

“It doesn’t strike me that this a choice issue”

Homosexuality, Choice, Pathology, and Theology in the 1970s

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Traditional American Christian thought is widely believed to be opposed to homosexuality. Many mainstream evangelical ministries espouse the belief that homosexuality is a sin and gays are “going to hell.” Influential Protestant organization Focus on the Family currently states that “Both Jesus and all of scripture approve of no other sexual union than that between a husband and wife.”¹ Anticipating the counterargument that there are different ways of interpreting the Bible’s stance on non-heterosexual unions, Focus on the Family declares that its stance “is the uncontested historical teaching of Judaism and Christianity, and it is not something that true Christianity is free to adjust with the times.”² With such rhetoric, it’s understandable that LGBTQ+ individuals often come to dislike Christianity and consequently distance themselves from it.³ However, the history of Christianity is a history of interpretation and reinterpretation and there is hardly an “uncontested historical teaching” of any scripture.⁴ Indeed, since even before Focus on the Family’s founding by American evangelical James Dobson in 1977, various Christian theologians have challenged the basis of its teachings on homosexuality. While homosexuality was explicitly condemned by conservative evangelical groups like Dobson’s Focus on the Family, Anita Bryant’s Save Our Children, Inc., and Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority in the 1970s, there were Protestant Christian theologians who viewed homosexuals with sympathy and homosexuality with tolerance, if not acceptance, in the same decade. This paper will focus on how these two groups theologically diverged and will explore how homosexuality is “given its shape and its meaning through eminently cultural and historical

¹ Karli Williamson, “10 Things Everyone Should Know about a Christian View of Homosexuality,” Focus on the Family, Assessed December 13, 2021, <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/faith/10-things-everyone-should-know-about-a-christian-view-of-homosexuality/>.

² See footnote 1.

³ Lucy Knight, “Being a Gay Christian Can Be Hurtful and Gruelling, but I Refuse to Lose Faith,” The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, published March 21, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/mar/21/gay-christian-church-lgbt>

⁴ Michael Pye, “Skillful Means and the Interpretation of Christianity,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 10 (1990): 17–22. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1390188>, pg. 1.

processes.”⁵ Specifically, this essay will investigate the factors that contributed to a new understanding of homosexuality as an intrinsic trait in the 1970s and how that understanding influenced Christian theologians to reevaluate the traditional delineation between homosexuality and sin, or (more generally) sexuality and morality, in a continuing historical process. While conservative evangelicals responded to the idea of homosexuality as innate by politicizing homosexual unions in ways that still reverberate today, gay-sympathetic Christian theologians and writers responded by formulating a new hierarchy of sexual morality around the preliminary legitimacy of homosexual unions.

Building up from almost a century of sexology research, the American Psychiatric Institution voted to delist homosexuality as a mental illness from the DSM-II in 1973, which legitimized the decoupling of homosexuality, choice, and pathology. About 90 years before the DSM-II’s homosexuality delisting, German psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing researched autobiographical histories of homosexuals and concluded that homosexuality was often not a choice. While many historians charge Krafft-Ebing with the pathologization of homosexuality by “replacing religious and judicial authority with a new form of medico-moral tyranny” on account of his othering diction (*Psychopathia Sexualis* equated homosexuality with “deviance,” “degeneration,” “inversion,” and “perverted sexual feeling”), historian Harry Oosterhuis writes that Krafft-Ebing was one of the first to recognize the “relativism of variance” in human sexual desire.⁶ For the first time, many of Krafft-Ebing’s homosexual contemporaries saw themselves within the bounds of variance and drew comfort in learning that there was a scientific reason that

⁵ Joy Dixon, “Introduction.” *Victorian Review* 37, no. 2 (2011): 41–45. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23646656>, pg. 41.

⁶ Harry Oosterhuis and Vernon A. Rosario, “Richard Von Krafft-Ebing’s ‘Step-Children Of Nature’: Psychiatry and the Making of Homosexual Identity,” Essay. In *Science and Homosexualities*. London: Routledge, 1997, pg. 84-85. (In the parentheses) Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Georges Bataille. *Psychopathia Sexualis*. München: Matthes & Seitz Verlag, 1984.

