

FROM THE AUTHOR OF THE GROUNDBREAKING *PEOPLE TO BE LOVED*

PRESTON SPRINKLE

LIVING IN A
GRAY
WORLD

A CHRISTIAN TEEN'S GUIDE TO
UNDERSTANDING HOMOSEXUALITY

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR
LIVING IN A GRAY WORLD

"This is the book I have been waiting for! *Living in a Gray World* approaches the issue of homosexuality biblically and yet with tremendous compassion and care. I wish every teen would read it."

SEAN MCDOWELL

Professor at Biola University
and the author of fifteen books, including
Ethix: Being Bold in a Whatever World

"This book is hands-down the best resource I've seen on this subject for Christian young people—biblical, grace-soaked, and incredibly practical. So many Christian teens (and their parents!) are confused about, scared of, and yet immersed in a culture where formerly black-and-white lines about sexuality have blurred gray. But rather than fear, judge, or ignore this shift, Preston guides us through Scripture to not only help us see God's best plan for sexuality but, perhaps even more importantly, remind us that we're talking about individual people with unique stories—not just discussing an 'issue.' I cannot recommend this book more!"

JESSIE MINASSIAN

Resident "big sis" at LifeLoveandGod.com,
and author of *Crushed, Unashamed,*
and *Backwards Beauty*

Other books by the author

People to Be Loved

LIVING IN A GRAY WORLD

A Christian Teen's Guide to
Understanding Homosexuality

PRESTON SPRINKLE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Living in a Gray World

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My heart goes out to the thousands of teens and students who are wrestling with their faith and sexuality—oftentimes with no one to talk to. My hope and prayer are that this book will not only help you in your journey, but encourage others to journey with you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>A Message to Parents</i>	11
Chapter One: A Conversation About Homosexuality . . .	15
Chapter Two: What Does the Bible Say About Marriage?	29
Chapter Three: What Does the Bible Say About Homosexuality?	43
Chapter Four: Gender, Transgender, and Intersex.	57
Chapter Five: Truth and Love.	69
Chapter Six: I Think I Might Be Gay	83
Chapter Seven: My Best Friend Is Gay . . . Now What? . .	97
Chapter Eight: Homosexuality All Around Me.	111
Chapter Nine: Can I Attend a Gay Wedding . . . and Other Questions	123
<i>Conclusion</i>	139
<i>Appendix: Does the Bible Really Say It's Wrong?</i>	145

A MESSAGE TO PARENTS

This book is written primarily for students between the ages of fifteen and twenty-two. Many parents therefore will wonder if their sons and daughters should read this book. So let me introduce myself and tell you what this book is all about.

I'm a husband to my beautiful and energetic wife, Christine, and father of four children. I've also been a college professor since 2008 and have a huge heart for the next generation of Christians. I received a PhD in New Testament and Ancient Judaism from Aberdeen University (Scotland) and have written several books about the Bible and theology. As a professor, I spend a lot of time with college students, and I sometimes speak to high school students as well. As a result, I've developed a strong understanding of the questions and issues they're wrestling with. And over the last few years, the topic of homosexuality is usually at the top of the list. Their questions have caused me to spend a considerable amount of time studying the topic as thoroughly as I can. I believe—and most people would agree—that the question of homosexuality is one of the most important ethical questions facing the church today. One of the problems I've encountered is that high school and college students are

getting bombarded with opinions about homosexuality from the media, school, friends, and coworkers, but the church often stays silent. Maybe you've talked to them about the topic, or maybe you haven't. My guess, though, is that even if you have, your voice is only one of many perspectives that are shaping their thinking on the issue. Hence, the reason for this book.

Let me tell you up front where I stand on the question of homosexuality. I believe that the Bible prohibits homosexual behavior. I don't believe this just because I've been told to, nor do I believe it because of my Christian upbringing. I believe this because after studying the topic for a few years, I've discovered that the so-called traditional view is correct. The Bible only endorses opposite-sex marriages and prohibits same-sex sexual relations. However, I also believe that Christians have not always reflected the love of Christ in the ways they've dealt with the issue of homosexuality. And many gay and lesbian people have been greatly hurt by the church's unloving and judgmental posture. We need to be truthful, but we also need to be loving. We shouldn't sacrifice the truth for the sake of love, or stop loving in order to be truthful. Jesus exemplifies both truth and love; therefore, so should we. And that's what this book is all about. How to be truthfully loving and lovingly truthful.

A few years ago, a friend of mine, who has a ministry with teen girls, told me that she gets questions about homosexuality almost daily. She's looked for some sort of resource to give these students but hasn't found any. Knowing that I've been studying the topic, she encouraged me to write a book for students. I also saw the need for this book, and the rest is history.

You probably want to know what I'm going to talk about in this book. As a parent, I know I would! So let me give you a quick snapshot. In the following pages, I'm going to have a very frank conversation with my student readers about homosexuality. I'm going to wrestle with hard questions and do my best to give biblical answers. As a parent, this might make you nervous; I don't know. You may wonder what I'm going to say—especially with such a debated topic as homosexuality. So let me give you a sneak peek into the three themes I'm going to cover in this book.

First, I'm going to educate my readers about homosexuality and other related issues, such as what it means to identify as transgender and intersex. Before we give an answer to a question, we must fully understand the question! The same is true of homosexuality. We need to understand all the different questions being raised before we provide biblical answers to those questions. So in this book, I'm going to explain the various concepts and terms that surround this discussion. I'm also going to share a lot of personal testimonies from people who are gay. After all, hearing the stories of real people is often the best way to become educated about homosexuality.

Second, I'm going to explain what the Bible says about homosexuality. I do this most explicitly in chapters 2–3 and in the appendix. Again, I do believe that same-sex sexual relations are sin. However, I also believe that Christians have historically done a very poor job of loving and pastoring people who are gay. So there's a healthy tension of truth and love woven throughout this book. It's a tension our students need to wrestle with. It's a tension that we need to wrestle with.

Third, I'm going to cultivate a heart for people. As I often say, homosexuality is not about some issue to debate; it's about people to love—people, like you and me, who need Jesus. On that note, if you have a son or daughter who is either gay or wrestling with same-sex attraction, this book will be good for both of you to read. I'm not just writing this book to straight students, but to all students. In fact, chapter 6 is written directly to students who experience same-sex attraction.

I hope and pray that this book will help guide your sons and daughters in thinking more biblically and compassionately about this important topic. And if the topic of homosexuality is something you want to learn more about, then you might want to read my other book, *People to Be Loved*. It's almost twice as long as this book and deals with the Bible and homosexuality in much more depth.

CHAPTER ONE

A CONVERSATION ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY

His hands were trembling and his face dripped with sweat. He didn't want to go in there, but knew he had to.

My friend Jordan was anxiously waiting in his car outside the church office.¹ He had recently come to grips with the fact that he was attracted to guys, and he'd even mustered up the courage to tell his pastor. But now he was about to go into a room full of church leaders and tell them, "I . . . I am . . . I'm. Gay. I'm gay." He could hardly say the words out loud in the safety of his car. But he knew he had to go. He had to tell them.

Jordan was helping out in the youth group at church and had just completed a year of college. He had spent several years wrestling with his same-sex attraction, though his commitment to the Bible prevented him from acting on it. He hadn't even touched another guy romantically. But no one at this church had known about his struggle.

