

WASHED AND STILL WAITING: AN EVANGELICAL APPROACH TO HOMOSEXUALITY

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Abstract: *Many same-sex attracted Christians will find themselves pursuing lives of faithful celibacy in the absence of any diminishment of their attractions. In order to help them flourish under these conditions, evangelical churches should pursue at least three avenues of assistance. First, churches should offer robust biblical affirmation of the celibate vocation, encouraging committed single believers to understand their celibacy as a calling. Second, churches should offer concrete, practical guidance on how to live the celibate life. And finally, churches should promote practices of spiritual friendship and kinship, in which single same-sex attracted Christians can be reminded that romantic partnerships are not the only place to give and receive genuine love.*

Key Words: *Homosexuality, same-sex attraction, celibacy, singleness, friendship.*

In 2010, I published a book titled *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality*.¹ The book contained elements of theology and biblical exposition, but it also belonged in the genre of memoir—“theological memoir,” as my publisher called it—insofar as it aimed to reflect on the meaning of my life as a single, sexually abstinent, same-sex-attracted Christian believer.

At the time I began writing the manuscript for that book, I intended to try to fill a gap in existing literature on the topic. I was conscious of how my personal narrative put me out of step with many of my fellow Christians. On the one hand, I was not able to locate myself in what the Princeton Seminary theologian William Stacy Johnson calls the “celebration,” “liberation,” or “consecration” paradigms, according to which committed same-sex sexual unions should be affirmed as good, presented as paradigms of social justice in the struggle against inequality, and fully blessed and sanctified in the churches.² As I wrote,

My story is very different from other stories told by people wearing the same designation—“homosexual Christian”—that I wear. Many in the church—more so in the mainline denominations than the evangelical ones, though that could soon change—tell stories of “homosexual holiness.” The authors of these narratives profess a deep faith in Christ and claim a powerful experience of the Holy Spirit precisely *in* and *through* their homosexual practice. According to these Christians, their homosexuality is an expression of holiness, a symbol and con-

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¹ Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

² William Stacy Johnson, *A Time to Embrace: Same-Sex Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 46.

duit of God's grace in their lives. My own story, by contrast, is a story of feeling spiritually hindered, rather than helped, by my homosexuality. Another way to say it would be to say that my story testifies to the truth of the position the Christian church has held with almost total unanimity throughout the centuries—namely, that homosexuality was not God's original creative intention for humanity, that it is, on the contrary, a tragic sign of human nature and relationships being fractured by sin, and therefore that homosexual practice goes against God's express will for all human beings, especially those who trust in Christ.

On the other hand, though, I was equally unable to locate myself in the paradigm of "deliverance from" or "diminishment of" my same-sex attractions. Again, to quote my book: "Unlike some, I have never experienced a dramatic, healing reversal of my homosexual orientation. In other words, God's presence in my life has not meant that I have become heterosexual." Although I did not and still do not want to dispute that some same-sex-attracted persons experience what have been described as "significant shifts on a continuum of change" and end up marrying a spouse of the opposite sex,³ I *did* want to testify that such shifting had not been (and still has not been) my own experience. I have remained exclusively attracted to members of my own sex. "So," I wrote,

this book is neither about how to live faithfully as [a sexually active gay Christian] nor about how to live faithfully as a fully healed or former homosexual. J. I. Packer, commenting on Paul's hopeful word for sexual sinners in 1 Corinthians 6:9–11, says: "With some of the Corinthian Christians, Paul was celebrating the moral empowering of the Holy Spirit in heterosexual terms; with others of the Corinthians, today's homosexuals are called to prove, live out, and celebrate the moral empowering of the Holy Spirit in homosexual terms."⁴ This book is about what it means to do that—how, practically, a non-practicing but still-desiring homosexual Christian can "prove, live out, and celebrate" the grace of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit *in homosexual terms*.

Such a project involved me in several interrelated pursuits. In the first place, I had to give some account of the rationality and plausibility of traditional Christian sexual ethics: that marriage is the lifelong, covenantal union of one man and one woman (in accordance with the witness of OT and NT, read canonically); that any sexual conduct outside of that marital bond is proscribed; and that same-sex sexual acts, therefore, are morally wrong in themselves, not merely when they are accompanied by exploitation or violence (as Paul's creational theology in Romans 1 indicates). But, second, I also had to give some account of why I did not therefore opt for trying to change my sexual orientation; why, in more technical language, I did not pursue some strategy of "repair" for my same-sex attractions. And, third, I then

³ On this, see Melinda Selmys, *Sexual Authenticity: An Intimate Reflection on Homosexuality and Catholicism* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2009); idem, *Sexual Authenticity: More Reflections* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2013). For the language of "significant shifts," see Stanton L. Jones and Mark A. Yarhouse, *Ex-Gays? A Longitudinal Study of Religiously Mediated Change in Sexual Orientation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007).

