

BONNETS, BIKINIS, AND THE WORSHIP OF FALSE GODS (PART 3) :

A GRACE-FILLED RESPONSE TO HOMOSEXUALITY

–MESSY (BUT BEAUTIFUL) CHRISTIANITY, WEEK 39–

1 Corinthians 11:2-16 (NIV)

The Issue Paul is Facing: Some Christian Corinthian Women Were Not Wearing Head Coverings when Leading in Public Worship

The Timeless Principle Underlying This Issue: We Must All Practice Modesty and God-Honoring Appropriateness (Especially in Worship)

I. PAUL ' S ARGUMENT FROM FAMILY

²I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the traditions just as I passed them on to you. ³But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. ⁴Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. ⁵But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is the same as having her head shaved. ⁶For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head.

II. PAUL ' S ARGUMENT FROM CREATION ORDER

⁷A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. ⁸For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; ⁹neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. ¹⁰It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head, because of the angels. ¹¹Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. ¹²For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.

III. PAUL ' S ARGUMENTS FROM NATURE AND CHURCH CUSTOM

¹³Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? ¹⁴**Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him,** ¹⁵but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. ¹⁶If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God.

The reference to a man with long hair in that culture could have connotations of transgender behavior or homosexuality (e.g., Philo Spec. Laws III 7:37-42; Ps.-Phoc. 210-12), though not in every case. Here is a clearer reference to homosexuality in 1 Corinthians that we did not discuss previously, and thus take up now:

1 Corinthians 6:9-11 (NIV)

⁹Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers **nor men who have sex with men:** ¹⁰nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11 (NET)

⁹Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! The sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, **passive homosexual partners, practicing homosexuals,** ¹⁰thieves, the greedy, drunkards, the verbally abusive, and swindlers will not inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹Some of you once lived this way. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

A GRACE-FILLED RESPONSE TO HOMOSEXUALITY

I. WE MUST BE GENTLE WITH THIS TOPIC, AS IT CONCERNS PLACES OF DEEP PAIN

- To experience same-sex attraction is not someone's choice; in fact, because of societal pressures it is usually resisted. Consider:

“John, a thirty-seven year old man, is just starting to understand himself and his faith. Twenty-two years earlier, locked in his room on Sunday morning, John finally understood what was making him so different from every other boy his age: he was gay. Day after day, tears flowed down his face—in private. He socially shut himself off from everyone he knew because he was overwhelmed with the thought that someone might suspect something. His constant self-analysis began to consume all of his thoughts, and he continued to grow further away from everything he once loved. His secret trapped him and he didn't see any way out.

John's story is like that of many others when they first realized their same-sex attraction, except that he had Christian parents and Christian brothers and sisters. They loved the Lord with all of their hearts, as did he. John went to a Christian high school and was heavily involved in his church and youth group. He volunteered in his local community and in college attended the largest, most well known evangelical university in the country, where he was prestigiously elected student body president.

Through all of these outward Christian successes John's soul was scarred because he thought he had to keep his attractions a secret. Daily he wondered why God would let *him* have these problems. He had decided at age fifteen, when the attractions first began, that he would earnestly pray one prayer every night: “Lord, when I wake up in the morning please just let me be straight like everyone else. John prayed that prayer every night until he was *thirty years old*. And every morning for fifteen years he woke up dejected and broken because he still had the same attractions he never wanted in the first place. [...]

The majority of the GLBT people whom I have met over my nine years of being immersed in their community—believers and nonbelievers, black and white, men and women—have told me the same thing: when they first realized their same-sex thoughts and attractions they started to pray that God would take those unwanted feelings away. Even atheists have told me that they were willing to put their unbelief in God aside in the hope that he would make them straight like everyone else” (Marin, 25-27).

- Many (most?) of those who are gay have been deeply hurt by Christians and the church. This rejection is very difficult to overcome. Thus, love, grace and friendship should be our default position. Consider:

“Chuck had been attending the Marin Foundation's community classes and programs for about a year. He hadn't said more than two words the entire time, but one night his entire life's history suddenly came crashing to the surface. In the 1950s Chuck had been kicked out of his home in a small farm town because his traditional believing parents didn't know how to handle the admission of his sexuality. Chuck packed up all of his belongings and moved to Chicago. He had nothing to his name other than what he squeezed into his tiny car.