When he entered the room, he was greeted with smiles. With palms still dripping with sweat, he decided to get it

¹ "Jordan" is a pseudonym for my friend. The following story represents the basic gist of what happened, though some phrases and scenes come from other events in Jordan's life.

over with. "I know you all trust me and allow me to help out in church. So, I wanted to let you know that . . . I mean . . . I want to confess that, well . . . I'm sort of . . . I'm . . . I struggle with same-sex attraction. I'm . . . I'm attracted to guys."

Silence.

"I thought he was a Christian?" one leader said to another, forgetting that Jordan was still in the room. A few feet away. With ears. That worked.

"Jordan, when did you decide this?"

"Um . . . when? What do you mean? I . . . I didn't decide this. I don't *want* to be attracted to guys."

The leader continued, "You know, Jordan, what God thinks about homosexuals? The Bible says that they are an abomination!"

Jordan was taken aback. He didn't know what to say. The line between homosexual *practice* and struggling with same-sex *attraction* was painfully blurred. And the confusion continued to dehumanize Jordan limb by limb.

"Jordan, we can't condone someone with your lifestyle," another leader interjected with polished conviction.

Lifestyle? Jordan thought. *I haven't even touched another person. I'm probably more pure than any other guy my age. Lifestyle?!*

Before Jordan could respond, another leader added, "And what about our children? I mean, we can't have you working with our children!"

Jordan didn't know how to respond. "Um . . . sir, I . . . I'm not a *pedophile*. I don't struggle with wanting to have sex with children."

As Jordan sat through the rest of the rather brief meeting, he felt his humanity slipping away. He might as well have been stuffed in a cage and sold to the zoo. The last thing Jordan remembers that night is heading to his car, locking the door, squeezing the steering wheel until his fingers turned white, and screaming away his pain.

Ugh.

My heart breaks whenever I think about Jordan in that church office. Over the years I've talked with a lot of gay and lesbian people. Almost all of them have similar stories of feeling less than human and being painfully misunderstood. If there's one thing I've learned, it's that we've got to put flesh on this topic. We've got to stop talking about issues and start talking about human beings. As Jordan's story shows, focusing on truth with little compassion can actually damage other people who are made in God's image.

LET'S HAVE A CONVERSATION

I think it's time to have a conversation about homosexuality. No, not a feisty, angry, explosive conversation—maybe you've had some of those before. Let's have a cordial conversation. An honest talk filled with authenticity and love. One where hard questions are raised and genuine answers

are given. And if there is no clear answer, a simple “Let’s keep thinking about that” will do just fine.

I know it sounds weird for a book to be a “conversation”—especially since you won’t be able to talk back at this book without others thinking you’re nuts. But I think this book can still be a discussion. I’m not going to lecture at you, cram info down your throat, or even tell you what you must believe. I’m going to converse with you through these pages as if we’re hanging out at a coffee shop together. I’ll bring up the same subjects you’re probably wondering about, and I’ll try to raise some pushbacks that you might have.

So let’s have an honest dialogue about a very tough topic. I’m sure you have questions. Good questions, hard questions, weird questions, or questions you can’t ask anyone else. For instance:

Can I be friends with someone who’s gay?

How should I respond when my sister tells me she’s a lesbian?

Should I attend a gay wedding?

If two people love each other and they’re not hurting anyone else, then can’t they get married?

Does the Bible really say homosexuality is wrong?

If people are born gay, then doesn’t this mean God made them that way?

And . . . are people born gay?

I feel like I’m attracted to the same sex, but I have no one to talk to. What should I do?

I'm glad you asked these good questions. There are no bad questions in our conversation. (There could be some bad answers out there, but no bad questions.) Now let me be up front. I'm not going to pretend that there's one cookie-cutter answer to every question. There's not. Some questions have simple answers, but many don't. Most questions require a lot of thought and honest discussion. So let's have that discussion.

REAL PEOPLE

Let's begin our conversation by meeting some real people. Real people with real stories. My hope is that hearing their stories will help us "put flesh" on the topic of homosexuality.

The first friend I want to introduce to you is Dan. Dan is a gay man happily married to another man. Dan isn't very religious and he often gets frustrated with conservative Christians. He mocks them, yells at them, and would love to see the conservative church simply fade out of existence. Dan is the type of guy many Christians think of when they hear the word *homosexuality*. A feisty, angry, church-hating loudmouth who loves to fire off mean comments on blogs and Twitter.

And then there's Maddie. Maddie is a lesbian, but she's not attracted to women. This seems weird until you hear her story. When Maddie was nine years old, her dad chained her to a toilet in the basement and fed her scraps of food for three months. He then apologized, released her, and warned her that he'd kill her if she told anyone about what

had happened. As if that wasn't bad enough, he raped her over the next four years. And that's why Maddie is a lesbian. She isn't attracted to women, but she chooses to be a lesbian because she vows that because of what her father did, "no man will ever touch me again."

Unlike Maddie, Justin was raised in a healthy Christian home and became a follower of Christ at a young age. His mom wasn't domineering, his dad was around, his sisters didn't dress him up in pink, and he wasn't sexually abused. Justin breaks all the stereotypes of what some people say "makes" people gay. Justin is a Bible-believing Christian who grew up in a loving family. But when Justin was fourteen, he realized he was attracted to the same sex. He then spent several years studying what the Bible says about same-sex relations, and he ended up concluding that, based on his interpretation, the Bible does not condemn consensual, loving, same-sex marriages.

You've already met my friend Jordan. He grew up a lot like Justin, but Jordan believes that acting on homosexual desires is a sin. Jordan is still attracted to guys, but he's committed to a life without marriage and sex because he's convinced that same-sex relations are wrong and that he can best serve God through celibacy. In case you're wondering, Jordan got through that frightful evening with the leaders at his church. He ended up forgiving all of them for making him feel less than human. And today, he actually has a very good relationship with people at his church. Jordan is one of the most amazing Christians I've ever met. In fact, he's one of the most life-giving humans I've ever hung out with.

My friend Lesli is a female, but from the time she was four years old she believed that she was a boy. Biologically, Lesli is female. But psychologically and mentally, she identified as a male. In other words, she realized that she was “transgender” (we’ll get to that word later). She didn’t choose to feel this way. But now Lesli is a believer in Christ and helps other transgender men and women work through what it means to experience gender confusion.

The last person I want you to meet is Eric. He too was born into a Christian home and discovered he was attracted to the same sex at fourteen. Throughout high school, Eric was mocked, beat up, and made to feel less than human by Christians and non-Christians. When he came out to his parents about being gay, they told him he was an abomination and kicked him out of the house. A year later, he committed suicide. Eric died lonely, confused, and unloved.

Each one of these people has some experience with homosexuality. But as you can see, their stories are as different as night and day. They all have a unique set of experiences, joys and fears, things they hate and love, things that make them smile and other things that make them crazy mad. And they have stories. Lots and lots of stories. Stories that make them sing, and stories that make them shudder with cold sweat. I’ve introduced you to Dan, Maddie, Justin, Jordan, Lesli, and Eric because there’s something we really need to agree on up front. What I’m about to say will be *foundational* to everything I write in this book. However you feel about homosexuality, the Bible, or whatever, this truth is *nonnegotiable*:

Homosexuality is about *people* and not about some *issue*.

We're talking about people. People who have been raped into lesbianism, and people who have been born with same-sex attraction. (We'll get into the whole "born with it" debate later as well.) Men who feel more like women, and women who feel like men. Some gay and lesbians who act on their attraction, and others who don't. Some who believe in Jesus, and others who despise the Christian faith. And those who used to love Jesus but were so mocked and hated by Christians that they've left the church. Or committed suicide. The point is, there's no one-size-fits-all category for gay and lesbian people. Just like you and me and everybody else, they're different. So whether you are gay or straight or somewhere in between, you have a unique story. We are all individual human beings. And this book—I mean, *conversation*—is about understanding fellow human beings.

