

# The Bible's Yes to Same-Sex Marriage



*An Evangelical's Change of Heart*

New Edition  
with Study Guide

MARK ACHEMEIER

**WJK** WESTMINSTER  
JOHN KNOX PRESS  
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

# CONTENTS



Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	xi
1. The Harvest of Despair: Why Traditional Condemnations of Gay Relationships Can't Be Right	1
2. Jesus and the Law: How Biblical Fragments Can Lead Us Astray	17
3. With All Your Mind: Reading the Bible Faithfully and Responsibly	27
4. "This Is My Body, Given for You": God's Plan for Love, Marriage, and Sexuality	43
5. Special Blessings: Why Gay People Have an Honored Place in God's Heart	57
6. Reclaiming the Witnesses 1: Making Sense of the Old Testament Fragments	75
7. Reclaiming the Witnesses 2: Making Sense of the New Testament Fragments	87
8. Testing the Spirits: How Do We Know We're on the Right Track?	103

9. The Word of Life: Biblical Teaching for the Real World	117
Conclusion	127
Study Guide	133
Notes	167

# CHAPTER 1



## THE HARVEST OF DESPAIR

### *Why Traditional Condemnations of Gay Relationships Can't Be Right*

The young seminarian speaks to me in hushed tones across the table in the café where we have agreed to meet. Kristi (not her real name) is bright, capable, and committed, but today her face appears deeply troubled.

Kristi describes herself as a conservative evangelical who has always been deeply committed to Christ and the church. She has grown up convinced that God was calling her into full-time ministry, and she arrived at seminary tremendously excited about having her call become a reality.

Kristi also confesses to me that she has struggled with same-sex attraction since the time when she was a young teen. When she first became aware of these feelings she was horrified. At first she tried her best to ignore them, hoping they were a passing phase. But even though she never acted on them, the feelings have persisted over the years, becoming an ever deeper source of anguish and struggle for her.

I note the quaver in her voice as she speaks about all the years she has spent in fervent prayer, begging God to

relieve her of what she believes are unholy impulses. She has sought out ministers and chaplains and Christian counselors. All have advised her to keep praying and hanging on, trusting that God will give her the strength to overcome these feelings.

As her story tumbles out, it becomes clear to me that Kristi is at the end of her rope. She speaks about faith with resentment in her voice, wondering why God would weigh her down with such an affliction when all she wants is to serve Christ as a committed disciple. She can't understand why a loving God would ignore her heartfelt prayers. She is not praying for any selfish reasons, she assures me, but only so that she can become the kind of faithful minister God has called her to be. After so much struggle, it is clear that God seems more like a distant, uncaring judge to Kristi than the loving, heavenly Father she grew up hearing about. Her future plans are in shambles, and she is on the verge of giving up on the faith altogether. The many years she has spent faithfully battling temptation and following church teaching have left her feeling bitter, hopeless, and deeply depressed. With tears running down her cheeks, she confesses to me she has been thinking about suicide.



I found Kristi's story very troubling, first and foremost on a human level because her deep distress couldn't help but tug at my heartstrings. But even beyond the emotional impact of her story, her testimony was disturbing because none of it matched up with the Bible's teaching about how faith and discipleship are supposed to work.

A really striking feature of Kristi's story was that through all this trial and struggle, she had continued to faithfully follow the path that her Christian mentors and teachers had identified as God's will for her life. This was not a story about a person falling prey to temptation and reaping a bitter reward as a result. Kristi had persisted in the battle against the troubling feelings that disturbed her so deeply. She had not surrendered to her



alienation from God and a weariness that was leading her to give up on the faith altogether. These were not at all the outcomes Scripture would lead us to expect from a life of faithfulness.

This is not to suggest that faithfulness to Christ always leads to a peaceful life of serenity and comfort. The Bible never suggests that faithfulness will always be easy. Followers of Jesus are by no means exempt from facing hardship, suffering, and struggle in life, and in this they follow their Master's example. After all, the path of perfect faithfulness for Jesus led to the cross, and Christ teaches his followers that they, too, must be willing to pick up their crosses daily and follow him (Luke 9:23). God sometimes calls us to do things that are very hard for us.

