

Facilitator's Guide

**Same-Gender Relationships in the Church:
Seven Theological Viewpoints**

**A study paper prepared for the
Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church**

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Facilitator's Guide by Louise Lawson Johnson

A Facilitator's Guide

Introduction

These materials are designed to promote discussion of a study paper prepared for the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church, *Same-Gender Relationships in the Church: Seven Theological Viewpoints*. The goal is to begin a crucial conversation about an issue that is controversial in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). As Princeton Seminary theologian William Stacy Johnson states in his introduction to the study:

The best way to think of this study is as a survey of some of the theological literature and positions presently influencing the church's thought and action regarding persons in same-gender relationships. The goal is to help church leaders and members clarify what is at stake in recent church debates. To that end, the study provides a critical and constructive treatment of a cross section of opinion. It is "critical" in that every viewpoint considered here is subjected to scrutiny and questioning. It is "constructive" in that it draws out the implications of each of the seven positions for a contemporary theology of human sexuality.... I find elements of truth worth considering in all seven of these positions.... Although it is not logically possible for all seven viewpoints to be correct in every respect, it is also not theologically possible for any one of them to possess a monopoly on the truth. Each position seeks to give an account of Christian truth from a particular perspective. Each is currently being put forward by fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who are seeking to discern the will of God in the Spirit-led interpretation of Scripture. In affirming that there can be elements of Christian truth in all seven positions, one is not thereby committed to some sort of bland "relativism" or "pluralism" in which all viewpoints are equally valid and in which religious and moral truth is not ascertainable. Rather than committing one to "pluralism," a study of this sort actually depends on a belief that God is always at work in the midst of God's people, and that when different Christian perspectives are brought together in Spirit-led dialogue and discernment, the whole that emerges is often greater than the sum of its parts. It is hoped that, through God's grace, the exploration of these seven positions will contribute to mutual understanding as together we seek the peace, unity, and purity of the church.

Your Role as Facilitator

You have agreed to provide leadership for this study in your church or presbytery. Your primary role is to help your group model Christian community as it discusses the issue of same-gender relationships in the church. As facilitator, you are to encourage every member of your group to participate in ways that promote the sharing of ideas, mutual understanding, and respect. The role of a facilitator differs from that of a teacher or instructor as outlined in the table below.

TEACHER/INSTRUCTOR	FACILITATOR
Focuses on the content.	Focuses on the process.
Determines the design, time, and process.	Helps the group come to agreement on design, time, and process.
Shares knowledge, perspective, insights.	Encourages group members to share their knowledge, perspectives, insights.
Lots of air time.	Little air time.
Operates from a firm and fixed design.	Responds to the desires of the group, while keeping them on the subject.
Provides answers to the questions.	Opens up the area under discussion by asking more questions.
Summarizes and advises, sharing the leader's conclusions.	Enables the group to explore, discover, integrate, and assimilate.
Draws upon personal experiences to illustrate ideas.	Invites participants to share and build upon their experiences.
Shares personal gifts.	Stimulates the recognition and sharing of participant's gifts.
Interaction is back and forth between the instructor and the group.	Guides the interaction among group members.
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In preparation for each session, you will need a copy of the study paper and this facilitator's guide. Each participant needs a copy of the study paper for each group meeting. Copies of both can be found on the Web at www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity.

GENERAL SUGGESTIONS

- It is important to create a positive environment in which your group can study, discuss, and share. What this means in terms of physical conditions is that the meeting room should be inviting. It should be well lit, pleasant in terms of temperature, equipped with a black/white board or easel with flip chart, and have adequate numbers of tables and comfortable chairs. Arrange the seating so that participants can see each other's faces rather than each other's backs. Having handy a stack of Bibles is always a good idea.
- One of the goals of this study is to challenge adults to integrate faith with life and to think deeply about how faith in Jesus Christ makes a difference in who we are and how we act in the world. Remind participants that this kind of spiritual wrestling requires that your group be a safe place where issues and viewpoints can be discussed without negative repercussions, and where questions and opinions of all kinds are welcome. Because we are brothers and sisters in Christ, we can have a mutual respect for each other even when we disagree. We can care for each other and show support for each other, even when we cannot fully support each other's ideas.
- Make sure there are extra copies of the study available each time you meet. Encourage everyone to come fully prepared before each session. If there are participants who have not read the material in advance, take 5 minutes at the beginning of the session to allow them to read the author's summary remarks related to the material you are covering, which you will find at the conclusion of the study paper (pg. 98).

About this Study

- These study materials are intended for use in church officer meetings, as curriculum for adult church school, in small group discussions, as the focus of a retreat or workshop, and in presbytery study groups.
- The subject of this study is the variety of viewpoints about same-gender relationships found in the church, but the distinctive feature of this study is the emphasis on how each of the viewpoints imagines God at work in creation, reconciliation and redemption. When the discussion of same-gender relationships is set within a broader theological framework, it is easier to avoid the superficiality of biblical proof-texting. The particular way that each viewpoint handles creation, reconciliation, and redemption gives it its unique shape and definition (see the chart on page 108 of the study paper).

- The study paper is presented in three parts:

Part One: Non-affirming Viewpoints

(Prohibition, Toleration, Accommodation)

Part Two: Critique of the Non-affirming Viewpoints

(Legitimation)

Part Three: Welcoming and Affirming Viewpoints

(Celebration, Liberation, Consecration)

Each of these three parts is prefaced by an introduction that helps to explain the viewpoint(s) under discussion. At the end of each part is a useful chart and short set of discussion questions.

Suggested Formats

Because there are many settings in which this study can be used, flexibility and adaptability are required. The following are suggested formats for various user groups, lengths of study, and contexts. The sample formats range in time commitment and include:

- One sixty-minute presentation
- Two-week study (two 60-minute sessions)
- Three-week study (three 60-minute sessions)
- Four-week study (four 60-minute sessions)
- Six-week study (six 60-minute sessions)
- Eight-week study (eight 60-minute sessions)
- One-day retreat or workshop (six hours)

One-Hour Presentation of All Seven Viewpoints

This format is ideal for groups that want a large amount of information in a short amount of time. Needless to say, this format is not conducive for in-depth study or meaningful discussion. Make sure each person has a copy of the study paper. Ideally, each person should have read the paper in its entirety in advance.

Suggested schedule:

- 5 minutes: welcome and prayer
- 55 minutes: a summary of each viewpoint followed by an illustrative dialogue (*approx. 4 min. per summary; 4 min. per dialogue*)

Allow at least 90 minutes if discussion is added to this format.

The obvious challenge is to do justice to each viewpoint in such a limited amount of time. It is possible to summarize the major points of each position using “Major Ideas to Emphasize in Each Section of the Study” found on page 16 of this guide. These condensed summaries can then be used as a Powerpoint presentation, projected on an overhead projector, or made into handouts. Having this kind of visual aid is particularly effective when the crowd is large. An example of a one-page summary for Viewpoint One is below.

A particularly engaging way to present this material is to follow each condensed summary by the dialogue that illustrates that position (see dialogues below). By using this summary/dialogue format, you can add interest while staying within the 8-minute limit for each viewpoint.