Throughout our conversation, you and I are going to ask some hard questions and sort through some tough debates. We're going to look at the Bible, psychology, and philosophy. And we're going to listen to a lot of stories. As we wrestle with all of this, never forget that we're talking about people—real people with real feelings.

LGBTQTIAP

Before we really dive into our conversation, we need to get on the same page about some important words. One thing

I've learned from talking to gay people over the years is that words really matter, *especially* in this discussion. There's a stupid saying that I used to hear as a kid. Maybe you've heard it too. It goes like this: "Sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me." This is terribly wrong. Yes, a big old stone will probably break your bones, but words have the power to crush your heart. Millions of people have been psychologically and emotionally slaughtered over something they were called more than twenty years ago. Eating disorders, depression, and suicide are often caused by hurtful words. Words have the power to hurt and to heal, to build up and to tear down. And unfortunately, many gay and lesbian individuals have been slashed by words that feel like razor blades across their eyeballs.

Take the word *lifestyle*. Too often, the terms *gay* or *homosexual* are quickly followed by the word *lifestyle*, like in Jordan's conversation with his church leaders. We need to be careful with this term. *Lifestyle*. Does every gay person have the same *lifestyle*?

Think about it. How would you feel if someone talked about the "straight lifestyle" and then lumped you into a category with every other straight person who walks the planet? I think you'd probably resist such a label, since you are a unique person, not some clone cut out of straightness.

I think what people really mean by "lifestyle" is—here we go—sex. After all, gay and lesbian people live the same lives as straight people. They work, they play, they eat and sleep. Both gay and straight people have gay and straight friends. So when people talk about "the gay lifestyle," what

they may really mean is gay sex. But as we'll see, the discussion about homosexuality is much more complex than just a conversation about sex. So let's drop the "lifestyle" lingo.

We also need to be careful about the term *homosexuality*. It's fine to use it; I'll use it throughout our conversation. But we need to be very clear about what we mean. Are we talking about people having sex with someone of the same gender? Or someone just attracted to the same sex? What if they're not acting on their attraction? What if they're not acting on it *now*, but maybe they will in the future? What if someone's actually straight, but they've had same-sex experiences in the past? What if someone is only slightly gay?

"Homosexuality" is a very broad concept that includes many different types of people. So if someone asks you, "What's your view on homosexuality?" ask them what they *mean* by homosexuality before you answer.

I'd recommend never using the word *homosexual* when referring to people. That is, don't use it as a noun, like, "Hey, look at that homosexual." You can say *homosexual* when referring to concepts or things rather than people ("homosexual relationship," "homosexual desires"). But almost every gay person I know does not like to be called "a homosexual." They prefer to be called gay or lesbian. There's no alternative for *bisexual* (someone attracted to both men and women), so that word is okay. Or you could use the well-known acronym LGBT. That is, **L**esbian **G**ay **B**isexual **T**ransgender. Most people tack on a Q for "Queer" (or "Questioning") at the end—LGBTQ. *Queer* is sort of a catchall identifier for everyone else who feels marginalized

based on their sexuality. And sometimes there are several other letters added to the mix, like LGBTQTIAP (**L**esbian, **G**ay, **B**isexual, **T**ransgender, **Q**ueer, **T**ranssexual, **I**ntersex, **A**sexual, **P**ansexual) and a long list of others. I tend to just use LGBT or sometimes LGBTQ.

“Transgender,” if you’re wondering, refers to someone who doesn’t identify with his or her biological sex. That person may be a woman on the outside, but they feel like the opposite gender and have the thoughts and emotions of a man, or vice versa. You may wonder, “Isn’t that person just a lesbian?” No, they aren’t. A lesbian is a woman who feels like a woman, and who’s attracted to other women. But a transgender woman identifies as a man (regardless of what their body looks like) and is attracted to women. Or men, in some cases. I know. It gets confusing. We’ll talk about all this stuff in chapter 4. When in doubt, just stick to LGBT.

The term *gay* is also used very differently depending on the person using it. When many Christians hear the term *gay*, they immediately think of sexual immorality. But I know many gay people who aren’t having sex. The term *gay* is often used as a synonym for “same-sex attraction” (or SSA) and doesn’t necessarily mean that the “gay” person is acting on that attraction. We’ll talk more about the term *gay* in chapters 6 and 7. For now, I’ll use the term *gay* in our conversation as a description of someone who is attracted to the same sex.

There’s another set of words that should rarely be used. Words such as “we” versus “they,” and “us” versus “them.” No one likes to feel like some “other”—a subspecies to the human race. Unfortunately, many gay and lesbians feel like

this whenever they hear Christians talk about “those gay people” or other such “they/them”-type words. Think about it: Pretend you are fifteen years old and struggling with same-sex attraction. (Some of you don’t need to pretend.) You’re sitting in the front row at church and the preacher keeps talking about “those gay people” and how “we need to stand strong against *them*” and “we can’t let *their* agenda influence *our* children.” Whose side would you be on? Even if you desired to be one of “us” (the good, righteous, straight people, who happen to be attracted to the opposite sex), you’ve just been pushed out to the community of “them.” Those nasty, abominable, gay people.

This is not an “us/them” discussion, but very much a “we” discussion. How can we best love people who are same-sex attracted among *us*? Who *are* us? Sometimes it’s inevitable to use the words “us” or “them.” Sometimes the English language demands it. I’ve even used these terms a few times already, in case you didn’t notice! My point is to be very careful about using these terms and to make sure you don’t cause people to feel like some less-than-human “other.”

A BETTER WAY

Let me be up front and honest about something: I’m not too thrilled with the way many Christians have gone about the “issue” (aah, that term!) of homosexuality. I can always tell whether somebody actually knows a gay person or not. When someone doesn’t know a person who’s gay, they tend to be harsh, black and white, and factual in their statements.

They quote Bible verses and speak with way too much confidence. And many clearly don't understand, nor do they try to understand, what it may feel like to be sexually attracted to someone of the same sex. Homosexuality is either wrong or right, and since the Bible is clear that it's wrong, they have no patience for those who think otherwise.

That seems to be many Christians these days. But then there's the other side. Those who mockingly discount the Bible as archaic and backwoods—an old-school book for a homeschooled family. How could anyone actually use the Bible to justify their beliefs? Doesn't the Bible also endorse slavery and a flat earth? Can anyone with half a brain still think that the Bible is scientifically credible? Come on, folks! Get with the twenty-first century.

Maybe you've heard some of this before too. Or maybe you've felt the same feelings. Let me be frank: I think both approaches are wrong. The dehumanizing, backwoods, "homosexuality is an abomination, *period*" approach is wrong. And the atheistic, arrogant, "I have no authority but science, myself, and Oprah" approach is wrong too.

I want to take a more balanced approach. It's the more difficult path, but it's one that seeks truth *and* love, conviction *and* compassion. I want to listen to the Bible and take seriously the words of my Creator. And I also want to sit down with a cup of coffee and ask Jordan what it feels like to be treated like an animal at the zoo. We can love people *and* still ask hard questions. Love and truth aren't at odds.

So let's get to some of those questions I mentioned earlier. The first question we're going to ask is this: Are all types

of homosexual relations wrong? More specifically, does the Bible prohibit a loving, faithful, committed gay couple from getting married? So we're not asking about people having sex before marriage, or multiple partners. (I take it for granted that the Bible asserts sex outside of marriage is wrong and that bouncing around from lover to lover is sin.) But what about two men or two women who love each other, who love Jesus and who are committed to lifelong faithfulness? Is anything wrong with that?