they could not change. Through the lens of sexology, Krafft-Ebing disassociated choice from homosexuality, but in doing so, associated it instead with pathology. It wasn't until 62 years later that American sexologist Alfred Kinsey's work "demanded a reevaluation" of homosexuality's pathologization because his sex surveys found such a proliferation of same-sex activity that "it is difficult to maintain the view that psychosexual reactions between individuals of the same sex are rare and therefore abnormal or unnatural."⁷ Kinsey's report and the follow-up work of contemporaries like Evelyn Hooker in 1956 (who found that "Homosexuality as a clinical entity does not exist") did much to remove the stigma that stemmed from homosexuality's pathologization by positioning homosexuality as something commonplace, and as such, normal. Kinsey's and Hooker's work gained mainstream attention in the decades after their respective publications and, combined with gay activism in the wake of the 1969 Stonewall Riots, culminated in the 1973 APA delisting.⁸ Because the APA and its published DSM-II had tremendous scientific credibility, the APA's delisting of homosexuality legitimized the decades-long separation of homosexuality, choice, and pathology.

The APA's delisting challenged the traditional American Protestant belief that homosexuality was a sin and contributed to a new Christian understanding of homosexuality. Prior to the APA's delisting, most, if not all, American Protestants believed that homosexuality was a sin according to the Bible. In 1982, Professor Robert Booth Fowler published a history titled *A New Engagement: Evangelical Political Thought, 1966-1976*. On homosexuality, Fowler writes

There was no ambiguity about biblical teaching on homosexuality. Both the Old Testament (Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Genesis 19:5-9, and Judges 19:22-28) and the

⁷ Regina Markell Morantz, "The Scientist as Sex Crusader: Alfred C. Kinsey and American Culture," *American Quarterly* 29, no. 5 (1977): 563–89. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2712574> pg. 580.

⁸ Jack Drescher, "Out of DSM: Depathologizing Homosexuality," *Behavioral sciences* (Basel, Switzerland). U.S. National Library of Medicine, December 4, 2015, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4695779/>.

New Testament (1 Timothy 1:9, 1 Corinthians 6:9, and Romans 1:27) condemned homosexuality in unequivocal terms.⁹

Given that Fowler also defines an Christian evangelical in the 1960s and early 1970s as one who “affirmed the truth of the scriptures... acknowledged the Bible’s divine authority, and... claimed to be determined to worship and live by its commands,” the Bible’s “unequivocal” condemnation of homosexuality conflated homosexuality with sin without much room for recourse.¹⁰ After all, the Bible cannot be the ultimate moral authority if some of its verses were continuously challenged or disregarded. However, the APA’s delisting, by decoupling homosexuality with choice, opened room for Biblical reinterpretation. Because choice, or some measure of free will, is a necessary prerequisite for sin, it follows that a lack thereof would have to absolve the homosexual. Prominent 20th century Reformed theologian Reinhold Niebuhr explains that it is an “absurd position that man sins inevitably and by fateful necessity but that he is nevertheless to be held responsible for actions which are prompted by an ineluctable fate.”¹¹ Writing on the doctrine of original sin in 1943, Niebuhr articulates the absurdity of penalizing one for that which he cannot control. Applied to homosexuality, Niebuhr’s logic construes that if homosexuality was not a choice, then it cannot be a sin for which homosexuals bear entire responsibility. Five years after the APA’s delisting, Presbyterian theologian Dwight C. Smith, Jr. takes up this exact stance by writing that the “critical element” differentiating a homosexual and an adulterer “would appear to be choice,” and while an adulterer can be asked to “go and sin no more,” asking a homosexual to change orientations would be “analogous to ordering a cracked

⁹Robert Booth Fowler, *A New Engagement: Evangelical Political Thought, 1966-1976*, Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1982, pg. 198.

¹⁰ Robert Booth Fowler, *A New Engagement*, pg. 2.

¹¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, “Sin and Man's Responsibility,” Essay, In *The Nature and Destiny of Man: Volume I: Human Nature*, Scribner, 1964, pg. 241.

glass not to leak.”¹² Smith’s rhetoric, highlighting the impossibility of asking homosexuals to repent their orientation, demonstrates the incredible theological repercussions of the popularization of the APA’s delisting.

