Homosexuality, marriage and the church: A conversation

by Luke Timothy Johnson, and Max Stackhouse, and David Matzko McCarthy

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Few topics are as divisive in churches these days as homosexuality. The debate touches upon a variety of issues that are contested throughout the culture--sexual ethics, the meaning of marriage and the shape of the family. Within the church, the discussion of homosexuality has involved reflection on scriptural interpretation, ecclesial authority, and theological understandings of creation and sexuality.

While churches have not lacked for debates on this topic--indeed, most of the arguments of the opposing sides are quite familiar by this point--instances of genuine conversation are rare. With that in mind, we recently asked three theological thinkers to converse about the state of the debate and their own responses to it. The participants were Luke Timothy Johnson, professor of New Testament at Emory University in Atlanta; David McCarthy Matzko, who teaches theology at the College of St. Rose in Albany, New York; and Max L. Stackhouse, professor of Christian ethics at Princeton Theological Seminary in Princeton, New Jersey. The discussion was convened by David Heim, managing editor.

David Heim: American Christians have been debating the issue of homosexuality for two decades now and no end to the debate is in sight. The churches remain polarized over such questions as whether homosexuals can be ordained and whether the church can approve or perhaps even bless gay sexual relationships. Has any advance in understanding been made? Has anything been clarified by all the debate?

Max Stackhouse: I think a rough consensus has been reached among mainline churches: They agree on the need to defend the human rights of homosexuals and on the need for a policy of tolerance toward people in homosexual relationships. At the same time, most churches agree that homosexual relationships are not the

ideal. They are not something the church should praise or celebrate. Despite disagreements on issues of, say, ordination, there are these two overarching points of agreement.

Luke Johnson: One thing that has been clarified for me is the importance of where one starts the discussion. If one begins, as I do, with a strong sense of God's continuing self-revelation--with the sense that God is still capable of surprises and that the church's task is to respond in obedience to how God discloses God's self--then the reading of scripture, while extremely important, is not definitive. The question of homosexuality then becomes not an exegetical one--not "What does the tradition say?"--but a hermeneutical one--"How do we balance what different authorities say?"

If one begins, on the other hand, with the texts of scripture and the precedents in the church and the sense that the church is primarily the custodian of a body of revelation, then the conversation moves in a very different direction.

David Matzko: One thing that has been learned is that theology matters. When gay issues first surfaced in church discussions in the 1970s they came from the outside--from the world of gay politics. As a result, the conversation at first was nontheological. It was based on the language of rights, for example. A more substantive theological discussion is just now starting to emerge. This is a discussion about sanctification, grace and holiness. The theological question is not whether you have the "right" to pursue a certain lifestyle but whether one can pursue a nonheterosexual way of life--which is an anomaly within a heterosexual tradition--in a way that leads to sanctification.

Stackhouse: Well, suppose one does believe that God may do something new. You still have to have some way of knowing that it's God, not a post-theological or antitheological ideology, that's doing something new.

Johnson: We need to keep in mind the way God has dealt in the past with God's precedents. The appearance of Jesus, the crucified Messiah, is a classic case of God operating outside God's own precedents. The inclusion of the gentiles in the first generation of the church is another example. It was only after saying yes to God's activity among the gentiles that the church began to figure out how this activity was in deep continuity with God's own plan.

I recognize that discernment as well as openness is needed. What divides us so often is that we emphasize the one over the other. That's why David Matzko's reference to sanctification is important. It's clear that the church cannot say yes to what Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 refers to as porneia, that is, sexual immorality. The church can only say yes to that which builds up the church. The question is: Is it possible for homosexual, covenanted relationships to demonstrate sanctification?

Heim: Can we say more about the shape of this sanctification? As you know, many Christians would say that it is the male-female relationship as given in creation that is part of the structure needed for our sexual lives to be in accord with God's intent.

Johnson: We still have to decide whether what we know about creation comes only from scripture or whether it also comes from considering how humans are actually created. I once taught a course in which I asked students to reflect on their life stories using such categories as idolatry, faith and sin. Reading the stories by the gays and lesbians in that class was for me a decisive experience. For these people, accepting their sexual orientation was accepting the way God had created them.