But the Bible also speaks clearly and consistently about the blessing that attends such sacrifices in the form of closeness to God and the "peace of God, which surpasses all understanding" (Phil. 4:7). Jesus went to the cross out of his passionate desire to do the Father's will; as a result of his supreme sacrifice, God has highly exalted him (2:9–10). Paul and Silas, attacked by a hostile mob, beaten and thrown into prison, pass their time in captivity singing hymns of praise (Acts 16:16–25). The early Christian martyrs gave heartfelt testimony to God as they made the ultimate sacrifice for their faith. Even a modern-day martyr like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, imprisoned by the Nazis and struggling with isolation and depression in his filthy prison cell, gives a witness to a calm and sustaining faith that has inspired countless thousands down to the present day. A prison doctor gave the following eyewitness account of his death:

Through the half-open door in one room of the huts I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.<sup>1</sup>

The abiding presence of God, strengthening and upholding the faithful through times of hardship and suffering, has been a nearly universal feature of Christian experience from biblical times down to the present day.

But this was strikingly not the case for Kristi. The sacrificial commitments she had made in her attempts to remain faithful had resulted in alienation from God and loss of faith. I was left wondering: If this path Kristi had been walking produced results that were in so many ways the exact opposite of what Scripture would lead us to expect from a life of faithfulness, could it be that both she and I were mistaken about what path God really wanted her to follow?

Kristi's story didn't end there, but the events following our lunchtime conversation served only to reinforce my questions. By this point in my journey I had developed some contacts among gay Presbyterians. I was so concerned and shaken by the depth of Kristi's distress that I asked one of those friends if he might be willing to talk with her. That contact in turn put her in touch with a quiet fellowship of gay seminarians, many of whom had also come from very traditional backgrounds. These were people who had struggled with the same issues that had led Kristi to the brink of despair. Hearing their stories and becoming a part of their fellowship led Kristi for the first time to consider that God might not be automatically condemning her for the attractions she was feeling. For the first time she considered the possibility that her future might include sharing her life together with a partner whom she loved, in a relationship blessed by God.

The ensuing transformation in Kristi was remarkable. Her faith in God revived, stronger than ever. Her previous despair and depression rolled back, and a passionate, committed, Christ-centered young woman appeared, eager to be a witness of God's love. Once again, these were exactly the opposite results one would expect if her new openness was a move *away* from God's will for her. If a person's life departs in a serious way from God's will, one would not expect the result to be a flourishing spiritual commitment. John's Gospel records Jesus' clear teaching on this:



I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers. . . .

(John 15:5–6)

Seeing Kristi's vibrant faith and strong commitment re-emerge as a result of her newfound openness made as deep an impression on me as her former despair. I couldn't help wondering if this really was the path God intended for her. I could see nothing in Kristi's life that looked like the spiritual withering one would expect to find in a person whose life had moved away from abiding in Christ.

Kristi's story is far from unique. I remember being struck early in my journey by the testimony of author and blogger Andrew Sullivan. Sullivan spoke in an interview about his early attempts to conform his life as a gay man to the teachings of his Roman Catholic faith, to which he was deeply devoted. Sullivan writes,

The moral consequences, in my own life, of the refusal to allow myself to love another human being were disastrous. They made me permanently frustrated and angry and bitter. It spilled over into other areas of my life. Once that emotional blockage is removed, one's whole moral equilibrium can improve. . . . These things are part of a continuous moral whole. You can't ask someone to suppress what makes them whole as a human being and then to lead blameless lives. We are human beings, and we need love in our lives in order to love others, in order to be good Christians! What the church is asking gay people to do is not to be holy, but actually to be warped.<sup>2</sup>

Here again the same, puzzling pattern appears: Sullivan's committed attempts to follow church teaching on homosexuality did not lead to the spiritual flourishing that Scripture would lead us to expect as the fruit of true faithfulness. Instead they led to a spiritual life that was warped and stunted. Perhaps what the church was asking of gay people wasn't true faithfulness after all.