Theologically, conservative evangelicals responded to the popularization of the APA’s delisting by conflating homosexuality with homosexual acts and argued that the former is a sin because the practice of the latter is a choice. Conservative evangelicals were not able to directly refute the decoupling of choice and homosexual attraction legitimized by the APA’s delisting, so they built a logic chain that held same-sex attraction sinful based on the sinfulness of same-sex acts assumed to propagate from the attraction. British author and evangelical Roy Hession, in his influential 1977 book *Forgotten Factors of Sexual Sins*, writes that “Homosexual tendencies are not only congenital, that is, part of a man’s original makeup which he cannot help; but they are more often acquired by one’s being introduced to such practices by others.”¹³ Hession first implicitly synonymizes “homosexual tendencies” with homosexuality the orientation and concedes that an inclination toward same-sex sexual attraction is not always chosen. He acknowledges, albeit begrudgingly, the prevailing scientific understanding of the day and does not directly call homosexual attraction sinful. This is because Hession does not have the scientific backing to claim that homosexual attraction is a choice, and following Niebuhr’s articulation of sin as that which must require some element of choice, Hession cannot draw the conclusion that an unchosen attraction is sinful. However, Hession finds that “the practice of homosexual acts... is still a sin.”¹⁴ Building upon this, Hession argues that homosexual attraction

¹² Dwight C. Smith, Jr, “Studying ‘Others’, Finding Self: Presbyterians on Homosexuality,” *Christianity and Crisis* 38, no. 2 (February 20, 1978): 22–27. <https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy2.library.illinois.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0000764762&site=ehost-live>, 27.

¹³ Roy Hession, *Forgotten Factors of Sexual Sins*, Fort Washington, PA: CLC Publications, 1977, pg. 24.

¹⁴ See footnote 13, pg. 24.

is “acquired” through practicing homosexual acts, so homosexual attraction is a sin because the practice of the acts that *caused* it are choices. It’s important to note the conflation between homosexual attraction and homosexual acts here: Hession and other conservative evangelicals have proved the sinfulness of homosexuality only on the basis of choosing to engage in homosexual acts, but by calling homosexuality itself sinful, they are assuming that which they did not prove. In response to the APA’s delisting effectively breaking the direct link between homosexuality and choice (and consequently sin), conservative evangelicals redefined an indirect link between the two by building upon the choice involved in practicing homosexual acts.

Conservative evangelicals’ conflation between homosexuality and sin evolved into a conflation directly between homosexuality and choice that served as a theologically based normalizing alternative to the APA’s normalization of homosexuality and allowed homosexual Christians to live according to heterosexual Christian family ideals. After Hession successfully conflated homosexuality with sin, he then used the converse of link between sin and choice articulated by Niebuhr to argue that homosexuality is a choice *because* it is a sin. And, because Christian theology finds that all men are born sinners and their hope for salvation lies in Christ’s forgiveness, Hession argues that homosexuals can choose to repudiate the sin of their homosexuality. This, he writes, is exceedingly good news for the homosexual:

For if homosexuality is not sin, but simply an unfortunate trait in his make-up, he is stuck with it for life; there is nothing much that can be done about it, except to learn to live with it. Indeed, a psychiatrist said to me, “We do not profess to cure a homosexual, but only to turn a miserable homosexual into a happy one.” Perish the thought! But if a man is willing to call it sin, then there is every hope in the world for him; there is for him a Savior whose blood cleanses from sin; and he will find that the acknowledgement of sin is a man’s best qualification to meet that Savior.¹⁵

¹⁵ See footnote 13, pg. 25.

Unlike before, when Hession argued for the sinfulness of homosexuality based on homosexual acts, Hession now directly argues for the sinfulness of a homosexual orientation. He hides his inability refute modern psychiatry's decoupling of homosexuality and choice by juxtaposing Christianity against psychiatry and implying that Christianity can "cure a homosexual" while modern psychiatry cannot. On the basis of sin, Hession's logic is simple: homosexuality is a sin, which means that it is a choice like other sins, which means that Christians can choose to not sin, which means that Christians can choose to not be homosexual, which means that Christians can choose to be heterosexual. Hession's argument and logic represents mainstream conservative evangelical thought of the 1970s. In the early 1970s, a Christian "homosexuality-as-sin" conversion therapy approach emerged as a normalizing alternative to the APA's endorsement of homosexual acceptance. In 1973, evangelical minister Jay E. Adams wrote *The Christian Counselor's Manual*, and in it, he counseled homosexual Christian clients to call homosexuality a sin so that they could "deal with their desires and actions as any Christian deals with persistent habits of self-indulgent sin."¹⁶ Under an "all people were born sinners" contextualization, Adams destigmatizes homosexuality by equating it to common sins like adultery or gluttony. Thus, conservative evangelicals utilized their interpretation of Scripture as a normalizing alternative to the APA's normalization. In fact, the ex-gay movement, which purported to turn homosexual Christians into "ex-gay" Christians who could live within heterosexual Christian family ideals, utilized Hession's and Adams' logic as the basis of its ideology. Professor John Fletcher finds that ex-gay evangelism was "conceived not as a tool of the religious right... but as a means of responding to the situation of gay and lesbian evangelicals who experienced a conflict between

