

# Avoiding Taking Sides in the Christian Debate about Homosexuality

L. R. Holben. *What Christians Think About Homosexuality: Six Representative Viewpoints*. N. Richland Hills, Tex.: D. and F. Scott Publishing, 1999. 320 pages.

*Reviewed by Ben Kemena*

**H**omosexuality is passionately debated in Christian circles today. The topic has joined abortion, racial equality, pacifism, and capital punishment as a concern that divides Christians into separate camps, though all still believe in the same God. To all groups, the Bible is the foundational defense, despite their widely divergent conclusions. So it is with the topic of homosexuality.

In *What Christians Think About Homosexuality*, L. R. Holben presents six different Christian viewpoints, each of which has sound theological, ethical, and scriptural support. Holben has done a masterful, if not pedantic, job of presenting these viewpoints with solid scholarship and rigorous attention to detail. His book is a joy to read, though many will find it unsettling.

Because the topic is so genuinely disquieting, Holben kindly and graciously appeals to the reader for an open mind and forgiving spirit. By doing so, he hopes to establish trust with the reader. His preface presents the six viewpoints along with twelve questions he asks of each in a format of point and counterpoint. He understands that some Christians may find terms like "queer theory" offensive and explains the reasoning behind his nomenclature and his punctuation.

Holben is to be applauded for beginning with this clear definition:

In referring to the gay, lesbian or homosexual person, I will not have in mind mere erotic itch, what "turns one on" physically and nothing more. Rather, I will be speaking of a person in whom not only the sexual drives but also the deepest emotional and psychological urges for self-revelation, intimacy, connectedness, closeness and commitment—all that we call romantic/erotic love—find their internal, spontaneous fulfillment not in the opposite sex but in the same. (xvii)

Even if he or she reads no more of the book than the "Introduction: The Historical Context," the Christian reader will be edified. In twenty-seven pages, Holben gives a precise summary of homosexuality and our human understanding of it throughout history, particularly from a Christian perspective. These pages should be considered "must reading" for anyone interested in

discussing or debating this topic further. In fact, this reviewer sorely wishes that this section could have been expanded.

Why? Because so many Christians are so concerned with questions about the causation of homosexuality and/or the possible transformation from homosexual to heterosexual orientations, and viewpoints on these subjects among Christians vary widely. For instance, Christians who believe that homosexuality is a conscious choice understand the issue quite differently from those who believe that homosexuality has a biological basis.

The American medical community declassified homosexuality as an illness approximately thirty years ago based on research and consensus peer review. This information has been part of a secular debate for years. When the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Colorado's Amendment 2 (a law meant to prohibit gay rights protection in Colorado), this literature was extensively reviewed and strongly influenced the legal debate.

One would hope that religious communities would spend as much time and care in the analysis of research on homosexuality. Much of this research is quite gruesome—from hormone injections to lobotomies (the last large study finished in 1959) to castration. On the topic of homosexuality, many Christians have already reached a personal opinion based on very little scientific information or understanding.

Science and Christian morality are not mutually exclusive—indeed, scientific understanding has often brought new enlightenment to ethics on issues such as race and gender. Although we may not have identified an exact causation for homosexual orientation, many Christians have spent little time



reviewing the significant amount of medical research that does exist. The main purpose of Holben's book is to introduce his readers to different Christian viewpoints regarding homosexuality rather than offering a biomedical review. However, issues of causation and immutability are at the core of the debate, particularly around the morality of homosexuality.

Holben is passionate about his topic, but he deftly avoids taking sides. His writing is masterfully concise and pithy, and he shows that each of the six views has a scriptural and moral basis. He walks the reader through the logic, exegesis, and common sense of each view and shows how the particular opinion can be defended or undermined. He shows how the views differ as part of a continuum in Christian thought. Some of these arguments and their defenses are brilliantly constructed.

Holben starts with "Condemnation," the so-called traditional Christian point of view. He defines this view by citing experts that include Greg Bahnsen and Harold Lindsell. According to this stance, all human beings are heterosexual and those who have strayed into homosexual behaviors are sinful and must repent. Those holding this opinion are also quick to point out that the Bible never clearly condones or supports homosexual activity of any kind. Furthermore, they believe there is no involuntary homosexual orientation. Those engaged in homosexual activities should not be pitied, but rather condemned. Homosexual relationships are evil and cannot be loving because these relationships fall far short of the marriage ideal outlined in Scripture.

In "A Promise of Healing," homosexuality is viewed as an

illness that must be healed, a moral and physical brokenness that can be cured. Holben cites C. S. Lewis, Elizabeth Moberly, and Andy Comiskey as representatives of this Christian viewpoint. Many ex-gay ministries use these arguments to support their programs and outreach efforts. Homosexuality is viewed as an addiction that should be addressed and conquered. In this way, those suffering from homosexual addiction can find re-enfranchisement into Christian fellowship.

Holben's "Call to Costly Discipleship," is the first of the six Christian viewpoints that accepts the notion of homosexual orientation. However, it calls on all homosexuals either to remain celibate (the majority) or to work toward embracing heterosexual behaviors (understanding that most can never achieve this ideal). Homosexual activity can never be condoned by Christians; this is a fact that all homosexuals must appreciate to remain in Christian fellowship. This view most closely reflects the beliefs of Roman Catholics and the official Catholic outreach program to homosexuals known as "Courage."

