

Debating homosexuality

by [Gene Huff](#) in the [March 8, 2000](#) issue

*Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches*, edited by Walter Wink

Though gays and lesbians have a role in the debate over securing justice for themselves in the church, most of those engaged in the struggle are heterosexual. The fullest burden for achieving change falls on progressive and moderate straights and their ability to convince fair-minded conservatives to accept gay people. Walter Wink has edited a collection of 16 wide-ranging essays that make a significant contribution to that enterprise. Though it might seem incongruous that none of the writers clearly is gay or lesbian, Wink's goal is to encourage straights to deal frankly with typical heterosexual assumptions.

Wink places the essays in the context of the churches' fratricidal struggle over this issue. No issue since the struggle over racial segregation has been treated with such bitterness and closed-mindedness. Wink is distressed about the absence of rigorous theological thinking on the subject. To fill this gap, he has brought together evangelical and mainline Christians—among them John Cobb, William Sloane Coffin, Peggy Campolo and James Forbes—who range across the liberal-conservative continuum, including a number who reject such labels for themselves. He believes they represent the church at its best as it struggles for clarity on this tortured issue.

The book attends to the critical issue of biblical witness. Wink's own brilliant essay on "Homosexuality and the Bible," which has previously appeared as a pamphlet, deals carefully with biblical sexual mores and cogently with the problem of biblical authority. Ken Sehested of the Baptist Peace Fellowship also provides a detailed summary of what the Bible does and does not say about homosexuality.

At the practical ethical level, Lewis Smedes, a longtime professor of theology and ethics at California's Fuller Seminary, challenges the notion that homosexuals are a threat to the family or are any more likely than heterosexuals to abuse children: there is no evidence to support such claims, he argues. He points out that homosexual men are being murdered by heterosexual people for just being gay,

while there is no record of a heterosexual being murdered for not being gay. Smedes asks, "Why . . . in a world of violence, starving children, cruel tyrannies and natural disasters, are Christian people so steamed up about the harmless and often beneficent presence of gays and lesbians among us?"

In an essay on "Where the Gospel Leads Us," Richard Rohr, a Franciscan, insists that God asks of homosexual relationships exactly what God asks of heterosexual ones: "truth, faithfulness, and striving to enter into covenants of continuing forgiveness of one another." John Cobb argues that a context of committed relationships includes sexual love. The church should teach that ideal without apology and without excluding a whole class of people. He hopes that heterosexual and homosexual Christians can work together to bring a healthy order out of the present sexual chaos.

A helpful commentary on the heated debate over holy unions is presented by M. Mahan Siler Jr., a North Carolina pastor expelled from the Southern Baptist Convention in 1993 after presiding at a covenant ceremony for a gay church member. Siler sees the ritual as a public affirmation of a lifelong covenant enabling the couple to receive the same community support available to those entering heterosexual marriage covenants. He reminds readers how little encouragement is offered to gay people in monogamous, loving relationships, and how much our society continues to equate homosexuality with promiscuity.

People share deeply personal testimonies about children, colleagues and friends who are gay. Donald Shriver Jr. remembers his friendship with a fellow seminary student who would have been an outstanding minister, but whose life was cut short by suicide. Years after his friend's death, Shriver learned from a retired professor what had been at the root of his friend's problem. As a gay man, Shriver's friend could discover no social space—in the seminary or anywhere else—in which he could be himself.

Lutheran Bishop Paul Egertson describes how he and his wife responded when the oldest of their six sons told them that he was gay. They moved gradually through what Egertson terms six periods of creative development and transformation, from denial to eventual celebration.

Wink's expressed purpose is to bring serious reflection and a more loving approach to the debate. His preface includes a poignant observation: "We stand, blessed, before this stupendous gift—the mystery of human sexuality—awed, confused, and

rendered delicate toward ourselves and others as we seek to listen closely to the new things the Spirit is saying to the churches."