

COMPASSION
without
COMPROMISE

How the Gospel Frees Us to Love
Our Gay Friends Without Losing the Truth

Adam T. Barr & Ron Citlau



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from Adam

To my dad and mom, Randy and Sandra Barr. Thank you for showing me how to follow Jesus. Your lives are a legacy of love for the Lord, each other, and the Kingdom. I pray that same love will mark the path I leave behind.

from Ron

To Andrew Comiskey and Charlie Contreras. You were the first pastors who declared the good news of the gospel to me in my brokenness. When there was no hope, the Lord used you both to show me salvation in Jesus Christ. Your lives are witnesses of who he is and what he does. This book is, in part, the fruit of your good ministry. Thank you.

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Foreword

Hardly a day goes by when we don't hear something about homosexuality. It's all over the news and all over social media. It's the subject of countless conversations, arguments, diatribes, rants, punditry, and commentary. You can't help but wonder: *Is there really anything left to say?*

Actually, there is a lot that still needs to be said. This issue is not about to fade into the background, and many of the hardest personal and pastoral questions are just beginning to surface. That's why I am delighted with this new book.

Adam and Ron are excellent pastors, good thinkers, and great friends. I've known Adam since we went to college together and I sat there jealously as he, with his long, flowing locks, played guitar and crooned in the worship team, much to the admiration of many young women. Since then we've become close friends, colleagues in ministry, and, in many ways, brothers in arms.

My friendship with Ron is not as long, but just as rich. I will never forget Ron's stirring, courageous testimony at our denomination's General Synod back in 2012. I don't think I've ever heard the gospel more poignantly and powerfully presented at such a

gathering. I'm grateful for Ron's winsome, yet bold, approach to this difficult topic of sexuality. I have learned much from him.

As much as I appreciate Adam and Ron personally, that's not the reason to read this book. A much better reason is that they have teamed up to write an engaging, accessible, sensitive, uncompromising, wise, and biblical book about the most controversial issue of our day. There are other books on homosexuality—and many of them should be read alongside this one. But what makes this volume unique is the personal touch—especially Ron's story of having had gay feelings for most of his life—and the pastoral approach to the difficult questions none of us can avoid:

- Should I attend my friend's gay “wedding”?
- Should we invite our homosexual son's partner to our home for the holidays?
- How should I respond if my young child thinks he's gay?

There are dozens of questions like this in the book, each one answered with biblical insight and with good sense. I can't imagine any Christian not being helped by this book. Adam and Ron are clear about the Bible's prohibition of homosexual activity. They are informed on the latest scholarship. They are discerning when it comes to real-life application. And they are, above all, hopeful. Hopeful in the power of the gospel to save, to forgive, to restore, and to transform. If you are looking for a resource that will help you think about the issue of homosexuality with unflinching truth and with sincere grace, this is a great place to start.

—Kevin DeYoung

Introduction

We Understand. . . . It Would Be Easy to Panic

In the next year you can bet at least one of these things will happen in your life:

- A family member will come out of the closet and expect you to be okay with it. If you are not, family members may call you unloving and judgmental.
- You'll be invited to a cousin's "wedding" . . . to someone of the same gender.
- Your elementary-age child will come home talking about bullying; the curriculum will feature a major section on the need to respect peers from LGBT* families.
- You'll show up for one of your kid's soccer games and discover that the woman who comes to every game with little Billy's mom is *not* his aunt.

* LGBT is a commonly used acronym for "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered." Often, a Q will be appended to the end, indicating "Queer" or "Questioning."

- Your company human resources department will hold a session on how to build a tolerant workplace for LGBT co-workers.
- You will encounter someone who says the gospel cannot bring healing to our sexual identity or orientation.
- You'll have to share a bathroom with someone of the opposite gender who self-identifies as your own.
- You'll have a conversation with your college-age child and learn she thinks your view on homosexuality is bigoted, a twenty-first-century version of 1960s racism.
- You will read about a nationally recognized church leader endorsing the idea of same-sex marriage.

