



How might a better understanding of missional holiness inform the
UK church's engagement in the area of homosexuality?

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DECLARATION

This dissertation is the product of my own work. I declare also that the dissertation is available for photocopying, reference purposes and Inter-Library Loan.

Anne Witton

ABSTRACT

How might a better understanding of missional holiness inform the UK church's engagement in the area of homosexuality?

Anne Witton, 10 September 2021

This paper explores the way in which a greater understanding of missional holiness might shape the U.K. church's approach to homosexuality. It considers the missional significance of homosexuality as a moral issue and places that discussion in the framework of the calling of God's people to be holy as God is holy for the sake of bringing salvation and blessing to the nations. Through desk research and biblical exegesis it explores definitions and themes of missional holiness and applies them to the area of sexual ethics. It concludes that homosexuality is a key missional issue and that a better understanding of missional ethics helps to appreciate what is at stake and engage with homosexuality in a more constructive way. The paper also proposes some practical recommendations for Christians to live out a counter-cultural holy sexuality and suggests avenues for further research.

Word count: 19777

PREFACE

I have spent most of my Christian life in full-time mission and I am exclusively same-sex attracted. I have therefore always thought simultaneously about mission and sexuality. The relationship between the two has shifted dramatically over recent decades and I am often caught between 'affirming' and 'conservative' Christians. I aim here to explore some contentious areas through the lens of missional holiness. How can we recover our identity as a counter-cultural community who reflect God's holiness through our sexual behaviour to make him known to the world?

I have used a range of sources including scholarly books on missional holiness, missional hermeneutics and biblical sexuality, commentaries, papers, journal articles, reports, blog posts and websites.

This has been written during a particularly difficult time in my life and would never have emerged without the unfailing support of my Christian family. Thanks to:

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction and research methodology

1.1 Introduction

My aim is to explore how a better understanding of missional holiness (MH) might inform the UK church's engagement with homosexuality. Sexuality is a key missional issue in Britain today, yet little research has explored the relationship between theological stance and missional effectiveness. Both traditionalists and revisionists (explained below) assume that theirs is the right theological approach for the sake of mission, the former arguing that it concerns scriptural obedience, and the latter contending that condemning homosexual practice alienates people from the church.

The questions I will ask are:

- What are some of the biggest issues regarding sexuality and mission?
- What are the key themes of MH?
- How might we define missional holy sexuality?
- How might a better understanding of MH help us develop a theology of welcome and inclusion that builds on a traditionalist view of biblical sexual morality.
- How can the church live out its calling to be holy and a light and blessing to the nations amidst our cultures' sexual idolatry and immorality?
- How can celibate SSA Christians challenge the church to more faithful sexual holiness for the sake of God's mission in the world?

I will examine homosexuality through the lens of missional ethics (ME) and link theological reflection to the identity of God's people as reflecting the holiness of God as a witness to the nations. My scope is intentionally broad, aiming to make initial observations about sexual holiness within a MH framework and providing a structure for further research.

Chapter two reviews the literature on MH and sexuality, identifying key texts and themes. Chapters three and four develop a biblical understanding of missional sexual holiness, drawing on OT and NT key texts. Chapter five explores contemporary Christian sexuality focussing on two aspects of ME—distinctiveness and blessing—and defines missional holy sexuality. Chapter six makes recommendations for the church, learning from the experiences of celibate same-sex attracted (SSA) Christians and chapter seven offers a summary.

I recognise this is the start of a conversation on missional sexuality and that much more work is needed.

1.2 Personal motivation

This thesis unites my two principal interests: mission and sexuality. I have spent many years working for mission agencies and greatly desire to make Jesus known. I am also exclusively SSA and have spent 26 years determining how to submit my sexuality to Christ in a way that honours him and demonstrates his goodness to others. I currently lead mission at my church and co-direct Living Out (<https://www.livingout.org/>), so this research will benefit my ministry.

1.3 Research methodology

My research consisted solely of desk research for several reasons. There is much theological reflection available around sexuality and, to a lesser extent, MH but little connecting the two. Given the limited wordcount, a thorough survey and critique of the literature, a development of a sustained argument and drawing some initial conclusions did not allow the inclusion of field research. A valuable follow-up project could test my conclusions in the field, but this is beyond my remit here.

My sources included missiological writing on MH, scholarly work on homosexuality, journal articles and Bible commentaries for the exegetical work in chapters three and four. I also examined popular level books, blogs, and organisational websites across the theological spectrum.