Background: Principles Underlying Non-affirming Beliefs in General

All same-gender sexual behavior is sin; therefore it is wrong to “affirm” such conduct in any way. These conclusions are based upon the following beliefs:

- a judgment that Scripture is clear in prohibiting same-gender sexual behavior
- sexual expression must be limited to marriage between a man and a woman
- arguments from “natural law,” according to which sexual relationships between persons of the same gender are against nature
- centuries of Jewish/Christian moral teaching against same-gender sexuality
- opening the doors to gay and lesbian relationships will undermine the institution of monogamous marriage

Viewpoint One: Prohibition (pg. 19 of study paper)

- All homoerotic *behavior* is an absolute violation of the will of God; some adherents believe that any form of homoerotic *desire* is an expression of perversion.
- Persons who engage unrepentantly in same-gender sex acts should be ineligible to hold church office.
- Within society at large, “heterosexual marriage” should be affirmed and all forms of homoeroticism (including gay marriage or unions) should be discouraged.

Creation: Same-gender sexual expression is not a part of the goodness of creation nor is it a gift of God. Such acts violate nature, undermining the “gender complementarity” visible in the created world.

Reconciliation: To come into right relationship with God, gays and lesbians must repent of their conduct; some would add homoerotic desires; others add a duty to try to achieve a heterosexual orientation through “reparative therapy.”

Redemption: Living a life of redemption requires that one return to one’s “true,” God-given heterosexual nature or remain celibate.

Summary and Critique of this Viewpoint

Strengths: The conclusions follow effortlessly from the major premise, which is that certain forms of homoerotic behavior have been clearly prohibited by Scripture, tradition, and morality. If this is true, then such behavior must not be sanctioned by the church or by society at large.

Weaknesses: Prohibitionists resist allowing the truth of their interpretation to be tested in the light of everything else that we know. There are other alternative readings of Scripture, tradition, and morality, which some prohibitionists either ignore or belittle. Everything rests on deductive reasoning derived from definitions put forward in advance. Little attention is paid to empirical or scientific study, except where it supports the prohibitionist stance.

Dialogues Illustrating Each Viewpoint
requires a female (F) and a male (M) reader

Viewpoint One: Prohibition

- F:** Did you hear about Ted and Alice's son, Brantley? When he was home over Christmas, he told them he was gay.
- M:** Oh, no! That's horrible news. What a terrible shock. Brantley wasn't raised that way, that's for sure.
- F:** No kidding. Ted and Alice had him at church every time the doors opened. I took Brantley through confirmation class myself. How can he not see that being gay is not God's will?
- M:** Sin is sin, whether Brantley recognizes it or not. I think we need to pray that he will ask God to remove all homosexual desires from his life.
- F:** Amen!

Viewpoint Two: Toleration

- M:** It's just a tragedy about Brantley's being gay. I don't understand why some people are wired that way. Think of how hard that must be, not only for Ted and Alice, but also for Brantley.
- F:** There go any hopes for a grandchild. I know Ted and Alice had hoped Brantley would marry that cute girl he dated in college. Now he's destined to be single and celibate, and Brantley is such a people person.
- M:** It's just a crying shame.

Viewpoint Three: Accommodation

- F:** You know, I just can't get Brantley off of my mind. Ever since he was a little boy, he's been different. I couldn't put my finger on it then, but now it makes sense.
- M:** What I hate to think about is Brantley being all alone in the world. After all, human beings were created to be in relationships with one another. My life surely would have been different without you in it.
- F:** Different?! Don't you mean "impoverished?"
- M:** Yes, right! Of course. But that's my point. Would it be so horrible if Brantley were to find a partner with whom to share a committed life of love and faith?
- F:** Well, that would sure beat the alternative of the singles bar scene with its promiscuous lifestyle.

Viewpoint Four: Legitimation

- M:** Brantley's situation bothers me at another level besides just the social one. Brantley is a person of deep faith, and I think he would make a great church officer. But according to our current church polity, if Brantley is ever in a relationship with someone—even a committed and exclusive relationship—he is disqualified from ordained service to the church.
- F:** That's not fair. That makes Brantley a second-class citizen.
- M:** Precisely. No matter what we think about Brantley's being gay—and frankly, I'm not sure *what* I think—there is a basic justice issue involved.
- F:** I can see that. Even if having a gay orientation or lifestyle is a sin, we're *all* sinners. On most holidays, I'm an unrepentant glutton myself. I don't believe we are entitled to isolate some folks for special exclusion and others for special privilege in the church.

Viewpoint Five: Celebration

- M:** Last year, one of my co-workers, Joan, came out of the closet. She said she was tired of hiding who she was. Now she talks openly about being a lesbian. She says God made her that way and it's nothing to be ashamed of. She even speaks of being lesbian as God's good gift.
- F:** Wow. But isn't she lonely, and won't she miss getting married and having children?
- M:** She is in a committed relationship with her partner, Jean Ann. She and Jean Ann have been together for over 5 years—it's just that they were in the closet until now. They are planning to adopt a child together in the future.
- F:** Sounds like they see no difference morally or ethically between their situation and that of a heterosexual married couple.
- M:** Correct. They believe their gay identity is a fact to be claimed and even celebrated—not denied. Joan said it's time for them to live openly with integrity and to stop hiding in the closet. Since Joan and Jean Ann are both Christians, they hope one day to have their union blessed by the church.

Viewpoint Six: Liberation

- F:** Talking about Joan and Jean Ann reminds me of the research that my cousin is doing at the University on gender roles. He says there are folks who contend that gender itself is a social construct, and that what we associate with being masculine and feminine is nothing more than learned behavior. The evidence is that what is considered masculine and feminine varies quite a bit from culture to culture and from age to age.

- M:** That's interesting. But one thing that *doesn't* vary from culture to culture and from age to age is our sexual equipment. There is a pesky appendage whose absence or presence determines a lot, if I'm not mistaken!
- F:** Believe it or not, you *are* mistaken. Most of us don't grow up learning this, my cousin said, but in about one in every thousand births, a baby is born with indistinguishable genitalia. In other words, the baby's gender can't be determined by looking at the sexual equipment, as you called it. There are also people whose psychological identity does not match their biological bodies—they have a female awareness, but a male body—or vice versa.
- M:** Wow. How does all of this figure into the notion of all people being created in the image of God?
- F:** Well, it certainly calls into question the assumption that there is only male and female, and that all people can be expected to be heterosexual without question. Apparently the human family is far more complex than that.

Viewpoint Seven: Consecration

- M:** I've been thinking a lot about this whole gay union thing. What would it look like for the church to bless the monogamous unions of gay people like Joan, Jean Ann, and Brantley? How would consecrating their relationships hurt anyone?
- F:** You mean for the church to just drop all sexual standards entirely? I think that is an awful idea. Sexual ethics has already gone to hell in a hand basket in our society. Just look at all that smut on TV, in movies, and on the radio—not to mention what's on the Internet!
- M:** Wait, you misunderstand. I'm not talking about the church abandoning sexual standards. Quite the contrary. I'm talking about the church holding up the same sexual standards for gay unions as they do for heterosexual couples who marry. Why shouldn't Brantley and a gay partner or Joan and Jean Ann have their unions blessed by the church and recognized as a committed covenant if they are in a mutually exclusive relationship that they intend to be lifelong?
- F:** I'll have to admit, the church seems to gladly bless the unions of countless people who have been unrepentantly "living in sin," as we used to call it, without batting an eye.
- M:** Consecrating gay unions is a far cry from endorsing a promiscuous, "anything goes" sexual ethic. As a matter of fact, it is a call to sexual accountability and commitment, values that the church has always stood for. Why should the church object to that?