Are you ready?

Are you ready to answer the tough questions your friends are asking you about your beliefs? Are you ready to reply to the wedding invitation from your gay cousin? Are you ready to deal with your daughter's new friend, her two mommies, and the invitation for a sleepover? Are you ready to show someone that you can really, truly love people *and* still believe that sin is sin?

Are you ready, or are you panicking?

If you are reading this book, chances are you would answer in the affirmative if someone asked you, "Is homosexual behavior a sin?" But consider three follow-up questions:

First, why do you believe this? Is it simply because "that's how I was raised"? Is it because you find "those people" kind of "gross" and "weird"? Reality check: If our convictions are that shallow, then how can we respond with Christlike compassion to people Jesus died to save? How will you be a real witness to the gospel? How will your faith survive when one of "those people" turns out to be someone you know and love? People gripped by the gospel are able to reach out to *anyone* in a way that balances truth and love.

Second, have you taken time to really explore what the Bible teaches about sexuality? You might (correctly) believe that Scripture says homosexual activity is a sin, but are you prepared to help someone else see that? Are you ready to defend your beliefs when someone persuasively argues that the Bible does not really condemn loving, committed same-sex relationships? Simply responding, “It’s what I’ve always believed” will not help you be a faithful witness. It will not help you when smart people ask hard questions.

Third, if your convictions on this issue are not well founded on rock-solid truth, do you really think they will stand the test of a hard storm? Jesus said that someone who hears his Word and obeys it is like a person who has built his house on a solid rock. The rain comes, the wind rages, but the house stands. If our stated convictions are not undergirded by solid foundations, they can be quickly swept aside. On this issue, Christians who faithfully speak the truth will increasingly stand in the minority. In the last decade alone, our culture has experienced a revolution of thought when it comes to homosexuality. The pressure to conform will be intense.

Are you ready?

Or are you panicking?

Trust Us. . . . You Don’t Need to Panic

Why would two thirty-something guys write a book about homosexuality? Do we have an ax to grind or a hobbyhorse to ride? Are we just modern-day Pharisees who want to pick on one sin? What motivates us, and why are we qualified to answer your questions?

One simple answer: We are pastors. That means we routinely sit with real people and hear their stories. We have listened to teenage boys who wonder why they’re attracted to other boys

and are compulsively driven to view homosexual pornography. We have prayed with parents who just learned their firstborn son is living with another man. We have church members come up and ask questions like, “So, is it wrong for me to tell my nephew that he can’t bring his boyfriend to Thanksgiving dinner?”

Each week we write sermons, care for church members, lead meetings, teach classes, organize ministries, and write devotionals. Our pastoral lives are full and exciting. And one of the greatest blessings of our work is getting to see how what we teach impacts real people every single day.

Additionally, each of us is a husband and a dad. We love our wives and children. Each of us has been married to his wife for more than a decade. Each of us has four sons. We coach soccer, go to awards ceremonies, attend parent-teacher meetings. . . . You get the picture. Life is full, demanding, and very satisfying. And we both wonder, *What will happen as our own kids grow up in a world that has increasingly decided to celebrate what the Bible censors? How can we, as pastors and fathers, help our kids navigate this new world?*

We think it’s time for a book that will help real people, living in the real world, to give real answers. That is what motivates us to write. And that is why we think we have something to say that will help you.

While our motives are very similar, the stories that shaped them are very different. In the coming chapters, we are going to be exploring some issues that cut close to the heart. So before we do that, we thought we should share our stories with you.

Ron: A Story of Restoration

I am a Christian, husband, father of four boys, and pastor, and I have had gay feelings for most of my life. These feelings

have shamed me, delighted me, hurt me, and confused me. As a teenager, I grew up in church and did not know what to do with these impulses. Because of great fear, I never shared the sexual chaos that I was experiencing with anyone in the church I attended. As an adolescent, in the isolation of that chaos, an adult man befriended me and sexually abused me.