I also drew on personal experience, many year's experience working with SSA people of different backgrounds and attitudes towards the Christian faith, and written accounts from SSA Christians.

1.4 Assumptions and biases

As Creswell highlights, "We always bring certain beliefs and philosophical assumptions to our research." (Creswell, 2007, p.15). I have a conservative evangelical background and a traditionalist position on biblical sexuality—that is, I hold that sex is solely for heterosexual marriage that is a life-long, faithful commitment. All sex outside this is immoral, including same-sex sexual (SSS) behaviour (Gane, Cole and Walton, 2004, p.323).

I started with the conviction that for the church to be good news to LGB people, and our culture, requires an orthodox biblical sexual ethic, since sexual holiness is central to what it means to live as God's people and be a "light for the Gentiles" (Isaiah 42:6). As God's purpose for sexuality is rooted in the bigger story of his relationship with the church, I contend that when we compromise biblical teaching on sexuality, we seriously inhibit our missional effectiveness. I will unpack and explore this in light of MH, looking for evidence to support this view, but also being open to challenge.

I realise that sexuality is a contentious and complex issue, and I will listen sensitively to the best arguments from different perspectives and articulate them fairly. I intend that readers from different theological perspectives will feel well represented. I will look specifically for areas where revisionists and traditionalists can agree and challenge one another.

1.5 Definitions and terminology

Terminology is problematic as many terms are understood differently or used pejoratively. My preferred terms for describing the two postures towards homosexual activity are traditionalist (for those against) and revisionist (for those in favour), following Brownson, who himself takes a revisionist position (Brownson, 2013, p.4). These terms helpfully focus on postures toward scriptural interpretation rather than attitudes towards people. I will not use the terms 'inclusive' or 'affirming' because they imply a value judgement that the opposite view is excluding and negating (see Table I), and I maintain one can be an inclusive and affirming traditionalist. I will also avoid 'Side A / Side B / Side X' language where possible as this polarises debate and treats people as 'others'. Neutralising language is important in hearing one another well.

Revisionist	Traditionalist
Side A	Side B
Progressive	Regressive / Old fashioned
Inclusive	Excluding / discriminatory
Open	Closed
Affirming	Denying / negating
Welcoming	Hostile

Table 1 The difficulty with terminology. The second column shows the opposites of the adjectives in the first column and demonstrates how the language employed in the LGBT debate caricatures the revisionist position as being positive and pro-gay and the traditionalist position as being negative towards LGBT people.

Although the letters ‘LGBTQI+’ often appear together, I will focus exclusively on homosexuality and bisexuality inasmuch that it overlaps, so use LGB to clarify that I am not talking about trans* or other identities which are beyond my scope.

1.6 Limitations

Although there are those pro-SSS relationships who accept that Scripture condemns homosexuality, and so choose to reject the Bible’s authority (Johnson, 2007; Wink, 1999, p.47), I will focus on self-described evangelicals who maintain the Bible’s authority but disagree about its teaching on sexuality, and therefore disagree about how to engage missionally whilst recognising the importance of mission. I am not primarily concerned with pitting those who believe the Bible against those who do not, but rather with the disagreement between Christians, both revisionists and traditionalists who affirm the Bible’s authority. (Schafer, 2019, loc.5285). I will present the best affirming arguments, engaging fairly with the literature.

I lack the scope for an exhaustive argument for an orthodox biblical sexual ethic or for detailed exegesis of particular passages on homosexuality but point to Gagnon, Sprinkle and DeYoung. I will focus on the missional importance of holy sexuality. I will not examine every Scripture concerning homosexuality or MH but select those that provide the best coherent narrative.

Although I recognise there is a wider conversation about homosexuality and mission in the global church, restrictions necessitate limiting my research to a Western context and material principally from the U.K. and U.S.A.

1.7 Research benefits

I hope to publish my findings through Living Out and use my conclusions to inform training days and speaking events. I also aim to develop resources to help evangelical church leaders see how orthodox biblical teaching on sexuality and missional effectiveness are linked. To that end, chapter two surveys ME and sexuality literature before chapters three and four identify some common themes of ME in the Bible.

