

JUNE 2015

## THE BIBLE AND SAME SEX RELATIONSHIPS: A REVIEW ARTICLE

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BY TIM KELLER

Vines, Matthew, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same Sex Relationships*, Convergent Books, 2014

Wilson, Ken, *A Letter to My Congregation*, David Crum Media, 2014.

The relationship of homosexuality to Christianity is one of the main topics of discussion in our culture today. In the fall of last year I wrote a review of books by Wesley Hill and Sam Allberry that take the historic Christian view, in Hill's words: "that homosexuality was not

God's original creative intention for humanity ... and therefore that homosexual practice goes against God's express will for all human beings, especially those who trust in Christ."

There are a number of other books that take the opposite view, namely that the Bible either allows for or supports same sex relationships. Over the last year or so I (and other pastors at Redeemer) have been regularly asked for responses to their arguments. The two most read volumes taking this position seem to be those by Matthew Vines and Ken Wilson. The re-

view of these two books will be longer than usual because the topic is so contested today and, while I disagree with the authors' theses, a too-brief review can't avoid appearing cursory and dismissive. Hence the length.

I see five basic arguments that these books and others like them make.

### ***Knowing gay people personally.***

Vines and Wilson relate stories of people who were sure that the Bible condemned homosexuality. However, they were  
*(Continued on page 4)*

## 25TH ANNIVERSARY COMMERMORATIVE BOOK

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In 1989 a small group of people set out to start a gospel-centered church in New York City. Redeemer was born out of the idea that we are more sinful than we can imagine, but more loved than we ever dared hope. Redeemer's history is rich with stories of people who have experienced gospel transformation. As we look back at the work God has started through Redeemer, we look forward with great hope for

what he will do in and through the people of Redeemer in the years ahead.

In order to give individuals a way to share the story of our first 25 years in ministry, we took a few months after the anniversary last September to compile a colorful and informative way of telling Redeemer's story (so far). We created a full color 13" x 13" book which features some of the history of Redeemer's first 25 years of minis-

try in NYC as well as photography and highlights from the 25th Anniversary weekend. You can preview a PDF of the book and place orders at **redeemer.com/25thbook**.

If you order a book, the cost is \$40 plus \$5.00 for shipping & handling. Please allow two to three weeks to receive shipment. There is no mark up on the print costs and all money received will go to pay for supplies, production and postage.

# HIGHLIGHTS FROM OUR MAY 9, 2015 CONGREGATIONAL MEETING

On Saturday May 9, 2015, Redeemer held its annual congregational meeting. Here are some of the highlights. To watch the videos shown on Prayer and the Ministry Year go to [redeemer.com/May9](http://redeemer.com/May9).

## *Election of Associate Pastor*

The Rev. Abraham Cho was elected as Associate Pastor and new East Side lead pastor. Since last September a search team has been conducting an exten-

sive process to find a new East Side lead pastor. After much prayer and careful consideration that team recently made a unanimous recommendation to the Session that the Rev. Abraham Cho, assistant pastor of the West Side congregation, become the new East Side lead pastor. The Session is immensely pleased to announce they have, in turn, unanimously recommended Abe to our members at the May 9 Congregational

Meeting and he was elected as an associate pastor and the lead pastor of the East Side congregation.

## *Loan Rate Modification*

Church members voted unanimously to authorize the trustees to approve a loan rate modification for our W83 mortgage. This refinancing will reduce our interest rate from 4.75% to 4.25% resulting in significant annual savings.



Please join us in welcoming our new officers!

## *Officer Elections*

All officer and trustee candidates, received at least 51% yes votes during the congregational meeting on Saturday! They have been voted in to begin a three-year term starting June 1, 2015, and ending May 31, 2018. Thank you for supporting and praying for these men and women.

### *Trustee:*

Paul Gross

### *New Elders:*

Dan Bitar  
Albert Chang  
Wally Larson  
Mark Stambaugh  
Henry Woo

### *Re-elected for a second 3-year term:*

Christian Becker  
Tim Knapp

### *New Deacons:*

Gary Bowler

Daniel Clemens  
James Griffin  
Barry Russell  
Nick Shatraw

### *New Deaconesses:*

Kristin Carotenuto  
Patricia Denson  
Hannah Jang  
Inok Kim  
Karen Kwon  
Esther Larson  
Margaret Nelson

## REDEEMER REPORT

Kathy Keller  
Heather Klein

Hunter College Auditorium  
E. 69th St.  
(between Park & Lexington)  
Services: 10:30 a.m. & 6 p.m.