To find out, let's crack open the Bible and see what it says. I think you might be surprised.

People to Be Loved

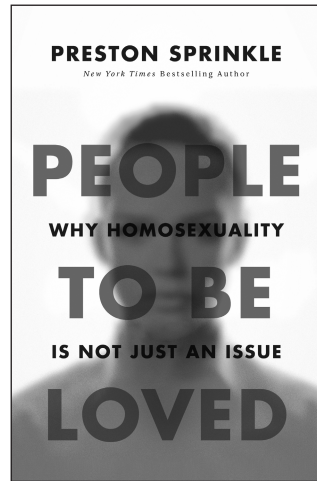
Why Homosexuality Is Not Just an Issue

Preston Sprinkle

Christians who are confused by the homosexuality debate raging in the U.S. are looking for resources that are based solidly on a deep study of what Scripture says about the issue. In *People to Be Loved*, Preston Sprinkle challenges those on all sides of the debate to consider what the Bible says and how we should approach the topic of homosexuality in light of it.

In a manner that appeals to a scholarly and lay-audience alike, Preston takes on difficult questions such as how should the church treat people struggling with same-sex attraction? Is same-sex attraction a product of biological or societal factors or both? How should the church think about larger cultural issues, such as gay marriage, gay pride, and whether intolerance over LGBT amounts to racism? How (or if) Christians should do business with LGBT persons and supportive companies?

Simply saying that the Bible condemns homosexuality is not accurate, nor is it enough to end the debate. Those holding a traditional view still struggle to reconcile the Bible's prohibition of same-sex attraction with the message of radical, unconditional grace. This book meets that need.



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PRESTON SPRINKLE

New York Times Bestselling Author

PEOPLE

WHY HOMOSEXUALITY

TO BE

IS NOT JUST AN ISSUE

LOVED

With the poignant accuracy of a scholar and the passionate heart of a pastor, Preston challenges Christians to look at the LGBT community from a deeper level. Specifically, he drives home the point that LGBT people in our lives aren't nameless faces, but real individuals that God loves. Each person has a voice, deserves to be listened to, and needs to be valued. I'm thankful Preston has pushed us further into the tension of grace and truth.

CALEB KALTENBACH, lead pastor, Discovery Church; author, *Messy Grace*

This is a remarkable book. The tone overflows with love, compassion, and grace. Preston is an exceptional biblical scholar, and as such, his exegesis of Scripture is excellent. As I read, I kept thinking, "Preston really loves the LGBTYQ Community." This book will be a resource at Transformation Church.

DERWIN L. GRAY, lead pastor, Transformation Church; author, *The High Definition Leader; Building Multiethnic Churches in a Multiethnic World*

In his new book, *People to Be Loved*, Preston Sprinkle serves as a trustworthy guide through the debated passages of Scripture that relate to homosexuality. His thoughtful, balanced reflection on the arguments on both sides, as well as his willingness to share with the reader what he has concluded, reflect the kind of "convicted civility" that is often lacking in any discussion of the topic. Sprinkle's approach also models for the Christian a commitment to respectful engagement with others with whom you may disagree.

MARK A. YARHOUSE, PsyD, Professor of Psychology and Rosemarie S. Hughes Endowed Chair, Regent University; author, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture*

In a conversation polarized by hate, fear, and misunderstanding, Preston Sprinkle steps into the fray with a thoughtful, articulate, nuanced, humble, and courageous take on the current debate over sexuality and the Bible. His particular cocktail of professor, pastor, and down-to-earth regular Joe is an intoxicating blend that makes for good reading and even better learning. I'm thankful for Preston and this book.

JOHN MARK COMER, pastor for teaching and vision,
Bridgetown: A Jesus Church in Portland

Preston Sprinkle has a deep reverence for Scripture and a great love for people, meaning this book is not just accessible and lively, but rewarding and compassionate. It deserves to be widely read.

SAM ALLBERRY, associate pastor, St. Mary's Church, Maidenhead, UK;
author, *Is God Anti-Gay?* and *James For You*

Preston Sprinkle does conservative Christians a needed service by guiding them into the complexity of biblical interpretation, sexual ethics, and compassionate listening. His meticulous research is applied with an even hand as he affirms and critiques arguments coming from both affirming and nonaffirming Christians, all the while offering wise pastoral counsel to straight and gay alike. Affirming scholars will disagree with various points in his interpretation but there is no question that Sprinkle is going as far as he can go within a nonaffirming viewpoint to move this debate away from the rhetoric of the culture war toward a more productive, respectful, loving conversation.

MEGAN K. DEFRANZA, author, *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female and Intersex in the Image of God*;
visiting researcher, Boston University School of Theology and
the Institute for the Bio-Cultural Study of Religion

With honesty, empathy and all-too-uncommon grace, Preston Sprinkle contributes brilliantly to the ongoing conversation our culture is having regarding Christianity and sexuality. Preston has done a rare thing: addressing controversial issues and dealing with perplexing questions in a way that is fair and gracious to all participants. This is a refreshing and immensely helpful book in navigating the deep waters of sexual ethics. I highly recommend it!

MIKE ERRE, pastor, First Evangelical Free Church of Fullerton

Amidst the arguing at fever-pitch comes Preston Sprinkle and *People to Be Loved*. I am grateful for his thoughtful perspective and great desire to love at the risk of being both criticized and marginalized. I pray more people will opt into relationship and conversation with one another in the way Preston has and find deeper friendship and understanding.

ALAN CHAMBERS, author, *My Exodus: From FEAR to Grace*; www.AlanChambers.org

Powerful and accessible, *People to Be Loved* engages top scholarship from all sides of this conversation in a way that's easy to read and down-to-earth, respectfully avoiding straw men while exploring Scripture with conviction and grace. Moreover, Preston models a posture for straight Christians to allow the abuse and mistreatment gay people have experienced to break and reshape us, to let their beauty and dignity draw our eyes to Jesus, and to "front love" as we seek to embody the sacrificial love of our King for his world.

JOSHUA RYAN BUTLER, pastor, Imago Dei Community (Portland);
author, *The Skeletons in God's Closet*

PEOPLE TO BE LOVED

WHY HOMOSEXUALITY
IS NOT JUST AN ISSUE

PRESTON SPRINKLE

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CONTENTS

<i>Foreword by Wesley Hill</i>	7
<i>Preface</i>	9
1: "MY NAME WAS FAGGOT"	13
2: HOLY OTHERNESS: <i>Is Male and Female Sexual Difference Necessary for Marriage?</i>	27
3: FROM SEX IN THE CITY TO LAW & ORDER: <i>Homosexuality in the Old Testament</i>	41
4: RATED R: <i>Homosexuality in Judaism and Greco-Roman Culture</i>	55
5: WHOM WOULD JESUS LOVE? <i>Homosexuality and the Savior</i>	69
6: FALL SHORT OF GOD'S GLORY: <i>Homosexual and Heterosexual Sins in Romans 1</i>	87
7: LOST IN TRANSLATION: <i>Homosexuality in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10</i>	103
INTERLUDE: A SUMMARY	121
8: "BORN THIS WAY": <i>Does God Make People Gay?</i>	127
9: GAY AND CHRISTIAN: <i>Can Someone Be Both?</i>	141
10: ON THE SIDE OF THE ANGELS: <i>What Does Christian Faithfulness Look Like?</i>	157
<i>Afterword: The Challenge</i>	177
<i>Appendix: Five Affirming Interpretations of Romans 1</i>	187
<i>Notes</i>	193

*For Matt, Brian, Nick, Julie, Nate, Wesley, Lesli,
and the millions of other Christians
who daily wrestle with their Christian faith
and same-sex sexuality.*

FOREWORD

WESLEY HILL

I know a Christian scholar who for many years has participated in a weekly meeting with two rabbis. The three men's purpose is to study Scripture together. Initially their meetings focused on the Hebrew Bible, a text that both Jews and Christians treat as inspired and trustworthy. Later, as they went on, they moved to the New Testament.