CHAPTER 2

Literature review

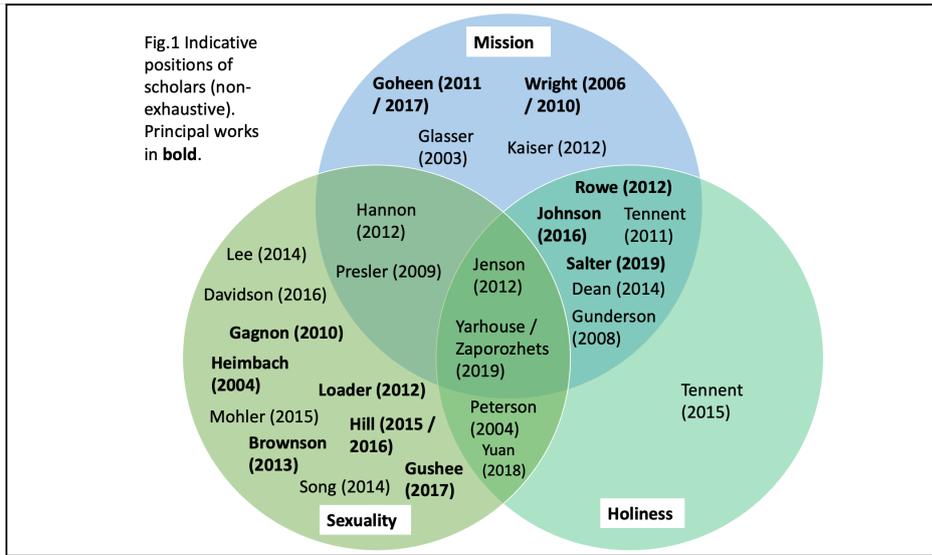
2.1 Introduction

Here I will identify key scholars in the emerging field of MH and explore definitions of ME to provide a framework for discussion of missional sexual ethics. I will then examine key works on homosexuality and highlight common themes.

Sexuality in the West is increasingly seen as a private, individual conviction and choice and this attitude has increasingly influenced Christian thinking. I will re-frame the debate around sexual morality and suggest it is central to the church's call to MH.

I have deliberately kept discussions of MH texts brief here, as I will examine them more deeply, drawing out MH themes in the following chapters' biblical exegesis. I will focus here on identifying key texts, exploring definitions of ME, and developing themes from wide-ranging sexuality materials to inform this paper.

As I am working across three connected but distinct areas, I have roughly mapped where the principal works sit (Fig.1). My aim throughout this paper is to show how holiness, mission and sexuality are connected and specifically how understanding MH can help the church engage well with homosexuality. For reasons outlined above, my scope is limited to literature from a Western evangelical perspective.



2.2 Missional holiness

2.2.1 Key texts

To develop and explore a missional sexual ethic, it is essential to understand current conversations around ME. Few scholars are writing specifically about ME, key texts being Draycott and Rowe (2012), Johnson (2016) and Salter (2019). Salter’s work is a revised PhD thesis (2017), and he is pastor of a U.K. evangelical church and trustee of the Keswick Convention. Draycott teaches at Biola University, and Johnson is Professor of New Testament at Nazarene Theological Seminary.

As I examine the biblical texts, I will also draw on the work of missiologists writing on the Bible and mission including Wright, Goheen, Kaiser and Glasser. Few texts make an explicit connection between the missional nature of holiness and sexual ethics, but I discuss the most relevant namely Peterson (2004), Jenson (2013a) and Yuan (2018).

2.2.2 Definitions and scope

There is no consensus over a definition of ME, although several have posited definitions. As Salter states “The term, ‘missional ethics,’ is relatively recent, first appearing in an article by M. Douglas Meeks in 2001.1 (Salter, 2019, p.11) but he later observes: “the concept of missional ethics pre-dates the terminology” (Ibid., p.289).

Rowe outlines five characteristic shapes of ME: God shaped; Story shaped; Community shaped; 'Other' shaped; Shaped only in outline. The first three will be particularly helpful when exploring key themes later. However, his fourth characteristic, framed as "not conceiv[ing] the other as a target." (Rowe, 2013, p.22) may confuse the ethics of conducting mission 'activities' (e.g., non-coercive evangelism, contextualisation) with the ethical character of Christians and faith communities as a missional prerequisite. It would also be clearer to describe mission being for the benefit of others rather than shaped by others. Rowe correctly acknowledges the ongoing work in describing ME and how it should shape the life of God's people (Ibid., p.25). He claims that "it is not possible, therefore, to prescribe particular shapes to the moral or missional life applicable to all." (Ibid., p.26) but I do not believe this allows enough weight for the universality of covenant law or the ethical prescriptions we will explore in chapters three and four.