From there, my life spiraled out of control—marked by intense drug use and promiscuous same-sex sexual behavior. This was my teenage and early adult life. Though I had many partners, I was all alone. It was hard. It was painful, and it was the darkest time of my life. It was in this horrible place that I met Jesus. Seventeen years ago, Jesus pursued me and found me, and my life is radically different because of him. I love the life that Jesus has given me!

When Adam and I first began collaborating on this book, I wasn't sure I wanted my sex life in print. God has done an amazing work in my life; there is a part of me that just wants to live out my freedom and wholeness in private. But as I prayed and considered the idea, I realized that this book needed to be written.

This book needed to be written because the gospel is amazing news for the sexual sinner. I have experienced the bondage of sexual sin. I did not find freedom, fulfillment, and wholeness in the exploration of my gay desire, far from it. All I experienced was brokenness and lostness. When I pursued homosexuality, the result was a life decimated by sin.

Thank God, there is good news! In 1997, I said yes to Jesus and began attending a local church in Southern California, where I lived. This church knew how to walk with me; it had experience in helping people find Jesus in their brokenness. They understood that the gospel of Jesus was good news to the sexual sinner. Over the next five years, I grew as a follower of Jesus, and slowly God began to bring gospel transformation to my life.

This transformation began for me with God’s sweet love that accepted me as I was—sinful, broken, and confused. Transformation continued as I repented of the many sins I had committed sexually. Then, as I accepted his love and experienced his forgiveness, transformation commanded and created sexual purity. Out of love, repentance, and purity, I began to see the reordering of my sexual desire.

As I look back over the last seventeen years, I see that Jesus and his gospel have profoundly transformed me as a sexual person. I am a different man than I used to be. This book needs to be written because the gospel for the sexual sinner is being reduced, marginalized, and treated like something to forget whenever possible or apologize for whenever required. There is good news! And Adam and I want to tell it.

Christ’s gospel is the hope for the sexual sinner. Jesus can and does do extraordinary things for anyone who would put his or her trust in him. Whether it is hope-filled celibacy or profound sexual transformation, Jesus is in the business of changing lives! I have had the great honor of walking with many men and women who are honoring Christ in their sexuality and who have been radically touched by the gospel. What I have experienced personally and have seen in the church is not unique or peculiar. I believe this is the good news of Jesus, and I am writing this book to share it.

Adam: A Love for the Church

“I want you to break into groups of three to five people,” my professor instructed. “You are church members who have gathered to discuss a sensitive issue. Here is the topic: How should our church respond to the news that one of our elders’ children is gay? Should we condemn this son of the church as sinful, or should we welcome him as one of God’s children?”

The year was 1994. I was a sophomore taking a summer intensive course at my smallish, well-respected Christian college. The class was called Christian Love. The professor was a local pastor and active leader in my denomination, the Reformed Church in America. In the discussion that followed, I realized very soon that my grasp of the topic was weak.

I can still remember the chaos and confusion shooting through the debate that day. It did not take long for people to draw up sides. In just a few moments, fellow students stopped trying to act out their parts. The illusion that we were grown-up church leaders soon dissolved and we were speaking like young adults with strong opinions, little information, and lots of passion.

When the bell rang at the end of class, I walked away with a few distinct impressions. I knew I would need to get a better grip on the Bible's teaching about human sexuality. I realized that simple responses to homosexuality like "Love the sinner, hate the sin" really were *not* going to cut it in the years ahead. I wondered how in the world the gospel would be good news in a culture where conversations would increasingly look and sound like the "dialogue" that took place in that classroom.