Hearing about their times together, you might be tempted to focus on all the ways the Scriptural study could go badly. Convinced of the rightness of their own positions, each man might have assumed he had nothing to learn from the others. Or, if he kept an open mind, each man might have treated the others' views as historical or sociological curiosities, much in the way one might catalog a new animal species, without being willing to have his own views challenged and expanded in the process. But, it seems, none of these things has happened. At least for these three men, studying Scripture together in the face of deep division has proved, again and again, to be worth continuing.

I found myself thinking about these weekly meetings as I read Preston Sprinkle's book on homosexuality and Christian faith. I made this connection, first, because of the book's down-to-earth, conversational style. In the pages to come, you'll encounter a voice that is warm, self-effacing, and poignantly honest about ongoing uncertainty and open questions. Reading the book feels like sitting down and sharing coffee with the author.

But second, I also thought of those meetings because of their apparent futility. If Jewish-Christian dialogue seems, at times, too fraught to be viable in the long term, how much more might we be tempted to think something similar about the debates among

Christians over the Bible and homosexuality! If ever there were a futile conversation, we may say to ourselves, this is it. And yet, like the rabbis meeting with the Christian scholar to read the Bible, Preston's book persists in believing that there is value in opening the Scriptures—yet again—and reading them for insight and instruction. In the face of persistent, apparently intractable disagreement, Preston returns to the Bible and interprets it afresh and invites us to join him.

But there's a third reason I think of those weekly meetings when I read this book, and that's because they were meetings *with* others who see matters differently. Rather than a Christian meeting with other Christians, or rabbis meeting with other rabbis, the weekly Bible study between the Christian scholar and the two rabbis is a time for those who disagree to sit around a table together. And that, I think, is the model for what Preston attempts here. On almost every page that follows, you'll see Preston trying to interact fairly, charitably, and deeply with his fellow scholars and authors. He not only quotes their words, he seeks to uncover their passions and worries. He tries to respect their positions but also read between the lines to address their larger, underlying concerns. He admits when they seem to have stumped him, and he freely gives credit when his own points of view depend on their ground-clearing efforts.

As a gay Christian myself, I'm intensely interested in what Preston's written here. I don't agree with him on everything (as a catholic-minded Anglican, I would have liked to see him, for instance, putting Augustine's teaching on the three goods of marriage—including procreation—and the New Testament texts into more conversation with each other), and I'd say several things differently.

But more than anything, I admire the *posture* of this book. It models how to have a fruitful discussion of homosexuality, the Bible, and pastoral care in the church today. If more of our conversations with our fellow believers took their cues from what Preston has written here, the church would be a healthier, holier place.

I hope you will read on. And, perhaps like the rabbis who meet weekly with the Christian scholar, I hope you'll read this book with others with whom you disagree. Preston's book sets the table for us, and I hope you'll take your seats and open your Bibles with him.

PREFACE

I used to sleep like a baby. If a dump truck blew through my living room, I wouldn't wake up. But I don't sleep as well as I used to. I frequently wake up way before my alarm, haunted by the pain that Christians have caused gay people. Sometimes I hit the pillow exhausted but am instantly stirred up by a rush of fear that I have interpreted the Bible incorrectly—and hurt people by doing so. I can no longer read what the Bible says about homosexuality from a distance. I now see real names, beautiful faces, and complex stories splashed across its pages.

This book is by far the most difficult one I've written. If all I did was to study a bunch of Bible verses, it would have been much easier. But as I began researching for this project, I made it a point to spend half my time in books and the other half in the lives of gay people. And my life will never be the same. I have made many unexpected friends whose stories have seeped down into my bones.

I guess that some of you may already be agitated. All this talk about listening to gay people makes you wonder where I “stand.” So let me tell you up front: I stand on truth and I stand on love. Figuring out how to stand on both is hard work. The question of homosexuality defies simple answers, so I refuse to give thin answers to thick questions in the pages that follow. If you want quick, easy answers, or if you just want me to affirm all of your assumptions—whatever they may be—then this book isn't for you. There are plenty of books out there that will reaffirm your presuppositions. In this book, we're going to think. We're going to study. We're going

to listen to the pain and joy of real people who are gay. We're going to hold our views with a humble heart and an open hand—inviting God to correct us where we have been wrong. We are going to do our best to lay aside our assumptions and genuinely seek to know what the Bible, not our tradition, says about homosexuality.

Some of you may affirm same-sex relations while others may not. I am writing this book for both of you—for all of us—for anyone who cares to know what the Bible says (and doesn't say) about homosexuality. This book is written for Christians, those who consider the Bible to be authoritative. Although I am a biblical scholar by profession, I am also a pastor who cares about people, and an ordinary dude who likes to surf, play baseball, and watch action-packed movies that get bad reviews. I have a PhD in New Testament and Judaism, and yet I didn't read a book from cover to cover until I was seventeen. I am not a natural-born geek. I happened to have become one because I fell in love with learning.

All that is to say, I sought to make the tone of this book more conversational so that anyone interested in the topic will understand it. The professor side of me cringes at books that are built on thin or sloppy research, so I've included many endnotes and an appendix for those of you who wish to go deeper into the subject.

The first two thirds of this book wrestle with what the Bible says about homosexuality, while the last third addresses other questions that come up in the discussion. I am well aware that some people are tired of bantering around about the so-called “clobber passages” in the Bible that mention homosexuality. I can see why people feel this way, but as I've read many books on the subject, I still see a great need for a clear, thorough, and fair-minded study of Scripture. Some books I've read seem like they are using the Bible to justify their previously held beliefs about homosexuality. They feel more like a defense of a particular view rather than an exploration of what the Bible actually says—being willing to go where the text leads, even if it leads them to change their view. There is no such thing as an unbiased reading of the Bible. We all bring

assumptions and presuppositions to the text. But as my philosopher friend Jamie Smith recently put it, it is possible to give the text a “fair reading”—a reading that recognizes one’s assumptions and invites others to point them out.

I have tried to read the Bible as fairly as I know how with regard to homosexuality. I have listened to people on both sides of the debate, those who affirm same-sex relations and those who do not. To my surprise, I have made many friends with people who hold very different views of homosexuality. Perhaps it’s because, as you’ll see, I have discovered that the Bible challenges people on *both* sides of the question. It has certainly challenged me.

Whenever I write a book, I seek to do it in the context of a diverse community. I invite feedback and pushback on every sentence, and with this book, I cast the net broadly. There are dozens of people whose voices can be found hidden behind every word, and this book would have been different if I just sat in a room and wrote it by myself. I didn’t. This book reflects an ongoing conversation with many people about the Bible, the church, and homosexuality.

The word *ongoing* is important. This book is not my last word on homosexuality, but my first word (in print, at least). It doesn’t represent my codified, unchangeable, etched-in-stone declaration of what I have and always will believe about homosexuality. This book is a contribution to a complex conversation about a difficult topic. I would be in sin if I had the audacity to declare that I have it all figured out. But before God and before you, I pray that the pages that follow give honor to my Lord and King who does have it all figured out.