¹⁶ John Fletcher, "Change Is Possible: Exodus and the Opposite of Homosexuality," In *Preaching to Convert: Evangelical Outreach and Performance Activism in a Secular Age*, 262–302, University of Michigan Press, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.4078895.12>, pg. 279.

their sexuality and their faith.”¹⁷ Ex-gay ministries used a “a prayer-and-Bible-study approach” championed by Adams to “heal” parishioners who struggled with same-sex attractions.¹⁸ Because of their belief in the Bible’s divine authority, these parishioners sought to change their homosexual orientation so that they could conform to “God’s design for the heterosexual family.”¹⁹ And while many ex-gays eventually rediscovered Krafft-Ebing’s finding a century earlier of the futility of trying to change one’s sexuality, conservative evangelicals utilized their unfaltering belief in the conflation between homosexuality and choice to argue for the chosen veracity of heterosexual unions.

It was upon the idea that homosexuality was a sin and heterosexuality could be chosen that evangelical opera singer Anita Bryant started the process of politicizing homosexuality in the late 1970s. In January 1977, Bryant’s County Commission for Dade County approved an ordinance that, according to the New York Times, “prohibit[ed] discrimination against homosexuals in housing, public accommodation and employment.”²⁰ Incensed by what she viewed as a law that “gave special privileges to homosexuals,” Bryant launched a grassroots campaign against “militant homosexuals” who wanted to “gain so-called rights and life-style approval.”²¹ In her 1977 book, *The Anita Bryant Story*, which documents her campaign, Bryant claims to derive her authority from the Bible and quotes large sections of it verbatim. She cites Hession and argues that homosexuality is both a sin and a choice. And, though Bryant shares the evangelical belief that she and all people are sinners, she found that those “who are proud to be gay” are “unrepentant sinners,” while those who are ex-gay have been “[led]... to Christ.”²² In

¹⁷ See footnote 16, pg. 278.

¹⁸ See footnote 16, pg. 279.

¹⁹ See footnote 16, pg. 284.

²⁰ “Bias against Homosexuals Is Outlawed in Miami,” The New York Times, The New York Times, January 19, 1977. <https://www.nytimes.com/1977/01/19/archives/bias-against-homosexuals-is-outlawed-in-miami.html>

²¹ Anita Bryant. *The Anita Bryant Story*. Fleming H. Revell Co, 1977, pg. 2.

²² Anita Bryant, *The Anita Bryant Story*, 150-151.

other words, Bryant found the existence of homosexuality itself to mean that an individual did not yet repent his sin, for if he truly repented, he would be an ex-gay heterosexual. The spread of gay rights was then the spread of an unrepentant sin, and Bryant felt morally justified, if not morally obligated, to make its eradication a political issue. By limiting the scope of gay rights through legislation (or inhibiting its spread through lack thereof), Bryant believed that she was doing God's work in limiting sin. Yet, to accomplish her goal, Bryant had to give homosexuality a politicized body that could consolidate support amongst non-evangelical Christians. She did this by linking homosexuality with pedophilia. Naming her campaign "Save Our Children," Bryant exaggerated the statistics of pedophilia amongst homosexual males and "distributed leaflets that tied homosexuals to several recent child abuse cases."²³ While non-evangelical voters might not wish to interfere in the sexual affairs of others, they have a personal stake in protecting their children and families, so Bryant's rhetoric was "designed to appeal to a broad cross-section of potential voters."²⁴ And the voters delivered. The Dade County Commission's gay rights ordinance was put to referendum in June 1977, where it was resoundingly defeated. Springboarding off of Hession's convoluted logic, Bryant made opposition to gay rights a political issue that later became sticking point in the conservative right's social agenda.

Upon seeing the success of the "Save Our Children" campaign and the political clout Bryant had gained as a result of it, California State Senator John Briggs, in a bid for his own power, completely rehomed the Christian interpretation of homosexuality from the theological realm to the political realm. Though only a first-term state legislator in 1977, Briggs was an "aspiring gubernatorial candidate" who believed that launching a "California Save Our Children"

²³ Seth Dowland, "'Family Values' and the Formation of a Christian Right Agenda," *Church History* 78, no. 3 (2009): 606–31. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20618754>, pg. 22.