At nineteen years old, living on his own and not knowing anybody, he took out loans, got a few odd jobs, and ending up putting himself through college and grad school. Over the years he searched for a place to fit in because he was never athletic, never liked the bar scene and just wanted to feel loved. After many years Chuck decided to give Christianity a try again. Even though the Christian faith was the basis for his parents' rejection, Chuck always thought there was something unique about believers. He started to attend a church and was scared for anyone to find out he was gay, so he just kept it to himself. After a while he felt safe and confident that he could tell someone he trusted.

Unfortunately his worst fears were realized when that person told everyone and he got kicked out of the second place that ever felt like home.

Without any other options, he immersed himself into the large GLBT community in Chicago and began to meet some wonderful friends who were also gay and knew what he was going through. Thirty-five years later Chuck has a well-paying job, a nice house, a nice car, a loving partner and supportive group of friends who have never turned their back on him.

One night during class I looked at Chuck, about to ask him a question. He started shaking. Seconds later he choked out the burdensome message he had been yearning to say for the last forty years of his life. ‘Why do you I need you, and why do I need your God? I don’t need either!’

And then it was over. Raw tears of freedom replaced the tears of entrapment he had been crying for the majority of his life.

At that moment I was simultaneously an innocent bystander and the target of his words. I had no idea what was going through his head or why tonight he decided to free himself of what he’d kept pent up for almost half a century. I stood there soaking in the excruciating emotion that was bleeding out of his pores, realizing that his first experience of emotional freedom in almost fifty years came by telling a Christian he didn’t need him or his God.

But what kept running through my head was, why even come to the Marin Foundation in the first place if those were his thoughts? Why keep coming back? Why tell other gay and lesbian people to come as well? What could I possibly be offering him if he didn’t need me or my God?

Snapping back to reality from my cloud of questions, I peered around the room and saw the faces of thirteen other gay men and lesbian women. At that moment I realized the Chuck had released what they all felt and yet never had the emotional energy or raw courage to vocalize.

Each day of my life working with the GLBT community I see the tears and I hear the pain. But for the first time that day I *felt* the tears and I *felt* a pain I had never experienced before. In a traditional interpretation of Scripture, gay sexual behavior is defined as sin, and because of that many Christians have taken that sin and, in their mind, rightfully ostracized an entire group of people. Think about what that means to a gay or lesbian person who is trying to discover, or rediscover, church. Even if they were to attend a service or involve themselves in a small group or church activities, they would still be separate, and could never be considered equal unless they became like everyone else—a sinner who doesn’t sin with same-sex attraction. Where is the hope in that expectation, when many GLBT people are not being met where they are?

That night Chuck let a conservative, Bible-believing, evangelical, straight male into the real life of someone in the GLBT community. I felt bad; I felt guilty. My soul ached because in some small way I finally began to scrape the surface of the intense depth and despair that the GLBT community feels. Only they could truly understand what they have experienced. And all that I, my Christian church, my Christian friends and anyone else who has never been attracted to someone of the same sex should have been doing was to be there in support and love, doing our best to willfully convene in the middle of Chuck’s place of tension—trying to grasp what only he knew he has been through.

When everyone’s eyes started to dry, I asked Chuck what brought on that moment. “I come to these classes because it brings me back to the one thing that I always wanted. But I’m too scared to let myself fall for this again. So I just sit and listen and try to feel blessed in this place as I pray that there is somehow a spot for me in heaven” (Marin, 28-30).

II. WE MUST ALSO BE HUMBLE SINCE THE TOPIC INVOLVES SOME ISSUES THAT REMAIN UNCERTAIN

- The causes of same-sex attraction remain unclear, but likely involve a mix of influences. After surveying the scientific evidence, Christian Psychologist Mark Yarhouse summarizes:

“There does not appear to be any one cause of same-sex attraction or a homosexual orientation. There appear to be many factors that may contribute to same-sex attraction or a homosexual orientation, and these factors are probably weighted differently for different people” (80).

- Since sexual orientation can be somewhat fluid, changing one’s sexual orientation to some degree is possible for some Christians, but major shifts seem rare. Yarhouse again:

“Although some people do experience a change in sexual orientation, most experience modest gains, and many share that they continue to have same-sex attractions at times. It does not appear to be intrinsically harmful to try to change sexual orientation, especially if a person has realistic expectations. Where people may struggle the most is with unrealistic expectations or messages that they are not trying hard enough or do not have enough faith” (95).

- While the traditional view remains dominant in most Christian circles, there is enough Christian disagreement over the relevant biblical passages on homosexuality that humility is called for even here (see below).