Since this book is the fruit of communal discussion, I have many people to thank. Several people read through all, or portions of, this book: Joey Dodson, Roy Ciampa, Sam Roberto, Mark Yarhouse, Jeff Cook, and I am especially thankful for the many gay and lesbian readers who have offered incisive feedback, especially on my language, tone, and ignorant assumptions: Matt Jones, Nathan Collins, Julie Rodgers, Bill Henson, Brian Gee, Wesley Hill, Bill

Henson, and Nick Roen. Several others, who didn't read the manuscript but whose stories had a significant impact on my thinking, include Lesli Hudson-Reynolds, Justin Lee, Eve Tushnet, and many others whose testimonies have forever shaped my life. I don't know if I would have been able to finish this book were it not for the constant encouragement of my pastor and friend Bren Angelos and my friend Brad Heinrichs, who let me use his mountain cabin to finish writing this book. Most of all, thanks to my wife, Christine, and my four kids who have seen this book take a toll on my life.

Many thanks also to the ninety students in my class: "Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church" (Spring 2014), as you listened to me test-drive an earlier version of this book. Also, there were many people who interacted deeply with my ongoing series of blogs on the topic. There are too many names to remember, but Julie Perez, Joe Tobias, and David "Ford" Sinclair stand out. None of you would let me get away with any unthoughtful remark—and I am a better person for it. I am sorry for some of the offensive things I have said, and I am very grateful for your critical feedback.

I've given several talks on homosexuality to diverse audiences, and, by God's grace, I'm still alive. In particular, the AudioFeed Music Festival in Champaign, Illinois (July 2014), the Young Adults Conference at First Baptist Church in Arkadelphia, Arkansas (March 2014), and the Clydehurst Family Camp somewhere in the boonies of Montana (August 2014) proved to be incredibly helpful in shaping my thinking. Thanks are also due to Denny Burk, Wesley Hill (again), and Owen Strachan for your stimulating interaction in our seminar on sexual orientation at the Evangelical Theological Society's Annual Meeting in San Diego (November 2014).

CHAPTER ONE

"MY NAME WAS FAGGOT"

Eric Borges was raised in a conservative Christian home. At a young age, Eric realized he was different, and other kids at school let him know it. He endured relentless and ongoing bullying throughout kindergarten, and the rest of his elementary school years were tarnished with horror. "I was physically, mentally, verbally, and emotionally assaulted on a daily basis," recalls Eric. This led to chronic migraines, debilitating depression, suicidal thoughts, and a whole host of other mental and physical problems. "My name was not Eric, but Faggot. I was stalked, spit on, and ostracized." On one occasion, he was assaulted in a full classroom, and nobody intervened, not even the teacher who was present. Throughout school, Eric was treated like a monster, a sub-species of the human race. "I was told that the very essence of my being was unacceptable. I had nowhere safe to go"—not even church.

In his sophomore year of college, Eric came out to his parents; he told them he was gay. After performing an exorcism on their son, they told him, among other things, that he was "disgusting, perverted, unnatural, and damned to hell." Later that year, they kicked him out of the house. Eric shared his story on YouTube in 2011. In the video, he encouraged other youth who have had similar experiences that "it gets better."¹ Having suffered in a hissing cauldron of ridicule and torment, Eric wanted to help others to find comfort and hope to pull them through the pain.

One month later, Eric killed himself.

I wish Eric's story was an anomaly, but it's not.² Having listened to countless testimonies and looking at startling statistics, I am disheartened to say that the Christian church has often played an unintended yet active role in pushing gay people away from Christ. Sometimes away from Christ and into the grave.

The ones who don't kill themselves often end up leaving the church. But here's the thing: most people who are attracted to the same sex don't end up leaving the church because they were told that same-sex behavior is wrong. They leave because they were dehumanized, ridiculed, and treated like an "other."

An old Baptist pastor recently told me, "People will always gravitate to where they are loved. And if they don't find love in the church, they'll go elsewhere." He is right. Most of my gay and lesbian friends have diverse stories, but they are all held together by a common thread that looks a lot like Eric's:

I was raised in the church, but everyone knew I was different.
I was made fun of, mocked, and made to feel like a monster.
When I came out, I was rejected, so I found another community where I was accepted.

A gay friend of mine leads a Bible study for gay and lesbian people at his college campus. He recently told me that all the participants of his study are hungry to know God's Word but they are too scared to go to church. My friend didn't say "uninterested" or "turned off" or "too busy." He said "scared," as in *frightened*. They feared they would be harassed or harmed, beat up or bullied—verbally or physically—if they stepped across the holy threshold on Sunday. Another thing they all had in common is that they had all tried to kill themselves at one point. The last place they think they would find good news worthy of life is inside the church. So they remain outside—hungry to know God's Word yet terrified of people inside the church.

Learning about Eric's story and many others like it has caused me to revisit the question of homosexuality. Like many of you, I

grew up inheriting a Christian tradition that told me homosexuality is a sin. And for many years, I never questioned this assumption. But after hearing innumerable stories that reflect Eric's, I began to ask myself, *Am I sure we've got this one right?* If the gospel is good news, and the church is to be the light that warms the world with this good news, then why are gay people leaving the church in search of better news? If the gospel is not good news for gay people, then it's not good news.

As I read the Gospels, I see people drawing near to Jesus (Luke 15:1). All kinds of people. Broken people, sinful people, marginalized people, people who are clean and unclean, pure and impure. Some are befriended. Others are confronted. All of them are loved. And none walk away wanting to kill themselves. The people who are most repelled by Jesus are the religious hypocrites. As I think about the question of homosexuality, I see many gay and lesbian people repelled by the church. And so I am asking myself, *Why?*

Has the church handled the question of homosexuality with Christlike love? Are we sure we've understood what the Bible *really* says about same-sex relations? As you read on, you'll see that the answer is both yes and no.

"THE BIBLE IS VERY CLEAR"

I was sitting next to a couple on a plane and quickly found out that they were Christians. When I told them I was a writer, they asked me what I was currently working on. "Well . . ."—I'm always nervous about dropping the homosexuality bomb with people I don't know—"I am actually writing a book about homosexuality."

The husband immediately looked down and shook his head back and forth slowly while confidently asserting, "The Bible is *very* clear. It's *very* clear. There's no debate. Homosexuality is *wrong*." I didn't know what to say, so I cowardly nodded with apathetic agreement, "Hmmm . . . uh . . . ya . . ." I didn't want to get into the whole debate, but he kept on preaching, "It's *very* clear . . . there is no debate."

I found the statement odd since there actually is a debate, a *massive* debate, regardless of how clear he thinks the Bible is. In any case, I couldn't help myself. The opportunity was ripe to gather some evidence. I've often wondered whether Christians who "know for a fact" that homosexuality is wrong could name the passages where the Bible says so. In most cases, they can't. But I wanted to see if this person was different. For him, the Bible's condemnation of homosexuality seemed about as clear as the deity of Christ or the existence of God. "It's *very* clear."

So I asked, "Umm . . . which passages are you talking about?"

"Huh?" He was taken aback.

"Which passages are you talking about?" I repeated. "You know, the ones that you say are very clear about condemning homosexuality?"

Silence. Frustration.

"It's *very* clear!" he proclaimed.

"Yes, I know," I cordially agreed. "But which passages are *very* clear?"