⁴ J. I. Packer, "Why I Walked," *Christianity Today* 47 (January 21, 2003): 46.

had to try to explain what a “third way” might look like—a way that did not simply “affirm” my sexuality but also did not try to escape from it: in short, I had to describe my life of discipleship to Christ as a life that was both sexually abstinent, or “celibate,” and also same-sex-attracted, or “gay.” I did my best to describe in precise terms the shape of such a life—how it involved experiences of loneliness, doubt and questioning, ongoing battles with shame and guilt, and a pursuit of community, friendship, and ecclesial service. I wrote about these things in order that other same-sex-attracted Christians might be able to identify with and derive some comfort from my narrative, and in order that pastors and other Christian leaders might be able to learn from my experience how better to minister to gay and lesbian believers in their churches. My shorthand description for this place of tension I was (and am) seeking to occupy is “washed and waiting”: forgiven and cleansed in the waters of baptism, per Paul’s description in 1 Corinthians 6, and eagerly awaiting the redemption of the body, with the final sanctification and transformation of a fallen sexuality, per Paul’s hopeful words in Romans 8. In terms of the “already but not yet” of the NT’s inaugurated eschatology, I wanted for myself and for other gay and lesbian believers the identity of being washed in the blood of the Lamb and waiting with endurance for the consummation of the kingdom of God.

A few years after I published my book, a journalist named Jeff Chu wrote a book titled *Does Jesus Really Love Me? A Gay Christian’s Pilgrimage in Search of God in America*. Toward the middle of his survey of American Christian gay life, Chu reflects on my *Washed and Waiting*. “When I finished Hill’s slim volume,” he writes,

I realized ... that I would rather have read *Washed and Still Waiting*, the book that he might be ready to write three decades from now. It’s one thing for someone in his twenties to declare publicly his choice of celibacy—admittedly, a difficult, unorthodox, and bold thing. It’s entirely another to stand by that decision thirty years on. What are the effects of this kind of long-term chastity? What would life look like for the homosexual who, in his relative youth, chose this?⁵

Taking my cues from Chu’s questions, I want in this paper to offer a follow-up reflection on the heels of *Washed and Waiting*. Although I cannot offer the benefit of three decades’ hindsight, I do believe I can offer some theological and pastoral reflections on what I now view as necessary for my project to succeed in the long term. In what follows, I want to explore three areas of pastoral theology of particular relevance for celibate Christian believers who are gay or lesbian. First, I will discuss our collective need to recover the dignity of the calling of celibacy in specifically evangelical settings. Second, I will discuss the need for theological reflection on the discipline of stewarding one’s sexuality in celibacy. And third, I will describe the churches’ need for a theology of celibacy’s direction or destination, specifically, in the form of spiritual kinship and friendship.

⁵ Jeff Chu, *Does Jesus Really Love Me? A Gay Christian’s Pilgrimage in Search of God in America* (New York: Harper, 2013), 150.

I. THE DIGNITY OF CELIBACY

Turning first to the honor and dignity that we must learn to accord once more to celibacy, I want to note a few features of the evangelical cultural landscape that make it difficult for us to think well about this particular aspect of pastoral and moral theology. The first is simply that celibacy has been underdiscussed and undertheorized in evangelical biblical and theological scholarship. This dearth of resources on the theme is beginning to be redressed, but prior to the publication in 2009 of Christine Colón and Bonnie Field's remarkable book *Singled Out: Why Celibacy Must be Reinvented in Today's Church* and, a year later, of Barry Danylak's book *Redeeming Singleness: How the Storyline of Scripture Affirms the Single Life*,⁶ evangelical pastors and teachers had to rely mostly on occasional, piecemeal treatments of the topic that were oriented toward practical considerations and that for the most part eschewed large-scale efforts to locate celibacy on a broad biblical-theological canvas.

Coupled with this lack of attention to the theological rationale for celibacy has been the active effort among some evangelicals to discourage the embrace of singleness among young Christian men in particular. Prominent evangelical pastors have made headlines in recent years for their teaching that marriage ought to be understood not merely as an occasion for sacrificial love but also, barring the discernment that one has a special "gift" for celibacy, as a mandate. As one evangelical pastor put it bluntly, "Biblically, singleness is not ideal."⁷

Alongside this denigration of the vocation of celibacy is the fact that much of the most well-known and widely read evangelical literature on homosexuality has consistently, on the one hand, noted that most same-sex-attracted people who will pursue the Christian vision of chastity will find themselves living as single people, and, on the other hand, declined to offer any extensive treatment of why and how they may do so. For instance, Bob Davies and Lori Rentzel's book *Coming Out of Homosexuality: New Freedom for Men and Women*, originally published in 1993 and widely distributed among "ex-gay" ministries, said this:

The majority of former homosexuals are single, even those who have been out of same-sex immorality for many years. Some left homosexuality while in their late twenties or older and simply have not found a suitable potential spouse. Others have been married previously and hesitate to initiate a new marriage. Some are content in their singleness and feel no desire to begin dating.⁸

However, in spite of that fact, the authors devoted one and a half pages of their 208-page book to a discussion of celibacy. Meanwhile, they chose to include three

⁶ Christine Colón and Bonnie Field, *Singled Out: Why Celibacy Must Be Reinvented in Today's Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009); Barry Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness: How the Storyline of Scripture Affirms the Single Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010); cf. idem, "Secular Singleness and Paul's Response in 1 Corinthians 7" (Ph.D. diss., University of Cambridge, 2012); idem, *A Biblical Theology of Singleness* (Grove Series B45; Cambridge, UK: Grove, 2007).

⁷ Mark Driscoll, *Religion Saves: And Nine Other Misconceptions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 186.