Two-Week Study (two 60-minute sessions)

This format, while somewhat more relaxed than the one-hour presentation, still covers a great deal of information in a small amount of time. It will give an overview of the positions, but discussion time will be limited. Because it is necessary to cover seven viewpoints in two sessions, each session will need to rely on the author's summaries found at the end of the study. As facilitator, you have added helps in the "Major Ideas to Emphasize in Each Section of the Study" on page 16 of this guide.

Session One: Non-Affirming Viewpoints and their Critique

Prohibition, Toleration, Accommodation, Legitimation

Session Two: Welcoming and Affirming Viewpoints

Celebration, Liberation, Consecration

Suggested Lesson Plan

5 minutes: Welcome and prayer

20 minutes: Participants divide into either two or four groups for study

2 groups: Group A reviews and summarizes the Prohibition and Toleration Viewpoints. Group B reviews and summarizes the Accommodation and Legitimation Viewpoints (*10 minutes to process each viewpoint*)

4 groups: Each group takes one viewpoint to review and summarize (*up to 20 minutes on its viewpoint*)

The author's summaries found at the conclusion of the study can help each group maximize its time. The goal is for each group to be able to present its viewpoint to the whole group.

20 minutes: Subgroups present their viewpoint(s) to the whole group

(Each viewpoint needs to be presented in 5 minutes or less)

15 minutes: Discussion of all viewpoints

Questions at the end of each part of the study can be used here; facilitators can add the strengths and weaknesses of each view contained in the "Major Ideas to Emphasize in Each Section of the Study" found on page 16 of this guide.

Three-Week Study (three 60-minute sessions)

The advantage of this format is that each session can be devoted to a single part of the study. There is more time to treat each viewpoint and more time for meaty discussion.

Session One: Non-Affirming Viewpoints

Prohibition, Toleration, Accommodation

Session Two: Critique of Non-Affirming Viewpoints

Legitimation

Session Three: Welcoming and Affirming Viewpoints

Celebration, Liberation, Consecration

Suggested Lesson Plan A

5 minutes: Welcome and prayer

20 minutes: Participants divide into 2 groups for study (*Session 3 requires 3 groups*)
Group A reviews and summarizes one viewpoint; Group B reviews and summarizes the other.

The author's summaries found at the conclusion of the study can help each group maximize its time. The goal is for each group to be able to present its viewpoint to the whole group.

10 minutes: Subgroups present their viewpoint(s) to the whole group
(*Each viewpoint needs to be presented in 5 minutes or less*)

25 minutes: Discussion of both viewpoints (*20 minutes in Session 3 for 3 viewpoints*)

Questions at the end of the first part of the study can be used here; facilitators can add the strengths and weaknesses of each view contained in the "Major Ideas to Emphasize in Each Section of the Study" found on page 16 of this guide.

Suggested Lesson Plan B

5 minutes: Welcome and prayer

30 minutes: Participants study and summarize the content of the viewpoints together

25 minutes: Discussion of viewpoints

Four-Week Study (four 60-minute sessions)

This format allows for a session devoted to the Introduction of this study. The introduction asks some practical and penetrating questions and forces us to recognize that this issue is first and foremost about the lives of real people. It also clarifies some terms and sets the rest of what follows in a theological framework.

Session One: Introduction

(Follow the format in “Major Ideas to Emphasize in Each Section of the Study” on page 16 of this guide.)

Session Two: Non-Affirming Viewpoints

Prohibition, Toleration, Accommodation

Session Three: Critique of Non-Affirming Viewpoints

Legitimation

Session Four: Welcoming and Affirming Viewpoints

Celebration, Liberation, Consecration

- Use Suggested Lesson Plan B for the first session.
- Choose between Lesson Plans A and B in the remaining sessions (see Lesson Plans A and B in format for three-week study on page 12).

Six Week Study (six 60-minute sessions)

This format has the advantage of allowing for in-depth study and discussion of each of the viewpoints. Whereas the time constraints of the other formats mean that participants will need to rely on the author's summaries at the end of the study, this plan allows participants to explore the text of the study paper itself.

- Session One:** Introduction and Viewpoint One (Prohibition)
- Session Two:** Viewpoint Two (Toleration); questions at end of Part One
- Session Three:** Viewpoint Three: (Accommodation)
- Session Four:** Viewpoint Four (Legitimation); questions at end of Part Two
- Session Five:** Viewpoint Five (Celebration); Viewpoint Six (Liberation)
- Session Six:** Viewpoint Seven (Consecration); questions at end of Part Three

Eight-Week Study (eight 60-minute sessions)

This format is the most ideal of all. It allows for each segment of the study paper to be dealt with in its own session. Facilitators can use the "Major Ideas to Emphasize in Each Section of the Study" (page 16 of this guide) as talking points. The various sessions can be structured using one of the suggested lesson plans in this guide.

- Session One:** Introduction
- Session Two:** Prohibition
- Session Three:** Toleration; questions at end of Part One
- Session Four:** Accommodation
- Session Five:** Legitimation; questions at end of Part Two
- Session Six:** Celebration
- Session Seven:** Liberation
- Session Eight:** Consecration; questions at end of Part Three

One-Day Retreat or Workshop (6 hours)

This format is ideal for groups of 12 or more people. The room should be set up so that participants sit in table groups of 6-7 persons. The table group is the primary discussion group. It would be useful for each table group to have newsprint for recording the group's thoughts. It will also be helpful for each table to choose a spokesperson to serve as reporter during group feedback times.

- 9:00 5 min. – Welcome, opening prayer/singing
 10 min. – Introduction of each other
 5 min. – Setting/reviewing ground rules for responsible discussion
 40 min. – Introduction to the study using the format in “Major Ideas to Emphasize in Each Section of the Study” (pg. 16)
- 10:00 Break
- 10:15 Non-Affirming Viewpoints (*Prohibition, Toleration, Accommodation*)
 30 min. – group divides into three subgroups; each studies a different viewpoint
 15 min. – groups report summaries of their learnings
 15 min. – whole group responds to questions at end of Part One
- 11:15 Break
- 11:30 Critique of Non-Affirming Viewpoints (*Legitimation*)
 30 min. – same subgroups; each studies this viewpoint
 15 min. – groups report summaries of their learnings
 15 min. – whole group responds to questions at end of Part Two
- 12:30 Lunch
- 1:15 Welcoming and Affirming Viewpoints (*Celebration, Liberation, Consecration*)
 30 min. – group divides into three subgroups each studies a different viewpoint
 15 min. – subgroups report summaries of their learnings
 15 min. – whole group responds to questions at end of Part Three
- 2:15 Review the day. Offer further insights, discoveries.
- 3:00 Closing devotional/hymns/prayers

Major Ideas to Emphasize in Each Section of the Study

Introduction to the Study (pg. 3)

1. The crux of the matter is the lives of real people. We all know gay and lesbian people; some of us may know gay and lesbian Christians, some of whom are in committed relationships. What does the gospel have to say about these people and the nature of their relationships? These are issues that cannot be dealt with in the abstract, so let's put a human face on it. Let's ask ourselves the following key questions:
 - Imagine that your child, a sibling, another family member, or a friend is a lesbian woman or gay man. How do you think about the sexual identity of this person? How do you relate to this person? Is your stance to affirm and support this person or to rebuke and correct?
 - Imagine that this person tells you about finding a life partner. You hear about how wonderful and life-giving this newfound relationship is, and how more than anything in the world these two now want to give themselves to each other. In short, they tell you they plan to commit themselves in an exclusive, lifelong, covenantal union, and then they ask for your response.
 - So what *is* your response? And what should be the *church's* response? Should we express disapproval or approval? Should we criticize or congratulate? When they invite us to a ceremony aimed at blessing their life together, do we attend or not? What is our attitude if we attend? At this turning point in their lives, to what extent do we allow ourselves to enter into the joy of their celebration?
 - Further questions arise. Suppose this couple adopts a child. What will be our posture toward the child and this new family? Do we rightly consider them a family? Do we allow the child to be baptized? If so, do we allow both of the adults to stand with their child? When presented with these circumstances, a Roman Catholic cardinal in Canada recently said that he would deny baptism to the child. Is this response the most faithful to the gospel?
 - Regarding the pastoral care the church extends to its members, suppose that one of the two suddenly is killed in a tragic accident. What shall our response be then? What language will we use to interpret what is happening to this couple? To their child? To the body of Christ of which they are a part? (pg. 7)

2. There are two things that are problematic in terms of our future discussions of this issue in the church: (1) the term *homosexual*; and (2) the church's focus on ordination prior to a discussion about the morality of same-gender, committed, exclusive relationships.