²⁴ See footnote 23, same page.

campaign would “catapult him into the spotlight and bring him the flood of campaign donations he would need” to secure the seat.²⁵ While Bryant’s rhetoric utilized a conflation between homosexuality and pedophilia to drive political engagement, her motivations were still rooted in a theology — Bryant did not want to spread what she viewed as an unrepentant sin. Briggs’ rhetoric, on the other hand, made little to no mention of homosexuality as a sin, but instead utilized the conflation between homosexuality and pedophilia to argue that homosexuality destroyed the “traditional values” held dear by a multi-denominational social conservative base. Ignoring much of Bryant’s ideology, Briggs played directly off of Bryant’s politically successful rhetoric that homosexuality is anti-children. He launched his eponymous “Briggs Initiative,” which “provide[d] for the removal of any teacher, teacher’s aide, school administrator or counselor who advocates, solicits, encourages, or promotes homosexual behavior” to referendum in California in 1978.²⁶ Like Bryant, Briggs popularized statistics linking homosexual males to pedophilia, and on this basis, claimed that homosexual teachers should be separated from children for the safety of the children. And, even if voters did not buy his pedophilia argument, Briggs further argued that homosexuality played a large part in “the undermining of traditional values” by being an “alternative life style.”²⁷ Nowhere in his initiative does Briggs mention homosexuality as a sin or condemn homosexual acts. In fact, he adopts a position permitting adult homosexual activities by writing, “We don’t question the right of adults to solve problems as they see fit, but we do object to their imposing their solutions on our children.”²⁸ This is sharp departure from any theologically based argument condemning homosexuality thus far, and shows

²⁵ Blount, Jackie M. “CHAPTER FIVE: How Sweet It Is!” *Counterpoints* 367 (2012): 46–60.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/42981383>, pg. 1.

²⁶ https://web.archive.org/web/20060818145437/http://library.uchastings.edu/ballot_pdf/1978g.pdf

²⁷ See footnote 26, same page.

²⁸ See footnote 26, same page.

how fully Briggs positioned homosexuality as a social issue that had consequential, instead of theological, impacts. By centering and expanding on Bryant's methods of political success, Briggs fully shifted homosexuality from a theological issue to a socially political issue that could unite conservatives across denominations.

On a larger scale, conservative evangelical leaders utilized this purely social opposition to gay rights as one of its main "family value" positions, and in doing so, conflated Christianity with anti-homosexuality in the mainstream. Following the successful mobilizations of voters caused by Bryant's and Briggs' gay rights campaigns, conservative evangelicals coupled Briggs' gay rights narrative with the already existing feminism and abortion narratives into a "family values" political narrative. Broadly speaking, "family values" was a "triumvirate of political positions that came to constitute... opposition to abortion, feminism, and gay rights."²⁹ The platform was Christian in the sense that it supported a Christian family unit ideal that, according to Professor Seth Dowland, consisted of "two heterosexual parents, with the husband as the head and, preferably, the primary breadwinner."³⁰ Acceptance of abortion, feminism, and gay rights challenged this ideal, and would consequently "destroy the family." While the "traditional family" ideal had its roots in Scripture, there was plenty of debate within the larger Christian community surrounding Scriptural interpretation of the "proper" family. For example, the Mormon Church cites the biblical story of Abraham to justify polygamy, which falls outside of the "traditional family" purview defined by Dowland. However, the evangelical right's intensely vocal usage of Bible verses as evidence to refute proponents of these three social issues conflated the views of Christianity the religion with the views of its evangelical followers. In fact, so mainstream was the "Christian" belief in and support for "family values" that the platform's

²⁹ Seth Dowland, "'Family Values' and the Formation of a Christian Right Agenda," 3.

³⁰ See footnote 29, same page.

rhetoric united both Protestants and Catholics who sought to “battle jointly societal decay” that stemmed from “abortion, homosexuality, and the destruction of the family.”³¹ During Jimmy Carter’s 1976 run for presidency, he assumed support from both Catholics and conservative evangelicals, despite their historic mistrust of each other, by positioning himself as a “champion of the American family.”³² That a platform bulwarked by Christian “family values,” which held opposition toward gay rights as one of its core components, bridged internal Christian divides and led to a successful presidential election shows its efficacy and mainstream reach. Modern American Christianity, as it has been constructed and diffused in mainstream politics, takes a decidedly anti-homosexual stance that originated from conservative right campaigns against homosexuality in the 1970s.