Rowe formulates this definition: ME "is all the ways in which Christian ethical practice flows out of, supports and advances the wider mission of the church to proclaim the gospel – in other words, the church's living witness." (Ibid., p.31). Whilst capturing the importance of right living to the church's mission, the definition omits Rowe's own stipulation that ME must be God-shaped and story-shaped.

Johnson identifies six characteristics of holiness (Johnson, 2016, pp.151–152) which emphasise God as the source of holiness; its corporate nature; faithfulness to God expressed in cruciform love; peace-making; purity and Spirit-empowerment. These are particularly helpful in reminding us that MH is not concerned with private ethics but encompasses all God's people in every area of life. It also roots its source and power in the Trinitarian God.

Johnson defines ME as: "God's means of (re)shaping us into the *imago Dei*, of making us holy, is inseparable from – indeed, primarily constituted by – our participation in, and witness to, the *missio Dei* whose ultimate goal is to bring creation to its intended destiny." (Ibid., pp.xvi, 43, 152 and 193).

The strength of this definition is its rooting in God's character and mission, and its eschatological framing of mission as the fulfilment of God's purposes in creation. Further unpacking holiness as the counter-cultural way that God's people reflect God's character to the world would strengthen it further.

Salter's methodology—rooted in Scripture, following its narrational trajectory, applying a missional hermeneutic and acknowledging how text and community shape each other—provides a solid basis

for enquiry (Salter, 2019, pp.24–41). Scripture must be read as authoritative, with a grand missional narrative from creation to new creation in which all God's people are located.

In defining ME, Salter states it “refers to the ways in which the believing community's behaviour—specifically their love for God, and love for neighbour, expressed in the exercise of justice, charity, and worship—bears witness, in the *imitatio Dei*, to the nature and character of God before a watching world. (Ibid., p.2)

It is a shame that Salter's acknowledgement that ethics concerns 'right being' (Ibid., p.325) is missing from his definition as this would have highlighted the important fact that *who we are* and not just *what we do* is important.

Wright emphasises “*There is no biblical mission without biblical ethics*” because “*The ethical quality of the life of the people of God is the vital link between their calling and their mission.*” Wright, 2006, p.369, emphasis his). This challenges those that think holiness makes us less relevant to the culture we are witnessing to, and who are tempted to dilute the gospel to make it more palatable. As Gunderson remarks, “As soon as we start thinking that the way to be missional is to be a little less holy...we have missed the biblical boat entirely.” (Gunderson, 2008).

ME clearly involves God's people being holy—that is, set apart for God (Goheen, 2011, p.39) and reflecting his ethical standards and character—for the *missio Dei* (making God known among the nations), the blessing of the nations and the redemption of all creation.

Regarding ME's scope, both Rowe and Salter correctly state that “Mission is more than right living.” (Rowe, 2013, p.16. See also Salter, 2019, p.294). The credit for our changed lives belongs to God and we must proclaim this.

The literature agrees that ME is an emerging area of study, that definitions are evolving (Salter, 2019, p.20; Rowe, 2013, p.25) and further reflection is encouraged. My contribution will build on existing definitions and develop a distinctively missional sexual ethic, applying key principles of MH to a pattern for missional biblical sexuality.

2.3 Sexuality

There is an increasing body of scholarly and popular work around sexual ethics focussing on homosexuality. Gagnon's seminal work (2010) remains the leading traditionalist argument and Brownson (2013), Gushee (2017) and Song (2014) have worked on a biblical case in favour of SSS partnerships, despite not convincingly addressing all Gagnon's arguments. I will not evaluate these arguments, as my focus is on the missional impact of sexual ethics. Instead, I will survey a range of texts from both traditionalists (Gagnon, Harrison, Heimbach, Hill, Mohler, Peterson, Shaw, Sprinkle, Yarhouse and Zaporozhets, and Yuan) and revisionists (Brownson, Davison, Gushee, Lee, Loader, Ozanne, Song, Vines) to identify missional themes.

Sexuality is central to our humanity and one of the strongest desires many will experience. It is the foundation of family and community but equally can fracture families and communities. Therefore, sexual ethics is naturally a dominant missional issue. As Presler perceptively observes, mission is important on both sides of the homosexuality debate, and both contend that their stance is best for mission: "Progressives are zealous about the fullness of God's mission being extended to and through homosexual persons. Traditionalists are concerned lest the integrity of God's mission be fatally compromised by a repudiation of biblical morality." (Presler, 2009, p.13). There is acknowledgement across the literature that homosexuality is a key factor in millennials leaving or failing to engage with the church (Vines, 2014, p.1; Gushee, 2017, pp.3, 12; Lee, 2014, p.3; Collins, 2016, p.49; Sprinkle and Hill, 2015, p.82). Mohler highlights Kinnaman and Lyons' research which identifies "a posture of judgement against homosexuality to be the number one reason millennials rejected or abandoned Christianity." (Mohler, 2015, p.147.)