- “The continued use of words like *homosexual* and *homosexuality* can only mislead us. They mislead us into assuming there is a unique type of person—a ‘homosexual’—and a peculiar sort of condition—‘homosexuality’—that are the same in biblical times, in contemporary times, and in all times. . . . It is certainly true that there have been people with homoerotic desires in all times and places, and in all cultures, races, and religions. The way such same-gender desire works itself out practically and culturally, however, has differed dramatically through the centuries. Hence, there is no such thing as the single, monolithic abstraction we call ‘homosexual-ity.’ Instead, there are many ‘homosexual-ities,’ which differ profoundly according to time, place, social condition, and culture.” (pg. 4)
- By beginning with the question of ordination, the two presbyteries in 1976 were asking for churchwide recognition of *gay leadership* when a majority in the church had yet to recognize *gay identity*. (pg. 5)

What this suggests is that, in following the lead of the wider culture, the church in 1976 may inadvertently have had its questions exactly backwards. For society at large, civil rights for gay individuals (the presenting question of the 1970s) logically had to precede the question of civil rights for gay relationships (the presenting question today). Yet things sometimes work differently in the church. Because of the priority the church places on the exemplary character of ordained leadership, the logic may actually work the other way around. For the church the question of the legitimacy of gay relationships logically precedes the question of the integrity of gay leadership. If the church were to create an appropriate context for same-gender relationships, then the question of gay leadership would quickly fall into place. (pg. 6)

3. The focus of this study will be on the variety of viewpoints about same-gender relationships in the church, but the distinctive feature of this study is the emphasis on how each of the viewpoints imagines God at work in creation, reconciliation and redemption. (Definitions are below; refer people to the helpful chart on page 11 of the study paper).

- This Trinitarian drama has traditionally been conceived as an unfolding work of creation, reconciliation, and redemption. Through the act of **creation**, God thought of us before we were and brought us into being. To believe in creation is to know our absolute dependence upon God for all that we are and all that we are called to be and do. To know that we human beings are creatures is to recognize both the limits placed upon our lives and the possibilities that creaturely existence places before us. It is also to search for the purposes God has for us as creatures. One of the main issues in a study such as this is to discern where homoerotic desire or sexual orientation fits within the scheme of creation. Some see same-

gender sexual orientation as a violation of creation, while others point out that same-gender sexual desire seems to be a fairly consistent feature of creation as we know it.

- The divine act of **reconciliation in Christ** presupposes that human beings have sinned and are in need of restoration of a right relationship with God and with one another. The term “reconciliation” is one of many biblical words that speak about what God does to save us from our rebellion and sin. Other words include atonement, ransom, victory, and transformation. Reconciliation is in the first instance a gracious act of God, but it also calls forth a human response. This response includes faith, repentance, and living a life of holiness. A key question in the discussion concerning gay and lesbian Christians is how this reconciliation becomes real in lived experience. It needs to be remembered that reconciliation includes both a vertical and a horizontal dimension. We are to be reconciled both to God and to one another.
- Through the gracious act of **redemption in the Holy Spirit**, God enables us more and more to become what God would have us be. It is sometimes not easy to see the difference between these two “R” words: reconciliation and redemption. Reconciliation is something that was accomplished in the past by the gracious act of God in Jesus Christ and that is working itself out still today. By contrast, redemption in the New Testament is more of a future-oriented reality. Therefore, when we speak of redemption, we are asking what sort of life we need to be living to anticipate and “live into” the fullness that God desires for each one of us. To speak of redemption is to speak about the ethical life one must live by grace in order to become what God would have us be.

* * * * *

With these understandings in mind, we return to the question that is before the church today and that this study seeks to address:

Where do persons who are baptized members in good standing of a Christian congregation, whose sexual orientation is firmly established, and who desire to enter into an exclusive, committed, lifelong, same-gender relationship with another baptized Christian find their place within the fellowship of the church? More importantly, where do such persons find themselves within the unfolding gospel drama of creation, reconciliation, and redemption?

Part One: Non-Affirming Viewpoints

General Non-affirming Principles

Some Christians believe that all same-gender sexual behavior is sin, and therefore they believe it is wrong to “affirm” such conduct in any way. These beliefs are based upon:

- a judgment that Scripture is clear about prohibiting same-gender sexual behavior; (pg. 14)
- an argument that the church’s theology of marriage requires that Christians limit sexual expression to marriage between a man and a woman; (pg. 16)
- arguments from “natural law,” according to which sexual relationships between a man and a woman are natural and those between persons of the same gender are against nature; (pg. 17)
- centuries of Jewish and Christian moral teaching that condemns same-gender sexuality. (pg. 17)

Modern social concerns include the belief that faithfulness from gay men is unrealistic, and a worry that opening the doors to gay and lesbian relationships will undermine the institution of monogamous marriage.

Viewpoint One: Prohibition (pg. 19)

- All homoerotic behavior is an absolute violation of the will of God. Strict adherents of this position believe that not only the behavior itself but also any form of homoerotic desire is an expression of something perverted.
- Within the church, all prohibitionists agree that persons who engage unrepentantly in same-gender sex acts should be rendered ineligible to hold church office.
- Within society at large, the prohibitionist concern about gays is part of a larger concern for upholding traditional morality, including concerns about sexual promiscuity (especially among teenagers), the decline in marriage rates, the rise in divorce rates, the dramatic increase in out-of-wedlock births, and the legalization of abortion. Prohibitionists feel that support of gays and lesbians also lends symbolic support to the decline of marriage and other social ills. Some express concern about a “homosexual agenda” that would undermine the family. Society should affirm “heterosexual marriage” and discourage all forms of homoeroticism. It is not appropriate to allow gay marriage, say prohibitionists, because this would only encourage more people to adopt a gay lifestyle. A logical corollary is that any move to loosen the marital standards of our culture places the vitality of our civilization at risk.

Creation - Prohibitionists are unsure about the category of “sexual orientation.” They view homoerotic acts as a perverse and deliberate choice for which persons must be held accountable. Same-gender sexual expression is not a part of the goodness of creation nor is it a gift of God. Such acts violate nature and undermine the “gender complementarity” visible in the created world.

Reconciliation - To come into right relationship with God, prohibitionists insist that gay and lesbian people must repent of their conduct. Many prohibitionists would also say that repentance of homoerotic desire is necessary, and some would argue that there is a duty to seek reparative therapy to try to “change” one’s homosexual orientation.

Redemption - Living a life of redemption requires that one return to one’s “true,” God-given heterosexual nature or remain celibate.