However, while conservative evangelicals were certainly the loudest voices explaining Christianity’s stance on homosexuality, they were not the only Christian voices trying to parse through the sinfulness (or lack thereof) of homosexuality in light of the APA’s 1973 homosexuality delisting. Many Christian theologians of diverse denominations struggled with the quandary of how to establish both homosexuality as a concept and gay believers within Christian ministries in the 1970s. David Hilliard, writing in the *Cambridge History of Christianity*, writes that as “public opinion in Western societies liberalized on most areas of sexual behaviour” in the 1970s, “Christian churches began to look again at homosexuality” and the debated six main issues internally. These issues were surrounding

- the authority and meaning of those biblical texts that referred to homosexual activity and how they should be interpreted and applied in the contemporary world
- the question of whether it was possible or desirable to seek to change a person’s homosexual orientation or whether this should be seen as a ‘gift from God’

³¹ J. Brooks Flippen, “Carter, Catholics, and the Politics of Family,” *American Catholic Studies* 123, no. 3 (2012): 27–51. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44195421>, pg. 31.

³² See footnote 31, pg. 35.

- the extent to which churches should support legal equality for homosexual minorities in society
- the admission of known gay and lesbian people into church membership and positions of leadership within the local congregation
- whether the church should support, and bless, ‘stable’ same-sex unions
- the ordination of publicly affirmed lesbians and gay men³³

The answers that churches came up with to answer these questions positioned them on a gradient of tolerance to intolerance that correlated strongly with how much each ministry balanced the weight of the idea of sexuality as choice (or lack thereof) against their belief in clear Scriptural teachings. Though popular, the views of conservative evangelicals like Bryant, Dobson, and Hession fell to an extreme on this gradient. Many Christian ministries and theologians, influenced by the idea that homosexuality wasn’t entirely chosen, expressed more empathy for the plight of homosexuals than such as was popularized by popular culture. For example, Christian writer Letha Scanzoni beseeches the Christian academic readers of the *Reformed Journal* to “be attuned to the sufferings of people” for “I cannot imagine what it would be like never to tell anyone my husband and I were married.”³⁴ However, even those theologians who entirely disagreed with Bryant and her faction of conservative evangelicals still believed in the Bible’s divine authority, and consequently had to balance their sympathy for the plight of homosexuals with verses in the Bible that seemed to explicitly call homosexuality a sin. So, the way that gay-sympathetic theologians argued in favor of gay rights was incredibly nuanced as they sought to challenge Biblical authority on homosexuality while still affirming their subservience to Biblical word and obedience to the rest of its terms. Different theologians

³³ Adrian Thatcher et al, “Male and Female.” Chapter. In *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, edited by Hugh McLeod, 9:534–68. Cambridge History of Christianity. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. doi:10.1017/CHOL9780521815000.030.

³⁴ Letha Scanzoni, “On Homosexuality: A Response to Smedes,” *Reformed Journal* 28, no. 5 (May 1978): 7–12. <https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy2.library.illinois.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLA0001829051&site=ehost-live>, pg. 10.

approached striking this balance very differently. Most notably, there were two main approaches taken by gay-sympathetic theologians in the 1970s. The first was a middling approach that sympathized with homosexual suffering, but still held the Bible as the ultimate moral authority; proponents of this approach held that homosexuals ought to be shown grace, but homosexuality was a “disorder” whose affirmation would be “immoral.”³⁵ While Bryant’s stance could be colloquially stated with the classic “love the sinner, hate the sin” phrasing, these middling theologians took the stance of “love the sinner, dislike associating any positive connotation with the sin.” The second approach that was taken by gay-sympathetic theologians was decidedly more supportive and firmly affirmed homosexuality as a valid sexual orientation that could not be changed; it could colloquially be translated into “love the sinner, for we’re all sinners.”

Those of the latter group — fully gay-sympathetic theologians who believed in the immutability of sexual orientation — responded to the rhetoric of Bryant and Briggs by pointing out that many acts were deemed Biblical sins but carried none of the religious stigma associated with homosexuality; consequently, they viewed homosexual unions as just as sexually moral as heterosexual ones. In a sermon in support of gay rights in 1974, Reverend Steven Johnson limited the impact of the sinfulness of homosexual acts by noting that

There are also Old Testament condemnations for people who eat rabbit, clams, shrimp, lobster, and rare steak. And St. Paul bans from the kingdom of God not only homosexuals, but ‘the immoral, idolators, adulterers, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, and robbers’ as well. Doesn’t that pretty well take care of us in some way or another, at some time or another?³⁶

³⁵ Lewis B. Smedes, “A Reply,” *Reformed Journal* 28, no. 5 (May 1978): 12–13. <https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy2.library.illinois.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0001829056&site=ehost-live>.