In today's Western culture, evangelical churches cannot justify avoiding the topic of sexual morality.. As Gushee rightly says "Avoidism cannot be sustained due to Christian missional, vocational and leadership responsibility." (Gushee, 2017, pp.23-4).

2.3.1 Key themes

Several themes will impact our discussions of missional holy sexuality in later chapters. Here I will briefly overview those themes, critique the main arguments and demonstrate how I will develop them.

2.3.1.1 Harm

One of the biggest areas of contention is around the issue of harm.

There are two main claims: Firstly, that the church's homophobia has alienated and rejected many LGB people. This is sadly true and highlighted by revisionists like Davison, who urge repentance and change: "Addressing the Church's reputation for excluding, even victimizing, non-heterosexual people is not just a matter of window dressing." (Davison, 2016, p.83). We should be distressed, moved to compassion and repentant for every LGB person who has suffered hatred and discrimination from the church.

There is much agreement on both sides, that the ex-gay movement—which believed in trying to change people's sexual orientation from gay to straight—was misguided and caused harm, even when intentions were honourable. (Gushee, 2017, p.45; Shaw, 2021a; Yarhouse and Zaporozhets, 2019, p.49). Current attempts to outlaw conversion therapy—ill-defined as it is—are a legacy of the damage done through 'gay-cure' practices, particularly in the 1980s and 90s.

However, there is danger in over-stating the problem to serve one's own political purposes. The 'harm narrative' has been exaggerated and popularised by campaigners like Steve Chalke and Jayne Ozanne (Chalke, n.d.) and has become a persuasive piece of rhetoric, particularly in debates about conversion therapy. Scare tactics and unsubstantiated claims have impeded nuanced debate and hindered traditionalists being properly heard. Gushee speaks of psychological distress, self-harm, and suicide (Gushee, 2017, p.100) but it is unclear whether the higher incidence of mental health difficulties in LGB people is due to their faith experiences (Bunt, 2021).

Ozanne's National Faith & Sexuality Survey focused on determining the harm from conversion therapy. The Executive Summary claims, "The results provide **strong evidence of the harm** that attempts to change sexual orientation are reported to inflict" (2018a, emphasis original) even though 89% of respondents experienced no attempts to change their sexual orientation (Q23 results). Further, the statistical significance of the difference between mental health for heterosexuals (3.88/5) and LGBTQ+ people (3.5/5) is debateable and further research is necessary to explain the difference. We know from secular studies that mental health in the general population tends to be poorer for LGBTQ+ people and the reasons are likely complex (Hudson-Sharp and Metcalf, 2016, pp.39, 59). Interestingly, Ozanne observes that: "Although the number of "same-sex attracted" respondents was too small to conduct significance testing... their average weighting [for well-being] was higher than all the other groups (4.07)." (2018b, p.19). This is confirmed by the most extensive study of celibate gay

Christians (Side B) to date (Yarhouse and Zaporozhets, 2019) which concluded most were in the normal range for depression, anxiety, stress, and well-being (Ibid., p.218). It is important to note that Ozanne's respondents were U.K. based whereas the Yarhouse/Zaporozhets research was conducted in the U.S.A., so are not directly comparable. It would be instructive to survey a large, randomised sample of both Side A and Side B gay Christians in the U.K.

The second claim concerning harm is that traditional Christian teaching on homosexuality is inherently damaging and incompatible with acceptance of and kindness towards LGB people. Rather than seen as life-giving, traditional teaching on biblical sexual morality is increasingly seen as immoral and harmful. (Heimbach, 2004, p.317; Mohler, 2015, p.126). Vines specifically claims that "our interpretation of Scripture on same-sex relationships has been at the root of that harm." (2017, p.XXVI). A key misplaced assumption amongst revisionists is that challenging people not to act on SSS desires is unfair and unwarranted, which is in turn based on a faulty identity ideology that we will examine shortly.