⁸ Bob Davies and Lori Rentzel, *Coming Out of Homosexuality: New Freedom for Men and Women* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 179.

chapters, totaling 38 pages (or almost a fifth of the entire book) to giving advice to “former” homosexual people about dating and marriage. Despite recognizing that the majority of their readers will find this material irrelevant, that is where they chose to lay the emphasis. One might compare the similar neglect of—and occasionally outright disdain for—the choice same-sex-attracted Christians may make for a life of celibacy in a prominent 2006 book edited by then-president of Exodus International Alan Chambers.⁹

In these ways, among others, evangelicals have failed to affirm the honor and dignity of the celibate life. This must change if evangelicals are to offer pastoral guidance and assistance to same-sex-attracted believers in our churches.

In the first place, evangelicals must recover the biblical-theological rationale for celibacy. Far from being a concession to the ascetic excesses of the earliest Christians, celibacy in the NT is recognized—and indeed encouraged—as a supremely honorable calling which serves to highlight the destiny of all believers as well as reinforce the gift-character of the marital vocation. As Barry Danylak and others have shown, the logic of the NT’s teaching on celibacy gains its force and texture from its eschatological setting. In multiple Hellenistic and Roman philosophies of the first century, and even in the OT, to be a man is to be obligated to raise up offspring and guarantee one’s lineage by marrying and fathering children. “Male,” in this understanding, is incomplete without “female.” To be fully masculine is to define oneself in relation to one’s wife. As later Jewish rabbinic teaching would put it hyperbolically, “He who is twenty years old and not yet married spends all of his days in sin” (*b. Qidd.* 29b). Likewise, to be a woman is to be obligated to bear children and establish one’s femininity by marrying and devoting oneself to wifely duties. “Female,” in this understanding, is incomplete without “male.” One becomes a “whole” woman precisely by defining oneself in relation to one’s husband and children. Hence the numerous OT laments of barren women (see, e.g., Gen 11:27–30; 29:29–30; Judg 13:2–7; 1 Sam 1:1–8; 2 Kgs 4:14–16).

In the face of these cultural norms, Jesus chooses to practice celibacy himself and commend it to others as a radical sign of the “turning of the ages.” In Matthew 19, his commendation of the voluntarily chosen life of a eunuch is said to depend on the kingdom—the newly inbreaking reign—of God (v. 12). As most scholars now recognize, Jesus’s practice and encouragement of some of his followers to choose celibacy is not a timeless asceticism but rather an eschatologically charged symbol of the lateness of the hour and the significance of his advent.¹⁰ Because the future resurrection state will involve neither marrying nor being given in marriage (Mark 12:25; Matt 22:30), because death will be no more and therefore there will be

⁹ Alan Chambers, ed., *God’s Grace and the Homosexual Next Door: Reaching the Heart of the Gay Men and Women in Your World* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2006), 64. Mike Goeke’s chapter speaks of the commendation of celibacy found in Roman Catholic documents on homosexuality as implying “true change is not possible.” I owe these observations to Ron Belgau, “Celibacy and Healing”; online: <http://spiritualfriendship.org/2013/08/09/celibacy-and-healing>.

¹⁰ See Dale C. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 197–210; Robert Song, *Covenant and Calling: Towards a Theology of Same-Sex Relationships* (London: SCM, 2014), 18.

no more need for bearing children and perpetuating the species (Luke 20:35–36), Jesus and his followers begin to live in anticipation of that future in the present time—a future which he himself, the Gospel writers attest, inaugurates by his death and resurrection.

Subsequently, the apostle Paul, as well, makes a place for singleness—not as a temporary state on the way to marriage but as an honorable state that one might permanently accept, a vocation worthy of equal honor alongside marriage. As he puts it to the Corinthians, “He who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better” (1 Cor 7:38). The turning of the ages with the Christ-event marks the first time in the history of God’s dealings with Israel and the nations that celibacy is affirmed as a good state in and of itself. It is no longer necessary for the male to be yoked to the female in marriage, or the female to be yoked to the male in marriage, in order for both or either person to gesture towards the coming kingdom of God. Rather, insofar as all are clothed with Christ in baptism, one may rest assured of one’s full endowment with the Spirit and full empowerment for ministry regardless of marital status (Gal 3:27–28).¹¹

This eschatological understanding of celibacy is not just understood to involve the celibate person herself in a project of moral self-improvement, as if the goal were some kind of individualistic heroism.¹² Rather, the vocation of celibacy is understood in tandem with that of marriage as a way of *bearing witness* to the coming kingdom.¹³ Neither celibacy nor marriage is intelligible by itself; both are viewed as interlocking and mutually reinforcing, as they together point toward the eschatological reign of God. Marriage in the NT comes to be understood as a sign of Christ’s love for the church (Eph 5:22–33) and as a figure for the eschatological marriage supper of the Lamb in the book of Revelation (19:9; 21:1–2). Furthermore, the celibate vocation witnesses to what Oliver O’Donovan has called the “expansion,” in the eschaton, of the fidelity of love that marriage signifies and makes possible.¹⁴ Insofar as there will be no marrying nor being given in marriage in the resurrection (Matt 22:30), the celibate person’s life now serves as a direct sign of the eschatological state. As Ephraim Radner has put it,

Virgins are the firstfruits of the Church’s destiny, in that their particular form of disciplined life acts as a figure of that holiness that all Christians in the Church will eventually embrace at the moment of their perfect readiness for their union

¹¹ J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 33A; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 381. Compare also the insightful remarks along these lines, on which my comments depend, in Sarah Ruden, *Paul Among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Times* (New York: Pantheon, 2010), chap. 4.

