

How Churches Must Move Forward on LGBTQ Debate

The debate taking place within churches across denominational lines regarding the inclusion of LGBTQ individuals and their relationships is more than familiar by now.

On one side, there are traditionalists arguing in favor of maintaining the church's position of recognizing marriage and celibacy as the only licit options for Christians.

On the other side, there are revisionists calling for the expansion of the church's traditional sexual ethic to include LGBTQ people.

Judging by the [varied responses](#) to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's [Illumination Project](#), it is clear that angst and frustration exists on both sides of the debate.

Depending on one's perspective, the report either went too far or did not go far enough.

In his February 2018 EthicsDaily.com [column](#), Colin Harris wisely suggests that the committee's report be viewed as a "guide for ongoing conversation." A transition rather than a period at the end of sentence.

If we are to continue along this path, perhaps it would be fruitful to step back and examine the trajectory of the conversation to this point as well as the terms in which it is taking place.

Revisionists call for the welcome and inclusion of LGBTQ individuals and their relationships, assuming those relationships are characterized by fidelity and lifelong commitment. Consider one way this argument plays out.

First, revisionists appeal to the doctrine of the Trinity. They argue that the Triune God is a divine, unified community of beings that displays relationality, mutuality and the sharing of love.

Humans, created in the image of God, are called to reflect these qualities by sharing mutual love with others.

Second, revisionists argue that humans express love through sexuality. It is through sexuality that God invites humans into relationship with others in order that love might be shared.

From this perspective, requiring LGBTQ individuals to remain celibate represents a barrier to the expression of love.

Third, revisionists appeal to Jesus, who is described as the one who broke down barriers to inclusion and sought to bring the marginalized into the fold.

If the church is to follow Jesus' example, revisionists argue, she should welcome and affirm LGBTQ people and their relationships.

Finally, revisionists choose to read Scripture through the lens of God's ever-widening inclusion and acceptance.

For example, God's covenant began with the family of Abram and was eventually extended to the Gentiles. In similar fashion, the church should reflect God's expanding love by affirming LGBTQ people.

Based on these arguments, revisionists assert that the debate over the inclusion of LGBTQ people is primarily about love's expression and welcoming the outcast.

By contrast, traditionalists argue in favor of maintaining the church's historic position by defining marriage as a lifelong, monogamous relationship between a man and a woman.

First, traditionalists argue that God set the parameters for marriage with the

creation of the first couple in Genesis. Marriage requires sexual differentiation and monogamy.

Second, relying primarily on the creation stories from Genesis and the books of the law, the traditionalists argue that heterosexual, monogamous marriage is the only place that the Old Testament considers acceptable for sexual expression.

Sexual acts that fall outside this parameter are sinful in a way parallel to other sexual sins mentioned in the Old Testament, such as heterosexual promiscuity or pedophilia.

Third, traditionalists assert that the definition of marriage found in creation is affirmed in the New Testament, where it becomes a metaphor for Christ's relationship with the church.

Finally, traditionalists assert that the biblical witness consistently denounces sexual relationships that do transgress the bounds of marriage. The inclusion of LGBTQ people amounts to rejecting the plain meaning of the Bible.

Thus, for traditionalists, the debate over the affirmation of LGBTQ people and their relationships is concerned with the authority of Scripture.

What is striking is not what is included in these two positions, but what is missing in the discussion.

For example, the revisionist account struggles to make sense of two key parts of the creation stories: sexual difference and procreation.

A theological explanation of sexuality must account for the description of humans created in the image of God as male and female (Genesis 1:26-27).

The traditionalists also have their shortcomings. Their account relies heavily on a doctrine of creation.

Theologically speaking, creation is not an independent category; it is connected to

the fall, redemption and eschatology in the grand narrative of God's action in the world.

A theological account of sexuality must be able to explain how the coming of Christ alters the church's understanding of sex and marriage; in other words, why Christians are not required to marry and have children.

As it stands, the debate presents two mutually exclusive options.

From the traditionalist perspective, it is a choice between submitting to or rejecting the authority of Scripture.

From the viewpoint of the revisionists, the choice is between welcoming a more just, loving future for the outcast or retreating to the traditional, archaic position of the past.

It is clear that the debate cannot be solved while couched in these terms.

This discussion is not primarily about the authority of Scripture: those who believe the Bible versus those who do not. This is a disagreement taking place between Christians.

It's also not a question of either clinging to a tired, obsolete past or leaving the dark ages of tradition, institution or anything else that slows the wheels of "progress" as we march into the light of a more just and equitable future. Christians are those who have inherited an "old, old story."

If the conversation is to continue, the more pressing questions concern the ways in which Scripture is deployed to discuss issues pivotal to sexuality and marriage as well as how our understanding of sex and marriage has been altered by the passing of time.

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