Matzko: This issue of creation is theologically important. Apart from issues of sexuality or homosexuality, it's a major mistake to regard creation as something that happened in the distant past. The revelation of Jesus is part of God's creative activity, as well as the giving of the Spirit in the formation of the church and the church's ongoing life--all this is part of God's creative activity.

Stackhouse: Nevertheless, we have to distinguish between creation and fall. We can't tell the story of redemption until we have something to be redeemed from. Many people these days are confusing "nature" with "creation." They think that if something occurs "in nature," or occurs "naturally," then it's "creation" and so it's good.

That's why you can hear this kind of argument: "I'm naturally a polygamist; that's the way God made me, that's my nature, and surely I must live it out."

But what if my polygamist impulses are part of the fall? How do we know when our impulses are part of that which God created and in accord with the intentions of God and when they are fundamentally flawed because they represent a rebellion against or a distortion of God's intention?

Johnson: That is a fundamental question. To answer it, we have to employ the proper process of discernment. I'd point out, however, that my own Roman Catholic tradition has failed to employ the proper discernment in regard to women in the church. By refusing to acknowledge that women have a story that needs to be heard, the church has sinned against the Holy Spirit. If the church is to say yes to homosexual covenants, then it will be by learning from those homosexuals in sanctified unions.

Stackhouse: Perhaps our difference reflects a different ecclesial experience. I'm a member of the United Church of Christ, and in much of the UCC there's not really a problem of being unable to hear the voices of homosexuals. The problem is that one can't encounter the biblical and classical theological traditions and therefore can't use those traditions for purposes of discernment without being viewed as a Neanderthal. This is also the situation in certain seminaries and congregations.

Matzko: I'd like to return to this question of nature, because it's related to the frequently used term "orientation." People often distinguish homosexual orientation from homosexual actions. What is missing from the discussion is any mention of the appetites and desires which can be shaped.

Someone with a homosexual orientation still has a malleable desire. In Christian terms, they have a disposition that can be fashioned by habits of virtue. Gays and lesbians want to say, "This is how I am oriented"--but that leaves open the question of how their appetites will be expressed and developed.

The fact that you are homosexual doesn't make you automatically a member of a particular political or moral community. Simply learning about someone's orientation doesn't tell us about how their desires are expressed.

In a similar way, I don't see how heterosexuality forms a particular moral community. For example, I just don't see what I share with the Playboy readership or with Hustler publisher Larry Flynt. Some heterosexual people get married and hardly ever have sex, some get married and have sex all the time, some are married and unfaithful. It all gets classified under the term "heterosexual orientation."

It's odd, in light of this, that so many people say that abstinence is the only option for homosexuality. This assumes that the gift of abstinence, the discipline of abstinence, is bestowed on all those who are homosexually oriented--something that is not evident.

Stackhouse: Let's put this issue of malleable desires in pastoral terms. Let's say that a young man is about to be married and he goes to his pastor and says, "Pastor, I really love this woman, but to tell you the truth, I'm struggling terribly with my lust for other women. Every time I go to the shopping mall, my eyes are all over other women." How would a pastor respond?

My bet is that a good pastor would say, "Look, we all have impulses, but we need to channel them in such a way so that they don't endanger the community and our fidelity to God. And we need to try, through spiritual discipline and prayer, to be a faithful partner."

Now let's consider another scenario: A gay-oriented or bisexual man is about to be married to a woman he really cares for. They have a deep, abiding friendship. He goes to the pastor and says, "When I go to a shopping mall, all I can look at is other males." Would the pastor then say, "Well, we all have desires, we all have impulses, but God designed the meaning of covenant in a particular way so that you should control this impulse and discipline yourself"? My bet is that a lot of pastors would not say that. Instead they would say, "You need to break off with her. You've got to go declare what you are."

I think this is a very telling difference. Why do we think some impulses can be channeled and others are incapable of being channeled?