Of the many convictions that pressed their way into my thinking after class, one stood out sharp and clear: *The church is going to be divided on this issue*. It seemed certain that some Christian thinkers would embrace our culture's trend toward open and affirming acceptance of homosexuality. Others would cling to the truth but completely disengage from our culture, slipping into irrelevance. *Was there another way?*

That question was important to me for many reasons. I grew up in a ministry family. My dad served more than thirty years as a pastor. Unlike many PKs (pastor's kids) I actually grew up with a deep love for the church. The thought that Christians would be divided on this issue grieved me deeply. Still more, I

wrestled with real frustration and sadness, knowing that in one way or another, people were going to be led astray.

Even as a nineteen-year-old college student I saw one thing clearly: This was much more than an academic discussion. Entire families would be fractured or fixed depending on how the church addressed this issue. People would experience deep healing or dark despair. God's people would be moving closer to him in obedience or wandering further away from him in rebellion. Ultimately, people's eternal destinies would be impacted by the answers to the questions we asked that day in a college class called Christian Love.

Why am I writing this book? Because the years since that class have only strengthened my conviction that this issue has the potential to divide God's people. Actually, I would put the matter a little more starkly: This issue is already dividing God's people. And when the church does not preach the gospel with a unified voice, the only light of the world is diminished. I write this book believing that God wants his people to be united around the truth on this issue. Only then can we reach out in love, holding forth the gospel as the only hope for sinners like us. And only then can we be free.

We Need Help!

This book needed to be written because the church needs help with how it addresses homosexuality. For the last three decades, evangelicals have tried to stand against the tide. We have tried to turn it back and “take back” our country. It is time to realize something: The ship has sailed. The question is no longer *Can we win the culture wars?* Rather, it is *How can we be a compassionate, uncompromising witness in a culture that celebrates what the Bible censures?*

We both serve in a denomination that is being ripped apart by this issue. On one side stand churches that embrace homosexuals, tell them God created them gay, and emphasize that the church ought to welcome them, marry them, and place them in leadership. On another side are churches that see homosexual activity as sin but can come across as insular—sometimes seeming bigoted or even hostile toward people who identify as gay or lesbian. In the middle, many well-intentioned Christians are afraid of hurting their gay friends and family. They would rather live as if homosexuality is not a critical issue.

As pastors, we want to help Christians navigate the new cultural landscape that is emerging. In the coming decade, we will discover that debate is not on the menu. We will be encouraged to choose between two equally unattractive alternatives: Either “join the team” that is open and affirming or sit on the sidelines, be labeled a bigot, and shut up. It is already happening.

College and high school students are being exposed to a number of key undermining claims aimed at overturning a traditional view of human sexuality. The claims of science are being leveraged against traditional morality. The claims of revisionist biblical interpreters are being employed to persuade the faithful.

An “open and affirming” message is being asserted everywhere, not just in Hollywood. As you read this book, students at colleges that once trained missionaries and pastors are being encouraged by their professors to change their views of human sexuality and biblical norms. They are attending lectures, workshops, and discussion groups meant to persuade them to reframe the Bible’s message. Not surprisingly, it’s not hard to convince them to do that. When students have never really heard a clear presentation of biblical truth on the issue, a moderately sophisticated presentation of unbiblical teaching will go down easy.

So how can we show compassion without compromise in a world like this?

We hope this book will help you begin answering that question. It is not exhaustive, but everything you read here is like a door that will lead you to further insight on the issue. We want to be pastorally helpful. We want to answer the questions that you are facing as a follower of Jesus in a clear, simple, and biblical way. In the last decade, brilliant authors have penned excellent theological and therapeutic works to address the issue of homosexuality. We will list some of them in our endnotes and a list of recommended resources at the back of the book. At the same time, we believe the church needs an accessible resource that gives clear biblical teaching, answers tough questions, and shares personal stories. This kind of book will help Christians in our changing world find balanced ways to respond to the issue of homosexuality.