"Well . . . umm . . . uh . . . I don't know. But I've studied them. I have. They are there. And they are *very* clear."

And maybe they are. Maybe he had a memory lapse. Maybe he had studied those passages in great detail but through the rest of life's worries, those passages were pressed down in the far reaches of his memory. I get it. I've been there. I still find it odd, however, that most Christians know "for a fact" that homosexuality is wrong—there's no debate, no discussion, the Bible is *very* clear. But those same Christians oftentimes can't name the passages where the Bible refers to homosexual relations.

You may think, "Well, that's because there are too many passages to remember! The Bible says it's wrong in so many places that there's no way anyone could possibly keep track of them all."

Actually, there are only six.³

Six passages.

Six passages in the Bible that seem to say that homosexual behavior is wrong.

And even with those six, there is a massive debate about whether those passages can apply to monogamous, consensual, loving gay relations.

Because that's the real question Christians are asking. The question is not about whether gay sex outside marriage is wrong. It's not about whether soliciting a same-sex prostitute or sleeping around with several partners is wrong. All genuine Christians believe these are sin. The question is whether two men or two women can date, fall in love, remain sexually pure before their wedding day, and commit to a life-long, consensual, Christ-centered, self-giving, monogamous union.

So the question is: Does the Bible really address—and prohibit—these types of relations?

MY JOURNEY

For much of my life, I was that guy on the plane. I believed that homosexuality was wrong; I just didn't know why it was wrong and where it said so. My beliefs stood firmly in midair with no reasoning, no rationale, no biblical foundation. So I began to study.

At the beginning of my journey, I set out to study what the Bible says about homosexuality. And to be honest, I thought this part of my study would take a few weeks. After all, my tradition had already concluded that same-sex relations are wrong, and so I only needed to find the verses that supported this tradition. But as I started to study those verses, I quickly found that the discussion is not so simple. You may find it shocking, but most scholars who have written books about homosexuality in the last forty years have concluded that the Bible does not condemn consensual, monogamous, same-sex relations.⁴ The debate is not about what the Bible says. That much is clear. The debate is over what the Bible means.

I've always been eager to test my traditional beliefs by Scripture. After all, I'm a product of the Protestant Reformation, which upholds Scripture—not tradition—as our ultimate authority. Sometimes the

church's tradition needs to be corrected and reformed by Scripture. For many years, the church stood on the wrong side of the question of slavery. Many Christians held the Bible in one hand while they whipped their slaves with the other. Christians have also stood on the wrong side of science. The famous Christian astronomer Galileo was excommunicated and imprisoned for trying to overturn the church's traditional belief that the sun revolves around the earth. Yet we are all thankful that Galileo had the nerve to question tradition—even one that was written in stone.

I underwent a similar shift in my own thinking a few years ago when I set out to study what the Bible says about warfare and violence. As a reformed evangelical and son of a Marine, I always assumed that it's perfectly okay for Christians to kill if it was during a war or to save an innocent person. It seemed like a no-brainer, and my tradition had all but unanimously affirmed it. But when I studied what the Bible actually says about violence and warfare, I ended up advocating—to my own surprise—absolute nonviolence, even though this goes against the tradition I grew up with.⁵

All that to say, I am quite eager to let the Bible challenge tradition. It's not that tradition is bad or doesn't carry any authority. I think it does. But all evangelical Christians agree that the Bible stands over tradition as our ultimate authority.⁶

So when I began my study a few years ago, I came before God and said, "If my tradition has been wrong about homosexuality, then please show me through your Word and give me the courage to proclaim the truth." I have prayed that prayer several times throughout this study, and I encourage you to do the same. If the Bible is our ultimate authority, and if tradition is subject to error, then we all should eagerly drag our traditions to the foot of Scripture and mandate a re-evaluation. That's what "reformation" means. It means that we submit our traditions to the authoritative Word, even if it compels us to reconfigure long-held beliefs.⁷

I'm not trying to create a spiritual force field around my interpretation, as if to say, "Since I prayed about it, I must be right." I only

share this with you to say that I have genuinely tried to approach this discussion as fairly and honestly as I know how. Yes, of course, we all have biases and presuppositions that we bring to the text. I'm well aware of that, and you should be too! But I also believe we have the ability to identify our assumptions, invite people to challenge those assumptions, consider the strengths and weaknesses of alternative interpretations, and prayerfully and communally interpret the text of Scripture in a responsible and humble manner—always being open to the possibility that we could be wrong. Before God and before you, I can say that I've tried to do that with the question of homosexuality.

Over the last few years, I have devoted countless hours to studying the Scriptures with an open mind. I have read piles of books and articles on the topic from both sides of the debate. I have researched the ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman context in which the Bible was written. I have looked at the ever-evolving conclusions of psychologists, counselors, and medical researchers. But studying the issue of homosexuality is not enough. Like flying an airplane with only one wing, reading about homosexuality is necessary—but dangerously insufficient.

We need to listen to gay and lesbian people.

I have enjoyed countless hours of conversations with gay and lesbian people, some who share my Christian faith and others who don't. I have invited their input and pushback through blogs, emails, Facebook conversations, and over many meals, which usually involve spicy food and good beer. Throughout my study, I have made many gay friends who have solidified my belief that homosexuality is not about an issue. It is about people.

With some topics, it's easy to keep the Bible at arm's length from real people. Plenty of writers have done this with homosexuality. But I can't, and I won't. When I read Leviticus 18, Romans 1, and other passages that talk about same-sex relations, I no longer see words on a page but people with a story—people whom I know and love.

I see Jeremy, Matt, David, and Andrew. I see Laura, Julie, and

my friend Caleb, whose parents both came out as gay when he was two years old. I love the Bible and I cherish its life-giving words. But like a gladiator's sword, some of its passages are dripping with blood. They have been wielded with reckless ignorance to slash open old wounds and carve out new ones. Razor-sharp verses are thrust between the ribs of people like Maddie, whose dad chained her to a toilet in the basement for three months when she was nine. He gave her scraps of food to keep her alive and then raped her repeatedly for the next four years. Now Maddie chooses to have relationships only with other women. "I'm not attracted to girls, but no man will ever touch me again," she says.⁸ When I read what Paul says about female same-sex behavior in Romans 1, my heart breaks for Maddie, and it's tough to read that passage without tears.

If the church is ever going to solve this issue, it needs to stop seeing it as an "issue." Homosexuality is not an issue to be solved; it's about people who need to love and be loved.

People like Tim Otto.

SEX IN SEARCH OF LOVE

Tim realized at a young age that he was attracted to other boys. But as a missionary kid and devout follower of Jesus, he believed he shouldn't act on his attractions. Tim suppressed his sexual desires for years until one day his passions overcame him. He entered an adult bookstore in downtown San Francisco and was scanning the magazines when another guy propositioned him. They went to a back room and had sex. Tim got dressed, left the store, sprawled out on the urine-stained sidewalk in the middle of the night, and contemplated suicide. "[A]s I lay on the sidewalk in front of an adult bookstore, the fact that the Mission Street pawn shops sold guns began to seem like a solution."⁹

By God's grace, Tim didn't kill himself that night. But his reflections on what happened are remarkable: "I wish that somehow, rather than ending up in the arms of that anonymous man, I could

have found myself in the arms of the church . . . I wish in the church I had found myself loved.”¹⁰

That last phrase should be branded on our hearts with glowing iron: “I wish in the church I had found myself loved.” Tim is a person, not an issue. A person who had sex with an anonymous man because he didn’t experience the rich, satisfying, intimate love of Christ mediated through Christ-followers in the church.