³⁶ Steven Johnson, *Walls of Ice* (sermon). Adam Matthew, Marlborough, Sex & Sexuality, 1974–1976. http://www.sexandsexuality.amdigital.co.uk.proxy2.library.illinois.edu/Documents/Details/ONE_ASC_B6_F39, pg. 4.

Reverend Jon Dobrer, in a sermon delivered in 1978, echoed Reverend Johnson's point four years later: "The anti-homosexual forces raise the old religious issue — the Bible forbids homosexuality. True, but it also forbids shaving, pork and masturbation. Somewhere in there we are all sinners."³⁷ The Reverends Johnson and Dobrer, like Hession, drew links between homosexuality and sin. However, while Hession placed significant weight on the "sin" of unrepentant homosexuality, the Reverends equated practicing homosexuality with sins that were oft forgotten and consequently widely practiced. While Hession urged homosexuals to struggle against their identity, the Reverends Johnson and Dobrer appear to urge homosexuals to embrace their identity: the sins that they list are those which have long been accepted as inconsequential, so by analogy, the sin of homosexuality is also inconsequential. Dobrer even goes so far to attack Bryant as a "fear monger" who acts if homosexuality "were a choice issue."³⁸ In Dobrer's view, being homosexual is "like being Jewish in the inquisition."³⁹ Because he does not view homosexuality as a choice and saw its sinfulness inconsequential, Dobrer viewed homosexual unions on equal ground to heterosexual ones. However, it's important to note that the Reverends did not directly attack any Biblical verses condemning homosexuality. Just like Hession had to implicitly concede to the science behind the APA's delisting, the Reverends Johnson and Dobrer had to implicitly concede to the point that homosexuality was still a Biblically-ordained sin; they just didn't believe that it was a sin worth lambasting.

Likewise, although they didn't fully support homosexuality, gay-sympathetic theologians who took a middling approach also showed remarkable empathy for gay Christians on the basis

³⁷Jon Dobrer. *Anti-Briggs Sermon by a Unitarian Minister, June 11, 1978*. https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C3175951, pg. 3. The title of this paper is a quote taken from this sermon.

³⁸ See footnote 37, pg. 2.

³⁹ See footnote 37, pg. 2.

of the immutability of sexuality. Lewis Smedes, Professor of Theology at Fuller National Seminary, insightfully notes that

The homosexual who wants to affirm homosexuality is caught within a tragic situation: he/she is anchored in a condition not chosen, but having that condition desires as full and complete a sexual life as anyone else — a life, however, that the Bible judges morally unacceptable. The challenge for the homosexual — a harder one than I can ever imagine facing — is to live Christianly within the boundaries of this burden.⁴⁰

It's clear that Smedes' sympathy draws very much from his belief that sexuality is not chosen.

And, from that basis, he seems to believe that the “sinfulness” of homosexuality is somewhat mitigated: it is a “tragic situation,” something that is “morally unacceptable,” but not something that is inherently wrong or sinful.⁴¹ This is a clear distinction from Bryant's viewpoint. It is important to note, however, that Smedes still does subscribe to the notion that the Bible mandates morality, and consequently believes homosexuality immoral. Yet, unlike Bryant, Smedes does not urge homosexuals to plead for redemption or to not follow through on their attractions, rather, he sees homosexuality as a condition that just is — heterosexuality cannot be chosen. Following Niebuhr, Smedes seems hesitant to assign the label of “sin” to sexuality because sin presumes a level of choice (which is the basis for Christian repentance, forgiveness, and grace), and consequently responsibility for that choice, but attraction and feelings themselves are outside of individual control. Because Smedes both believes in the validity of the decoupling of sexuality and choice given by the APA's delisting and the moral authority given by the Bible, he is left to conclude that homosexuality is a disorder that “is probably more tragic than it is

⁴⁰ Lewis B. Smedes, “The San Diego Decision: Presbyterians and Homosexuality,” *Reformed Journal* 28, no. 8 (August 1978): 12–16. <https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy2.library.illinois.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rth&AN=ATLA0001828472&site=ehost-live>, pg. 15.