W83rd Ministry Center  
150 W. 83rd St.  
(between Columbus & Amsterdam)  
Services: 9:30/11:30 a.m., 5 & 7 p.m.

Salvation Army Auditorium  
120 W. 14th St.  
(between 6th & 7th Aves.)  
Services: 9:30 a.m. & 5 p.m.

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# CFW START-UP PITCH NIGHT

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Last month the Center for Faith & Work hosted the first Start-Up Pitch Night, a part of CFW's efforts to encourage and support entrepreneurs who have a bold vision to start a new for-profit, or not-for-profit ventures that foster shalom and bring about gospel-centered renewal to New York City and beyond.

By unleashing the church's untapped potential to start new city-serving, gospel-manifesting ventures we hope to plant seeds to address unmet needs as well as help expand existing initiatives in the areas of industry renewal, human flourishing, and community development.

Judges awarded \$5,000 prizes to the non-profit pitches by Service to School and The Golden Spoon and for-profit awards to Forward Comix and Uplitalk. An audience of over 120 voted for their favorite pitches in each category, awarding an additional \$2,500 People's Choice Award to Service to School and Forward Comix.

## **Not for Profit Winners:**

*Chad Burgess*

*Service to School*

Service to School helps every transitioning military veteran win admission to the very best undergraduate or graduate institution possible. Service is provided at no cost to the service member. Life in the military is challenging, but transitioning after service can be the toughest challenge of all. Schools can benefit greatly

from soldiers' military experience. Service to School helps veterans continue their success as they pursue higher education.

*Kevin Katch*

*Golden Spoon*

Golden Spoon is a venture aimed at improving the nutritional quality of food served to New Yorkers in need by connecting soup kitchens to local restaurants. Research demonstrates that soup kitchens are severely overburdened and forced to provide meals with extremely limited resources. Creating partnerships connecting restaurants with local soup kitchens will help to improve the nutritional quality of served food. By having a restaurant donate nutritious food to a local soup kitchen, it provides a neighborhood-based solution that connects the passion of New York City restaurateurs to make good quality food with those in their community that need it the most. It is an expression of Christ's love, mercy, joy and abundance. It says "come to the banquet, for everything is now ready."

## **For Profit Winners:**

*Jerome Welford*

*Forward Comix*

Forward Comix is an award winning indie publisher, based in Brooklyn, founded in 2012. The socially conscious brand cur-

rently publishes select works in the form of graphic novels and literary fiction. With a strong commitment to excellence, Forward Comix follows their passion to see more diversity, better understanding and care for the world in which we all live.

*Iyob Gebremariam*

*UpliTalk*

Most college students start their job search by attending campus recruiting events. UpliTalk's goal is to bring these events online. UpliTalk is a website where companies offer online info sessions and tech talks to students and recent college graduates. Students and alumni sign up with their school emails and RSVP to upcoming UpliTalks held by firms of their interest.

UpliTalk offers a full multimedia platform where company representatives can broadcast talks and info sessions from their conference rooms at their headquarters. Students tune in and participate from their dorm rooms. At the end of a session students have the option to upload their resume to the events' virtual resume drop. The aim of UpliTalk is to provide students and recent college graduates a venue to explore a variety of career options. At the same time it hopes to give startups, non-profits and distant

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brought to a change of mind through getting to know gay people personally. It is certainly important for Christians who are not gay to hear the hearts and stories of people who are attracted to the same sex.

And when I see people discarding their older beliefs that homosexuality is sinful after engaging with loving, wise, gay people, I'm inclined to agree that those earlier views were likely defective. In fact, they *must* have been essentially a form of bigotry. They could not have been based on theological or ethical principles, or on an understanding of historical biblical teaching. They must have been grounded instead on a stereotype of gay people as worse sinners than others (which is itself a shallow theology of sin.) So I say good riddance to bigotry. However, the reality of bigotry cannot itself prove that the Bible never forbids homosexuality. We have to look to the text to determine that.