What would happen if Christians were known more by their radical, otherworldly love for gay people than their stance against gay sex? Just maybe there would be fewer people seeking anonymous sex to satisfy a craving to be loved.

In the pages that follow, you will be looking over my shoulder as I pore over the text of Scripture to see what it says about homosexuality. But I never want us to forget about Tim, Jeremy, Julie, Wes, or my beautiful friend Lesli who was born into a Christian home and grew up transgender. She too was mocked, spat upon, and pushed down the stairs at school more times than she can remember. Homosexuality is about people. At the same time, I want to be ruthlessly biblical in how we formulate our thoughts about homosexuality. It’s not an either the Bible or people question; it’s both the Bible *and* people. Homosexuality is not about either truth or love; it’s about both truth and love, since truth is loving and love is truthful. Our God is both. There’s no room for false dichotomies here. We need to be thoroughly biblical because we desire to thoroughly love people.

WORDS MATTER

Before we dive into the text, let’s talk about some words. An old saying goes “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.” This is a terrible lie. Words have the power to heal and to hurt, to comfort and to kill, to push someone off the edge of a twenty-story building. Or in the words of Albus Dumbledore: “Words are, in my not-so-humble opinion, our most inexhaustible

source of magic. Capable of both inflicting injury, and remedying it.”¹¹ Just ask your gay or lesbian friend if they’ve ever been hurt by words hurled at them by other people. And then ask them if those people were Christians.

Obviously, gay jokes, which are neither funny nor Christian, and words like *fag* and *homo* do not belong in the mouths of people who sing to Jesus on Sundays. James says that dehumanizing speech stokes the fires of hell (James 3:6), and I assume that we all want to avoid that place. But there are other words and phrases that we need either to ditch or to use with precision and care.

I would recommend not using the word *homosexual* as a noun to refer to a person who is gay. (It is okay to use *homosexual* as an adjective: homosexual relations, homosexual unions, etc.) The noun *homosexual* gained currency back in the day when psychologists thought gay people were pathologically nuts, and it sometimes still carries this nuance. Plus, *homosexual* feels clinical and impersonal; most gay people do not use this term to describe themselves. Most gay people I know prefer the term *gay*, which works for both men and women, or *lesbian*, which applies exclusively to women. When in doubt, you can use the popular and ever-growing acronym LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender), although you have to practice saying it thirty times in the mirror to make sure you put the L before the G and don’t mistake the T for a D. Many people add a Q (“Queer” or “Questioning”) at the end, which is sort of a catchall for all sexual minorities. And if you want to show off the fact that you took a human sexuality class in college, you can roll out the ever-growing acronym LGBTTQAIA: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Queer/Questioning, Asexual, Intersex, Ally. For this book, I’ll just stick with LGBT to save some ink.¹²

I would also recommend using the term *homosexuality* with care. When we say “homosexuality,” what exactly do we mean? Again, we’re talking about a diverse group of people, so which person or people are you referring to? Those who are married to someone of the same sex? Someone who is having same-sex intercourse?

Someone who is attracted to the same sex? If so, how much attraction on a scale of 1–10 qualifies one to be included in your concept of homosexuality? A four? A six? An eight?

Homosexuality, as you can see, is a broad term that has the potential of erasing the faces of real people with different stories. When I get asked, “Do you think homosexuality is a sin?” I immediately ask, “What do you mean by *homosexuality*?” and “Which person are you talking about?” Many Christians view “homosexuality” through the lens of what they see and read in the media and don’t think about the fourteen-year-old Awana champ who is isolated, depressed, and contemplating suicide because he experiences same-sex attraction and has no one at home or at church to talk to—no one who would listen, anyway.

I would also recommend ditching the term *lifestyle*, as in “the gay lifestyle.” It’s one of those one-size-fits-all phrases that ignores the vast diversity of actual LGBT people. Do you really know the style of life every gay person is living? Their jobs, their friends, their favorite food? Usually when people say “gay lifestyle” they mean “gay sex.” But this singles out one aspect of an entire person’s life. How do you know that all gay and lesbian people are having sex? Are you peeking through the window? Should someone call the cops? If there is a “gay lifestyle,” then there must also be a “straight lifestyle”: a pre-packaged stereotype that accurately describes every heterosexual on the planet. If you are straight, would you want to be associated with the lifestyle of all other straight people?

As you can see, the phrase *gay lifestyle* can be unnecessarily offensive and impersonal to the ears of LGBT people.

I’ve also gone back and forth on what to call people who hold different views on what the Bible says about same-sex relations. Some of the options for those who believe that the Bible allows for same-sex relations are *pro-homosex*, *revisionist*, *Side A*, or *affirming*. Those who believe that the Bible prohibits same-sex relations are called *traditionalists*, *conservative*, *Side B*, or *nonaffirming*. Quite honestly, I think all of these terms have problems. The terms that

carry the least amount of baggage and misunderstanding to my mind are *affirming* and *nonaffirming*. The one thing I don't like about *nonaffirming* is that it feels too negative. There are many things that nonaffirming people may *affirm* about gay people: their humanity, their love, their desire and need for relationships. The term *nonaffirming* could sound dehumanizing, and this is what I don't like about the term. Still, until I find a better pair of terms, I think *affirming* and *nonaffirming* are the best we've got.

To be clear: I'm using the word *nonaffirming* to describe those who don't believe that the God sanctions same-sex sexual relations and the word *affirming* to describe those who believe that consensual, monogamous, same-sex sexual relations can be sanctioned by God.

OUR APPROACH

There are other terms and phrases that I'll try to explain as I go (for example, the difference between sex and gender, the different meanings of *gay*). But let's go ahead and jump into our discussion. We will spend a good two-thirds of our time looking at the Bible, and at times it will get deep. But I assume you picked up this book because you don't want quick and easy Tweetable answers. You want to know what the Bible actually says. And to do that, we have to work hard and think deeply. Shallow answers to complex questions are offensive to our God-given minds and they fail to shape our hearts into being more like Jesus'.

After looking at the Bible, we will wrestle with pastoral questions that surround this discussion. Are people born gay or do they choose it? Can gay people become straight? Should gay people become straight? Is it right to force someone to be celibate if they are attracted to the same sex? Can a nonaffirming church truly love gay people without affirming same-sex behavior? Is same-sex attraction itself sinful? And should same-sex attracted Christians refer to themselves as "gay"? We will wrestle with these and many other questions.

But we can't responsibly address them unless we have a clear understanding of what the Bible actually says about same-sex relations.

So let's take a journey through Scripture. But before jumping to those six passages that mention homosexual behavior, I want to look first at what the Bible says about marriage; specifically, Does the Bible require biological sexual difference (male and female) in marriage?

Let's jump into Genesis 1-2.

Living in a Gray World

A Christian Teen's Guide to Understanding Homosexuality

Preston Sprinkle

In today's world, the topic of homosexuality seems to be part of everyday conversation in the media, in politics, and even inside churches, with pressure to accept one view or the other. And if you're a Christian teen, there seems to be few easy answers to the issues you regularly encounter, such as: Can you be friends with someone who is gay? What if your sister is a lesbian, or you sometimes wonder if you might be as well? Does the Bible really say homosexuality is wrong? What does God want us to do and say?

Preston Sprinkle has encountered these same questions, and as a theologian and a college professor he has dealt with these issues firsthand. Through honest conversation, real-life examples, and biblical research, Sprinkle unpacks what we can know to be true, and how Scripture's overall message to us today allows us to move forward and find answers that align with God's intent.

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