Another early conversation that got me thinking took place with a gay friend who was speaking to me about her marriage to her partner. I was suggesting, very generously I thought, that perhaps a commitment like hers could be justified from a Christian standpoint as a concession to human weakness: I believed that God's ideal for her as a gay person was to live a life of chaste singleness. But if she lacked the ability to do that, perhaps a marriage like hers could be viewed as a lesser evil in comparison with simply being promiscuous. Looking back on the conversation, I am amazed that she had the patience with me to respond in a civil manner, but her response has stayed with me. "I know all about sin and repentance," she said. "I have lots of areas in my life where I know I fall short and where I ask God's forgiveness and strive to do better. But my marriage just doesn't feel like one of these problem areas. My marriage feels like the part of my life that brings out the very best in me. It is where I learn the most about love and giving and self-sacrifice." Here was another striking break in the biblically predicted pattern: Scripture says that departing from God's will leads to spiritual withering. But the part of this person's life that I assumed was deeply contrary to God's will turned out to be one of the most fruitful areas of spiritual growth for her.

This conversation also started me wondering about what the church was asking gay people to do who were in committed, covenanted partnerships or marriages. Was it really God's will for people like my friend to abandon a beloved life partner and get a divorce?

I tried to think if there was any precedent in the Bible where God actively commands people to divorce their spouses. The one example I came up with was from Ezra, chapters 9–10. That biblical book chronicles the rebuilding of the nation of Israel following the peoples' return from seventy years in foreign exile. As chapter 9 opens, a group of officials brings to Ezra's attention a situation that has developed during the time of exile. Within that situation of captivity, many of the scattered Israelite men had intermarried with women from idol-worshipping foreign peoples, in violation of the Law of Moses. When Ezra and

the other officials bring this situation to light, a great zeal for purifying their national life overtakes the Israelite masses. They resolve to “send away” their foreign wives and children, and the officials subsequently put in place a systematic plan for imposing divorces on all the affected families in the nation. The whole episode struck me as heartless and a bit chilling.

It is not at all clear that God approves of these mandatory divorces imposed on the nation. Nowhere in the story does anyone report a direct word from the Lord commanding this action; it is the idea of the religious leaders. Furthermore, the book of the prophet Malachi, which comes from the same period of Israel’s history, contains a blistering condemnation of the divorces that have taken place within the nation (Mal. 2:13–16). This prophetic denunciation, which is reported as coming directly from God, sounds as if it is aimed squarely at this tragic episode of mandatory divorce undertaken by the returning exiles. The one recorded biblical instance where divorce is used as a remedy for marriages that were seen as violating God’s law leads not to blessing but to divine judgment.

Finding no biblical precedent where divorce was required as an act of faithfulness, I tried to think about this situation from a personal standpoint as well. What would it be like to hear the church telling me that the only way my life could find favor in God’s eyes would be for me to abandon my dear wife, Katherine, and seek a divorce? Whether or not I followed such teaching, what kind of damage would it do to my spiritual life and my view of God to hear a message like that coming from the church? I raised some of these questions in an address given to a gathering of conservative Presbyterians in 2002 and was surprised at the number of appreciative responses I received.<sup>5</sup>

As my circle of acquaintances within the gay community widened, I heard dozens of heartrending testimonies from committed gay Christians about the spiritual devastation that had resulted from desperately trying to conform their lives to the demands of a God whom they believed was standing in judgment over their longing for love and committed relationships.

And on the flip side of the ledger, I kept finding myself deeply impressed by the vibrant witness of gay Christians who had somehow come to terms with their sexual orientation and devoted themselves to following Jesus.

Sadly, I also encountered a great many stories that did not have the kind of happy ending I observed in Kristi's case. I became painfully aware of the thousands upon thousands of gay people who, upon finding themselves unable to live according to the requirements of traditional church teaching, had despaired of their faith, fled from the church, and lived under the assumption that the Christian God was their enemy. In the most heartbreaking cases, the burden of this spiritual devastation had proven too crushing to bear. These despairing children of God were turning to the path that had once tempted Kristi, seeing suicide as the only possible means of obtaining relief from the spiritual pain and heartbreak that resulted from their experiences with the church.