⁴¹ See footnote 40, pg. 16.

immoral.”⁴² Though not a resounding statement for gay rights, Smedes was very sympathetic to the homosexual plight.

However, despite, or perhaps because of his sympathy, Smedes and other gay-sympathetic theologians sought to carve out a specific enclave for homosexuality in the hierarchy of sexual morality to liberate it somewhat without overturning other aspects of sexual morality given by the Bible. Following his reasoning that homosexuality was a tragic disorder, Smedes places homosexual unions beneath heterosexual unions of the same caliber, but finds that in certain circumstances, homosexual unions can be placed above heterosexual unions. He defines a rough hierarchy as follows:

- (1) A covenanted homosexual partnership is better than a promiscuous homosexual life-style.
- (2) A covenanted homosexual partnership is not as good as a covenanted heterosexual partnership.
- (3) Any given heterosexual partnership could be worse than any given homosexual partnership. (For example, a marriage of wife-beating brutality is worse than a homosexual partnership of person-respecting love.)
- (4) A promiscuous homosexual life-style is worse than a promiscuous heterosexual life-style.⁴³

Though Smedes somewhat absolves the immorality of homosexuality on the basis of choice (by placing it above heterosexual unions where a partner *chooses* to commit violence), he still conforms to the Biblical understanding of promiscuity as a sin, presumably because one can choose to be promiscuous while one cannot choose to be heterosexual. Even Letha Scanzoni, who took Smedes to task for what she viewed as his lack of homosexual acceptance, delineates between a “moral” form of homosexuality that involved a monogamous, loving homosexual union and homosexual promiscuity. She writes,

⁴² Lewis B. Smedes, “A Reply,” *Reformed Journal* 28, no. 5 (May 1978): 12–13. <https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy2.library.illinois.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLA0001829056&site=ehost-live>, pg. 12.

⁴³ See footnote 42, pg. 12-13.

[T]he behavior of a person who recognizes in himself or herself an unchosen predisposition toward homosexuality, and after much struggle with fears and guilt enters what is hoped will be a permanent union of love, involves a different level of accountability than that of a homosexual person who sets out on a life of cruising and promiscuity, or that of a heterosexual swinger who experiments with homosexual acts “for kicks.”⁴⁴

It's interesting to note that both Smedes and Scanzoni define homosexual unions that imitate Biblically ordained monogamous heterosexual unions to be more moral than other forms of sexual expression. Such a definition allows Smedes and Scanzoni to grant homosexuals leeway for that which they cannot control while still maintaining consistency with unchallenged Biblical principles of sexual morality.

American theologians responded to the APA's 1973 delisting of homosexuality as mental illness very differently in the 1970s. Both gay-sympathetic and conservative evangelicals recognized that the APA's delisting decoupled homosexuality and choice, but while conservative evangelicals responded by linking homosexuality back to choice through a series of equivocations that ultimately resulted in the conflation between Christianity and homosexuality that we see today, gay-sympathetic theologians articulated a new hierarchy of sexual morality that accepted homosexual unions as a valid (though not the most moral) form of romantic and sexual expression. The history of Christianity has always been one of interpretation and reinterpretation through different theological lenses in response to different modern understandings of Biblical truth. Exactly two days ago, President Biden signed the Respect for Marriage Act, which repeals the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act and requires all U.S. governments to recognize the legitimacy of same-sex marriages. Of the proponents of the bill were twelve religious groups and twelve Republican senators, one of whom was directly

⁴⁴ See footnote 34, pg. 11.

influenced by her church's gay rights stance.⁴⁵ Though ex-gay conversion therapy is still around, and Dobson's Focus on the Family still refuses to recognize the legitimacy of homosexual unions, we've come a long way. If you walk through the University of Illinois campus, you'll see that the most visible signs of LGBTQ+ support are the rainbow signs in front of Christian churches of all denominations. Maybe one day acceptance will be so widespread that we will not need these signs of support. "But where sin increased, grace increased all the more."⁴⁶ I have hope.

⁴⁵ Brooke Migdon, "Religious Groups Call on Senate to Pass Respect for Marriage Act," The Hill. The Hill, November 29, 2022. <https://thehill.com/changing-america/respect/equality/3753368-religious-groups-call-on-senate-to-pass-respect-for-marriage-act/>.

Annie Karni, "The 12 Republican Senators Who Voted for the Same-Sex Marriage Law" The New York Times. The New York Times, December 13, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/13/us/politics/republican-senators-vote-same-sex-marriage.html>.

⁴⁶ Romans 5:20 NIV

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