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## RESPONDING TO PRO-GAY REVISIONIST TALKING POINTS

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Not long ago, I attended the Reformation Project national conference, which is part of a larger movement committed to reforming the church's traditional views on homosexuality.<sup>1</sup> My goal was simply to meet people and learn about the movement from the inside. Along with worship, testimonies, and lectures, there were multiple ninety-minute sessions focused on helping people rebut biblical arguments against homosexuality and to make the most compelling case for the compatibility of Christianity and same-sex relationships. These sessions were led by Reformation Project president Matthew Vines and author and professor James Brownson.

Once these sessions began, it was clear to me that Vines and Brownson were not touting rehashed arguments. Gone were the claims that Jonathan and David were homosexual. And gone were the arguments that Jesus healed a centurion's male lover (Luke 7:10). They emphasized that the kind of homosexual behavior the Bible prohibited was exploitative or excessive, unlike the kinds of loving same-sex relationships we "see" today. Ultimately, their goal is to convince Christians that they can affirm both the full authority of Scripture and committed, monogamous, same-sex relationships.

To persuade traditionalists to adopt the revisionist position, and to equip Christians to help reform the church from the inside out, the Reformation Project suggests ten "Talking Points." Vines and Brownson spent considerable time teaching each of these points at the conference, and then attendees were assigned a small group

to practice them through role-play. Since there is not space to answer all ten points, and some of them have been dealt with elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> I will focus on five key ones.<sup>3</sup>

**Talking Point 1: “Experience shouldn’t cause us to dismiss Scripture, but it can cause us to reconsider our interpretation of Scripture.”**

**Talking Point Summary:** It is important that we not elevate our experience over Scripture. While Scripture instructs us not to rely entirely on our experience, it also warns us not to ignore it altogether. For instance, in Matthew 7:15–20, Jesus warned against false prophets. He taught that good trees bear good fruit and bad trees bear bad fruit. He gives a simple test for discerning false prophets: “By their fruits you will know them.” Since traditional Christian teaching on homosexual behavior brings harm to gay people (depression and suicide, for instance), then it must not be biblical. By contrast, embracing monogamous same-sex relationships brings “good fruit” to gay people, and so it must be right. These experiences should cause us to reconsider our traditional interpretation of Scripture.

**Response:** Since Vines believes this is a question of interpretation, not biblical authority, the question is a matter of what the text *means*. If the larger context of Matthew 7 is taken into consideration, it becomes clear that bad fruit is “everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them” (v. 26; all Scripture citations from the ESV). And good fruit is “everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them” (v. 24). In other words, *good fruit is characterized by obedience to Christ and to God’s commands; bad fruit is sin*. Christians who hold to the traditional teaching are not producing bad fruit, since they are obeying God’s commands.

The reality is that there are many issues of orthodox teaching that can cause considerable hardship in people’s lives. Imagine the amount of distress and anger that would be caused if people followed the biblical guidelines on marriage and divorce (Matt. 19:3–12; 1 Cor. 7). Millions of Christians would experience angst, stress, depression, and frustration over what they believe is an unreasonable demand to remain married to someone they’ve fallen out of love with. Do we have the authority to change biblical teaching because our experience renders it difficult to live? It is hard to imagine Jesus and Paul adopting such an approach.

Experience can certainly cause us to reconsider our interpretation. But it cannot lead us to adopt a view that denies the plain meaning of the text.

## **Talking Point 2: “Celibacy is a gift, not a mandate.”**

**Talking Point Summary:** Celibacy is a gift that should not be forced on anyone. Genesis 2:18 says that it is not good for man to be alone, and in the New Testament, Jesus says celibacy can be accepted only by those to whom it is given (Matt. 19:11–12). Paul says he prefers all to be celibate, but recognizes that people have different gifts (1 Cor. 7:7). Thus, requiring celibacy for all gay Christians violates this teaching, which the Christian tradition has affirmed for two thousand years.

**Response:** While we should not minimize the genuine struggle those with same-sex attraction often have to remain chaste, this argument fails on two fronts. First, while celibacy *may* be a gift in some cases,<sup>4</sup> it is mandated in others. For instance, a person not appropriately divorced may not remarry (Matt. 19:9). And what about the single Christian man who never finds a wife? Even if we do not have the “gift,” each of us is called to be sexually pure in such circumstances.

Second, this point equivocates on “lonely” and “alone.” Nowhere in the creation account story are we told that the man is *lonely* and in need of *companionship*. Rather, God’s verdict is that he is *alone* and in need of a *helper*. What does he need a helper for? To “fill and form” the entire planet.

Genesis is making an objective point about the man’s incompleteness, that is, his inability to populate the earth, not about his subjective experience of loneliness, which requires a companion. Besides, Jesus, Paul, Jeremiah, and John the Baptist were all celibate, but not necessarily lonely.

## **Talking Point 3: “The New Testament points toward greater inclusion of gender and sexual minorities, including those who do not fit neatly within binary categories.”**

**Talking Point Summary:** In his 2001 book *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals*, William Webb argues that Christians should adopt a “redemptive-movement hermeneutic” that focuses on broad trends in Scripture. While biblical teaching on women and slavery may seem harsh by modern standards, the Bible moves in a liberating direction towards love, equality, and compassion relative to the original culture. By comparison, says Webb, biblical teachings on homosexuality move in a more restrictive direction, which

indicates the prohibitions are transcultural. However, according to Vines and Brownson, the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–39) offers a counterpoint to Webb, and provides an important precedent for inclusion of sexual minorities in the church today. In the Old Testament, God extended His blessings primarily through procreation, but now he extends it through personal faith in Christ.

