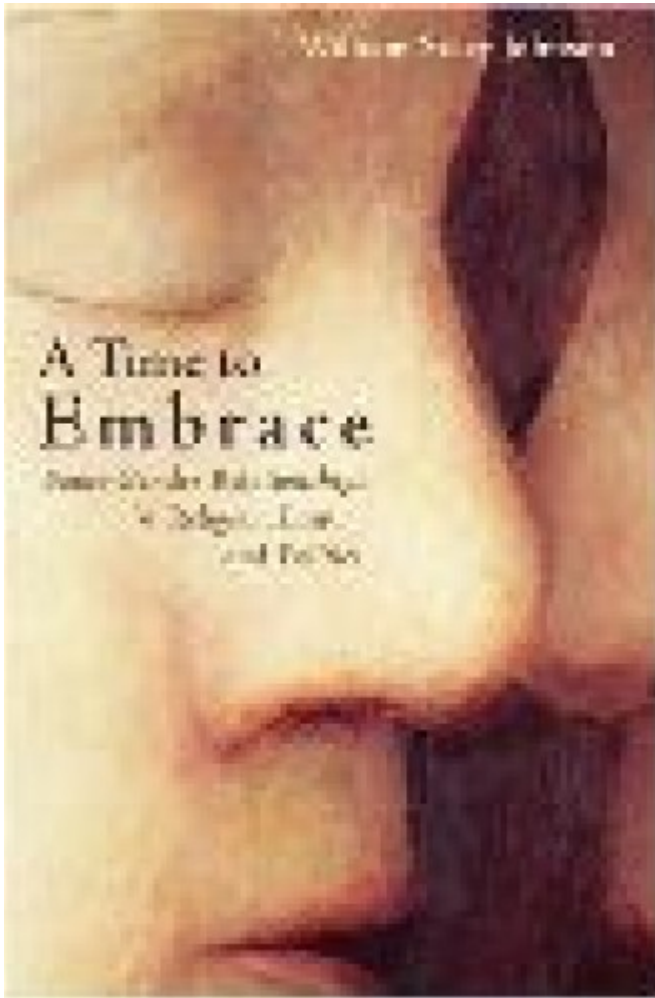


Same-sex unions

By [Paul G. Crowley](#) in the [May 1, 2007](#) issue

In Review



A Time to Embrace: Same-Gender Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics

William Stacy Johnson
Eerdmans

As a Jesuit theologian working in a university setting, I am occasionally asked to discuss difficult questions with people charged with adjudicating them. In the not-too-distant past a judge in California who was deciding a case on same-sex marriage asked me to suggest readings that might help in sorting out all the religious and legal issues that come into play in this extremely challenging area of theology and law. At stake were not only the fine points of the law, but also what this judge clearly saw as the religious underpinnings of so much of the legal debate.

How I wish this book had been in print at the time! *A Time to Embrace* is nothing less than a tour de force on the topic. William Stacy Johnson has impeccable credentials: a professor of systematic theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, an ordained Presbyterian minister, an established theologian and an attorney. He wants to help all of us in the churches to find a way forward on this issue; no longer able to remain a quiet spectator, he writes with a sense of urgency.

Johnson drew me into his discussion on the very first page, where he reports on a public ceremony held at the Church of St. John at the Latin Gate in Rome in 1578, wherein a group of Portuguese and Spanish men came forward to be married to one another. The men were arrested and burned alive at the stake, perhaps not a surprising result in a city where civic law and church law sometimes blended.

But if we are to take this story on its face, it indicates that the question of how society and church might imagine unions between people of the same sex is not entirely a new one. What is new, as Johnson continually reminds us, is our understandings of human sexuality, which have changed significantly since the 16th century, and even in the past 50 years.

This is a book for everyone in the church, from those completely new to the debates about same-sex relationships to those who have long been in the thicket of controversy. One of its unique contributions is that it intertwines a developing understanding of the church itself (from nonaffirming and nonwelcoming to welcoming, affirming and familial) with a growing understanding of scripture. This is a difficult task to pull off, and Johnson handles it deftly, leading the reader through some of the most difficult terrain of both scriptural interpretation and theology of the church.