III. OUTSIDE A CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW, ARGUMENTS AGAINST HOMOSEXUALITY WILL LIKELY NOT PERSUADE

- Three major Christian teachings seem to be foundational in order to even consider a negative judgment on homosexual behavior.
 - A belief in a God who has spoken authoritatively about human behavior, to whom we are bound to obey (e.g., 1 Peter 1:15-16).
 - A belief in the divine intent of human sexuality to be celebrated in the committed marriage of man and woman (Gen 1:27-28; 2:15-25). Notice this includes both physical complementarity in gender and openness to the bearing of children.
 - A belief that *all that exists is not necessarily good*—we live in a disordered world marred by sin (Gen 3), so it is not safe to merely follow our desires (Gal 5:16-24).
- So our chief purpose in our culture is not to persuade people that homosexuality is wrong, but to persuade them that Christ is right, and allow their views on morality to adjust as part of their ongoing allegiance to Christ. (To those who might refuse Christ because of the traditional Christian view of homosexuality, it might be wise for us to say it is an issue upon which Christians disagree, and that one’s view on homosexuality is secondary.)

IV. EVEN AMONG CHRISTIANS THERE IS DEBATE ON THE MORALITY OF HOMOSEXUALITY—YET IN MY VIEW THE TRADITIONAL VIEW REMAINS CORRECT: HOMOSEXUAL ACTIVITY SHOULD NOT BE PRACTICED BY CHRISTIANS

- Some Christians challenge the traditional position and argue that committed, loving, homosexual relationships were unknown in the first century. Rather, the kind of homosexual activity that was practiced was *pederasty* (relationships between an older man and a boy) and abusive. Because of this, the kind of homosexuality that the Bible condemns is different than practiced today by gay Christians. A Christian who holds this view writes:

“There were many different ways of practicing ‘heterosexuality’ and ‘homosexuality’ in the ancient world, and many of them were not the ways we are familiar with today. Just because the Bible declares some heterosexual sex as sinful does not mean that all heterosexual sex is sin. In the same way, just because the Bible condemns *certain kinds* of same-sex sexual acts does not mean that *all* same-sex sexual acts are therefore out of bounds. It is possible to read the prohibitions in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy 1 as proscriptions of decadence, lack of self-control, and exploitation, including the sexual exploitation of enslaved persons and prostitutes” (DeFranza, in Sprinkle, 91).

- Additionally, some Christians challenge the traditional position by saying that while the Bible prohibits homosexual activity, the biblical writers did not know that some people have a homosexual orientation. Because we now know some people or oriented this way, we should adjust the Bible’s view on sexuality. A Christian who holds this view writes:

“The reason why Paul argued as he did is that he, like other Jews of his time whose writings survive, believed that all people were heterosexual, male or female. Given that assumption about human reality, his conclusions make sense...the assumptions about human sexuality which underlie the approach of Paul and his fellow Jews needs supplementing with the insights and observations about human sexuality we have gained since. This is just one of many areas where it has been necessary to supplement first-century understandings of reality with twenty-first-century understandings. To do so is not to show disrespect for biblical writers, but to stand alongside them in their commitment to truth and willingness to change as essential to their faith” (Loader, in Sprinkle, 45).