This is why we are writing this book. We want to help you hold out the true hope of the gospel to *everyone*. That hope is not simple affirmation. It is much more than mere tolerance. Our hope begins with the message that we all need God's forgiveness and joyfully proclaims that Jesus has made a way. It is a message of freedom. We are called to bring that message to the world.

And the world is waiting.

1

Something Beautiful

Why did God make sex?

Birds, Bees, and a Medical Dictionary

I (Adam) was in first grade. Her name was Kirsten. We were classmates at the same Christian school, and her parents had dropped her off at my house for a play date. That is what I remember.

Looking back, I realize I was somewhere between Stage 1 and Stage 2. Just so we are all on the same page, let me explain what I mean by these stages. At the ripe old age of thirty-nine, I have come to the entirely unscientific conviction that boys generally move through three stages when it comes to girls.

At Stage 1, boys register very little distinction between themselves and the opposite sex. At this stage, boys will play sports with girls, knocking them down and expecting them to react just like the boys would. As a father of four boys myself, I can testify: We should not hold this kind of behavior against them. They are not responsible, because, frankly, they just don't know

any better! Their female peers are only distinguished by longer hair and a passion for things like glittery pink-maned ponies.

At Stage 2, boys have determined that all girls have *cooties* (archaic word for lice). Girls, they reason, are weird, gross, and like to play with dolls! In the mind of a Stage 2 boy, girls are like canned asparagus (to be avoided). At this stage, we see a radical separation of the sexes. Generally speaking, girls are fine with this arrangement, thank you very much.

Stage 3 comes at different times for different boys. The more mature, “with it” guys get there much sooner. At this stage, boys suddenly realize that girls are not only different, but totally awesome. Girls become an obsession for boys at this point. At sleepovers, boys talk about which girl is “hot” and which girl is not. They start becoming concerned with whether or not they are in the A-crowd or B-crowd. Boys no longer need to be reminded to take a shower or use deodorant. In fact, most social considerations revolve around whether the presenting options will help them get a girl to notice them or not.

I am not sure whether these stages still apply. After all, the world has changed a lot since I was a boy in the early 1980s. But for many boys back then, these were the essential periods of development. My four sons are still growing, but so far seem to be tracking right along this developmental path.

As I said, I was somewhere between Stage 1 and Stage 2. When I thought about it hard enough, I decided it was weird for Kirsten to be at my house, but as we got lost in a game of hide-and-seek or basketball she was “just one of the guys.”

At a certain point in the day, Kirsten and I decided we needed to find my mom, so we searched the house. But Mom was nowhere to be found. Next we looked for Dad. He was AWOL too. In reality, we probably checked a room or two, then gave up.

Kirsten and I found ourselves back out in the yard, looking up at my house. I can still remember sheepishly muttering

something like, “This just isn’t like Mom and Dad. They’re usually much more responsible than this. I wonder where they are.” At that point, Kirsten said something that changed my world forever.

“Maybe they’re upstairs . . . in their room . . . without any clothes on,” she suggested in a tone that blended insider knowledge and nervous hilarity in equal measure.

I was shocked and scandalized. Looking at her with disbelief, I replied, “I don’t think my parents would do that sort of thing.”

Man, was I wrong.

I learned just *how* wrong a few months later. It started with an innocent question for my mom and ended with our sitting down, a medical dictionary on her lap, and questions rushing through my mind at light speed.

Long story short, we had “the talk.” My mother explained the meaning and mechanics of menstruation. She reviewed the ins and outs of copulation, and then she dropped the big one: This is how babies are made! She patiently answered my questions, one by one—and being an insatiably curious kid, there were many. I simultaneously felt grown-up, naïve, curious, and grossed out beyond description. Finally, Mom asked, “Do you have any other questions?”

“Yes,” I replied, “Why in the *world* would you want to do that?”

Mom paused and thought for a moment. “Well . . . because that is how husbands and wives show their love. And because that is how *you* were born. And, well, because it’s fun.”