Summary and Critique

- *Strengths*: The conclusions follow effortlessly from its major premise, which is that certain forms of homoerotic behavior have been clearly prohibited by Scripture, tradition, and morality. If this is true, then such behavior must not be sanctioned by the church or by society at large.
- *Weaknesses*: Prohibitionists resist allowing the truth of their interpretation to be tested in the light of everything else that we know. There are other alternative readings of Scripture, tradition, and morality, which some prohibitionists either ignore or belittle. Everything rests on deductive reasoning derived from definitions put forward in advance. Little attention is paid to empirical or scientific study, except where it supports the prohibitionist stance.

Viewpoint Two: Toleration (pg. 25)

- The 1978 Statement was both traditional and innovative. It was innovative in pushing the church beyond blanket condemnations and toward a more welcoming stance toward gay and lesbian persons as church members. It was traditional in that it kept in place the significant features of the categorical prohibition approach, only now focused more narrowly on the issue of ordination. People in open gay or lesbian relationships were not to be ordained.
- The 1978 Statement is not the only statement of the church on this issue; there were four different studies between 1977 and 1979 in predecessor Presbyterian denominations. (pg. 25)
- *Departure from prohibitionist position*: The 1978 Statement clearly embraced the contemporary category of “sexual orientation,” a psychological term that refers to the predominant focus of a person’s erotic desires. For a small minority of people, a same-gender orientation is experienced as a stable and enduring feature of their

lives. Their attraction to persons of the same gender is as powerful and feels as “normal” as the attraction of others to persons of the opposite gender. In short, sexual orientation is experienced as a given rather than a choice. The document uses language that suggests it is a condition of life. In wrestling with whether the church should “value it, disvalue it, or find it morally neutral,” the document simply states, “it is not God’s wish for humanity.” In other words, gay or lesbian identity was not to be condemned, though gay or lesbian conduct was still to be prohibited.

- *Departure from prohibitionist position:* The advocacy by the 1978 Statement of civil rights for gay and lesbian persons. It called for the decriminalization of “homosexual and heterosexual acts in private between consenting adults” so long as there is no “public offense, personal injury, or exploitation.” It also called for an end to discrimination in “employment, housing, and public accommodation.” Ironically, it specifically exempted church employment practices from this precept of non-discrimination.
- *Adopts prohibitionist biblical exegesis:* The 1978 Statement adopts a single interpretation of each biblical passage. It does not even acknowledge the existence of counter-interpretations. The rhetorical effect was to shut down alternative viewpoints and shore up a single exegetical position for the church.
- *Relationship between the 1978 Statement and G-6.0106b (Book of Order) – (pg. 28):* From a theological point of view, the key focus of both Definitive Guidance and G-6.0106b is upon the interplay between conduct and repentance. Definitive Guidance (and the 1993 Authoritative Interpretation) referred to withholding ordination from persons guilty of “unrepentant homosexual practice.” G-6.0106b spoke similarly of not ordaining those “refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice that the confessions call sin.”

Creation – The 1978 Statement insisted that same-gender sexuality should no longer be condemned as a “perversion” of the created order. Rather, it should be viewed compassionately as a “tragic condition,” a burden that unfortunately the gay or lesbian person must bear. It is “tragic” in the sense that a homosexual orientation is something unfortunate that happens to a person and not of the person’s own doing. Even though one is not responsible for the condition, one is still responsible for what one does with the condition. This posture draws a clear distinction between sexual orientation on the one hand, and sexual practice on the other. Orientation is to be acknowledged and accepted, while practice is to be rejected.

Reconciliation - Whereas the emphasis for prohibitionists is upon creation, the emphasis for the 1978 Statement shifts slightly toward reconciliation. In contrast to the prohibitionist call for gay and lesbian people in particular to repent, Definitive Guidance demanded a “double repentance”: Straight people must repent of “homophobia,” which is an irrational animus toward gay people; gay

people, even though they are not responsible for their gay orientation or *identity*, must repent of their gay *behavior*.

Redemption - It is not clear under the 1978 Statement whether there is any such thing as a redeemed sexuality for gay and lesbian people. The teaching appears to be that gays and lesbians should not feel guilty about their sexual orientation, but that they should refuse to act upon it. They should accept their sexual orientation as a tragic burden they are forced to bear, and they should respond to this burden by living a life of Stoic abstinence.

Summary and Critique

- *Strengths*: A toleration position attempts to hold together a commitment to certain traditional biblical understandings about sexuality with a recognition of new understandings about sexual orientation. It also tries to avoid the blanket denunciations that have sometimes characterized prohibitionist rhetoric.
- *Weaknesses*: The principal instability is the bifurcation between orientation and practice, identity and behavior. The net result is that gay and lesbian persons are told they are respected, but not affirmed, in their identities. They are told not to be ashamed of their desires, but also not to act on them. They are welcomed as church members, but not as ordained leaders; they are told to be visible in worship, but to hide in personal matters. Gays and lesbians are being told that their position is no different from that of a heterosexual person who, for whatever reason, is without a marriage partner. Yet this way of thinking is predicated on a hidden double standard. Even if a heterosexual person is presently without a mate, he or she still may nurture the hope of a union the church will gladly bless. This is not so for the gay or lesbian person under the 1978 Statement. He or she is told to renounce any such hope.

Viewpoint Three: Accommodation (pg. 36)

- This position agrees with the teaching put forward by the 1978 Statement and G-6.0106b, but it also holds that the church needs to extend a gracious accommodation to persons who are doing the best they can to live their sexual lives with integrity. Some same-gender relationships may deserve a qualified acceptance. Though they are disobedient in form, they may be obedient in substance. That is, there may be many virtuous aspects of such relationships even though they depart from the perfect will of God.
- *Biblical texts supporting this position* – Romans 1 and John 8 (pg. 36): Romans 1 is a diagnosis of the human condition (general human sinfulness) by reference to the Gentile homoerotic practices of the Greco-Roman world. We are all sinners in need of God's mercy and grace. It is a misreading to understand this text as saying that homoeroticism is something that especially provokes God's wrath. In John 8,

Jesus refuses to condemn the woman caught in adultery. Jesus made a pastoral move toward her. Had he followed the letter of the law, he would have allowed her stoning to occur. Stoning was true to certain Levitical laws, but untrue to countless other texts having to do with God's mercy to sinners.

- Many Presbyterians have found it necessary to modify the church's teaching to allow for practical, pastoral exceptions, even though they still agree in principle with the 1978 Statement (and its progeny, G-6.0106b) that same-gender sex acts are not God's best intention for humanity. Because they believe that committed same-gender partnerships are morally superior to promiscuity (the lesser of the evils), they are convinced, on humanitarian and pastoral grounds, the church must find ways to accommodate—and perhaps even to encourage—committed same-gender partnerships.
- Perspectives offered by Thielicke (pg. 36), Gillespie (pg. 39), Hunsinger (pg. 39). The reflections of Thielicke, Gillespie, and Hunsinger are all consistent with the view that real life involves complex calculations of better and worse options.

Creation - This position tends to agree with the 1978 Statement that a same-gender sexual orientation is a tragic burden to bear. But it seeks to provide a gracious way for that burden to be lived out, namely, in an exclusive, committed partnership.

Reconciliation - The welcoming, but non-affirming stance needs to be made more stable by recognizing that repenting of gay desires is not easy for those with a same-gender sexual orientation. Even though committed gay relationships are disobedient in form, they can be obedient in substance.

