

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

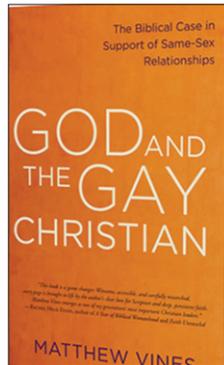
‘Pruning Vines’ Distinguishing between revision and reformation

This equipping study is somewhat different from what you are used to. Herein we are hoping to help you identify false teaching and equip you to engage in meaningful conversation in your church and with others about the “hot” topic of the day. The topic is Christian marriage, and recent developments in the national conversation in the church may surprise you.

Matthew Vines was raised in a Presbyterian church which has transitioned in recent years from the Presbyterian Church (USA) into the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. He was baptized, confirmed, and has lived a life of advantage and privilege in the context of a home with two professional parents. Matthew Vines also identifies himself as gay – a man who is sexually attracted to men – and he has an interest in being married to a man. But to get there he needs to find a way to radically revise his parents’ and the Church’s understanding of the Bible, sexual ethics and the meaning of marriage. *God and the Gay Christian* is a book, authored by Vines, that attempts that audacious challenge.

But why address this issue in the equipping study of *The Layman*? Because you need to be equipped to identify the errors in his arguments, and you need to be prepared to rightly handle the Word of God. So, this is not about Matthew Vines. This is about you, how you handle the Scriptures, what you believe about God’s nature and character, and how much of your life (thoughts and actions) you are willing to submit to His revealed will.

One line of rationalization that needs to be addressed is Vines’ assertion that the kind of monogamous, consensual, same-sex relationship he desires, one based on “sexual orientation,” “didn’t exist in the ancient world.” So, if it didn’t exist in the ancient world and it didn’t exist at Creation and God didn’t

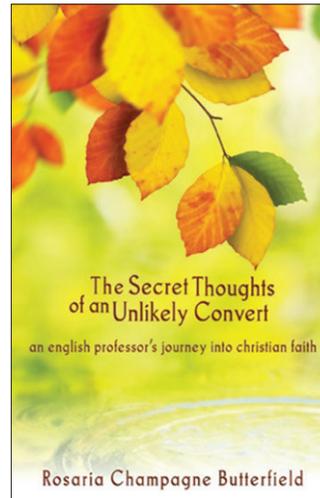


know about it when He inspired Paul to write the letter to the Christians in the church in Rome, then how can it be argued that it is a “good” part of God’s original design for human sexuality? This is where Vines’ interpretation of Genesis falls apart. He cannot have it both ways. Gay sexual orientation cannot be something “unknown” until modernity and yet also a pre-fall reality in God’s perfect created design. No matter how you twist the Scriptures, that does not hold.

There is nothing new about the tendency of mankind to pervert the truth of the Gospel. The Scriptures are filled with such warnings (II Peter 2, Jude 3-4, Titus 1:16, Matthew 7:15-16).

Ultimately what is presented by Vines is like unto Paul’s description of “a form of godliness that denies God’s power” (II Timothy 3:5).

As a student of the Bible, Vines certainly knows that Christians are called to be discerning when it comes to taking the counsel of others. There are false teachers in the world. Curiously, Vines chooses to follow the counsel of many who do not acknowledge the inspiration nor the authority of the Scriptures for faith and life. And in his book, he passes their counsel on to others. So, I do not commend Vines’ book to you. I do commend Rosario Cham-



pagne Butterfield’s book, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*, which faithfully bears witness to the power of the Gospel and the Truth of God’s Word.

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Part I: What's really at stake?

At issue is the veracity and reliability of God's Word

Vines claims to have a high view of the Bible, saying, "I believe all of Scripture is inspired by God and authoritative for my life." But in his treatment of Romans 1 he argues that the Apostle Paul is ignorant of the kind of committed, monogamous, same-sex coupling in which Vines is interested. In order to follow this logic you must be willing to believe that the Bible is not reliable, that the Author (God Himself) who stands behind its inspiration, did not know, could not anticipate and was not privy to the very predisposition that Vines also argues is God-blessed, innate, natural and immutable.

It is notable that the same chapter of Romans warns against precisely this kind of teaching: that which suppresses the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18).

If the Bible cannot be trusted on the subject of sexuality then how can the Bible be trusted on matters related to salvation? If God cannot be trusted to tell us the truth about sex, then how can God be trusted to tell us the truth about life and death and hope and glory? And if God cannot be trusted (the original lie uttered by the Tempter to the very first human beings in Genesis 3), then where does that leave us?

Vines undermines not only the sexual ethic of holiness demanded by God of Christians, he undermines the Christian's ability to confidently know God and His Will through the Scriptures. Which, friends, includes the ability of the Church to meaningfully proclaim to sinners the good news of salvation and transformation in Jesus Christ.