***Consulting historical scholarship.***

Vines and Wilson claim that scholarly research into the historical background show that biblical authors were not forbidding all same sex relationships, but only exploitative ones — pederasty, prostitution, and rape. Their argument is that Paul and other biblical writers had no concept of an innate homosexual orientation, that they only knew of exploitative homosexual practices, and

therefore they had no concept of mutual, loving, same-sex relationships.

These arguments were first asserted in the 1980s by John Boswell and Robin Scroggs. Vines, Wilson and others are essentially repopularizing them. However, they do not seem to be aware that the great pre-

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ponderance of the best historical scholarship since the 1980s — by the full spectrum of secular, liberal and conservative researchers — has rejected that assertion. Here are two examples.

Bernadette Brooten and William Loader have presented strong evidence that homosexual orientation was known in antiquity. Aristophanes, for example, tells a story about how Zeus split the original human beings in half, creating both heterosexual and homosexual humans, each of which were seeking to be reunited to their “lost halves” — heterosexuals seeking the opposite sex and homosexuals the same sex. Whether Aristophanes believed this myth literally is not the point. It was an explanation of a phenomenon the ancients could definitely see — that

some people are inherently attracted to the same sex rather than the opposite sex.

Contra Vine, *et al*, the ancients also knew about mutual, non-exploitative same sex relationships. In Romans 1, Paul describes homosexuality as men burning with passion “for one another” (verse 27). That is mutuality. Such a term could not represent rape, nor prostitution, nor pederasty (man/boy relationships). Paul could have used terms in Romans 1 that specifically designated those practices, but he did not. He categorically condemns all sexual relations between people of the same sex, both men and women. Paul knew about mutual same-sex relationships, and the ancients knew of homosexual orientation. Nonetheless “Nothing indicates that Paul is exempting some same-sex intercourse as acceptable.” (Loader, *Making Sense of Sex*, p.137).

I urge readers to familiarize themselves with this research. A good place to start is the Kindle book by William Loader *Sexuality in the New Testament* (2012) or his much larger *The New Testament on Sexuality* (2012) Loader is the most prominent expert on ancient and biblical views of sexuality, having written five large and two small volumes in his lifetime. It is worth noting that Loader himself does not personally see anything wrong with homosexual relationships; he just — rightly and definitively — proves that you  
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can't get the Bible itself to give them any support.

**Re-categorizing same sex relations.**

A third line of reasoning in these volumes and others like them involves recategorization. In the past, homosexuality was categorized by all Christian churches and theology as sin. However, many argue that homosexuality should be put in the same category as slavery and segregation. Vines writes, for example, that the Bible supported slavery and that most Christians used to believe that some form of slavery was condoned by the Bible, but we have now come to see that all slavery is wrong. Therefore, just as Christians interpreted the Bible to support segregation and slavery until times changed, so Christians should change their interpretations about homosexuality as history moves forward.

But historians such as Mark Noll (*America's God*, 2005 and *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, 2006) have shown the 19th century position some people took that the Bible condoned race-based chattel slavery was highly controversial and never a consensus. Most Protestants in Canada and Britain (and many in the northern U.S. states) condemned it as being wholly against the Scripture. Rodney Stark (*For the Glory of God*, 2003) points out that the Catholic church also came out early against the African slave trade. David L.

Chappell in his history of the Civil Rights Movement (*A Stone of Hope*, 2003) went further. He proves that even before the Supreme Court decisions of the mid-50s, almost no one was promoting the slender and forced biblical justifications for racial superiority and segregation. Even otherwise racist theologians and ministers could not find a basis for white supremacy in the Bible.

So we see the analogy between the church's view of slavery and its view of homosexuality breaks down. Up until very recently, all Christian churches and theologians unanimously read the Bible as condemning homosexuality. By contrast, there was never any consensus or even a majority of

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churches that thought slavery and segregation were supported by the Bible. David Chappell shows that even within the segregationist South, efforts to support racial separation from the Bible collapsed within a few years. Does anyone really think that within a few years from now there will be no one willing to defend the traditional view of sexuality from biblical texts? The answer is surely no. This negates the claim that the number, strength, and clar-

ity of those biblical texts supposedly supporting slavery and those texts condemning homosexuality are equal, and equally open to changed interpretations.