¹² Compare Joachim Gnllka, *Jesus of Nazareth: Message and History* (trans. Siegfried S. Schatzmann; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997 [German orig., 1993]), 173.

¹³ See esp. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1991), chap. 10; idem, *After Christendom* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), chap. 5.

¹⁴ O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 70.

with Christ. ... Sexual virginity is ... a shadow of something fuller to come, a shadow, that is, of the purified life of redemptive reconciliation.¹⁵

At the same time, the ongoing Christian practice of marriage casts a backward eye to the creation narratives of Genesis 1–2, setting itself against all forms of incipient Marcionism or Manichaeism and “confirm[ing] and restor[ing] ... the order of creation.”¹⁶ Inasmuch as marriage does this, it stands opposed to the ascetic impulse to devalue the body and question the goodness of creation.¹⁷ And yet also, insofar as celibacy maintains its dignity, it underscores the gift-quality of marriage: “celibacy need[ed] to exist in the Church’s social life in order for marriage to be a matter of freedom rather than compulsion.”¹⁸ Marriage, as Karl Barth recognized, became, in the NT’s understanding, “a special vocation and gift, ... a free decision and act on the part of the two human beings concerned.”¹⁹ The NT’s endorsement of the celibate life “pointed beyond [the order of creation] to its eschatological transformation”²⁰ and thereby guaranteed both the dethroning of marriage as an obligation (one can be a sign of the eschatological life of God in Christ without marrying) and, at the same time, the celebration of marriage as a calling (one may receive marriage as a gift knowing that it is not the only form of life blessed by God).

In light of all this, evangelicals must commit themselves not merely to the toleration of celibacy but to its active promotion. Celibacy is not merely a temporary state to be lamented and endured as people make their inevitable passage toward marriage. Nor is celibacy to be understood as an inferior calling in which same-sex-attracted Christians fail to live out a truly healed or transformed life. On the contrary, celibate gay Christians precisely in and through their celibacy may be imitators of the life of Christ, signs of the coming kingdom, witnesses to the gracious calling of God for themselves and for their married friends and neighbors.

II. THE DISCIPLINE OF CELIBATE SEXUALITY

Turning our attention from the dignity of the celibate life, we must also ask about its nurture and discipline. How far is it practicable? What are the conditions that must be met for celibacy to be lived out in our churches with joy and hope? The Anglican theologian Sarah Coakley has noted the ways in which contemporary Western reflection on sexual desire is marked by contradictions. On the one hand, we hear clear calls for sexual abstinence for those who are unmarried. Any Chris-

¹⁵ See Ephraim Radner, *Hope Among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engagement of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), 131.

¹⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 43.

¹⁷ For Paul’s qualification of Corinthian asceticism, see Alistair May, *The Body for the Lord: Sex and Identity in 1 Corinthians 5–7* (LNTS 278; London: T&T Clark, 2004).

¹⁸ The World Meeting of Families, *Love is Our Mission: The Family Fully Alive* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2014), 65.

¹⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/4 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 217.

²⁰ Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 70–71.

tian who is not wedded to a spouse is expected to abstain from sexual activity, in accord with biblical and classic Christian theology. On the other hand, we hear equally clear suspicion of the celibate state. Long-term singleness is viewed by many churches as inadvisable because of the unruly character of sexual desire. The result, as Coakley puts it, is “a most profound ... ‘cultural contradiction’: celibacy is impossible, but celibacy must be embraced by some with unacceptable... [sexual] desires.”²¹

If Coakley is at all on the right track with her diagnosis of our contemporary churches, then the situation is especially acute for those believers who experience sexual desire for members of their own sex. On the one hand, those of us who share that experience are asked to remain sexually abstinent. There is no Christian vocation of marriage to a spouse of the same sex. But on the other hand, we regularly encounter a dearth of theological and pastoral reflection when we seek to grapple with the practicalities and confusions of long-term sexual abstinence.

If gay and lesbian Christians are to be able to embrace long-term sexual abstinence, they need more than biblical theology. They need their fellow believers to help them face the pastoral and practical questions of the lived experience of celibacy in the midst of ongoing sexual desire. To return to Sarah Coakley’s so-called “cultural contradiction,” celibate gay and lesbian Christians are in need of churches who will not only continue to uphold the classic Christian teaching on marriage, celibacy, and homosexuality; they are equally in need of churches who will not denigrate the impossible ideal of celibacy but who will instead explore the intricate challenges and opportunities of that vocation with a view to the concrete specificities of daily experience.

What I have in mind is the kind of work that would enable gay and lesbian Christians not to try to erase or ignore their identities as sexual creatures but rather, as Oliver O’Donovan has put it, to “clothe ... [their gay experience, which O’Donovan calls a “form of sensibility and feeling”] in an appropriate pattern of life for the service of God and discipleship of Christ.”²² Celibacy, in the Christian tradition, is not a form of life that turns a blind eye to the realities of sexual desire. It is not a way of seeking to escape one’s created being. Indeed, as Coakley notes, in some ways “celibacy generally involve[s] a greater consciousness of sexual desire and its frustration than a life lived with regular sexual satisfaction.”²³

The reason for this is at least twofold. First, celibacy is, according to some of the most rigorous psychological research that has been undertaken in relation to this form of life, a pattern of life that is deepened over time and that yields its greatest benefits only after long practice. Contentment and loving service in and

²¹ Sarah Coakley, “Taming Desire: Celibacy, Sexuality and the Church” (May 20, 2011); online: <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2011/05/20/3222443.htm> (italics removed). Cf. now Sarah Coakley, *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2015).