Redemption - The church needs to give gay and lesbian people a greater hope than a Stoic denial of desire, a denial that amounts to non-voluntary celibacy. Pastorally speaking, a committed, exclusive, lifelong partnership is morally better than promiscuity, and better than living a life of loneliness. Accommodationists will sometimes extend blessing to gay couples, but only in private. They usually are not in favor of the public blessing of same-gender relationships.

Summary and Critique

- *Strengths*: This viewpoint acknowledges that all are sinners in need of the mercy and grace of God. It advocates reaching out in compassionate solidarity to gays and lesbians as fellow children of God. Many people who are prohibitionists in principle nevertheless choose to operate within the framework of accommodation.
- *Weaknesses*: Strict prohibitionists may object that this viewpoint leads to unacceptable compromises of biblical admonitions. Gays and lesbians themselves may consider it condescending to have their commitments characterized as the "lesser of the evils." They may also wonder why

accommodationists are only willing to affirm the elements of virtue in exclusive, committed gay and lesbian relationships but not to officially affirm or bless the relationships themselves.

Part Two: A Critique of Non-Affirming Viewpoints

General Remarks about this Critique

The legitimization position offers strong criticisms of the three non-affirming viewpoints. Viewpoint Three—Accommodation—has already begun to provide an internal modification posed from within the framework of the 1978 Statement. It seeks to live with the standards of the 1978 Statement, but to interpret those standards with pastoral sensitivity. But Viewpoint Four—Legitimation—takes a step or two outside the framework of the 1978 Statement in order to critique it from the standpoint of fundamental fairness.

Viewpoint Four: Legitimation (pg. 46)

- The policy of welcoming gays and lesbians into the church, but denying them access to ordained leadership, is unjust, creates a division of first and second class citizens in the church, and constitutes a denial of the equality and unity to which all are entitled in Christ.
- *Biblical text supporting this position* – Gal. 3:28 (pg. 46): It is not just one's status as male *or* female that is declared irrelevant for one's identity in Jesus Christ; it is also the foundational reality of gender itself—the pairing of male *and* female—that has no ultimate hold on the new community seeking to live out the gospel. Invoking “gender complementarity” or even “gender identity” as a fundamental basis for drawing distinctions within the body of Christ has no support in the gospel according to Gal. 3:28. Gender roles and expectations need no longer determine the ultimate identity of the baptized, for all are now “Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.”
- From a justice point of view, the idea that one can be “welcoming, but not affirming” is self-contradictory, drawing a distinction in theory that does not work in fact. To be non-affirming is itself to be un-welcoming. To single out one group of people for special scrutiny, based on their sexual identity alone, is to turn them into second-class citizens.
- The targeted prohibition against ordaining gays and lesbians upsets the long-standing prerogative of local governing bodies to make determinations about fitness for office. Many feel there are gays and lesbians in the church whose overall “manner of life” *is* a demonstration of the gospel, and that governing bodies should have the constitutional duty and responsibility to discern such matters in making decisions about ordination. (pg. 48).

- Legitimation advocates believe heightened scrutiny of gay and lesbian people exposes the church to the charge of hypocrisy. Ironically, the current policy, at least as it is expressed in the 1978 Statement, adopts a lower standard of justice within its own fellowship than prevails in the society at large. Gay and lesbian church officers and even non-ordained employees are sometimes “outed,” with the result that they lose their jobs. On the other hand, the church seems to “wink” at heterosexual conduct that clearly falls short of the “fidelity and chastity” standards. (Capetz case, pg. 50).
- Christian justice derives from God’s justice. Our God is one who reaches out to embrace all people of every sort, especially those whom the world excludes. The founding narrative in Scripture is of God’s activity to bring release to the captives (Exodus) and deliverance to the despised and rejected (Resurrection). Advocates of justice see the drama of creation, reconciliation, and redemption as a story of ever-widening grace. For this reason, Princeton theologian Daniel Migliore insists it will not do to cobble together a theology of sexuality from a few isolated texts of Scripture. Instead, one must look to the overarching biblical story of God’s faithful, committed, covenantal love for God’s people. In keeping with this vision, “the central principle of a Christian understanding of sexuality is fidelity in self-giving and other-affirming love.”

Creation - Legitimation advocates take various positions on the theological status of same-gender desire. Many agree with the 1978 Statement that same-gender desire is a departure from God’s highest and best intention for humanity, but they argue that this departure is no different from any other departure from this ideal.

Reconciliation - In response to the church’s demand that gays and lesbians repent, legitimation advocates counter that the church should not only repent of its homophobia, as called for by the 1978 Statement; the church must also repent of singling out gay and lesbian people for special scrutiny.

Redemption - Legitimation advocates urge the church to aspire to a hope for redemption that is more than the Stoic resignation to fate suggested by the 1978 Statement. By grace, the church needs to hope and strive for a world in which our differences no longer make a difference.

Summary and Critique

- *Strengths*: According to the doctrine of justification by grace, everyone has the same need of grace; we all must rely on the mercy and justice of God for that grace; and God’s justice demands that all are entitled to equity and fair treatment. Equity and fair treatment in the church means that the privilege of ordination should be extended to all who have the gifts for ministry, irrespective of race, ethnicity, gender, or gender orientation.

- *Weaknesses*: Even if some persons are being unfairly excluded from church office, many in the PC(USA) do not think of ordination as a “right” that can be demanded in the cause of justice. Instead, it is a “privilege” that must be conferred for the benefit of the church. True church leadership, many Presbyterians feel, should be servant leadership and not a leadership that draws attention to itself or is politicized. The church is not excluding non-celibate gays and lesbians from eligibility for church office by its own authority, but by the authority of Scripture. It may be true that the church has not been even-handed in its exercise of discipline. Yet, just because the church has failed to discipline some does not mean it should refrain from disciplining anyone.

Part Three: Welcoming and Affirming Viewpoints

General Remarks About Welcoming and Affirming Viewpoints

These viewpoints argue that to be consistent with everything we know about the gospel and everything we know about the lived experience of gay and lesbian people, the church needs to craft a new teaching that can guide the people of God into a new day. They believe that we can and *should* foster a new situation in the church in which practicing homosexual persons would be free to obtain the church’s blessing upon their committed, covenantal, exclusive unions, as well as on their gifts for service and ministry through ordination. Proponents claim that these changes are not a contradiction of the gospel, but a logical extension of everything the gospel teaches.

There are four arguments from opponents that welcoming and affirming positions must address:

1. The biblical witness against homoerotic activity is unanimous and clear:

- *Leviticus 18:22, 20:13* (pg. 56): These two texts prohibit *some*, but not *all*, acts of same-gender intercourse. There is nothing here that prohibits holding hands, touching, kissing, or other forms of erotic intimacy. Nor is there any prohibition whatsoever of homoerotic affection between women. From the grammar of the text, we know it only prohibits anal sex between men and remains silent about other forms of sexual expression. The claim that the text imposes a per se, or absolute, ban on all forms of homoeroticism is simply not true.
- *Galatians 3:28* (pg. 59): This text tells us something about how life in the covenant community is to be lived. Having been freed from slavery (Gal. 4:1, 7, 22, 23, 24, 25, 30, 31; 5:1, 13), and given the status of God’s children (literally, “sons”: Gal. 4:4, 5, 6, 7, 22, 23, 30), we are freed for a life lived in the Spirit (Gal. 4:6). Indeed, it is “for freedom that Christ has set us free” (Gal. 5:1). So astonishing is this spiritual freedom, that “if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law” (Gal. 5:18). This does not signify freedom *from* the law, but freedom *for* the law, as reinterpreted in the power

of the Spirit. Quoting Lev. 19:18, Paul considers that “the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal. 5:14). How do we know when we are loving our neighbor as ourselves? The interpretive key is whether we are following the “flesh” or the “Spirit” (Gal. 5:16-26). The fruit of the Spirit is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things” (Gal. 5:22-23). By contrast, the works of the flesh are “fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these” (Gal. 5:19-21a). So then, in considering the case of committed same-gender unions, we need to ask whether such unions exhibit the “fruit of the spirit” or the “works of the flesh.” Are persons in committed, exclusive, same-gender relationships exhibiting behavior more like the second list of vices or more like the first list of virtues?