- In my opinion these are decent arguments, and I am sympathetic to them. In the end though, I am not persuaded, and I believe the traditional view remains correct (note how it is still held by the majority of churches).
 - While it is true that the majority of male homosexual behavior in the first century may have been exploitive and abusive, *pederasty* was not practiced among females. Thus it is significant that when Paul writes against homosexual behavior in Romans 1:26-27, he begins by discussing same-sex activity between women. This indicates that the problem as he saw it was not only abusive *pederasty* (though surely Paul condemned this behavior too), but rather activity that Paul saw as “unnatural” versus “natural” (Rom 1:26). By this language Paul probably had in mind the structural intent of our gendered bodies, as intended by God in creation (Gen 1-3). God designed men for women in marriage, and vice versa.
 - It is true that the concept of sexual orientation did not exist in Paul’s day (the terminology was coined only in 1869). Yet this does not mean Paul did not realize that people could be attracted sexually to people of the same gender! The Christian understanding was that we have a variety of attractions that are inappropriate and must be resisted (e.g., 1 John 2:15-17), even if they are attractions we consistently feel.
 - It is not so easy to dismiss the Bible’s prohibitions on homosexuality as merely cultural. This stands in contrast to the Bible’s treatment of women and slaves. On the issues of women and slaves, we see a “redemptive movement” throughout the storyline of the Bible, with increasing value and freedom for women and slaves as compared to the surrounding cultures, and there is an essential equality in the gospel that concerns women and slaves (Gal 3:28). This gives us clues that some of the Bible’s restrictions on women and slaves was indeed cultural, and thus limited. The Bible’s treatment of women and slave thus stands in contrast to the Bible’s evaluation of homosexuality, which is uniformly negative (Lev 18:22; 20:13; Rom 1:18-25; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10-11), especially as it stands in contrast with the creation intent of man and woman in Genesis. (On the contrast between the Bible’s treatment of these groups, see the book *Slaves, Women, & Homosexuals*, by William J. Webb.)
- Yet even within the traditional view, we should recognize that it is not a sin to be attracted to the same sex. By that I mean having a homosexual orientation is not sinful in and of itself. I would say that these desires are part of the disordered and broken world we find ourselves in, and which we all experience in different ways. It is never a sin to be tempted or to have wrongly-ordered desires—what is sinful is when we engage in sinful behavior. A Christian who has same-sex desires thus still has a choice—how will he or she respond?

V. GUIDANCE TO THE CHRISTIAN WITH SAME-SEX ATTRACTION: A CHOICE OF SEXUAL IDENTITY

(taken from the exceptionally good book *Homosexuality and the Christian* by Yarhouse)

- It is helpful to distinguish three separate tiers of this experience.
 - *Same-Sex Attraction*

“Using this term is the most descriptive way people can talk about their feelings. This is the part of the equation they cannot control. Certain people, regardless of the cause, have experiences of attraction to the same sex. This fact doesn’t say anything about either their identity or their behavior. It doesn’t hint at who they are or what they do. It is descriptive. We are simply talking about the fact that a person experiences same-sex attraction” (Yarhouse 41).
 - *Homosexual Orientation*

“When people talk about having a homosexual orientation, they are essentially saying that they experience same-sex attraction that is strong enough, durable enough, and persistent enough for them to feel they are *oriented* toward the same sex. If it is *only* toward the same sex, they might say that they have a homosexual orientation, whereas if it is toward both sexes they might say they have a bisexual orientation. The person is simply describing the amount and persistence of their own attraction, which is based on what they perceive attraction to be. That may seem like a subtle difference, but it is an important one to consider, because one’s perception of attraction may be on target or it may be skewed.

No one knows how much attraction to the same sex is necessary for a person to feel that their orientation is now homosexual or bisexual. This would be impossible to measure. We do know that some people experience some same-sex attraction but are completely comfortable saying that their sexual orientation is still heterosexual. We take this to mean that the attractions to the same sex are either not particularly strong, or fleeting, or are limited to a specific person” (Yarhouse, 41-42).
 - *Gay Identity*

“This is the most prescriptive. It is a socio-cultural label that people use to describe themselves, and it is a label that is imbued with meaning in our culture....When people take on this label, they move beyond describing their experience and instead are forming their identity. When most people talk about ‘being gay,’ they are usually revealing more than their attraction to the same sex; rather, ‘being gay’ has taken on certain connotations—perhaps some would say it has taken on a life of its own.

Here’s another way to look at the three-tier distinction: The vast majority of people have opposite-sex attractions. About 6 percent of men and 4.5 percent of women report feeling attracted to members of the same sex. But only about 2 percent of men and about 1 percent of women apparently have strong enough same-sex attraction that they would say they have a homosexual orientation. Then, presumably, some percentage of those with a homosexual orientation have integrated their attractions and orientation into a gay identity....Often we presume they are the same thing—we collapse the three tiers into one so that the person experiencing same-sex attraction is presumed to be gay” (Yarhouse, 42-43).