For example, he distinguishes between outright prohibition of same-gender sexual activity and toleration (where approval is not granted but gay and lesbian people are

not persecuted or rejected because being gay or lesbian in orientation is not seen as a choice—which is the Roman Catholic position). In the course of laying out these positions, Johnson examines some of the most contested passages of scripture, notably Romans 1, employing a critical reading that shows that the intent of these passages is very different from what some contemporary readers believe it is.

In Romans 1, Paul is speaking to a situation of social chaos that has come to be expressed in part through sexual profligacy. The point is not condemnation of same-sex activity as it might be understood today within a committed relationship, but the need for all people to live by faith (Rom. 1:17). Those who do not live by faith have become fools (1:22), and their foolishness is made manifest in sexual profligacy. As Johnson repeatedly reminds us, same-sex unions as we understand them today do not involve sexual profligacy. Furthermore, he argues, they simply are not addressed in scripture.

Then how might the church approach same-sex unions? Johnson lays out seven ways of looking at the question, ranging from prohibition to full-scale “consecration.” In between those positions lie shades of gray: from degrees of toleration or acceptance or accommodation to more affirming, even “celebratory” positions. At this point a certain ambiguity appears in the book that is perhaps unavoidable, for discussion of approving same-sex unions inevitably requires discussion of the degree to which same-sex relations are accepted within the churches. Johnson’s categories, therefore, describe first the church’s posture toward “being gay” itself, and then, by implication, the church’s posture toward same-sex unions. The church may absolutely prohibit any same-sex activity and therefore same-sex unions as well, or the church may reverence individuals’ given sexuality as a part of God’s creation that needs to be ordered but is nevertheless holy. Johnson concludes that persons of same-sex orientation possess a sexuality that “is to be consecrated through an exclusive, committed covenant blessed by the Church.”

One of the more impressive aspects of this book is the way Johnson runs each of these seven positions through the theological filters of creation, reconciliation and redemption to show how sexuality can be correlated with some of the central doctrines of Christian faith. For the Roman Catholic reader this is a refreshing approach to the topic. Because Roman Catholic discourse is still largely rooted in natural-law theory, specific references to the central doctrines of the faith are rather rare; instead, certain moral categories, in particular that of “objective disorder,” have recently held sway.

Johnson offers not only a classical theological framework for understanding human sexuality but also an inclusive theology of marriage, in which marriage is understood as a union of mutual companionship, lasting commitment and loving community. His chapter “Becoming Family” offers an extended theology of marriage that could prove useful in the debates within church and society over gay marriage.

The theological debates over same-sex unions have their legal counterparts. In the second half of the book Johnson asks how a churchly consecration of same-sex unions can be supported by the law as well. Johnson’s masterful bridging of theological and legal worlds is what might have helped my friend the judge.

One of the most important insights Johnson offers is that legal protections for gay people and for their right to form families have developed in recent years not out of the legal theory of privacy, but out of the theory of liberty. This is an important distinction. Privacy rights would allow people to conduct their lives within the enclosure of their homes as they wish, but would not protect them from various forms of discrimination outside the home. The principle of liberty, appealing to the 14th Amendment, calls for equality of rights within both the private and public spheres. Johnson traces the judicial history from *Romer v. Evans* (1996), in which the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a Colorado law that denied gays and lesbians protection under the state’s antidiscrimination laws, to the famous 2003 *Goodridge* decision, in which the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts evoked liberty in declaring that denial of marriage to people of the same gender is a form of discrimination.

Johnson concludes that this is “a time to embrace” gay and lesbian people who long to become full members of the human family and that we can do this by embracing the implications of recent theological and legal developments in our understanding of human sexuality—and of same-sex unions in particular. In both theological and legal terms, it is a matter of justice.

This book is indispensable reading for any committed Christian who is facing these questions today. And that means most of us.