Wilson puts forward a different form of the recategorization argument when he says the issue of same-sex relations in the church is like issues of divorce and remarriage, Christian participation in war, or the use of *in vitro* fertilization. We can extend that list to include matters such as women's roles in ministry and society, as well as views of baptism, charismatic gifts, and so on. These are “issues where good Christians differ.” We may believe that another Christian with a different view of divorce is seriously wrong, but we don't say this means his or her view undermines orthodox Christian faith. Wilson, Vines, and many others argue that same-sex relations must now be put into this category. Since we see that there are sincere Christians who disagree over this, it is said, we should “agree to disagree” on this.

However history shows that same-sex relations do not belong in this category, either. Around each of the other items on Wilson's list there are long-standing and historical divisions within the church. There have always been substantial parts of the church that came to different positions on these issues. But until very, very recently, there was been

*(Continued on page 6)*



complete unanimity about homosexuality in the church across all centuries, cultures, and even across major divisions of the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant traditions. So homosexuality is categorically different. One has to ask, then, why is it the case that literally no church, theologian, or Christian thinker or movement ever thought that any kind same sex relationships was allowable until now?

One answer to the question is an ironic one. During the Civil War, British Presbyterian biblical scholars told their southern American colleagues who supported slavery that they were reading the Scriptural texts through cultural blinders. They *wanted* to find evidence for their views in the Bible and *voila* — they found it. If no Christian reading the Bible — across diverse cultures and times — ever previously discovered support for same-sex relationships in the Bible until today, it is hard not to wonder if many now have new cultural spectacles on, having a strong predisposition to find in these texts evidence for the views they already hold.

What are those cultural spectacles? The reason that homosexual relationships make so much more sense to people today than in previous times is because they have absorbed late modern western culture's narratives about the human life. Our society presses its members to believe "you have to be

yourself," that sexual desires are crucial to personal identity, that any curbing of strong sexual desires leads to psychological damage, and that individuals should be free to live as they alone see fit.

*“It is part of the brilliance of God’s creation that diverse, unlike things are made to unite and create dynamic wholes which generate more and more life and beauty through their relationships.”*

These narratives have been well analyzed by scholars such as Robert Bellah and Charles Taylor. They are beliefs about the nature of reality that are not self-evident to most societies and they carry no more empirical proof than any other religious beliefs. They are also filled with inconsistencies and problems. Both Vines and Wilson largely assume these cultural narratives. It is these faith assumptions about identity and freedom that make the straightforward reading of the biblical texts seem so wrong to them. They are the underlying reason for their views, but they are never identified or discussed.

**Revising biblical authority.**

Vines and Wilson claim that they continue to hold to a high view of biblical authority, and that they believe the Bible is completely true, but that they don't think it teaches all same-sex relations are wrong. Vines argues that while the Levitical

code forbids homosexuality (Leviticus 18:22) it also forbids eating shellfish (Leviticus 11:9-12). Yet, he says, Christians no longer regard eating shellfish as wrong — so why can't we change our minds on homosexuality? Here Vines is rejecting the New Testament understanding that the ceremonial laws of Moses around the sacrificial system and ritual purity were fulfilled in Christ and no longer binding, but that the moral law of the Old Testament is still in force. Hebrews 10:16, for example, tells us that the Holy Spirit writes "God's laws" on Christians' hearts (so they are obviously still in force), even though that same book of the Bible tells us that some of those Mosaic laws — the ceremonial — are no longer in binding on us. This view has been accepted by all branches of the church since New Testament times.

When Vines refuses to accept this ancient distinction between the ceremonial and moral law, he is doing much more than simply giving us an alternative interpretation of the Old Testament — he is radically revising what biblical authority means. When he says "Christians no longer regard eating shellfish as wrong," and then applies this to homosexuality (though assuming that Leviticus 19:18 — the Golden Rule — is still in force), he is assuming that it is Christians themselves, not the Bible, who have the right

*(Continued on page 7)*

to decide which parts of the Bible are essentially now out of date. *That decisively shifts the ultimate authority to define right and wrong onto the individual Christian and away from the biblical text.*

The traditional view is this: Yes, there are things in the Bible that Christians no longer have to follow but, if the Scripture is our final authority, it is **only the Bible itself** that can tell us what those things are. The prohibitions against homosexuality are re-stated in the New Testament (Romans 1, 1 Corinthians 6, 1 Timothy 1) but Jesus himself (Mark 7), as well as the rest of the New Testament, tells us that the clean laws and ceremonial code is no longer in force.

