fall, of sin. This is not true of licit heterosexual relations, which are God-given. In this limited sense, homosexual sin and heterosexual sin are different. Homosexual practice derives from sin in ways that gender differentiation itself obviously does not (Gen. 1:26–28). Male and female equally and complementarily bear the image of God. Thus women deserve full and total equality in the church and in society because of creation. What about practicing homosexuals within the church?

Civil society may, of course, determine, as a matter of human rights, that both homosexuals and heterosexuals deserve equal rights in every respect, as is happening now in the United States. But the Church of Jesus Christ necessarily adheres to a higher moral standard because of its covenant relationship to God through Jesus Christ. If the church betrays that higher standard in one area (for example, social justice or the treatment of women), that still does not justify nullifying biblical morality in the area of sexuality.

Here again we see that women's rights and the acceptance of homosexual practice are quite different issues. Full equality of women affirms creation and

biblical authority. In parallel fashion, the ban on homosexual practice as acceptable Christian behavior affirms creation (and recognition of the Fall) and thus affirms biblical authority.

We hasten to add, however, that the biblical command to love is a higher-level truth and ethic than the prohibition of homosexual practice. The proper way to reconcile these is conceptually clear, though difficult in practice: Christians must show unbounded love toward homosexual persons, while not accepting homosexual practice as acceptable in the context of Christian holiness and discipleship. This is consistent with the example of Jesus that we examined at the beginning of the book.

Is this the same as saying, “Hate the sin; love the sinner”? Yes and no. Jesus made it crystal clear that his followers should, at times, hang around and eat with sinners and social outcasts, as he did. We often need to remind ourselves that homosexual sin in itself is no greater than heterosexual sin.

Here the biblical witness is decisive. The unwavering biblical ban on homosexual practice with greater freedom for slaves and women leaves us with an argument that is unanswerable without compromising biblical authority. (I will say more about this later.)

2. The Issue of Family Life

Other important reasons underscore the insistence that homosexuality is a key issue for Christians, beginning with the matter of family stability.

Can a society that condones homosexual practice and homosexual families be stable over time? Perhaps, though it's never been tried in human history.

Christians believe that the *health* of family life and of society over generations depends on continuing to view homosexual behavior as morally offensive from a Christian standpoint, even if it is accepted in society.

God's plan as revealed in Scripture has to do with families, and with maintaining covenant fidelity over generations. (Note the biblical emphasis on "generations," which I discuss in *Salvation Means Creation Healed*.⁶)

Healthy society, and certainly healthy church life, depends on healthy family life. The church is the family of God and the Christian family is the church of God.

True, Jesus did not base his initial community of disciples on biological family units. Christian brotherhood and sisterhood transcends biological brotherhood and sisterhood. Yet, the Bible and the Christian gospel clearly teach that the biological family unit (male and female united and normally procreative) is foundational in God's plan and in the formation and generational

fidelity of His people. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” (Matt. 19:5; cf. Gen. 2:24).

Consider the many biblical injunctions to “teach your children” the ways of the Lord (for example, Deut. 11:19). This implies two things: that men and women will, in most cases, wed and have children and that they are to teach them what the Bible says about sexual and gender relationships. If these two things are not done, obviously society will drift from God’s ways.

The church is based largely (though not exclusively) on marriage and family life, and stable, healthy society is built largely on healthy and stable Christian families. Maintaining biblical standards of sexual and gender relationships contributes to social stability over generations.

We have entered a time, especially in the West, when same-sex couples are marrying and raising either adopted or biological children—that is, children of one or the other or both parties in the same-sex union by using surrogate partners. Whether such families can be stable over generations remains to be seen. Perhaps so, and perhaps as much as heterosexual unions, which of course, often are dysfunctional and/or end in divorce. But even if such family arrangements prove to be stable over generations, they will model a morality, at least with regard to sexuality, that is contrary to biblical teachings.⁷ The revealed biblical pattern is the wiser and healthier way.

3. The Image of God

“God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them” (Gen. 1:27). Man and woman were created in full equality, with a commission to jointly and compassionately “rule” and steward the earth.

Human creation in God’s image is a hugely important fact, practically and theologically, as John Wesley recognized so profoundly. It has essential implications for salvation, holiness, and new creation. And it speaks to the issue of homosexuality.

Human creation as male and female is in some sense a reflection of the unity and diversity of the Holy Trinity. When the Tri-Personal God creates, gendered humankind is the result. The profound unity-in-diversity of the Trinity is in a derivative sense reflected in the unity-in-diversity of the human family—mother, father, offspring. God is beyond and yet in some sense incorporates gender. In creation, the richness of Triune life produces gender distinction within the unity of human personhood.

In other words, the distinction between male and female, and the complementarity they share, is built into creation. Its source is the unity of and distinction between the Persons of the Trinity.

This fact does not resolve all issues regarding homosexuality (as some Christians may be tempted to think). However it does weigh on the side of biblical morality,

with its prohibition of homosexual practice, since the obvious implication of male-female distinction is male-female union in marriage. This is assumed throughout the Bible.