Johnson. I still think we need to look more at individual cases. Of all the marriages I know about, it's a lesbian marriage that is the longest lasting, most faithful, most productive, most socially active and most generous. The two partners are deeply spiritual people who find no place for themselves within the church. What I'm asking is whether the church ought to at least entertain the possibility of replicating Peter's response to the Holy Spirit being poured out on the household of Cornelius: If God has accepted them, why shouldn't we?

Stackhouse: If the couple is baptized, are they not already a part of a community of faith? That is a sign of membership in the community, and the church should be accountable for all who are baptized and carry out a ministry to them.

As to whether the couple can come to church together--why not? They do it in most churches, whether it's officially permitted or not. As far as I know, it would be rare for such a couple to be asked not to attend or asked not to take communion. And I think all that's good.

But a different set of issues arises when the couple says not only that they want to be included in the church, but that they want the church to acknowledge their gayness publicly, and not only that, but also affirm it; they want the church not only to affirm their relationship but to celebrate their relationship. And they want not only a celebration but a certain sacramentalization of their relationship. One needs to discriminate among these various requests. Even given all the wonderful qualities of the couple Luke cited, I think one still has to ask: Is that all that's involved in a marriage covenant? Is that all that's involved in a sacrament?

Johnson: Gosh, if most of the marriages I knew had that much going for them, I'd be delighted.

Stackhouse: But you can have all the qualities just mentioned in contractual relationships. A covenant is something different--it is an agreement made under terms which are understood to be given by God. Contracts are human constructs which can be made or broken according to the desires of the parties involved.

Johnson: Well, the relationship I was referring to is not, in fact, contractual. It is not specified in terms of codicils. It is open-ended. It has endured suffering. It has endured all of the kinds of things that long-term commitment involves. It is a covenant, modeled on the primary covenant--the one between God and the people of Israel.

Matzko: Traditionally, the sacrament of marriage is understood as a substantiation of what the church does as a whole. That is, the couple's commitment is connected to the telos of the church and their relationship is considered grace-giving not just for the two people involved but for the whole community. This is why the issue of covenantal marriage for gay people is so controversial. It is closely tied to the issue of church acceptance. And it teeters between being a covenant and being a contract because people aren't sure how life-giving it can be to the community as a whole.

Stackhouse: I'm pressing this point about covenant because Protestants, who have never had a theory of marriage as a sacrament, have moved very close to treating marriage simply as a contract--it's simply whatever the two parties say it is. In the face of this view I think that marriage does have a distinctive form and is governed by a higher covenant with God.

Matzko: These covenants and contracts are very confusing in the modern world. On the one hand, churches directly witness the joining together of marriage covenants; on the other hand, it's the state that witnesses a divorce. When a couple gets

divorced, they don’t go back to the clergy to undo the marriage.

Heim: I’d like to consider further the nature of the covenant we are referring to. If we agree that marriage is a covenant rooted in God, is it to be defined by faithfulness and companionship through suffering--the kind of things Luke Johnson just talked about--or is it also to be defined in part by gender differentiation?

Stackhouse: This is the hardest question for me to answer. Most of the heated debate in the Reformed tradition is over this issue. Part of this question for me is the issue of generativity--of connectedness across the generations. There is a deep tradition in the Old Testament of the “begats.” Most of us get bogged down in reading about who begat whom, but the Old Testament does emphasize the blessing of life that is passed on from generation to generation. So I have to ask: What does it mean that homosexual relations cut off the biophysical dimension of that?

And apart from the biophysical dimension, there is the temptation which all of us have of living only for ourselves or for our generational cohort, without reference to the wider and ongoing community. This is a problem that homosexuality raises.

Johnson: Since there’s no evidence that 90 percent of people are going to become homosexual, I don’t think the gene pool is under immediate threat. And there’s no reason why gay couples can’t, through adoption or other means, have children and be part of passing on life from generation to generation.

Furthermore, what decisively distinguishes the new covenant from the old and the new creation from the old--if I can say this without committing the Marcionite heresy--is that in Christianity the “begats” are relativized by a crucified Messiah, by the resurrection and by the eschatological age that the Messiah initiates.