Looking back, I cannot imagine Mom giving a better answer. In that moment she affirmed some important things. First, she told me that sex was a good, God-given gift, not some unspeakable mystery to be explored in the back seat of a car. Second, she told me that sex was something for marriage. Third, she

presented a child-appropriate understanding that our sexuality is meant to be a source of pleasure and joy.

Thanks, Mom.

When we look at Scripture, we find that a lot of the elements of my mom's response are contained in God's view of sexuality. That is important to note, because God designed sex in the first place. As such, he knows better than anyone exactly why we have it and exactly where and how we should enjoy it.

Something we should clarify up front: We believe that God has given us his perspective on a whole host of things. The Bible, we believe, is God's Word. When we open the Scriptures, we are encountering much more than human thoughts about God. In fact, we are encountering God's thoughts. Of course, God used human beings to write the Bible. He enlisted shepherds, priests, poets, physicians, and fishermen. Over 2,000 years ago, he used urban sophisticates and rural hicks. But in all the various voices and different styles, one voice speaks clearly in every word: the voice of the God who created us.

Maybe you believe this and maybe you don't. Whatever your personal convictions on the matter, we thought it would be important for you to understand how we are approaching the Bible. We believe there are many good reasons to read Scripture this way. If you would like to learn a little more about why this issue is important, check out the appendix: "The Watershed." For now, understand that we are going to do our level best to describe what Scripture says about human sexuality. Our perspective on homosexuality is shaped by an earnest effort to understand God's perspective. And the Bible is where we turn for that.

That said, let's look at what the Bible says about sex. The best possible place for us to turn is to the very beginning, where it was created.

Life in the Garden

Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field.

But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

The man said,

“This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called ‘woman,’
for she was taken out of man.”

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

Genesis 2:19–25 (NIV 1984)

In this opening section of the Bible, we are given a glimpse of how God designed the DNA of human relationships, an insight into what it means to be a person. Philosophers gaze from their navels to the heavens and beyond. Psychologists set out on the chaotic oceans of the id. Physicians run EKG tests and administer physical well-being. In other words, a lot of smart individuals try to help us understand what it means to be healthy, happy people. Here in Genesis, we discover a snapshot of what human flourishing really looks like from the One who created it, giving us the essential components of meaningful existence. The Designer of life deserves our attention.

The first thing to notice is that everybody needs somebody. Humans are not made to be alone. Just a few verses before, we read that of all the great things he had made only one was “not good.” God decided that it was not good for man to be all by himself. That is why verses 19 through 20 are all about Adam meeting the animals. Each one is brought to him. He gives it a name (exercising a godlike authority). But none of them is a fit partner for Adam.

A partner in what? Basically a partner in living. God wants Adam to have a helper, a companion to walk through life with as he seeks to fulfill his purpose. We could turn back to Genesis 1 and realize what that purpose is: to bear God’s image, living as God’s representative on earth, loving as God does, thinking as God does, and in a very small way, representing the power of God. God wanted Adam to have help with that.

The helper would need to be like Adam but different from him. In some miraculous way that we never would have imagined, God wanted a same-but-different kind of creature to be Adam’s companion. They would have to share an essential bond, not like two peas in a pod, but more complementary, like a lock and key, biceps and triceps, or a left pedal and right pedal . . . you get the picture.

And so God put Adam to sleep, took part of him, and made Eve. Don’t ask us how that worked. The actual biological process of the event is not what is most important here. What matters is that God was hands on the whole way. He handcrafted Eve from Adam’s rib, just as he molded Adam from the dust of the ground.

The moment Adam saw Eve, everything made sense. Like a puzzle the moment the pieces come together, it was clear that no other arrangement could have worked! Like Adam, Eve was a moving, thinking, physical-spiritual creature made in God’s image. Just like the rib God took to make her, Eve could be at Adam’s side, a partner in the task of making God’s garden grow.