In "Pastoral Accommodation," Holben moves the reader to a viewpoint that claims all relationships—heterosexual or homosexual—are flawed. However, all Christians should aspire to their very best. Homosexuals are first called to attempt a heterosexual transformation. If that is impossible, they are called to celibacy. If that is impossible, a monogamous homosexual relationship may be tolerated. Although Christians who hold this opinion would never support homosexual relationships, they also understand that a monogamous homosexual relationship is preferable to sexual chaos (par-

ticularly in the HIV era) and would encourage all to strive to come as close as possible to the heterosexual marriage ideal. Only in this way can homosexual relationships be tolerated, though never condoned. Holben quotes Lewis Smedes and Helmut Thielicke extensively as representatives of this view.

"Affirmation," by its very name, suggests a Christian viewpoint that supports homosexual relationships. Homosexual relationships are held to the same moral scrutiny and standards as heterosexual relationships. For those believing in this particular viewpoint, the Bible simply doesn't address long-term committed homosexual relationships. However, Scripture does support the abiding principles of love and respect as the foundational basis for good relationships. Holben quotes Bruce Bawer and Ralph Blair as stalwarts of this viewpoint.

Finally, in "Liberation," Holben presents his last Christian viewpoint, which suggests that some Christians support biblical principles, but do not want the intrusions of patriarchy, heterosexism, and cultural bias to cloud their understanding of social equality. These Christians argue that the example of Jesus always speaks to fighting against oppression and prejudice and that gays and lesbians have been created in the image of God and given a full complement of God's love. Christians who hold this view argue that heterosexual norms have often been dehumanizing and evil. Will Leckie is quoted for this perspective: "our morality as sexual creatures . . . is about finding genuine, non-abusive ways of relating to one another, not about what we do with our genitals" (210).

Holben goes to great pains to avoid pushing his reader to any particular point of view. His



writing is engaging and broad enough to reach both layman and clergy. He has deciphered the core elements of Christian disagreement regarding homosexuality as presented in his six viewpoints. The book's appendices, bibliography, and supporting notes are ample. In particular, the bibliography he includes is an excellent general reading list for Christian communities addressing the topic of homosexuality.

Holben's "Afterword" makes a strong appeal to all Christians to respect differences of opinion in a loving manner. His underlying message is that Christians must avoid a dogmatic approach to homosexuality. Christians have had to learn how to negotiate differences with respect to other issues like abortion and pacifism, and Holben argues for the same sort of charity with respect to different views about homosexuality.

"I would not have written this present book," he states, "unless I believed that there are men and women of integrity, intellectual honesty and genuine Christian faith advancing each of the viewpoints surveyed. . . . If we are to love God with our "whole mind" as we approach difficult moral issues, we have an obligation to expose ourselves to and attempt to understand viewpoints which are uncongenial, even painful to us" (227).

This is a very ennobling and passionate goal on Holben's part. True to his word, Holben never suggests what he believes to be the most palatable of views. He leaves that to his readers.

Yet, because causation and immutability, at least as presented here, still cloud the issue of homosexuality as "choice" or "innate," some readers may find

Holben's arguments lacking moral credibility. Also, although Holben's command of the topic is considerable and salient, because he is a gay Christian, some of his readers, including many Christians whom he wants to reach, may dismiss the entire book as flawed because of what they regard as Holben's sinful personal choice. Holben hopes that by presenting different Christian views about homosexuality, his readers will reconsider the issue with open minds and charitable hearts. However, he does not

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persuasively make the case for why Christians should be willing to reconsider their traditional views in the first place.

As a gay Christian reviewing Holben's text, I am struck by his genuine neutrality and goodwill. Holben's book will not be easy reading for most Christians. It includes something to delight and concern all of his readers, but I hope his grace and charity will move hearts. Although some may not be willing to read a gay author's book regardless of its merits, those who give Holben's a chance will be richly rewarded.

### Recommended Reading

#### Ethical Issues

- Baede, Beth, ed. *Congregations Talking About Homosexuality*. Bethesda, Md.: Alban Institute, 1989.
- Bawer, Bruce. *Stealing Jesus*. New York: Crown, 1997.
- Goldberg, Marilee. *The Art of the Question*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1998.
- Gomes, Peter. *The Good Book*. New York: William Morrow, 1996.
- Helminiak, Daniel. *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*. San Francisco: Alamo Square Press, 1994.

- Satinover, Jeffrey. *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1996.
- Scanzoni, Letha, and Virginia Mollenkott. *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?* New York: Harper Collins, 1978.
- Schmidt, Thomas. *Straight and Narrow?* Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995.
- Scroggs, Robin. *The New Testament and Homosexuality*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1983.
- Siker, Jeffrey, ed. *Homosexuality and the Church: Both Sides of the Debate*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1994.
- Soards, Marion. *Scripture and Homosexuality*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1995.
- Spencer, Colin. *Homosexuality in History*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995.

- Spong, John Shelby. *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*. New York: HarperCollins, 1998.
- Win, Walter, ed. *Homosexuality and Christian Faith*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1999.
- Wolf, Alan. *One Nation, After All*. New York: Viking, 1998.
- Wolfe, Christopher, ed. *Homosexuality and American Public Life*. Dallas, Tex.: Spence, 1999.
- Worthen, Anita, and Bob Davies. *Someone I Love is Gay*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996.

#### Medical Issues

- Friedman, Richard, and Jennifer Downey. "Special Article: Homosexuality." *New England Journal of Medicine* 331.14 (Oct. 6, 1994): 923-30.
- Hamer, Dean, and Peter Copeland. *The Science of Desire: The Search for the Gay Gene and the Biology of Behavior*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994.
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- Pillard, Richard, and J. Michael Bailey. "A Biological Perspective on Sexual Orientation." *Psychiatric Clinics of North America* 18.1 (March 1995).

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