A final point is an assumption in revisionist literature that Christians ought not to suffer (or at least not suffer sexual frustration) for following Christ (Gushee, 2017, p.45). Nuance is needed here as clearly some suffering should be alleviated if possible. However, costly discipleship involves taking up our cross and following our suffering Saviour. We will explore this further in chapters five and six.

2.3.1.2 Identity and practice

The issue of identity is integral to the LGB debate and to understanding some areas of conflict. For traditionalists, an LGB person is distinct from their outward behaviour. Therefore, in exercising sexual restraint, one is not losing the essence of oneself, but rather living out the God-given identity in Christ that all Christians must die to themselves to gain. (Colossians 3:3). For a revisionist, asking an LGB person to refrain from gay relationships is an unfair denial of a person's truest identity. Phrases like "deny who they are." (Davison, 2016, p.90), "accepted for who they are" (Gushee, 2017, p.93) and "truth of who they are" (Bayes, 2016, p.4) permeate the literature.

Matthews continues the harm narrative in claiming that "no-one can continually deny or fracture themselves without risking a serious impact on their health and wellbeing." (2016, p.44). This controversial claim runs counter to Jesus' teaching in Matthew 16:24 and will be important in considering missional sexual holiness.

Yarhouse and Zaporozhets rightly observe that sexual behaviour has become so integral to identity that it can no longer be evaluated without that evaluation being seen as a wholesale rejection of the person (2019, p.68) and Yuan astutely points out there is no other “sin-struggle where we have conflated behaviour, or even sinful desires with identity.” (Yuan, 2020).

2.3.1.3 Inclusion and welcome

Few argue that gay people should be excluded from the church, but it is the *nature* of the welcome and inclusion that is contentious. For revisionists—who see LGBT sexuality as integral to a person’s identity—full inclusion and embrace of gay people must involve affirming SSS relationships (Gushee 2017, p.5; Vines, 2014, p.172). Anything less would be “welcoming the left-handed so long as they don't use their left hand.” (Davison, 2016, p.86). There is no distinction between people and practice. It seems LGBT people are unique in being accepted without a challenge to transformation in all areas, including sexuality. We will return to this later.

Tellingly, even for revisionists like Gushee, there are boundaries to inclusion: “There are some liberal gay, lesbian and bisexual Christians who want me and other Christian pastor-scholar types to offer unequivocal "welcome and affirmation" to whatever sexual relationships they feel like embarking upon.” (2017, p.104). Interestingly, he uses scare quotes around "welcome and affirmation" to draw a line and exclude certain types of sexual behaviour. This raises the question of whether people practising that type of behaviour would be welcome in his church or whether that means that the church cannot be 'fully inclusive' as defined by revisionists after all.

There is an implication that if you are ‘for’ gay people—if you care about them and want to accept them—then you must adopt a revisionist position. (Vines 2014, p.163). It is interesting to note how few revisionist writers, except for Lee, engage with Side B SSA Christians. Indeed, Lee observes that “most gay and gay-friendly groups don't have any tangible place for 'Side B' celibate gays.” (Lee, 2014, p.217). Gushee claims "solidarity with my LGBTQ brothers and sisters" (2017, p.176) but does not acknowledge those who disagree with him on his sexual ethic, thereby making their lives harder and even more marginalised.

Gushee draws a false dichotomy between traditionalists and revisionists by packaging cultural, attitudinal, and legal change together with theological change (Ibid., pp.20–21). He leaves no room for someone who holds a traditional view of biblical sexual morality, is deeply opposed to

homophobia, and who wants to fully welcome LGB people into the church, seeming to think that such people cannot exist.

In contrast, Gagnon maintains that unquestioningly applauding behaviour that opposes God's desire is not a loving thing to do (2010, p.35). He also asserts that "No one on either side of the homosexuality debate wants to be inclusive of harmful behavior or widen diversity to include sin." (Ibid., p.28).

My research will explore how a better understanding of MH will help us develop a theology of welcome and inclusion that is compatible with—and predicated on—a traditionalist view of biblical sexual morality.

2.3.1.4 Conflating sex and intimacy

One of the most forceful arguments in revisionist literature is that no one should be denied intimacy and committed, loving relationships. There is agreement across all theological positions that intimacy is essential, but the difficulty with the revisionist position is the belief that intimacy is primarily achieved through sexual relationships.