- Thus, a Christian with same-sex attraction or a homosexual orientation still has a choice—will they decide to adopt a gay identity, or will they adopt a different identity based on different aspects of who they are?
 - One option is what we can call **The Gay Script**, our culture’s suggestion on how to form a sexual identity based on the experience of same-sex attraction or orientation. The key metaphor here is *discovery*. Here is what this script might look like:
 - “Same-sex attractions signal a naturally occurring or ‘intended by God’ distinction between homosexuality, heterosexuality, and bisexuality.
 - Same-sex attractions are the way you know who you ‘really are’ as a person (emphasis on *discovery*).
 - Same-sex attractions are at the core of who you are as a person.
 - Same-sex behavior is an extension of that core.
 - Self-actualization (behavior that matches who you ‘really are’) of your sexual identity is crucial for your fulfillment” (Yarhouse, 49).
 - But for Christians, another option exists, what we might call **The Identity in Christ Script**. The key metaphor here is *integration*.
 - “Same-sex attraction does *not* signal a categorical distinction among types of person, but is one of many human experiences that are ‘not the way it’s supposed to be.’
 - Same-sex attractions may be part of your experience, but they are not the defining element of your identity.
 - You can choose to integrate your experiences of attraction to the same sex into a gay identity.
 - On the other hand, you can choose to center your identity around other aspects of your experience, including your biological sex, gender identity, and so on.
 - The most compelling aspect of personhood for the Christian is one’s identity in Christ, a central and defining aspect of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

This script relies on the metaphor of *integration* rather than *discovery*. Remember that the discovery metaphor assumes that the attractions tell us who the person ‘really’ is. The integration metaphor, on the other hand, begins with a description of the attractions to the same sex then recognizes that a young person has choices to make about both behavior and identity. The young person can integrate his or her attractions into a gay identity or not.

A young person can then go on to center their sense of identity around other aspects of themselves as a person. Perhaps the most central theme we hear among those who choose not to identify as gay is that they form their identity around the person and work of Jesus Christ. Rather than focus on an identity that is a negative (*not* gay), they form an identity that is ‘in Christ,’ a positive sense of themselves and their sense of purpose and community that is based on the redemptive work of Christ in their own lives” (Yarbrough, 51-52).

- One path that is open to a Christian who has same-sex attraction and chooses to follow “The Identity in Christ Script” is to live a life of focused singleness in service to Christ. This path of godly celibacy has a rich history in Christian tradition. One such Christian with a homosexual orientation who has decided to live a life of singleness in service to Christ is Wesley Hill. He writes:

“For myself, I have increasingly come to understand my calling as a gay Christian to be one of ‘spiritual friendship.’ In contrast to relationships of convenience or minimal commitment, in which personal autonomy and the ability to move at whim are prized above all, I am learning to pursue deeper, more permanent sorts of bond with friends of the same (and opposite) sex, all the while maintaining my commitment to sexual abstinence (or, as I prefer, ‘celibacy’). In this, I believe myself to be standing in a venerable Christian tradition. [...]

In one of his letters, C. S. Lewis suggests that rather than fixating on the psychological roots of same-sex attraction and seeking to pinpoint its origins, modern-day Christians would do well to focus their attention more on what the person experiencing same-sex attraction is capable of offering to the church in which she finds herself:

Our speculations on the cause of the abnormality are not what matters and we must be content with ignorance. The disciples were not told why (in terms of efficient cause) the man was born blind (Jn IX 1-3): only the final cause, that the works of God should be made manifest in him. This suggest that in homosexuality, as in every tribulation, those works can be made manifest: i.e. that every disability conceals a vocation, if only we can find it, which will ‘turn the necessity to glorious gain.’

Lewis goes on later in the letter to describe ‘a certain pious homosexual man who believed that his necessity *could* be turned to spiritual gain: that there were certain kinds of sympathy and understanding, a certain social role which only he could play.’ To ask that question—about what particular role a celibate gay or lesbian believer can play in the church—is to ask how the special temptation or weakness or fallenness that same-sex attraction is may come to be understood as the site or occasion or circumstance in which a vocation to love is discovered. I suggest that we might follow Lewis’s lead today” (Hill, in Sprinkle 146-47).

THE BOTTOM LINE

Seek to bring every aspect of life, including sexuality, into the service of Christ and others.

...by being gentle with the topic of homosexuality, remembering how many people have been hurt.

...by coming alongside Christians with same-sex attraction in a way that is loving, supporting, and patient.

...by wrestling with your own sexual identity and choosing to find your identity in Christ before anything else.

Recommended Reading

Yarhouse, Mark A. *Homosexuality and the Christian: A Guide for Parents, Pastors, and Friends* (Bethany House), 2010.

Marin, Andrew. *Love is an Orientation: Elevating the Conversation with the Gay Community* (IVP), 2009.

Sprinkle, Preston, Ed. *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church* (Zondervan), 2016.

Webb, William J. *Slaves, Women, & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (IVP Academic), 2001.