- *1 Corinthians 6:9-10* and *1 Timothy 1:9-10* (pg. 60): These texts are most likely targeted at a widespread practice in the Roman Empire, namely, male prostitution. This sort of exploitative activity is not in keeping with the Christian faith. But to equate such promiscuous behavior with the conduct of gays and lesbians committing themselves in exclusive, covenantal unions is not only inaccurate; it is morally offensive.
- *Romans 1:18-32* (pg. 61): Paul is referring here to the hedonistic homoeroticism of the Greco-Roman world as an example of what happens when human beings idolatrously turn away from God. Given what we know about the Roman slave trade, surely Paul was right. Yet, what is at issue before the church today is not hedonistic and idolatrous homoeroticism, but just the opposite. It is Christian gays and lesbians who want to commit themselves to one another, not against, but in the sight of God. Regarding this possibility, the New Testament is silent.
- *Jesus and the Fulfillment of the Law* (pg. 63): In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus’ first act of healing is aimed at making clean a person whom the prohibitions of Leviticus had declared unclean. The same such reversal is going on in Jesus’ second act of healing in Matt. 8:3-13. In other words, just as the previous healing story pertained to one category of Levitical uncleanness—“leper”—so this one may have to do with another category—a man who has sex with another man. The point is not that Jesus is endorsing homoerotic activity. The point is that Jesus includes those who stand under the stigma of homoeroticism as part of that great reversal brought about by God’s reign in which sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes receive salvation before those who think themselves righteous (Matt. 21:31).
- *Acts 10—15* (pg. 65): Some Christians ask whether the movement of the Holy Spirit among gay and lesbian people is analogous to the early church’s experience of Gentiles among whom God was performing “signs and wonders.” Critics have countered that there is no analogy between being a Gentile, which is involuntary, and homoerotic practice, which one chooses to engage in voluntarily. Critics have also countered that listening to the Spirit never contradicts the plain meaning of Scripture. In response, those who seek

to be both welcoming and affirming point out that the proper analogy is not one of voluntary or involuntary behavior, but one of the presence of the Spirit. Moreover, they reply that Gentile inclusion required the church to countermand the plain meaning of the circumcision texts. Covenantal love between committed gays and lesbians, on this view, has been kindled by the same Spirit that inaugurated the Gentile mission.

2. Marriage is an “order of creation”

- Speaking of marriage as an “order of creation” suggests there is only one divinely ordained structure for the family. In fact, the organization of marriage and family life has varied significantly over time. Ancient kinship systems and extended families were not configured in the same way as the modern “nuclear” family. Nor has the Christian tradition always held up marriage and family life as the highest norm. To the contrary, up until the Reformation, celibacy was recommended for the most devout, and it is still required for priests in the Roman Church and bishops in Eastern Orthodoxy. All of this underscores how misleading and problematic is the talk of so-called divinely sanctioned “orders.” It is more helpful to speak of a dynamic divine “ordering.” What is most objectionable is the misrepresentation of the basic teaching of the gospel. The language of “orders of creation” poses a false separation between what God *has done* creating the world and what God *is doing* in the work of redemption.

3. Natural law

- The argument from “nature” appears nowhere in the biblical text itself. In fact, there is not even a word for “nature” in the Hebrew language. Christians should base their theology not upon “nature” but upon the creative and redemptive power of God. Not only do general arguments from nature fail but so do arguments based on so-called “gender complementarity” and on human anatomy. Using the concept of “gender complementarity” to interpret Scripture is reading into the Bible something that is not there. In standard histories of sexuality, pre-modern societies are characterized as thinking in terms of gender hierarchy, not gender complementarity. In short, the notion of “gender complementarity” is a modern concept, not a biblical concept. While the natural fecundity of “male and female” is always assumed in Scripture, affirming the necessity of procreation for the sustenance of life is not the same thing as valorizing the “mechanics” of human sexual anatomy and faulting gays and lesbians because their body parts are somehow wrong, or because their unions cannot produce progeny.

4. Jewish and Christian moral tradition

- The Jewish and Christian traditions have not been as monolithically opposed to homoeroticism as prohibitionists have insisted. Evidence suggests that our forebears allowed for a wider range of acceptable forms of same-gender affection. If the prohibitionist claim is that sex should be confined to marriage, then why not create a marriage, or marriage-like context in which gay and lesbian relationships can be blessed?

Viewpoint Five: Celebration (pg. 71)

- Advocates of this position argue that God wants gays and lesbians to celebrate the love they have found in their committed relationships, just as married couples do. This affirmation goes beyond the accommodation position. It argues that committed gay and lesbian relationships should be viewed not just as the lesser-of-the-evils, but as a positive good.
- The hallmark of the celebrationist position is the admonition that gay and lesbian people need to put aside the self-loathing that society has taught them to feel. They must learn not only to accept their sexual orientation, but to embrace and affirm it.
- For many gay and lesbian people, the desire for a partner of the same sex is an enduring feature of their identity. And, as is the case with heterosexual marriage, what most homosexual people desire is not just the sex act, but a deep and lasting relationship with another person. If this is true, then for the church to tell persons with an exclusively homosexual orientation they should abstain or become heterosexual is not only misguided, but it is profoundly cruel, and a denial of their basic humanity.
- When gay and lesbian persons order their sexual lives faithfully through exclusive, committed, monogamous relationships, then the church's message that gays and lesbians should repent or feel ashamed is out of place.

Creation - A gay or lesbian sexual orientation is not something to be scorned; rather, it is something to be accepted as God's good gift. It is neither a perversion nor a tragedy, but an integral part of who gays and lesbians are. Most celebrationists believe people experience sexual orientation as a "given," fixed, and natural part of life, rather than as a choice.

Reconciliation - The first reconciliation needed by gays and lesbians is to overcome the internalized homophobia that society has instilled within them. In other words, gays and lesbians need to be reconciled to the goodness of their own same-gender orientation. The experience of "coming out" to oneself and to others is a way of saying "yes" to the God-giveness of one's sexual orientation and the God-giveness of the diversity of creation itself.

Redemption - To be redeemed, for celebrationists, is to enter into the joy of celebrating one's God-given gay or lesbian identity and to be delivered from the unjust condemnation of an anti-gay society. Many celebrationists are bold to claim that the fidelity gay and lesbian persons show to the church, even in the midst of persecution, constitutes a transformative witness to the gospel.

