Homosexuality in the Context of Christian Sexual Ethics

Part 1 of 5: Discussing Homosexuality and Sexuality Together
with Stanton Jones, Darrell L. Bock, and Michael Brown
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Darrell Bock: Welcome to The Table videocast on relevant issues related to culture and theology. Today our topic is sexuality, particularly homosexuality. I have two outstanding guests with me today. Dr. Stan Jones is provost and professor of psychology at Wheaton College and is an expert in this area, having written in the area and having looked at the research that touches on the subject of homosexuality. And Dr. Michael Brown, who is president of the Fire School of Ministry, an undergraduate school in Concord, North Carolina. He also is an adjunct professor at Gordon-Conwell and Southern and Denver and Kings Seminary – he just travels around the country teaching everywhere. He also has a syndicated radio program on the Salem Radio Network entitled The Line of Fire. Good day, gentlemen. We're pleased to have you with us.

Stan Jones: Thanks for having us, Darrell.

Michael Brown: Thanks, Darrell.

Darrell Bock: I'm going to just launch right in. This is an important topic. The issue of homosexuality is certainly one that resonates through our culture in a variety of ways, in a variety of levels. It's in the media. It's in the news. We're dealing with legal issues that are related to it. There have been all kinds of studies psychologically about what goes on in this area. But I'd like to start with this question, and it is: Why is the discussion of homosexuality an important conversation to have in relationship to discussing sexuality in general? And, Stan, I'll let you lead us in.
**Stan Jones:** I think there are a number of reasons, Darrell, and one that comes to mind is that oftentimes we get quite polarized pushing the discussion in a direction that it's about “them out there,” when in reality homosexuality is just one variety of sexual brokenness, of sexual trouble, the troubled nature of the sexual nature of the entire human race. And I think that contextualizing the conversation about homosexuality in a broader understanding about sexuality helps to build bridges, helps us to approach the conversation with humility. I think those are crucial characteristics to having an effective ministry. I think another reason why it's really, really crucial is that, increasingly, the conversation is framed in the matter of civil rights. We are just coming through a very political season and that's exactly what we're hearing these days. And I think understanding homosexuality in the context of sexuality helps us to frame the issue the way Scripture itself frames the issue. Sexuality is a gift, but it's a gift that all of us experience in broken form, in need of being redeemed. I think of the teaching in 2 Timothy about [how] every gift from God is to be received with gratitude if it is sanctified, and that's a really crucial teaching. And so by examining homosexuality in the context of the broader issues, it helps to anchor us in a way that gives us access to fruitful conversations about the topic.

**Darrell Bock:** Okay. Michael, do you have anything to add in thinking through why sexuality and homosexuality should be kept on the table together?

**Michael Brown:** Just in brief. Because the main exposure we have to this is the day and night bombardment of gay activism and the day and night bombardment through the media, it's important that we not lose the larger context and that we not lose our heart of those that we're reaching out to. Simply that.

**Darrell Bock:** You know, to me, it seems like that the whole issue of the way God has designed the creation and the relationship between male and female, as well as the relationship between people in general, is an important part of this conversation. And sometimes in the discussion of homosexuality we lose the picture of what it is to be a human being and to be made in the image of God. Does that impact this discussion in your own thinking at all?
Stan Jones: It does. I think that the concept of being made in the image of God really does include our physicality. It includes our gender, our sexuality. And this is a tremendous gift from God. It's a way that we reflect the diversity and the unity of the human being. There's a sense in which the unity that can be achieved between a man and a woman in marriage is somehow reflective of the complexity of God's relationship within the Godhead. And so these issues are really, really crucial to tie together.

Darrell Bock: And it makes for a uniqueness in the male/female relationship in showing that diversity as well.

Stan Jones: It does. And in the current conversation there's oftentimes a rejection of any kind of norms to govern behavior, and there's this idea that the primary thing is to free ourselves, to shake off the shackles of expectations and norms and demands. And I think this is a really primary that the Christian message teaches us, that our sexuality is a gift, but it's a broken gift that we have to offer back to God to be redeemed and shaped. And so the trajectory of the human person is becoming more and more what God intended you to be. You're being called to something other than what you are now.

And in so much of the sexuality dialogs in the church, the way it's framed is quite contrary to that; that the way to access your true humanness is to find out what you really are and embrace what's inside, as if your impulses and desires define you. And I think that's one of the most crucial and deep issues that Christians have to resist. It's not that our desires and inclinations inside are real, but those are things that we offer up to God for him to call us towards what he would have us be.