Revisionist literature includes ample discussion of long-term, committed, intimate friendship and lots that traditionalists could agree with, but it is specifically the *sexual* aspect of relationships which must be debated. It is surprising how little mention there is specifically of sex in revisionist literature, and many revisionists seem to think that a traditionalist position embargoes deep, committed same-sex non-sexual intimacy. For example, Davison talks about "deny[ing] feelings of love for the sake of Church teaching" (2016, p.90); Lee states that "asking people to be single and alone for the rest of their lives seems harsh. (2014, p.212) and Archer talks about "carry[ing] the burden of forgoing any kind of intimacy...for life. (2016, p.30).

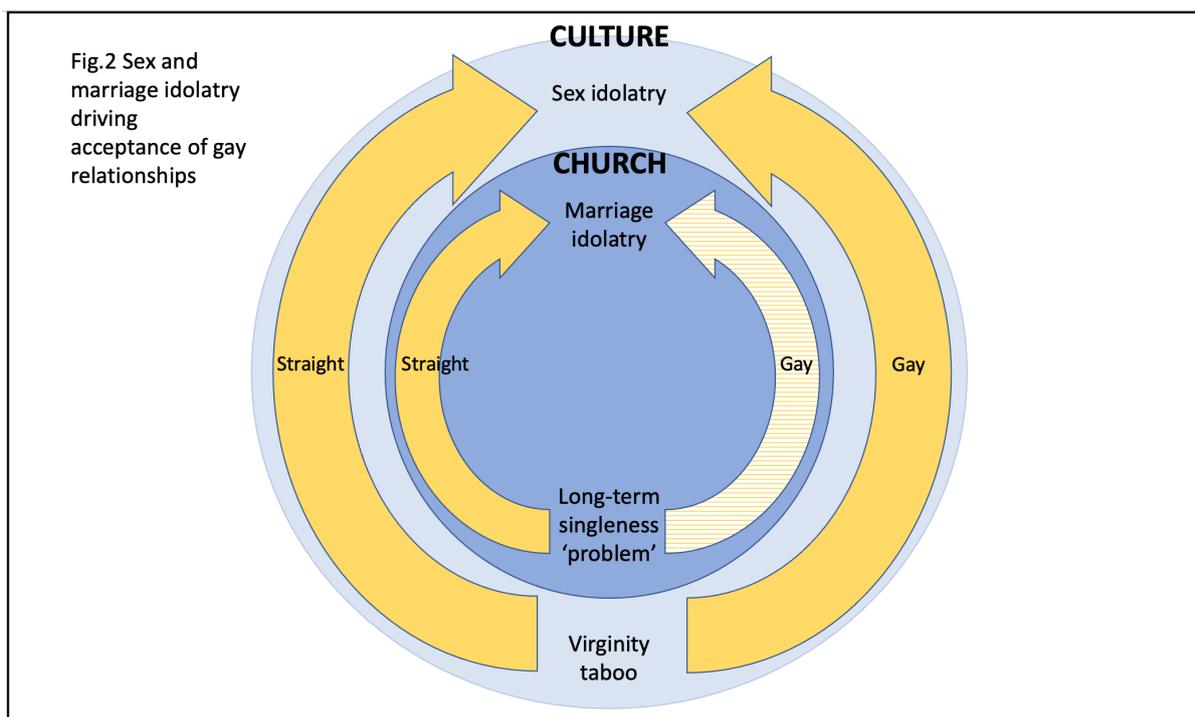
However, traditionalist teaching denies specifically SSS practice, which leaves ample scope for SSA (and heterosexual) singles to have their legitimate needs for intimacy met in God-ordained ways. As Sprinkle puts it, "I reject the myth that true love and intimacy are only found in a partner you can have sex with." (Sprinkle and Hill, 2015, p.174).

I will explore this further in chapter six in discussions about holy missional community and friendship.

2.3.1.5 Devaluing singleness

The danger of equating sex with intimacy is that it reinforces an idolatry of sexual relationship and devalues singleness. If sexual intimacy is crucial to human flourishing, then celibacy must be a privation to be endured. Celibacy is labelled as a ‘burden (Lee, 2014, pp.197, 215), ‘rare calling’ (Gushee, 2017, p.39) and even a ‘danger’ (Loader, 2012, p.494). Even churches that teach the equal value of marriage and singleness have “failed in not affirming the gift of celibacy.” (Mohler, 2015, p.171).