Summary and Critique

- *Strengths*: One of the strengths of the celebrationist viewpoint is that tapping into the core biblical belief that creation is good provides balance to the tendency of some prohibitionists to turn sexuality into something "dirty." Celebrationists take what they believe to be a particular "fact" of creation—sexual orientation—and make it normative for a redemptive Christian ethics. In other words, because one cannot help one's sexual orientation, one must be entitled to celebrate it.
- *Weaknesses*: Not all celebrationists have included monogamy among the ethical norms for sexuality. This leads advocates of the other viewpoints to wonder, rightly or wrongly, whether the broad umbrella set up by celebrationists is too broad. Why should the church modify its standards to conform to those of a culture that operates by a different set of values? If the church were to accommodate, or perhaps even affirm same-gender relationships, why should it give its blessing to unions that are anything less than exclusive, monogamous, and intended to be for life? If there is to be a single standard for all, then why is the standard not monogamy?

Viewpoint Six: Liberation (pg. 77)

- Liberationists for the most part are *social constructionists*. They emphasize that no matter what the biological basis of sexuality, same-gender orientation is culturally conditioned and has varied widely in different times and places.
- Liberationists are concerned to move beyond the binary oppositions of "straight/gay" or "heterosexual/homosexual." For liberationists, gender is a variable reality that does not fit neatly into oppositional categories.
- One of the goals of the liberationist perspective is to promote compassion and justice for all individuals who struggle with gender issues. Liberationists have also championed the concerns of bisexual and transgender people. Within the realm of legal scholarship, they have been concerned that the strategy of appealing to the fixed nature of sexual orientation to gain legal rights for gay people may have the unwanted side effect of causing society to look upon gender variable persons with pity, rather than respecting the integrity of their life choices.

Creation - Liberationists want to problematize the claim of a fixed order of creation that dictates a clear-cut definition of what is legitimately male and female. The very existence of gender-varied persons contests the idea that we can neatly divide the world up into categories of male and female, or gay and straight. Accordingly, liberationists insist that we read the biblical accounts of creation with a critical eye. Since gender is a performance in which people are guided by the scripts society imposes upon them, we need to pay attention to the way in which the mechanism of cultural conditioning operates, even in Scripture. Since gender is a social construct that varies from culture to culture, we must refrain from treating the practices and perspectives of biblical times as though they were easily portable into our own.

Reconciliation - Reconciliation is about coming into right relationship with God and one's fellow human beings. For liberationists, one of the chief ways this happens is by standing in solidarity with the poor, the outcast, and the oppressed. For gender liberationists, this includes solidarity with gender-varied persons. Further, not only must gays and gender-varied persons put aside society's negative stereotypes; of us must recognize that our gender categories, especially the binary opposition between gay and straight, homosexual and heterosexual, are social constructs that can operate in oppressive ways.

Redemption - For liberationists, the vilification and condemnation of gays and lesbians is part of an elaborate social construction of reality. That these negative evaluations are constructions means they can be de-constructed and re-constructed. Therein is hope. One pathway toward re-construction is the adoption of a new usage of the word, "queer," a word often used in a derogatory and offensive way of gay people. Today, many gay and lesbian persons have donned the label "queer" as a matter of pride.

Summary and Critique

- *Strengths*: The strength of the liberationist position is its passionate concern for those who reside on the margins of society—including not only sexual minorities in general, but also those who may reside on the margins of the gay and lesbian community itself. The crux of the liberationist position is that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons need to be freed from the social expectations of binary gender categories.
- *Weaknesses*: Some have suggested that claiming gender as socially constructed is really nothing new, and they wonder whether appeal to highly abstract academic categories actually helps people or merely creates an in-house language spoken only by the elite. Also, the liberationist movement in its approach to gender has so far been more deconstructive than constructive. It has emphasized "liberation from" more than "liberation for." As times goes on it will be interesting to see whether the liberationist position develops a constructive vision of its own that takes root in the Christian church, or

whether its main role is one of offering a critique that serves to keep the other viewpoints honest.

Viewpoint Seven: Consecration (pg. 88)

- This position makes a biblical and theological case not merely for *affirming* exclusive, committed, same-gender relationships, but also for *consecrating* them, i.e., for extending God’s blessing to them within the context of the church. According to this view, something more is needed than merely welcoming gay and lesbian people into the church as individuals. The church should also provide a place for committed gay and lesbian relationships within the rhythm of its life and worship.
- Marriage is not primarily an order of creation, but an order of redemption. Biblical texts that support this claim are Gen. 2:18 and Eph. 5:25-27 (pg. 88). In Genesis, the first “marriage” has more to do with redeeming a situation that is “not good” than with shoring up an already secure “order of creation.” The fact that the marriage covenant is an order of redemption is also clear from the New Testament; in Eph. 5:32, marriage is spoken of as a great “mystery” that pertains to the redemptive relationship between Christ and the church.
- Marriage is a means of grace. The pivotal question, then, is not whether we risk violating creation by allowing gays and lesbians to commit themselves to one another in the church. The real question is how the church can justify withholding from gays and lesbians this means of grace, which has meant so much to so many.
- The consecrationist position bears a certain similarity to the earlier viewpoint of accommodation, but with a critical difference. Both approaches attempt to extend acceptance to gay and lesbian couples. Yet most accommodationists, while being pastorally accepting, are not willing to extend the church’s blessing to gay couples—or, at most, would do so only in private. Consecrationists, by contrast, would create a public affirmation in analogy to marriage. Some would even expand the definition of marriage to include gay and lesbian couples.
- Once a context is created within which gay and lesbian persons may live out their commitments with the full blessing of the church, then the ordination of such persons no longer presents a problem.
- *Consecrationists also hold some things in common with celebrationists and with prohibitionists.* If the celebrationist position emphasizes a “welcoming and affirming” stance, the consecrationist position emphasizes a stance that is simultaneously “welcoming, affirming, and *ordering*.” It shares with the non-affirming positions, including prohibitionism, a concern for the moral structuring of human experience. The consecrationist position also shares with traditionalists a high view of life within the church as a means of grace. Because it shares so

much with both the non-affirming and affirming positions, the consecrationist approach may have potential to serve as a bridge between them.

Creation - For consecrationists, the goodness of sexuality depends on the context in which it occurs. A same-gender sexual orientation is not to be condemned, but affirmed when rightly ordered.

Reconciliation - The reconciliation that is ours in Christ does not merely accommodate us, but it reaches out to embrace and transform us. In addition, we must not view salvation as something pertaining merely to the individual, but our relationships with one another are means of grace, especially if covenantally-conceived. In all our relationships, we should do honor to the identity each of us acquires in baptism.

Redemption - Consecrationists share the celebrationist concern that gays and lesbians find wholeness and healing for the wounds society has inflicted upon them. Yet, rather than celebrating *sexuality* as God's good gift, consecrationists urge us to celebrate *people* as God's good gifts and to regulate our sexual lives accordingly. Therefore, the emphasis should shift from sexuality to relationality. In all things, we should regulate our lives so as to embody God's purposes and give God the glory.

Summary and Critique

- *Strengths*: There is potential for “consecrationism” to become a bridge position that would bring affirming and non-affirming positions together. To provide common ground, consecrationists would ask non-affirming positions to shift their view of marriage as an order of creation to marriage as an order of redemption. This would allow room to affirm relationships that are covenantally ordered, (i.e., the covenantal ordering of committed, exclusive, gay and lesbian relationships) and on that basis offer affirmation of their unions. By the same token, consecrationists would ask celebrationists to move from affirmation to order, (i.e., from affirmation of gay relationships generally to providing an intentionally covenantal order within which those relationships can find a holy purpose).
- *Weaknesses*: A problematic issue that the consecrationist viewpoint raises is how the church would create a balance between consecrating gay and lesbian relationships, were it to choose to move in this direction, and preserving the consciences of those who would disagree with such a move.