Darrell Bock: Okay. Michael?
**Michael Brown:** Yeah. Two comments on the heels of that: first, when we go back to 1 Genesis, when God creates Adam, who is man and humanity, he creates him male and female. That alone reflects the image of God, neither entirely male nor entirely female, but as reflected in male and female. Then when the two come together in Genesis, the second chapter, not only is there the perfect complementarity and the ability to reproduce, and everything else that goes into a relationship, and then the ability to join children to a mother and father, but now that union uniquely reflects the image of God. So it's so important that we convey that: that there is a biological design, there is an emotional complementary design, but there's also a design in terms of the image of God being reflected. I was flying overseas to Rome one time and the gentleman next to me was an out and proud gay flight attendant that was off duty but going to Rome to meet his partner. So as he was out and proud, I was out and proud, and we had a wonderful conversation for several hours. And there were two gay men who were in first class, traveling with three boys that must have been adopted or from a previous marriage, and he said, "You know, it's wonderful to see that. Look at this. They must be a successful family. Those men are giving the best to those boys." I said, "Did it ever occur to you that they're depriving those kids of having a mother?" He said, "I never thought of that." Something that simple, but a lot of it does come back to ultimately "it's all about me."

I'm totally sympathetic to what it must feel like for someone to be same-sex attracted, or for a boy to cry himself to sleep, wishing he could change, or to think God must hate me. But I had dinner last night with a local gay activist and his partner. They came to protest at our church a few weeks ago and left saying, "You're too nice to protest." And he called my radio program to apologize for the protest, so I said, "Let's have a meal together." And he said, "Look, here's what we're always told. We're basically told 'if you want God, you can't have your sexuality,' and that drives us away from God. Isn't it better for us to have God and our sexuality?"
And I said, "In order to be a true disciple of Jesus, you have to deny yourself and take up the cross." To the very core of your being, you have to say no to what you want if it's contrary to the will of God, even to the point of Jesus saying you have to hate yourself, renounce the power of every other hold on your life and now say, "God, I'm yours. Whatever you want. For the rest of my life I belong to you." That's where we start with discipleship. Whereas the contemporary American mentality – and often the contemporary American gospel – is “Bypass the cross; it's all about me. Jesus died to enhance me and make me a bigger and better and more satisfied person.” The issue with homosexuality and other sexual desires fits into the same paradigm.

**Darrell Bock:** Well, that actually is how I wanted to follow up, because I think the important observation that you're making here is that there's a denial that goes on, and that denial doesn't apply just to homosexuals when it comes to sexuality.

**Stan Jones:** That's right.

**Darrell Bock:** That denial comes in all kinds of areas related to sexuality for every person. And that discipline, if you will, in relationship to sexuality is something that everyone faces in one form or another. So it's not unique to the homosexual. Isn't that right?

**Stan Jones:** That's absolutely right. Michael leapt off some of my comments and I want to leap off some of his comments because they were very astute. I think one of the failings of the evangelical church is that we so promote the nuclear family that it is oftentimes the case that people living in single chastity are feeling left out. And the message that the church seems to have to them is nothing more or nothing less than just don't have sex. But we oftentimes don't work hard at the creation of salient communities of people – communities of love, communities of dedication. We don't foster those relationships and create communities where single people are welcomed into our homes and become part of our families.

And I think that the scriptural witness is that marital life is a blessed state, but so also is single life in the model of Jesus himself, in the model of Paul, and in the model of many figures in the history of the church. And so our failure in focusing on the family is one of not holding up chastity and working hard as a community to actualize, to make it the kind of blessed state that Michael was talking about.
As you give up certain dimensions of sexuality, you don't cease as a single person to being a sexual being. And the person who tries to be asexual, to be non-sexual, is really cutting off part of their personhood, and that doesn't mean that you act on your sexual impulses, but it does mean that you're aware of them, you take them into account, you realize how they feed into relationships, you realize your identity as a man, as a women. I think the church can allow for different modes of expression. There are men who are less traditionally masculine and there are women who are less traditionally feminine. But those are gifts that can be offered into the church and add to the community and the variety of giftedness in the church.

Darrell Bock: Michael, why don't you explain a little bit of the background of your involvement with the homosexual community and the ministry that you have, because that's the context out of which you're speaking. You're speaking out of a lot of experience in wrestling with this issue and thinking about how the church should minister, really, in this context.

Michael Brown: Yeah, my own involvement is very interesting. My Ph.D. is from NYU in Near Eastern languages and literature, so it obviously doesn't intersect with these issues. All my years of teaching and of preaching, when I talked about sexuality, impurity, it was always from a heterosexual viewpoint. Those were the issues. I was concerned with the breakdown of the family, pornography, adultery, those kinds of things, but always in a heterosexual context.