Gendered human creation in the image of God is a core matter of human identity. Clearly it establishes the biblical norm for persons, families, societies, and culture. It is basic to the biblical covenants. The sexual ethic of Scripture (both hetero and homo) is an integral and coherent part of the biblically revealed plan of salvation.

Since salvation means creation healed, salvation in its fullness will always mean healing also in this area of gender relationships—short-term, and/or long-term, in the fullness of God’s plan and purposes.

In all that follows, this central fact of human creation in the divine image is an underlying theme.

4. Countercultural Identity and Witness

As it seeks to follow God’s ways, the church will always be countercultural at key points. Those points vary over time and according to cultural context. Today, an essential mark of countercultural identity and witness concerns homosexuality.

There is no point in being countercultural just to be “counter” or different (which the church sometimes forgets). In every context the church is in some aspects

cultural, in others *subcultural*, and in still others *countercultural*. The key question is always: What does fidelity to Jesus Christ and God's covenant and kingdom mean *here and now*, in current society?

Today—in the West, but increasingly globally—homosexuality is a key and strategic issue of countercultural identity and witness. It is not the only one, nor even the most important. Today's church needs to be countercultural in caring for the earth; in ministering with and among the poor; in building loving community in the face of individualism and personal isolation; in its rejection of materialism, consumerism, and commodification; in redeeming the arts and economics. It should be countercultural in standing against materialism, consumerism, and commodification (that is, putting a price tag on everything), as well as other areas. But for all the reasons cited, homosexuality is a key area of countercultural witness.

The issue here is not primarily negative: condemnation. Rather, it is positive: embodying and incarnating a better, more healthful, more fulfilling and generationally sustainable way of life. A better way. Faithful Christian community models a healthier path as it really demonstrates the love of Jesus Christ.

Gender relationships are a key area where Christians can give powerful, positive witness—not so much through what we say or condemn, but by what we show in our

own lives and loves. This happens through embodying the biblical covenant in believers' relationships with God, with the earth, and with one another, whether in marriage or singleness.

These four points closely intertwine—scriptural witness, family life, the image of God, and counter-cultural identity. They lay a biblical and theological foundation. With that foundation in place, we can go on to look at specific questions and biblical passages that deal with sexual morality.

On the Other Hand!

So the argument here is at heart positive, not negative. Healthy, pure, licit gender relationships are one of the great blessings of living God's way. This includes the blessing of Christian friendships among men and women. Very close but nonerotic friendships, both cross-gender and same-sex, are a wonderful benefit of the gospel. Jesus' own life shows this beautifully, as does the witness of the early church. Biblically, human relationships are rich, varied, multidimensional—much wider and broader and more beautiful than relationships based solely or primarily on sex.

But wait. We need to add some qualifications and clarifications, because the issues here are complex.

As Christians, we are called to extend compassion and understanding in the area of sexual relations just as much as in others. Just as Jesus did. We should go as far as Christian truth and Jesus' example will allow in accepting homosexuals.

Christian doctrine rests on love and truth. Love without truth is not true love. Truth without love undermines itself; it becomes untruth. We seek to demonstrate God's love in the fullest, truest ways without compromising biblical truth. In this connection, I commend the approach of Thomas Hopko in his insightful little book *Christian Faith and Same-Sex Attraction: Eastern Orthodox Reflections*.

Hopko, former dean of St. Vladimir's Seminary, says Christians should view same-sex attraction from a revealed biblical perspective, regardless of how countercultural that is—even as we learn also from ongoing social-scientific studies. He writes, “[H]aving loving desires for people of one's own sex is not at all sinful; it is perfectly natural, normal, and necessary.”⁸ When such desires are erotic or lead to homosexual behavior, however, they are sinful and must be dealt with as such—compassionately, understandingly, firmly. (Here Hopko draws on C. S. Lewis.)

Hopko views erotic same-sex attraction through the lens of discipleship. All Christians are cross bearers. Christians struggling with homosexual tendencies,

whatever their source, are no different except in the nature of their struggle. They should “see their refusal to act out their feelings sexually as an extraordinary opportunity for imitating Christ” rather than conforming to the world.⁹

We must not minimize the struggle, however. A Christian friend recently described to me the pain and confusion of growing up with homosexual desires. “Imagine what it is like for a kid to grow up with same-sex attraction and never feel like there was a safe place to talk about it. I was a person who felt trapped, ashamed, and who didn’t want to let people down.

So understanding, compassion, and openness are essential. But that is not the same as approving or endorsing the behavior.

Hopko rightly insists therefore that Christians must love homosexuals. We should defend their civil rights, including domestic partnerships. “Civil unions” are not Christian marriage but can provide necessary protections in our fallen world. They are important especially for children growing up in families based on same-sex unions. We must recognize that civil and multi-religious society is not the Church of Jesus Christ—a key distinction.