In essential and obvious ways, she was different too. Let's get this out of the way: Eve had a vagina. Adam had a penis. We weren't there, but we figure that was one of the things Adam noticed right away. But this surface distinction in biological arrangement was reflective of a deeper difference in purpose. Actually, we could put a finer point on this. This distinction in appearance was reflective of a sameness-difference in purpose. Let us explain.

Reading the creation account, one thing we see is that God wrote a *principle of reproduction* into all living things. Living things are meant to make more living things (see Genesis 1:11–13, 20–25). Life makes life. Our bet is that God is letting us, in some small way, reflect his eternal life, his never-ending reservoir of energy, power, and goodness—like a river of life with no beginning or end. We creatures are allowed to physically represent that spiritual reality by reproducing life.

Adam and Eve were designed to manifest that principle together, but in very different ways. Adam would give. Eve would receive. Like a farmer, Adam would plant seed. Like the verdant garden, Eve would nurture life within herself. Of course, it was even more complex than this. It was not as if Adam had all the seed. We learn in Biology 101 that even at the smallest microscopic level, there is a reproductive partnership expressed in chromosomes coming together like lock and key, laying down genetic patterns and unleashing DNA. From the very obvious way the male and female anatomy fit together to the subtle pairing of genetic information, Adam and Eve were designed for reproduction.

This story does not exist simply to describe how Adam and Eve met, fell in love, and enjoyed life without tan lines. Genesis 2:24 (NIV 1984) helps us understand the theological significance of this event: *“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one*

flesh.” Another way to put this is: The reason God made man and woman with this same-but-different design is so that they could experience and enjoy an intimate, lifelong union. So in addition to the *principle of reproduction*, we also see the *principle of union* built into God’s purposes for Adam and Eve. They were designed by God to be joined together as “one flesh” not only in the physical act of marriage but also in a lifelong covenant.

The one-flesh union of verse 24 does more than illustrate principles. It also allows us to live as creatures that reflect God’s glory. For a moment, consider the Trinity. This mystery at the heart of our Christian faith proclaims that God is three-in-one. God is one God. God is three persons. As stated in the Athanasian Creed, not one person is less or more God than another. These persons are joined in a union that can only be described as oneness, yet distinguished in a way that must be categorized as three. Some theologians have likened this union-communion of God to a dance or a family (the Greek word is *perichoresis*). In an amazing, creaturely way, the husband-wife one-flesh union reflects the light of God’s eternal community, the Trinity.

In this story and throughout Scripture, human life is not viewed as an end in itself. We are not merely creatures who are born, try to find meaning to life, and then die. In fact, we are beings designed by God and created with purpose. As unique, physical-spiritual creatures, we are designed to find joy and meaning as we live out this purpose in our everyday lives. Even more important, when we live in harmony with God’s design, we give him glory. In fact, it is precisely through our joy in his plan that God is most glorified.

When We Leave the Garden . . .

But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So when the

woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

Genesis 3:4-7

We often think of sin as simply breaking the rules. Sin certainly has a rule-breaking component. Let's face it, though, we tend to think of rules as something on paper, in books. For a lot of us, rules are made to be broken. Many people find it difficult to feel personally connected to rules. But sin is personal. Sin has everything to do with relationship. Sin is more than ignoring a dictate in God's *Personnel Manual for Human Life*.

Throughout Scripture, sin is portrayed as an effort to live as if God doesn't matter. In fact, it is portrayed as an effort to be like little gods. Sin, biblically speaking, is turning one's back on God, the God who wants us to live in a face-to-face relationship with him.

Just as Genesis 2 gives us the original design plan for human sexuality, Genesis 3 takes us back to the very first crime scene. What do we find? A man and woman, trying to live in God's world while ignoring his Word. They are, of course, breaking the rules. God gave them a clear command, "Don't eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (see Genesis 2:17). They disobeyed.

But it was not simply the rules they were rejecting. It was the right of the Creator to give them the rules. Even more, they were rejecting the wisdom of the Creator who designed them. (And that was a really dumb thing to do.)