When we moved to Charlotte in 2003, thinking it's kind of a Southern Bible city, we were shocked the following year to see a local gay pride event which is often marked by extreme expressions, which is often marked by sexual expressions and celebration of lewdness and vulgarity – which doesn't reflect the whole community, but it does send a message out. We were shocked. In a public park with children, how can this go on? And then I began to see activism, the big businesses, some of the biggest companies in America based in Charlotte, the big banks, actively supporting gay activism. Curricula in the schools – hearing more and more kids upset with what was being taught.
And I became very burdened because of activism. And there's a confrontational part of me that is going to expose what's wrong and stand up for what's right, but I understand that in order to do that correctly, we need to understand the other side, get in people's shoes. So as I began to read the literature, the firsthand literature of people who said, "I tried to come out of homosexuality and I couldn't. I had demons driven out of me; I had shock therapy; and I couldn't change," my heart began to break for these people. As I began to see what they were struggling with and how, in their view, this was really about civil rights and equality and liberation, I really began to identify with their struggle and understand it.

And the model that we based everything on now for these eight years is “reach out and resist.” Reach out to the people with compassion; resist the agenda with courage. There is an activist agenda that's confronting us on every level in almost every state. School systems, colleges are being hit with it, flooding through the media. It's unavoidable. And we need to stand for righteousness in a responsible and godly way. At the same time, these are human beings for whom Jesus died. He shed the same blood for heterosexual as he did for homosexual. And it's imperative for the church to change much of its paradigm that makes gay men and women into the worst of sinners, that drives them away rather than saying, "Hey, Jesus receives us as we are, and then he transforms us as we come to him."

And because of that, we've tried to have this balance. I'll often write articles about the activism. I have a 700-page book called A Queer Thing Happened to America. At the same time, I'm constantly trying to build individual bridges. And last year at the gay pride event we had 400 or 500 of our people wearing red shirts that said, "God has a better way" and we walked through the event, handing out bottles of water. Just walking through, making people understand we're not thrilled with the protest in our city but we care about you as individuals. And as hokey as it may seem, the bottles of water were marked "Jesus loves you." I was told by this gay activist I met with last night that they talk about that a year later as the model Christian protest: that they say that it was peaceful and it set a great example as to how we have our differences in the midst of a community.
So that delicate balance — reach out and resist — and to constantly try to build bridges. We had a forum at our church, "Can You Be Gay and Christian?" I invited local gay clergy and gay affirming clergy to come. I've done lecture series in which we say there'll be no gay bashing, but I want other points of view. We keep trying to reach out and establish dialogue as a bridge to share the gospel and at the very least to be better neighbors and citizens in the midst of our differences.

**Darrell Bock:** We really do have a tough tension here in some ways between standing up morally for what we think God calls people to be, what the Scriptures reveal about that. I think the church has sounded that note out pretty hard and pretty directly. And then we have this idea that Jesus loves everybody and he reaches out to everybody and he is seeking to draw people from everybody, if I can say it that way. And then the third thing — that often is not in the mix — is our communities are tasked with modeling how to do this balance, how to frame communities that are able to juggle these balls all together at one time and do so in a reflective kind of way.

And I think, in all honesty, we've struggled with how to do that balance, how to do that balance well, how to stand up for what you believe God has designed people to be. I mean this is not just about what the Bible says. This is about what God has designed people to be and how people function well as human beings, alongside the idea of how do you have this outreach while you're saying that the direction that you are going is not the healthiest direction for you to go. Stan?

**Stan Jones:** Right. It's all about — I think that's absolutely on target, and it's all about, in a sense, what is the path to human flourishing. And as Michael gave, I think, ample testimony, the path to human flourishing is through death to self and life in Christ, to become one with Christ and to become part of the body of the Church. And the way that I framed it for many years is that we have two dual responsibilities that are very hard to hold in tension and to do both well, and that is to love and to tell the truth.
And I think among many Christian young people today there's such an emphasis on love, that telling the truth gets pushed out. And what I think is built in implicitly in this is the idea that love means giving the other person whatever it is that they say they want. But I think when you look at the ministry of Christ, he had a ministry that was loving and accepting and caring, but one that always told the truth. You think of the woman caught in adultery and how that story is retold oftentimes in gay activist circles, and it's told only in terms of, well, Jesus didn't condemn her. But the last part of the segment, the last line is very important: go and sin no more.

**Darrell Bock:** Right.

**Stan Jones:** Jesus doesn't blanch and he doesn't shy away from the fact that what you've been doing is destructive and immoral and is not leading you in a path towards God. And so I think the fundamental point is that love in the Christian understanding is not formless and void. Love takes distinct shape. God has a desire for how we are to live our lives, and that's where telling the truth becomes so important. Some churches are all about telling the truth, and they don't embody the love dimension. And so they'll throw Bible passages at the gay people in their community, and they'll issue moral judgments. But they don't live the kind of life that Michael was talking about, about handing out the bottles of water and having dinner with people and treating them as real human beings, being willing to walk alongside them in patience.

It's a very delicate balance to work that out in relationships. How do you maintain the moral standards but stay in relationship? And it actually becomes very hard as you're dealing with real human beings and staying engaged with them over a long period of time. But that is what God would call us to, I think, to have that kind of constancy of witness and that kind of thoughtfulness of how these two obligations – to love and to tell the truth – balance out.