At issue, then, is the nature of God and the power of the Gospel

If Vines is right – that homosexual orientation is immutable and pre-fall "good" – then it is not sin and therefore not subject to transformation in salvation. And if that is true then the power of the Gospel is limited and can only affect those parts of the self that the individual views as in need of redemption. That is not God's view of our fallenness nor our need, according to the Scriptures.

II Corinthians 5:16-21 reads: "From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard Him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God."

Matthew Vines advocates that we view people according to the flesh; but those who are in Christ can do so no longer. Vines

would also have us believe that people who are attracted to people of the same sex are so in such a way that is beyond God's ability to redeem. That means that the same-sex attracted person is made new in Christ in everything except this? That is not what the Scriptures teach us and that is not the experience of many others, like Rosario Champagne Butterfield, who have been made fully new in Christ.

So the question is this: Can God make all things new or is God's power limited in this one area?

The immediate response of a gay affirming advocate would be that this is not an area that needs redeeming. This is not sin and therefore stands outside of the scope of Christ's work. Really? How does that statement align with the Reformed tenet of total depravity? None of us has any part of our lives that stands beyond the need for Christ's work – in justification or ongoing sanctification. These are the two components of the Gospel: rescue from the penalty of sin and liberation from the power of sin in our lives. To diminish or alter the terms or reality of either of these is to adulterate the Gospel.

Read and reflect

1. Read Galatians. Note how in Galatians Paul makes the uncompromising statement, "if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!" How do you understand the nature and content of the Gospel and how is the reinterpretation proposed by those who want to legitimize homosexual practice different?
2. Consider that Galatians 1:1-5:12 is a presentation of how we are being rescued from the penalty of sin by the mighty redeeming work of Christ, which is applied by faith. Consider that Gal. 5:13-26 and following is then a description of the power of the Gospel to rescue us from sin's power.
3. Read Romans, chapters 1-8. Consider that Romans 1:16 makes the same argument made in Galatians: "The Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes." Note the orderly presentation of the Gospel. Can you see how Romans 1-3 presents the total brokenness of humanity; chapters 3b-5 present the forgiveness and justification that God provides to free the believer from sin's penalty; and how Romans 6-8 then presents the provision of the Gospel to free the believer from the bondage of sin every day, in every way?

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Part II: Rightly handling the Word of God

Presuppositions matter as we approach the Word of God.

The faithful study of Scripture presupposes:

- that I believe in the sovereignty of the God who is the ultimate Author who inspired the writers, and that I willingly subordinate my will and my understanding to His.
- that I approach the Scriptures with appreciative acknowledgement that God did not have to reveal Himself, nor His will, to us through the gift of His Word.
- that I am willing to make a careful study of the historical and cultural context in which the particular texts were written, but that I receive the Scriptures as a whole, telling God's redemptive story throughout every part.
- that I "receive the Word of God for what it really is" (I Thessalonians 2:13), and that I willingly submit to God's active work in my life to conform me to it.

I do not presuppose that I am unchangeable. However, the hermeneutic Vines proposes makes the individual the arbiter of truth, the final authority and the judge. His approach suggests that anything the Bible says which is contrary to the way I see myself or the desires of my heart is either inaccurate, non-applicable or subject to reinterpretation to fit my lifestyle.

Vines brings to the text a preconceived idea and interprets the text in light of that idea. Vines also attempts to set forth history as a means of interpreting Scripture rather than allowing Scripture to interpret history. He does this by affirming as axiomatic the fixed nature of sexual orientation as an absolute. He then places it as the interpretive key through which particular problematic texts are then reinterpreted. This is a blatant violation of the most basic principle of interpretation, which is to exegete a passage to draw out the meaning of the text. This is dangerous ground upon which to tread. In Job 40:8 God asks, "will you condemn me that you may be justified?"

A sound Biblical hermeneutic is the vehicle for discerning the truth of God. Historically, it was the return to a valid hermeneutic that freed the Gospel message from distortion and neglect during the Reformation. Each of us must handle the Word of God carefully, honestly, with great reverence and total humility. When we do so we can see both the truth, and the reality of those who actively suppress it.

For a thorough exposition of the passages Vines specifically deals with in his book, read the free e-book, "[God and the Gay Christian: A Response to Matthew Vines](#)" from Al Mohler and his colleagues at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville.

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Part III:

Knowing the truth about what God has said

Instead of studying at length the six passages that clearly condemn homosexual acts, I would recommend that you spend your time studying the full scope of what the Bible says positively about the place of sexual relations in the context of the joyful, complimentary marriage between a man and woman.

Read Tim Keller's fantastic book, [*The Meaning of Marriage*](#).

Revisit what the Bible and our confessions say about marriage

in the study we ran in this series several years ago. [You can find it online.](#)

Visit Theology Matters at www.theologymatters.com for [resources](#) on Scripture study and the right handling of the Word of God in relationship to the marriage issue.

Finally, pray. Ardently, submissively, with hope and confidence in the power of God to redeem even this.