## Asking the Impossible

My observations and experiences were raising a lot of questions about whether traditional church teaching on homosexuality was in accordance with God's will at all. As I became more and more aware of the personal and spiritual devastation that this teaching was causing, I realized that getting to the bottom of these questions was far more than just an intellectual exercise. Lives and souls were very much at stake. I had always assumed that the Bible's teaching on homosexuality was quite clear, but there was no denying the dramatic disconnect between the Bible's predictions about the fruits of faithfulness and the actual results I was seeing in the lives of gay people who followed, or tried to follow, this traditional teaching. I began wondering what I had overlooked in my own understanding of the Bible's teaching.

I also started to wonder what kind of God we were dealing with if the traditional condemnations of homosexuality really did reflect the will of God. These questions arose as I realized

that people like Kristi did not choose their same-sex orientation, nor did they have the ability to embrace a lifelong discipline of celibate singleness.

It was absolutely clear from my conversations with Kristi and others that their sexual orientation was not a choice. Many of them had devoted years to prayer and struggle, pleading with God and desperately trying to be rid of their same-sex attraction, all to no avail. Scientists sometimes debate whether sexual orientation is determined by a person's genes or by external environmental factors, or by both. But we don't need definitive answers to such questions in order to take seriously the testimony of people like Kristi: The traditional path of heterosexual love and marriage is simply not available to them, try as they might to choose to be something other than what they are. As I write this, the national news has recently reported a decision by the leadership of Exodus International, a well-known "ex-gay" organization, to give up on all its ministries aimed at "curing" gay and lesbian people of their same-sex attraction.<sup>4</sup> The leadership of this group has finally concluded, after years of trying, that peoples' sexual orientation can't be changed and that telling them otherwise is a source of grievous psychological and spiritual harm. Even the highly traditional Roman Catholic Church has acknowledged in its official teaching that same-sex orientation is not a condition that people can either choose or reject for themselves.<sup>5</sup>

It was also clear from all the stories of brokenness I was encountering that Kristi and many others were not able to embrace a lifelong commitment to celibacy without crippling spiritual and psychological consequences. It is not immediately obvious why this should be the case. I remember sharing Kristi's story at a conference where I was speaking one time, only to be approached afterward by a very indignant member of the audience. "I am a single person," she said. "I have been striving very hard my whole life to live faithfully according to biblical sexual morality, and it's not always easy. How is it you can talk about the crippling, impossible burdens of celibate life for gay

and lesbian people, but not for single men and women? Isn't that a double standard?"

In fact it's not a double standard, because traditional church teaching imposes requirements on gay and lesbian people that are far more drastic and far-reaching than anything it asks of single people. Yes, traditional church teaching counsels gay and single people alike to refrain from irresponsible sexual activity that is not coupled with covenant promises joining one's life together with one's partner. We will have much more to say on why this requirement makes sense in chapter 8. But for people like Kristi, the traditional teaching goes far beyond this.

Traditional teaching says to someone like Kristi that she must not only avoid irresponsible use of her sexuality while she is a single person but also forever give up hope of falling in love, getting married, and building a shared life with a person she loves. There is nothing comparable to this in the advice the church gives to single people, in fact it encourages them to find that special person they can share their life with. It is the traditional teaching's additional demand of gay people, that they must forever renounce even the hope and possibility of ever sharing in the kind of loving intimacy that is God's will for a good marriage, that makes the traditional teaching so spiritually and psychologically toxic for people like Kristi.

People sometimes fail to recognize this additional, heavy burden placed on gay people because they mistakenly believe that sex is the only issue on the table. I remember having a conversation one time with an older colleague who is usually quite wise and sensible. But on this particular occasion he said to me, "I just don't see how the church can say everyone has a *right* to have sex. That has never been the church's teaching." Indeed it has not. And if we put blinders on and pretend the issue is about only whether or not certain people should have sex, then it becomes very hard to register the difference between the church's traditional advice to single people and to gay people. In both cases it is advising a particular group to refrain from being sexually active. Church teaching has been communicating this

message to single people for centuries. So why all the fuss when it comes to gay people?