²² Oliver O’Donovan, *Church in Crisis: The Gay Controversy and the Anglican Communion* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 117.

²³ Coakley, “Taming Desire.”

through one's celibacy is not realized fully or flawlessly at first (e.g. by the Roman Catholic priests and vowed religious who make public pledges to do so) but is usually something "lived into," something that requires maturity. The former Catholic priest and psychotherapist A. W. Richard Sipe has spent the bulk of his career (approximately four decades) studying the practice of celibacy in Roman Catholic contexts, and he argues that genuine celibacy is indeed viable and healthy for those who attain it. But he believes it must be pursued.²⁴ A large number of vowed clergy do live lives of disciplined sexual abstinence, according to Sipe's major work *Celibacy in Crisis*, but what he refers to (unhelpfully)²⁵ as the "achievement" of celibacy—in which the major developmental crises have been weathered and the celibate state has been embraced and is, for all purposes, irreversible—is more rare, according to Sipe. He thinks that this mature state of "attained" celibacy is virtually always characterized by at least ten traits: first, by work (the productive use of time and energy);²⁶ second, by prayer (an active interior life lived in the presence of God); third, by community ("people to whom [celibates are] committed and people on whom they could rely");²⁷ fourth, by service (some form of self-giving that takes one beyond one's own sphere); fifth, by an awareness of one's physical needs and a willingness to fulfill one's lawful hungers with gentleness and self-care; sixth, by balance in the rhythms of one's lifestyle; seventh, by security in one's relational and communal commitments ("All celibate achievers had someone to whom they felt that they had confided the essence of themselves"); eighth, by order in one's daily and seasonal life; ninth, by learning and ongoing curiosity about others and the world one inhabits; and tenth and finally, by an appreciation of beauty. The one who undertakes this kind of celibate life must become intimately familiar with his or her characteristic patterns of desire, temptation, longing, and weakness.

But equally, celibates do not turn a blind eye to their sexuality because their sexuality is not reducible to their desire for genital intimacy. Sexuality, broadly conceived, is perhaps best understood as an affective capacity for relationality, encompassing the drive toward self-giving and reciprocal knowing in non-genital ways,

²⁴ A. W. Richard Sipe, *Celibacy in Crisis: A Secret World Revisited* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2003), 301.

²⁵ Evangelical theologians will wish to place Sipe's helpful findings in a theological framework in which a person's celibate vocation is not understood as their own achievement. Rather, as Jonathan Linebaugh has remarked to me in personal correspondence (November 14, 2015), "[Theologically,] vocation is where we find ourselves placed by God—in the world, in our body, in our relationships. Our vocation is something we suffer, in the sense that we receive, undergo, and live in it. In this sense, celibacy isn't so much an achievement as a pathos, less a virtue than a life received and lived. None of that is to downplay the tensions and pains and need for disciplines in our vocations, but it does reframe those things by taking the moral burden off of progress towards joining the 2% [of clergy whom Sipe thinks 'achieve' celibacy]. You are celibate, given a body and place and people, and in those givens—in your life—you are called to live not in yourself but in Christ through faith and in your neighbor through love."

²⁶ I think here of those lines from Auden: "There should be monuments, there should be odes, / to the nameless heroes who took it first, // to the first flaker of flints / who forgot his dinner, // the first collector of sea-shells / to remain celibate" (W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems* [New York: Modern Library, 2007], 628).

²⁷ Sipe, *Celibacy in Crisis*, 307.

and celibacy is not the refusal of the creaturely task of being sexual but rather one particularly costly way of exploring that task. The Roman Catholic priest Louis J. Cameli has put it this way:

A fundamental and essential distinction needs to be made between sexual (genital) activity and the living out of one's sexuality. They are not the same. [Although genital intimacy may or may not occur, living] out one's sexuality means an embodied and spiritual response to the innate dynamics of human sexuality to connect, to belong, and to give life. ... The specific challenge for homosexually inclined persons is to embrace their sexuality but not act out their sexuality in a genital way.²⁸

This challenge is one that gay and lesbian believers must be helped to embrace and explore. It is not enough to limn the rationale for celibacy without engaging in the concretely particular challenges of its embodiments. Or, putting it positively, we must both affirm the dignity of the celibate life and begin to think more concretely and creatively about the specific forms of discipline and nurture and guidance that will enable gay and lesbian believers to flourish while embracing that vocation. And this leads me directly into my final point.