Matzko: The Roman Catholic documents make it clear that the generativity needed in marriage isn’t simply a matter of having progeny. The point is that a married couple needs to offer a concrete and visible sign that their marriage is life-giving to the community. In the case of a childless couple, the couple should make a contribution to the life of the community that is analogous to the concrete gift of childbearing.

Johnson: I certainly agree that insofar as a relationship is solipsistic, or narcissistic, or simply self-gratifying, it is inadequate. It has to move into the larger world and be life-giving. But there is a continuum of what is life-giving. Bearing children is one

obvious way of doing that, but it’s not the only way.

Stackhouse: Nevertheless, the prospect of children and grandchildren is the primary existential link most people have to the future. And so I would want to stress the possibility of progeny more strongly.

Johnson: Would that put you in the old creation and me in the new creation?

Stackhouse: Well, the Reformed tradition to which I’m a convert does not see a great division between law and gospel. It asserts the interpenetration of law and gospel. And we want to avoid the Marcionism to which you and many others may be tempted on this issue. The old creation is not defied by the new but fulfilled and transformed by it.

Matzko: This brings us back to the question of orientation. A distinction is often made between a homosexual orientation and homosexual acts. The distinction is made in order to propose that it is a person’s acts that are morally and theologically important, and that orientation--because it is a given, not a choice--can be bracketed from public discussion. The acts are considered decisive. This strategy is used to narrow the debate, so that certain acts can be denounced without condemning or stigmatizing the person.

However, homosexually oriented people do not see such a neat division between behavior and person. And the argument for such a distinction tends to assume that orientation is not all that important for what it means to be a person--which I think is mistaken.

I would give a much deeper significance to orientation by focusing on the concept of complementarity. In other words, it is superficial to define homosexual orientation as an orientation toward a same-sex act or toward desire for a person of the same sex. I think it has to do with how one comes to be a self in relation to others.

Most accounts of marriage, for instance, suggest that the relationship between male and female enacts a completion of each person. I come to be who I am through the embodied presence of another.

Though I may never engage in sexual intercourse, my orientation toward the other is constitutive of how I come to be a self in community. The term orientation identifies a basic category of the interaction between self and world. At least that’s what

heterosexual orientation is usually considered to be.

In these terms, homosexual orientation would not be merely a tendency toward a certain kind of act or a certain kind of desire. The true oddity of homosexuality--an oddity, that is, for the tradition--is that a person is oriented as a self through an "other" who is a person of the same sex. A person with a homosexual orientation comes to full fruition as a human being through an otherness and complementarity that is not of the opposite sex. The complementarity required for a person's "coming to be" is not founded on sexual differentiation, but it is still founded on a real "otherness."

Johnson: There's plenty of otherness still even in the same sex.

Matzko: Exactly, exactly. There's simply another human being as other. I would prefer to think about orientation in terms of that development--not in isolated genital or physical terms.

At least it should be evident that separating orientation from behavior is a mistake. A heterosexual may not engage in heterosexual intercourse, but he or she would still be acting according to a heterosexual orientation. That orientation remains constitutive of the self, and, of course, the self is relational.

Whatever orientation is, it is something different from what can be formed by the church. But the church is right to be concerned with the formation of desires. The task of the church is to be shaped in faithful desires, so that people will be moved by a desire to be faithful to their partners and to God.

Johnson: It should be said at some point that, in general, the New Testament is much more interested in food as a symbol of fellowship and purity than it is in sex. There aren't very many commandments about sex. I wonder if our culture isn't preoccupied with sexuality. Is sex so significant in God's eyes? Is it more significant in God's eyes than the way we share food and possessions?

Stackhouse: Obviously not. We have just been through 150 years of bloody struggle over the nature of socialism and capitalism, and a lot more lives were lost in that battle than are going to be lost in the battle over homosexuality. And if you talk to our Mennonite friends they would say that the fundamental moral question of our time is not homosexuality but the use of coercive power.