What my colleague failed to appreciate is that for people like Kristi, the issue at stake isn't some right to be sexually active, but whether they can have love in their lives. Lots of people go without sex for various reasons, some for extended periods of time, without any sign of spiritual devastation or despair. But to ask someone to give up on the hope and possibility of ever getting to experience love and marriage—that is a far more serious matter.

In fact, in recognizing the overwhelming difficulty of a lifelong celibacy requirement, we stand squarely in line with traditional Protestant teaching about love and marriage. Starting in the early 1500s, leaders of the Protestant Reformation like Martin Luther and John Calvin vehemently criticized the Roman Catholic Church for imposing vows of lifelong celibacy on whole classes of people, as it was doing for monks, nuns, and priests.<sup>6</sup> These devout church Reformers argued that such vows were cruel. They required people to make sacrifices for God that were not in their power to make, resulting in widespread suffering, hypocrisy, and spiritual damage.<sup>7</sup> They also argued that celibacy requirements were unbiblical. Martin Luther emphasized that God created people for lifelong companionship with a spouse according to Genesis 2:18.<sup>8</sup> Both Jesus and Paul teach that celibacy is a gift given to only a few individuals. It is not an ability that God makes available to everyone (Matt. 9:16–17, 1 Cor. 7:7). John Calvin argued that it is an ungodly cruelty to impose a celibacy requirement indiscriminately on groups of people, the vast majority of whom have no gift or ability for it. Such an action substitutes spiritually damaging human regulations for the gracious gift God has provided in the institution of marriage.<sup>9</sup> And to those who claim that praying to God will help people find the strength to conform to such requirements, Calvin replies that God helps only those who walk in God's calling. People who despise the gift of marriage and try to embrace a celibacy for which they lack the requisite gifts are setting themselves against God and God's calling.<sup>10</sup>

Reviewing this Reformation teaching, I realized that there was nothing exaggerated, surprising, or unusual about the spiritual and psychological damage Kristi and other faithful gay people had experienced in trying to follow the church's traditional teaching. Protestant Christians had been arguing for centuries, on the basis of both Scripture and common experience, that requiring people to embrace a lifetime discipline of celibacy was cruel and damaging in the vast majority of cases.

## What Kind of God?

These observations set the stage for some serious questions about God. What kind of God were we dealing with, I wondered, if the traditional condemnations of homosexuality were faithful and accurate reflections of the divine will? That would mean that God places Kristi and others like her in a situation from which there is no escape. They have absolutely no ability to wish or pray or choose their way out of their same-sex attraction, yet God condemns them unless they can change it. God further adds to the difficulty of the situation by withholding the gifts and calling that would make lifelong celibacy a realistic possibility.

If the traditional condemnations were true, then God had put Kristi and countless thousands like her in a position where she had exactly two options open to her: either she could embrace a life of celibacy for which she had no calling and experience all the brokenness, loss of faith, and alienation from God that I had seen following from that; or she could follow the path that led to love and personal fulfillment and stand condemned by God.

The more I thought about this picture, the more uncomfortable I felt with it. What kind of God would put people, through no fault of their own, in a situation where the only spiritual options available to them were broken alienation from God or divine condemnation? It was quite literally a situation of "damned if you do and damned if you don't." Kristi certainly had no say in whether she was gay or not. She had no ability to choose not to be gay. Try as she might, she was unable to manufacture a gift



of celibacy for herself where none existed. The only way out for her was through seeking love and fulfillment within the bounds allotted her by her same-gender orientation. But if God truly condemned that path, then what? Then God had created Kristi simply as an object of condemnation, with no path available to her that led toward spiritual growth and wholeness, and no possibility of ever finding a life-giving relationship with God.

That was a distressing picture to contemplate, but fortunately I realized it was a picture that stood in utter contradiction to the portrait of God painted by Scripture. If the Bible and Christian proclamation are true and if Jesus really is God-with-us, then the clearest picture we have of what God is really like is Jesus himself. And there was absolutely nothing in Jesus' life or ministry that even remotely resembled the kind of gratuitous cruelty that would bring someone into existence only for the purpose of breaking or condemning them. To the contrary: Jesus' love and compassion broke through all the traditional barriers of his age, reaching out to embrace even his own enemies (Luke 23:34). Jesus spoke about God's heart rejoicing when the wandering find their way home (Luke 15) and about God's desire that no one be lost (Matt. 18:14). None of this fit with the picture of a God who would cruelly leave no path to grace for people like Kristi.