Think for a moment: Why are there rules? Imagine playing baseball with an umpire who constantly changed the strike zone.

Imagine that this ump simply ignored the “tie goes to the runner” rule or jettisoned the “four balls equal a walk” rule. If the ump threw out enough of the rules, eventually there would be no game. There would just be a bunch of guys in funny pants trying to hit leather-wrapped balls of string with sticks! The rules are not the point of the game, but without the rules, there is no game.

God’s command was given to Adam and Eve so they could understand the design plan of creation. He knew that if they stepped outside that divine plan, they would be doing much more than breaking a rule, they would be trying to live in a world that doesn’t exist. We understand this when it comes to things like gravity.

As a kid, I (Adam) was obsessed with defying gravity. My first foray into the business of flying was simple: I picked up one leg and then picked up the second one very quickly, hoping to hold myself up in the air. Realizing my first plan was creative but unrealistic, I graduated from that to a plastic shopping bag, reasoning it would work like a parachute. When that failed, I assumed that I simply needed more height so there would be more time for the air to fill the bag. Eventually, I found myself on top of the garage, counting to three, and jumping.

It didn’t work.

Are you surprised?

Of course not.

Just as we cannot simply change the reality of gravity on a whim, the laws of morality are much more than arbitrary lines in a heavenly rule book. They are reflections of the world as it was created. God designed a world with physical rules like gravity and wove throughout this universe a design for human flourishing reflected and described in the moral law. So when Adam and Eve decided to ignore God’s word, they were doing something as silly as jumping from a garage roof with a plastic shopping bag to slow their descent.

Not surprisingly, they fell. It is the saddest story ever. Like a central theme in a great symphony, this simple story is played out again and again in daily human life. Every time we assert our will to power, our plan for existence—as if God’s plan doesn’t count—then we, like Adam and Eve, are falling; we are walking the road that leads out of the garden and into the desert.

As we look through the Bible to see what it has to say about homosexuality, we will need to keep something in mind: For the biblical authors, questions of sexual ethics were not framed in terms of “Does some behavior cross an arbitrary line?” The real question was “Does this behavior honor the Creator’s plan for human sexuality?” If the answer was no, then the behavior was censored, precisely because it would lead people out of the garden of God’s blessing and into the desert.

Of course, you do not need us to tell you that there are all kinds of sexual practices alive and well in our culture. In the world and in the church, people are throwing the Creator’s good plan for sex and marriage out the window. We are quickly becoming a society that denies reality; we are jumping out into the moral firmament with gravity defiance on our minds.

As we write, even people who claim to follow Jesus are jumping feetfirst into the “hookup culture” so prevalent in society. Frightening numbers of Christians struggle with porn addiction. Heterosexual marriages are breaking apart at an alarming rate outside *and* inside the Christian community. Some would argue that these problems are at least as important to the health of the church as the behavior of two same-sex adults. We could agree—sort of.

One reason we need to call out this issue and revisit the Bible’s message is because—unlike other sexual sins plaguing our churches and culture—we are being told that homosexuality *isn’t* a sin. We are being told that we can live in God’s world

without his Word. *And that is serious.* There is no way back into the garden but through the gate that God himself opens. Whatever ethical question we're asking, if the answer we give contradicts God's revealed Word his blessings will never flow our way. Obedience to his will opens up the possibility of renewal, redemption, and abundant life in the world he has created.

Takeaway

Note: Each of our chapters will have a short “takeaway” section. This is designed to help you grasp the main point of the chapter and tuck it away for later reference.

God, the Creator of humanity, wants us to experience joy and life in our sexuality. But unless we live in his world according to his Word, we are going to experience tragedy—like Adam and Eve's expulsion from the garden of Eden. From the beginning, God created sexual intimacy for one man and one woman, in a lifetime covenant that reflects his glory.