Nevertheless, this issue of homosexuality is before us. We are addressing it not because we are obsessed with sex but because the question has been pressed upon us by the gay and lesbian community, which has demanded church approval of something that was previously disapproved of or relatively tolerated. It's in the face of this--of being told that the church must approve these relationships and bless them--that I am saying: Wait a minute, you haven't made your case yet. You haven't persuaded a large segment of the "liberal" churches, let alone the evangelicals, Orthodox, Roman Catholics or Pentecostals.

Johnson: I think that the whole approach of making demands is wrong. It's wrong to press the issue with the arguments of rights or on the basis of who can lobby the loudest. The church should not say yes to whoever can be the loudest in the sanctuary.

Stackhouse: Let me raise again the pastoral issue. What do you do when a gay couple comes to you and says, "Pastor, we'd really like you to pray with us, we'd really like you to bless our home, we'd really like you to conduct a service, we'd like to have you marry us." What do you think can and should be done, and which activities spill over into covenantal or sacramental theory where there are other issues at stake?

Johnson: Everything that you mentioned in that list is fine with me except marriage. Marriage is different, because it is something done on behalf of the whole church. All the other actions are pastoral responses that I can make on my own, whereas sacramental actions involve a church consensus. The symbolism of the body within the Body of Christ is not something that we can change frivolously. It can only be done in fear and trembling, in response to the perception that this is God's work, not human politics. We ought not to move precipitously, or simply on our own judgment. Marriage is marriage. It has meant something very specific for a very long time, and it has been understood in terms of procreation. So rather than renegotiating or eviscerating marriage, why don't we try to respond to this new reality?

Matzko: This might be a place again where there is an important difference between Catholics, who have a clear idea of the sacrament of marriage, and Protestants, who don't.

Stackhouse: Yes. The contractual model of marriage is widespread among Protestants. These days people make up their own marriage ceremonies and make

up their own vows to one another. And historically, some Protestants have been quite ready to hand the rite of marriage over to the state and say it has nothing to do with the church. In which case it is just a contract. In which case it appears arbitrary to deny marriage to anybody who wants to get married. Covenantal theology has a deeper root and a broader implication, but many try to press it into the contractual mold and make up rites and rituals to fit the market.

Matzko: This discussion reminds me of students I often encounter who are quite offended when they find out in the case, say, of a Catholic man who is marrying a Jewish woman that the couple can't find a priest or rabbi to perform such a marriage. In the students' minds, the priest and rabbi should do whatever the couple wants them to do. There's no sense that the church should uphold its understanding of the covenant.

Johnson: You're describing a rampant individualism--a consumer mentality. But I think we need to avoid scapegoating homosexuals in this context. It's quite clear that the family in the Western world has been in trouble for a long time. It certainly has been in deep trouble in America. And homosexual marriage did not cause this.

One could argue that homosexual marriages represent an opposite trend. The hugest threats to marriages in this country are the sexualization of identity and individualism--both of which lead to the view that whatever desires I have I should be able to fulfill. The desire of homosexuals to marry goes against all that promiscuity and against the Playboy culture. These homosexuals are trying to form stable households. They are saying: We don't want the saunas and the bathhouses. We want to say, "Til death do us part. . ." We want to say, "I want to grow old with you." In a sense, this is a saving element in our culture.

Matzko: In fact, there are gay writers who disavow marriage and say that to argue for gay marriage is to give in to heterosexist domination. This makes the gay Christian who is seeking a relationship of fidelity and commitment doubly alone.

Heim: Luke, do you have any worry that a legitimation of committed gay relationships by the church would have any negative consequences down the road? We don't have much data on what it means, say, for kids to grow up in a same-sex household. Do you have any concerns about that?

Johnson: Having had seven children and eight grandchildren, and having taught thousands of students over the past 25 years, I'm fundamentally apocalyptic about

the chances of successful relationships or marriages of any kind. I think that we need to cultivate every sign of civilization and humanity that we can find. We are living in a world in which barbarism is not just at the gates but well within. I don't attach any particular weight to this particular issue because, as I said, I think committed gay relationships are a positive rather than a negative sign. A gay couple wants to be part of the church and wants to be sanctified--I can accept that possibility more readily than I can people who want to use the local Catholic church as a drive-in service for getting their weekly wafer and who have absolutely no commitment to the church.