Vines asserts that he maintains a belief in biblical authority, but with arguments like this one he is actually undermining it. This represents a massive shift in historic Christian theology and life.

***Being on the wrong side of history.***

More explicit in Wilson's volume than Vine's is the common argument that history is moving toward greater freedom and equality for individuals, and so refusing to accept same-sex relationships is a futile attempt to stop inevitable historical development. Wilson says that the "complex forces" of history showed Christians that they were wrong about

slavery and something like that is happening now with homosexuality.

Charles Taylor, however, explains how this idea of inevitable historical progress developed out of the Enlightenment optimism about human nature and reason. It is another place where these writers seem to uncritically adopt background understandings that are foreign to the Bible. If we believe in the Bible's authority, then shifts in public opinion should not matter. The Christian faith will always be offensive to every cul-

*“Therefore, in one of the great ironies of late modern times, when we celebrate diversity in so many other cultural sectors, we have truncated the ultimate unity-in-diversity: inter-gendered marriage.*

ture at *some* points.

And besides, if you read Eric Kaufmann's *Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth?* (2010) and follow the latest demographic research, you will know that the world is *not* inevitably becoming more secular. The percentage of the world's population that are non-religious, and that put emphasis on individuals determining their own moral values, is shrinking. The more conservative religious faiths are growing very fast. No one studying these trends believes that history is moving in the direction of more secular societies.

***Missing the biblical vision.***

The saddest thing for me as a reader was how, in books on the Bible and sex, Vines and Wilson concentrated almost wholly on the biblical negatives, the prohibitions against homosexual practice, instead of giving sustained attention to the high, (yes) glorious Scriptural vision of sexuality. Both authors rightly say that the Bible calls for mutual loving relationships in marriage, but it points to far more than that.

In Genesis 1 you see pairs of different but complementary things made to work together: heaven and earth, sea and land, even God and humanity. It is part of the brilliance of God's creation that diverse, unlike things are made to unite and create dynamic wholes which generate more and more life and beauty through their relationships.

As N.T. Wright points out, the creation and uniting of male and female at the end of Genesis 2 is the climax of all this.

That means that male and female have unique, non-interchangeable glories — they each see and do things that the other cannot. Sex was created by God to be a way to mingle these strengths and glories within a life long-covenant of marriage. Marriage is the most intense (though not the only) place where this reunion of male and female takes place in human life. Male and female reshape, learn from, and work together.

*(Continued on page 8)*



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## A REVIEW ARTICLE ... (CONT'D FROM PAGE 7)

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Therefore, in one of the great ironies of late modern times, when we celebrate diversity in so many other cultural sectors, we have truncated the ultimate unity-in-diversity: inter-gendered marriage.

Without understanding this vision, the sexual prohibitions in the Bible make no sense. Homosexuality does not honor the need for this rich diversity

of perspective and gendered humanity in sexual relationships. Same-sex relationships not only cannot provide this for each spouse, they can't provide children with a deep connection to each half of humanity through a parent of each gender.

This review has been too brief to give these authors the credit they are due for maintaining a respectful and gra-

cious tone throughout. We live in a time in which civility and love in these discussions is fast going away, and I am thankful the authors are not part of the angry, caustic flow. In this regard they are being good examples, but because I think their main points are wrong, I have had to concentrate on them as I have in this review. I hope I have done so with equal civility.

## START-UP PITCH NIGHT ... (CONT'D FROM PAGE 3)

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and international companies a chance to make their presence felt in campus recruiting where large corporations often dominate.

Judges for the evening were Sean Coughlin (Cofounder and CEO of Faith Street), Ryan Darnell (Basset Investment Group), Scott Kauffmann (Redeemer City to City), Ja-

son Locy (Founder, Principal and Creative Director of Five-Stone), and Lou Anne Flanders-Stec (Administrative Director, Student Center for Entrepreneurship).