**Response:** The Mosaic Law did prohibit eunuchs from certain religious privileges, as well as other people (Deut. 23). As demonstrated in the case of the Ethiopian eunuch, these restrictions are removed with the dawn of the new covenant. So does this mean God accepts sexual minorities *just as they are*? The acceptance of the eunuch was in fulfillment of a prophecy written eight centuries earlier by Isaiah: “For thus says the LORD: ‘To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off’” (Isa. 56:4–5; all Scripture citations from the ESV).

God clearly now invites *all* people into the kingdom, including eunuchs, but they must “choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant.” In other words, in the new covenant, God invites all people to turn to Him in repentance and join His kingdom.

John Oswalt sums up the essence of this passage in Isaiah, and the implications of the conversion of the eunuch in Acts:

*Significantly, the message concerns the outcast persons: the son of a foreigner and the eunuch. This in itself should give these persons a sense of dignity and worth. They are told not to depreciate themselves. Others might do it, but they are not to acquiesce in it. God will not cut them off; they are not lifeless and fruitless. These words are a concrete expression of the limitless grace of God. Those who seek him (55:6) in sincerity as indicated by turning from their own wicked ways and thoughts (55:7) to the blessed ways and thoughts of God (55:10–11) will find themselves included no matter who they are.<sup>5</sup>*

While there is a movement to accept “sexual minorities” into the kingdom of God, there is no liberalization of the moral standards for sex and marriage that God first revealed in Genesis 1 and 2. In fact, as Webb observes, the restrictions Jesus gave actually move in a more restrictive direction than the broader culture (e.g., Matt. 5:27–32).

**Talking Point 4: “Sodom and Gomorrah involved a threatened gang rape, not a loving relationship.”**

**Talking Point Summary:** The attempted gang rape in Sodom is radically different than the kind of mutual, loving, faithful same-sex relationships we see today. The rest of Scripture refers to inhospitality, arrogance, and violence as the sin of Sodom, not sexual immorality. And the “sexual immorality” and “unnatural desire” mentioned in Jude 7 refers to lusting after angels, not humans of the same sex.

**Response:** The judgment against Sodom could not have been a result of the attempted gang rape, for God had already judged the city *prior* to the arrival of the angels (Gen. 18:20). The sins of Sodom certainly included inhospitality, arrogance, and violence, but none of these are capital crimes under the Mosaic Law. Homosexual sex, though, was a capital offense (Lev. 20:13).

After describing various sins of Sodom, such as pride and prosperous ease, Ezekiel 16:50 says, “They were haughty and did an abomination before me. So I removed them, when I saw it.” There is only one sin singled out in the Holiness Code as an abomination—homosexual behavior (see Lev. 18:22; 20:13). The people of Sodom committed many sins including arrogance, inhospitality, violence, *and* likely homosexual behavior.

**Talking Point 5: “Marriage is about keeping covenant with our spouse as a reflection of Christ’s love for the church.”**

**Talking Point Summary:** Ephesians 5:21–33 is a foundational biblical text on marriage. As this text portrays, marriage is essentially about commitment, which involves keeping our covenant with our spouse as a reflection of God’s covenant with His own people. Same-sex couples can do this just as effectively as heterosexual couples.

**Response:** Commitment is not the primary point of this passage, although it is important. Marriage is specifically portrayed as a *gendered* institution with husbands and wives, not merely “spouses.” In Ephesians 5:31, Paul refers back to the creation account as the normative pattern for God’s covenant with humanity, which is

specifically about Christ as the groom and the church as the bride. To ignore the gender component of marriage is to violate the design of marriage in Genesis 1 and 2, which is the basis for Paul’s analogy.

Revisionist scholars have both a strategy and a specialized message to persuade this new generation that God blesses same-sex relationships. Many in the church are not prepared to answer these “new” arguments. Still, there are no persuasive reasons to abandon the plain meaning of Scripture as it has been understood for roughly two thousand years. And yet we must be ready with an informed answer so we can lovingly “contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3).

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## NOTES

- 1 See: <http://www.reformationproject.org/>. My friend Alan Shlemon from Stand to Reason joined me at the conference. We spent time debriefing the conference afterward, and so I owe many of my insights here to him.
- 2 See Kevin DeYoung, *What Does the Bible Really Teach about Homosexuality?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), and Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001).
- 3 These Talking Points are found in the Reformation Project 2014 D.C. Conference Program, pages 22 to 44. I have chosen to change the number of each talking point for simplicity in this article, but the content is unaltered. Unless otherwise stated, all quotes are from this program.
- 4 If celibacy is a gift to the church, but not a *spiritual* gift, then the entire revisionist argument fails, since no one would have it uniquely as a spiritual gift and hence everyone—gay or straight—must refrain from sexual activity until marrying someone of the opposite sex.
- 5 John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, Chapters 40–66 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 457–58.