Stackhouse: I have apocalyptic moments too. People are awfully lonely, in or out of marriages and in or out of relationships, and they are trying to find ways to stabilize companionship in a way that will be nurturing and fruitful. But I don't know that simply blessing every hint and glimmer of promise is the way to do it. Are there any structural continuities, are there any patterns of behavior that we want to encourage?

Johnson: Yes, of course--it's those patterns I'm suggesting.

Matzko: The patterns of behavior are, we hope, in every church community. Amid the infidelity and promiscuity of our culture are couples who are models of fidelity and whose actions are powerful witnesses.

When I think about how I learned about marriage, I know I didn't learn it from a book. I learned it as a teenager by watching couples coming to church with their kids and grandkids. I understood the richness of the life they lived and I wanted to have that kind of life myself.

Johnson: It has occurred to me, during this conversation, that all the problems of pederasty and pedophilia that have emerged among Catholic clergy are directly attributable to the sexualization of identity that occurred in the late 1960s--and with it the rise of the idea that everybody deserves sexual gratification.

I was in the monastery myself for ten years before leaving at age 28 and getting married, and I saw both sides of the divide. Whatever one might think about the state of monastic life in the 1950s and early '60s, the monastic life was a chaste life. The monks I knew were suppressing and sublimating--doing whatever they had to do to be chaste. They did not have the notion that sexual fulfillment is the be-all and end-all of existence. This is not to say there were no problems. But the habits and

virtues of chastity did exist.

It’s when those habits and virtues collapsed that people began to be sexually exploitative. A way of life became corrupted from within.

Stackhouse: The Protestant experience has been different but certainly parallel. The impact of existential theology in the 1960s and certain forms of neo-Reformation theology and liberation theology led to a stress on the freedom of God. This translated into normlessness. Any thing people want to do is identified as a calling to live out God’s freedom. After you heard six sermons in a row on the freedom of God, you had to watch either your spouse or your wallet. Is God’s liberty really normless?

Heim: I take it that, despite the differences around the table, we have quite a bit of agreement. That, for example, it is not appropriate to talk about anybody having a “right” to sexual fulfillment.

Johnson: Sexual activity is not a right. It is only appropriate within a committed relationship. Commitment first, then intimacy, then passion--that is a more ordered mode of expression than the reverse, which is what our romantic notions of love have perpetuated.

Stackhouse: Or to put it another way, the level of intimacy should be appropriate to the level of commitment.

Johnson: I think, in fact, that we can see in our time a recovery of the language of virginity. Fifteen years ago when I taught 1 Corinthians to undergraduates, students would be uncomfortable with Paul’s talk of virginity. There would be titters in the classroom, and you’d have to explain why Paul thought virginity was an important option. Today the atmosphere is different. There’s a total acceptance of the option of virginity. Whether or not students are virgins themselves, they don’t see it as a laughable issue.

Matzko: I think we are all trying to say that faithful heterosexual procreative marriage is a classic model or a paradigmatic case. I would want to add to this that it is not a limiting case, although it is clearly representative. The paradigm does not exclude other cases, but it gives them definition. That’s where we differ, I think. I take it, Max, that you want to make male-female complementarity and the possibility of procreation the limit of possible cases.

Stackhouse: I want to protect the notion that there is a norm. I don't think there is a single opposition to the norm. Rather, we have a wide range of relative approximations of the ideal.

At the same time, I don't want those who have basically happy heterosexual marriages to think that they have everything because they have that. What they have is also only a relative approximation, and there are other relative approximations. But if we lose or intentionally obscure the ideal, we blur the vision of God's law, purpose and love as governing norms.

Johnson: My basic interest is in trying to see what God is doing. And it seems to me that that should also be the main concern of the church. This is not an issue of tolerance. It's an issue of obedience to God.

Stackhouse: But not everyone sees what God is doing in the same way.

Johnson: That's right. So we are called upon to clarify the issues in charity and in reasonableness, so that discernment is possible. We need to avoid scapegoating people and ideologizing the issue. And we need to enable various kinds of testimony and witness to come before the church.