III. THE DIRECTION OF CELIBACY: SPIRITUAL KINSHIP AND FRIENDSHIP

Closely related to—indeed bound up with—the need for careful pastoral engagement with gay and lesbian celibates' sexualities is the need for our churches to encourage the connectedness and belonging of gay and lesbian believers in relationships of loving commitment.²⁹ In the wake of the United States Supreme Court's decision to ratify same-sex marriage, it is worth reflecting on the fact that this course of action was anything but inevitable. As O'Donovan has reminded his fellow Christians, "By no means everyone who speaks from [gay and lesbian] experience believes that marriage is the right model for conceiving their relationships. Some have seen it as the 'bourgeoisization' of gay experience."³⁰ That marriage did eventually come to be seen by a great swath of Americans as the right relationship for the solemnizing of same-sex partnerships speaks to the eclipse of other forms of belonging and kinship. Put another way, if same-sex friendship were more recognized, stable, and attainable in Western cultures, marriage would not have come to be seen as *the* essential relationship needed by gay and lesbian people to promote their flourishing.³¹

²⁸ Louis J. Cameli, *Catholic Teaching on Homosexuality: New Paths to Understanding* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2012), 65.

²⁹ Cf. Paul Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 102: "Celibacy has not in the least prevented certain great Christian figures from displaying communion of soul, from developing a mystical friendship in an activity together."

³⁰ O'Donovan, *Church in Crisis*, 111.

³¹ Ironically, perhaps, I owe this line of thinking to Michel Foucault: "Homosexuality became a problem ... in the eighteenth century. ... I think the reason it appears as a problem, as a social issue, at this time is that friendship had disappeared. As long as friendship was something important, was socially

What has animated the same-sex marriage movement, aside from the desire for public honor and protection for the lives and loves of gay and lesbian people, is the desire for home. As multiple cultural critics have noted, this location of the ideal of home in marriage, specifically, is entangled with the increasingly marginal place of friendship on our various communities' horizons.³² Kinship and belonging are experiences that we have located almost exclusively in marriage. As the theologian Christopher Roberts has said, "We cannot imagine existing in our culture without the haven of an erotic partnership because our capacity to belong together in more chaste ways is so limited."³³

If our churches are going to encourage the practice of celibacy among gay and lesbian believers, we must also be prepared, then, to work at undermining the myth that true intimacy and genuine commitment are only available when one leaves the celibate state behind and turns to embrace marriage.

Christians are in part responsible for this state of affairs. Much of the history of Christian reflection on friendship, for instance, constitutes an effort to describe friendship as the least committed of relationships, or, in positive terms, as the freest, most preference-driven, and affection-dependent relationship that is possible for people to enjoy. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for instance, in an effort to elevate and praise the love of friendship, located it in the realm of play—the realm not of law and constraint but of grace and freedom. In one of his prison letters dated January 1944, he wrote to Eberhard Bethge that friendship, "unlike marriage and family relationships, ... doesn't enjoy any generally recognized rights but depends entirely on its own inherent quality."³⁴ The unfortunate result of this celebration of the freedom of friendship is that it may lead those who hunger for more committed, honored, and anchored relationships to think that such relationships are only possible for the married. Given our increasing isolation in late modernity and our fixation on the nuclear family, stressing the non-binding character of friendships may serve only to reinforce the atomization of celibate gay and lesbian believers and their lack of social integration in our churches and Christian communities.

accepted ... it just didn't matter. Once friendship disappeared as a culturally accepted relation, the issue arose: 'What is going on between men?' ... The disappearance of friendship as a social relation and the declaration of homosexuality as a social/political/medical problem are the same process" (*Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* [Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984, vol. 1; New York: The New Press, 1998], 171).

³² Cf. Eve Tushnet: "Gay couples long for marriage not solely—and often not primarily, as the rejection of civil unions suggests—for the practical benefits. ... [They long for the benefits] of home and honor, [which] are entirely a result of marriage's iconic status. ... These benefits lie close to the heart of the push for gay *marriage* rather than alternative kinship forms. (The other reason for 'gay marriage, not alternative kinship forms' is that modern folk, to our great detriment, stripped away the social and legal recognition and honor which once accrued to forms of kinship such as friendship and godparenthood. ... Because we can only understand kinship in terms of marriage and parenthood, we can only understand gay relationships as either marriages, or not really kin at all...)" "Keep the Aspidistra Flying"; online: http://eve-tushnet.blogspot.com/2010_09_01_archive.html#6065529697478253307.

³³ Roberts, *Creation and Covenant*, 227.

³⁴ For the full context, see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 8; trans. C. Gremmels, E. Bethge, R. Bethge, and I. Tödt; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 224, 247–48, 267.

Yet over against this strand of Christian reflection on friendship lies another interpretation of the love of friendship, one that views it as a form of kinship with its own kind of durability and obligation. Throughout much of Christian history, in both the Christian East and West, friendship was capable of solemnization, celebrated with public recognition, and strengthened by mutual promissory bonds. For instance, in the twentieth century philosopher-theologian Pavel Florensky's theological letters, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, he suggests that friendship be thought of as spiritual siblinghood. Fusing the voluntary love of friendship with the involuntary model of brother-to-brother love, Florensky maintained that Christian friendship is best understood as a permanent bond. "There are many temptations to turn away from a Friend, to remain alone or to start new relationships," he wrote. "But a person who has broken off one friendship will break off another, and a third, because he has replaced the way of asceticism"—the way of costly, self-sacrificial love—"with the desire for . . . comfort." But by pledging to be there for one particular friend, come what may, Florensky thought he could better learn the real meaning of Christian love. "The greatest . . . love is realizable," he concluded, "only in relation to *friends*, not in relation to all people, not 'in general.'"