This picture, of a God who leaves gay people no option but condemnation, collided so dramatically with the witness of Scripture, I knew something had to be wrong with it. But what? I couldn't pretend that Kristi had the ability to stop being gay—if that were the case she would have left it behind a long time ago. I also couldn't deny the spiritual brokenness I had seen in her and dozens of others as the result of trying to embrace a life of celibacy for which they had no calling. The only part of the picture that was open to doubt was the traditional teaching condemning homosexuality. If this teaching were true, then the New Testament portrait of a loving and compassionate God was demonstrably false in the case of gay people like Kristi. Rather than go this route, I chose to stick with the Bible's testimony about God. The traditional condemnations of homosexuality had to be mistaken.

## Summing Up

My encounters with Kristi and others like her brought to light two striking contradictions between the traditional church condemnations of homosexuality and the testimony of the Bible. First, the spiritual fruit I saw coming to the fore in lives of devout gay people who were trying to follow the traditional teaching was the exact opposite of what the Bible says will be the results of conforming our lives to the will of God. Instead of love, peace, joy, and closeness to God I was seeing bitterness, brokenness, and spiritual alienation. It was only when Kristi and others *gave up* trying to follow the traditional teaching that I saw the spiritual fruits emerging that would normally be associated with obedience to God's will.

Second, when I viewed the traditional teaching alongside the actual lived experience of people like Kristi, the result was a picture of an arbitrary and cruel God who closed off all possible avenues of escape for gay people and left them having to choose between psychological and spiritual brokenness on the one hand, and divine condemnation on the other. This picture differed strikingly from the portrait of a loving and compassionate God that is painted by the New Testament.

The combined weight of all this evidence forced me to conclude that the traditional condemnations were wrong. This recognition marked only the start of my journey, however. I had always assumed the traditional teaching was grounded in a straightforward manner on the testimony of Scripture. How could a teaching be in error if it was based on the Bible? I realized I would not be able to invest any confidence in my conclusions until I figured out how and why the traditional teaching had gone astray.



# STUDY GUIDE

Introduction to the Study Guide	135
Session 1	141
Session 2	147
Session 3	155
Session 4	161

# INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY GUIDE



## *To the Leader*

Welcome! In leading a study of this book, you have the opportunity to engage persons in Mark Achtemeier's own journey, in his own words, ". . . from a personal stance of judgment and exclusion to a changed heart that supports and celebrates my church's newly won openness to the ministries of gay and lesbian Christians and the blessing of their marriages" (p. xii).

As Achtemeier notes in the introduction, churches continue to be in turmoil over questions of sexuality. His goal in writing the book is to interject some light into the midst of all the heat that is being generated by the discussions. Any discussion of issues related to sexuality will stir up a range of emotions and opinions in a group. Perhaps this is because our sexual identity is inextricably bound up in our identity as human beings. Yet it is just because this is true, and because our sense of identity as children of God cannot be separated from our understanding of the sum of who we are, that such a conversation is so important. The following may be helpful guidelines:

1. This book study will be most fruitful if persons come with a broad range of understandings and opinions about the issue of same-sex relationships. Diversity of age and background will also make for a richer study. If persons all basically agree on this issue—that is, if everyone in the group is in favor of same-sex marriage or, conversely, if everyone is opposed—then the study has the potential to degenerate into an exercise in gathering ammunition for one’s position. A diversity of viewpoints and perspectives offers the most potential for the Holy Spirit to enter into the conversation.
2. A diversity of viewpoints, though, is fraught with the possibility for conflict and even hurt feelings and alienation among group members. The last thing the author would want is for the book to deepen the divide between Christians. It will be important for the leader to begin the study by getting the group’s commitment to engage with one another with honesty and sensitivity. The following are suggestions for establishing a climate of trust and respect:
  - Invite the group to formulate a covenant that includes guidelines for respectful dialogue. The Presbyterian Peacemaking Program has a helpful resource, *Seeking to Be Faithful Together: Guidelines for Presbyterians during Times of Disagreement*, available as a download at <http://www.pcusa.org/resource/seeking-be-faithful-together/>. Check your own denominational website for similar resources.
  - A group process called Mutual Invitation, developed by Episcopal priest Eric H. F. Law, can be helpful in diverse groups where some persons may be reluctant to share and others may monopolize the conversation. Find out more about it and download a PDF at [www.kscopeinstitute.org/2007-05\\_Kaleidoscope\\_newsletter\\_final.pdf](http://www.kscopeinstitute.org/2007-05_Kaleidoscope_newsletter_final.pdf).