Elsewhere Florensky compared this particular love of one friend for another to a molecular bond. Just as an organism depends on chemical connections, so too the church is not reducible to individuals but rather to pairs of friends. Believers are not called to exist as isolated units who love God in distinction from those around us. Instead, the love of God is manifested in our love for our friends, as the Johannine corpus in particular emphasizes (see John 15:13).³⁵

Florensky's work is readily comparable to that of another exemplar of committed friendship in the Christian tradition, the twelfth-century monk Aelred, who served as the abbot of Rievaulx Abbey in the north of England from 1147 to 1167. It is probable that Aelred himself, prior to his entrance into the monastic life, was sexually involved with male partners.³⁶ Aelred writes in veiled terms about youthful dalliances and losing his virginity. Yet by the time he wrote his famous dialogue *Spiritual Friendship*, he had bound himself to the teachings of the church and foreworn sexual liaisons. The man who could describe a friend as one "to whom you so join and unite yourself that you mix soul with soul" and one whom you could embrace "in the kiss of unity, with the sweetness of the Holy Spirit flowing over you"

³⁵ Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters* (trans. Boris Jakim; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 311, 318, 326.

³⁶ On Aelred as "gay," see John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 222–23. Compare also, however, the discussion in Brian Patrick McGuire, *Friendship and Community: The Monastic Experience, 350–1250* (1988; repr., Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 302–4, which critiques Boswell for greater confidence in his interpretation than Aelred's texts warrant. In the end, however, McGuire agrees that Aelred experienced same-sex attraction: "Insofar as Aelred indicated that he had to cope with a sexual desire for other men, Boswell's interpretation captures one aspect of the special quality of the earlier part of the twelfth century" (p. 303).

had apparently given up sex with persons of the same sex.³⁷ What Aelred called “spiritual friendship” was a form of same-sex intimacy that did not sanction its genital expression of erotic passion but rather—to borrow a later psychological vocabulary—sublimated or transmuted it.

Distinguishing between “carnal” or “worldly” friendship on the one hand and a higher, Christ-like friendship on the other, Aelred maintained that two or more monks could achieve a holy, purified intimacy that involved something like kinship ties or spousal promises. Echoing Cicero, he wrote, “Friendship is agreement in things human and divine, with good will and charity.” Aelred went further than Cicero in attempting a Christological grounding for friendship, speaking of this form of love with specific allusion to Jesus’s crucifixion: “Though challenged, though injured, though tossed into the flames, though nailed to a cross, *a friend loves always*.” The reason monks could forge such deep bonds of friendship is that that way had been opened for them by Christ’s own life and death.³⁸

One of the features of Aelred’s vision that has proved controversial over the years, even leading to the censoring of his book in twentieth-century monasteries, is his insistence that monks were not simply called to love all their fellow monks indiscriminately (although that was the baseline expectation). Aelred also made room for especially close bonds of mutual trust and affection between certain brothers and not others:

Divine authority commands that many more be received to the clasp of charity than to the embrace of friendship. By the law of charity we are ordered to welcome into the bosom of love not only our friends but also our enemies. But we call friends only those to whom we have no qualm about entrusting our heart and all its contents, while these friends are bound to us in turn by the same inviolable law of loyalty and trustworthiness.³⁹

Aelred explored and defended the possibility of uniquely intimate relationships that one monk might share with another, in which secrets were exchanged and depths of mutual trust were attained. Certainly Aelred also envisioned the gradual expansion of spiritual friendship, so that one’s circle of trusted brothers might grow to encompass a wide community. But he maintained that that vision can only come to fruition if it begins small, with pairs or trios of committed brothers.⁴⁰

To borrow Coakley’s word again, it is a contradiction and a mistake—indeed, I would go further and call it a failure of hope and love, a failure of moral imagination—for evangelicals to encourage abstinence from same-sex sexual behavior while offering no “thick” account of the direction or destination celibate love may assume. As one same-sex-attracted believer has put it, “When Christians sell books

³⁷ Aelred of Rievaulx, *De speculo caritatis*, as quoted in Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 225.

³⁸ Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship* (trans. L. C. Braceland; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 57, 59.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁴⁰ Much of the preceding section is adapted from Wesley Hill, *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015).

and preach sermons encouraging non-married people to embrace their ‘singleness’ as a blessing, we are promoting the destructive effects of the sexual revolution. ‘Singleness’ as we conceive of it in our culture is not the will of God at all. It is representative of a deeply fragmented society. Singleness in America typically means a lack of kinship connectedness.”⁴¹ What those of us who are seeking to live celibate lives need is encouragement to pursue relationships of spiritual kinship in which our celibacy may become not an occasion for isolation, loneliness, and self-indulgence but rather a practice by which we may begin to learn, alongside our married friends, the virtues of self-sacrifice and promise-keeping.

Embracing such a vision will require evangelicals to recognize the same-sex attraction of some of their fellow Christians as the occasion to discover a particular calling. In recent years, various groups in the Evangelical Theological Society have debated the precise terms with which to describe the “fallenness” or “sinfulness” of same-sex desire, and it is not my point here to enter further into those debates.⁴² Rather, I wish simply to underscore a point on which all parties should be able to agree, namely, that however the condition of same-sex sexual desire may be described and however it may be altered or sanctified at some future time, it constitutes the occasion for some to discover a positive call to love.

I say “occasion” rather than “means” in order to forestall the objection that a potentially sinful disposition could itself lead to holiness of conduct. It is not my purpose to argue that the seed of virtue inheres in same-sex sexual desire, or that such desire, apart from its social and cultural embodiment, somehow carries the potential for greater insight or ability. Rather, like many other fallen conditions that we rightly refuse to name as goods in and of themselves (e.g. deafness), same-sex attraction, while not among the goods of redemption, may become the locus at which or from which a particular habit or practice of love may emerge.⁴³ At the most basic level of personal testimony, I may register my own sense that it has been my experience of same-sex desire—and the hopes and fears that have emerged as I have wrestled with that desire—that have led me to read so much and think so carefully about how to preserve and strengthen my personal friendships. I doubt I would have given as much time and attention to the love of friendship if I had not grown up with the experience of same-sex attraction; I suspect I would have sought after marriage and appreciated, but perhaps not celebrated and arduously sought after, the love of friendship.

In one of his letters, C. S. Lewis suggests that rather than fixating on the psychological roots of same-sex attraction and seeking to pinpoint its origins, Chris-

⁴¹ Karen Keen, personal correspondence, August 25, 2013.

⁴² See Denny Burk, “Is Homosexual Orientation Sinful?,” *JETS* 58 (2015): 95–117.

⁴³ More theological reflection is needed at this point. If same-sex sexual attraction is intrinsically disordered, of what rightly ordered love is it therefore a distortion? We may rightly refuse to name same-sex attraction itself as neutral or as good while at the same time insisting that the good of which same-sex attraction is a falling short is a good that gay and lesbian people may be especially poised to recover and promote.

tians would do well to focus their attention more on what the person experiencing same-sex attraction is capable of offering to the church in which she finds herself:

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

Lewis goes on later in the letter to describe “a certain pious [homosexual man who] believed that his necessity *could* be turned to spiritual gain: that there were certain kinds of sympathy and understanding, a certain social role which [only he could play].”⁴⁴ To ask that question—about what particular role a celibate gay or lesbian believer can play in the church—is to ask how the special temptation or weakness or fallenness that same-sex attraction is may come to be understood as the site or occasion or circumstance in which a vocation to love is discovered.

The apostle Paul may provide another model of this kind of discovery with his theological reflection on his “thorn in [or ‘for’] the flesh” in 2 Cor 12:7–10. Paul is clear about the Satanic origin of the thorn (it is a “messenger of Satan to harass me” [2 Cor 12:7]). At the same time, his passive construction suggests that God has superintended this evil messenger and turned its evil to Paul’s advantage, to accomplish his humbling and to encourage him to rely only on the power of Christ.⁴⁵ Thus, the grace of the Lord (i.e. Jesus Christ) is made perfect *in* Paul’s weakness brought about by the thorn. The thorn is not itself a grace, but it becomes the occasion in or through which Paul encounters grace. Paul knows the Lord’s grace not in the absence of, but in the midst of, his ongoing weakness.⁴⁶ Why should the same not prove true for today’s gay and lesbian believers? We may decline to pinpoint some latent good in same-sex attraction itself, but we ought not to neglect to reflect on how the experience of same-sex desire may be the divinely appointed way in which celibate gay Christians discover the power of Christ made perfect in their lives.

IV. CONCLUSION

What will it take for gay and lesbian Christians to live lives, over the long term, that are marked by the graces of chastity, hope, and devoted service to others? If it is true that many same-sex-attracted Christians will find themselves living as single people with ongoing same-sex attraction, what kinds of support and care are they in need of for those lives to be practicable over the course of decades—and not

⁴⁴ Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 147.

⁴⁵ Frank J. Matera, *II Corinthians: A Commentary* (NLT; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2003), 282.

⁴⁶ See Hill, *Washed and Waiting*, 72–73.

just practicable but joyful and marked by deep involvement in church life and devoted service to others?

I have suggested that the answer is at least threefold: their choice of celibacy must not be viewed as a kind of halfway house between full “healing” (understood as the reversal of their homosexual orientation) and a sub- or non-Christian life of self-indulgence. On the contrary, their celibacy must be dignified and heralded as their participation in a venerable vocation that has ancient scriptural, patristic, and indeed evangelical roots.⁴⁷ Likewise, the discipline entailed by their choice of celibacy must be explored with acute attention and care; they must not simply be told to be celibate without also being offered psychological, moral, and spiritual direction, based on knowledge of the truest findings of psychological research as well as the rich reflections of the ascetic and spiritual traditions of Christian history. And finally, they must be encouraged—we must be encouraged, for I number myself among them—to view our particular existence as the “washed and waiting,” the same-sex-attracted and celibate, not simply as a life of deprivation but as a life that is directed toward community, friendship, hospitality: in short, directed toward love.

In these ways, please God, in thirty, forty, or fifty years, those gay and lesbian believers who are washed in the waters of baptism and waiting for the resurrection of the dead will be those who are washed and still waiting, still persevering in the hope of eternal life.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ See further Colón and Field, *Singled Out*.

⁴⁸ I am grateful to Michael Allen, James Ernest, Jonathan Linebaugh, Matthew Loftus, and Daniel Treier for comments on an earlier version of this paper.