### *Preparing for the Study*

- Pray for the leading of the Holy Spirit as you prepare to facilitate the study. Pray for discernment for yourself and for each member of the study group.
- The study has been divided into four sessions, with opening and closing prayers and suggested questions. You may decide to have more or fewer sessions based on the needs of your group and the time available.
- Read the book yourself in advance of the first session. Before each session, familiarize yourself again with the content by rereading the relevant chapters.
- Read the suggested questions and decide which of them to use, or pick other questions that come to mind.
- Prepare carefully, but allow space for the Holy Spirit to move in and through the content, the group members, and you as facilitator.
- Prepare the meeting space so that it will enhance interaction and openness. Ideally, group members should have comfortable seating around a table or in a circle so that each can see all the others. Also make available simple refreshments, such as coffee, tea, and fruit juices.
- Having available a variety of translations of the Bible may be helpful.

### *Shaping the Learning Environment*

- Create a climate of openness, encouraging group members to participate as they feel comfortable. Remember that some persons will jump right in with answers and comments, while others need time to process what is being discussed.
- If you notice that some members of the group seem never to be able to enter the conversation, ask them if they have thoughts to share, but don't insist. Some people prefer to listen, especially if the issue is one they are struggling with personally. Give everyone a chance

to talk, but keep the conversation moving. Moderate to prevent a few individuals from doing all the talking.

- If no one answers at first during discussions, allow for an interval of silence; then say something like, “Would anyone like to go first?” If no one responds, venture an answer yourself and ask for comments.
- Model openness as you share with the group. Group members will follow your example. If you limit your sharing to a surface level, others will follow suit.
- Encourage multiple answers or responses before moving on.
- Ask, “Why?” or “Why do you believe that?” or “Can you say more about that?” to help continue a discussion and give it greater depth.
- Affirm others’ responses with encouraging comments such as “Great” or “Thanks” or “Good insight”—especially if this is the first time someone has spoken during the group session.
- Monitor your own contributions. If you are doing most of the talking, back off so that you do not train the group to listen rather than speak up.
- Remember that you do not have all the answers. Your job is to keep the discussion going and encourage participation.
- Perhaps more than most other issues, those related to sexuality and sexual identity touch people where they live. In popular culture, sexuality is treated as a commodity, albeit one that is fascinating to most. In the church, sexuality has often been off-limits for discussion, even while so-called sexual sin is often dealt with as though it were somehow more evil than other sins. Within your group, there may be divorced persons and persons who have engaged in adulterous behavior, as well as others with sexual secrets they are fearful will be discovered. All these factors will have a significant impact on how people approach the book.

- Any dialogue on same-sex relationships will benefit from the insights of the LGBT persons most deeply impacted by the issue. As Mark Achtemeier reveals in the book, conversations with faithful LGBT persons were key in his transformation from an anti-gay activist to one who supports same-sex marriage. If your group includes LGBT persons, it will be important to not only hear their voices but also to avoid pressuring them into speaking when they choose to remain silent. Avoid at all costs making any person the poster child for gay marriage.

### *Planning Each Session*

Each session offers an opening prayer, followed by a number of suggested questions for the chapters covered. It then provides a closing prayer and has you remind participants to read the chapters for the next session. Please read through all the questions prior to the session and select ones your group will most enjoy discussing, including any additional questions that you feel are relevant and valuable for your particular group. Do not feel you need to ask all the questions, as there will surely not be enough time for that.