In our culture, a sexual relationship is seen as a rite of passage and a sign of maturity. Many churches sanctify this idolatry of sex by holding up marriage as the ideal. The result is that—if celibacy must be escapable for all—fairness dictates that LGB people should have the same opportunities for sexual relationship as straight people within the church as in wider culture. (Fig. 2)



This ideology that underlies a revisionist narrative contradicts biblical teaching on singleness and sexuality (as we will explore in chapter five) and increases the difficulty of living a fulfilled celibate, single life for gay and straight people alike. Ironically, many who believe they are ‘siding with’ gay people are unintentionally making life and faith harder for celibate gay (and straight) Christians.

The omission of any acknowledgement of straight single Christians who would like to be married is striking. One wonders how Vines would counsel someone in this position when he states that “Like heterosexuality, gay people's sexuality is a core part of what it means for them to be human. Attempts to extinguish it often result in destructive, emotionally crippling ways of living.” (Vines, 2014, pp.168–9). This raises the question of whether any boundaries on what we do sexually are justified. We will return to this later.

2.3.1.6 Religious liberty

The culture wars and public face of church debates over homosexuality raise the important issue of religious liberty. For some churches and evangelical institutions holding a traditional view, homosexuality and ‘gay rights’ are seen as enemies of the gospel. Sadly, this often leads to a defensive posture and ‘siege mentality’ as churches fear losing their own liberties in a pro-gay culture. (Gushee, 2017, p.13). This can be seen in some of the more conservative literature, with Mohler using the language of conflict and opposition (‘stand our ground’ (2015, p.150)) and Gagnon (2010, p.483) and Heimbach (2004, p.32) portraying traditionalists as victims in the culture war facing marginalisation and being denied their rights. Whilst rightly recognising there is much at stake, Heimbach adopts a defensive rather than missional posture, focussing more on the risks for the future of church and family life, than on the need for grace towards and compassion for LGB people (Ibid., p.130).

Treating homosexuality as a primarily political issue has the damaging effect of dehumanising both Christians and non-Christians for whom it is intensely personal. The public face of Christian engagement with homosexuality has often lacked a pastoral sensitivity towards those who are gay or lesbian, both inside and outside the church. “As we evangelicals fought political battles over sexuality, we ...ignored people in our own congregations who wrestle with their sexual desires and gender identity.” (Anderson, 2021, p.23).

The Christian Institute, for example, has published briefings on marriage (2012) and conversion therapy (2020) couched in terms of the freedom for Christians to speak openly about biblical sexual morality. Whilst this is an important strand of public policy—both for the rights of Christians and because missional opportunities might be denied if religious liberty was lost—it should not trump care for LGB people, otherwise a defence of religious liberties can easily become an attack on LGB people. We must stand alongside LGB people even if we do not agree with SSS behaviour.

2.3.1.7 Agree to disagree?

There are thinkers on both ends of the theological scale who think this is a matter of gospel importance and we cannot simply 'agree to disagree' (Gagnon, Heimbach, Shaw, Vines). Similarly, there are traditionalists and revisionists who consider this a 'disputable matter' that Bible-believing Christians can decide upon in line with their individual conscience (Lee, Davison, Sprinkle). For them, this issue would not be a litmus test of evangelical orthodoxy.

Davison maintains that—for the sake of mission—we should not make gay relationships a first order issue (2016, p.93), and Granberg-Michaelson contends that the disunity caused by debates over sexuality damages the church's witness. (2013, p.vii). Whilst some in-fighting has undeniably presented a poor picture of the gospel to the world, the solution is not as straightforward as simply agreeing to disagree.

Revisionists and traditionalists have opposing values and agendas which penetrate to the heart of the gospel. It is very difficult to work alongside someone who has completely different ideas of what holy sexuality looks like and is pulling in the opposite direction. As we will see, it is about much more than "how perhaps one-twentieth of all people handle their sexuality." (Gushee, 2017, p.23). We will return to this in chapter five.

2.3.1.8 Justice

Much revisionist literature advocates for a rethink on homosexuality for the sake of justice, just as previous generations overturned traditional understandings of slavery and race relations. Endorsing SSS relationships is seen as a natural progression from the abolitionist, women's liberation, and civil rights movements. (Ozanne, 2016, p.31, pp.34–5, pp.64–5, pp.78, p.84; Brownson, 2013, p.10; Davison, 2016, p.39; Gagnon, 2010, pp.441–2; Gushee, 2017, p.23, pp.159–62; Mohler, 2015, p.159). According to this argument, being on the 'right side of history' involves undoing the harms and righting the wrongs of 'oppressive' traditional sexual ethics. However, an analogy between sexual ethics and other justice movements is not as compelling as it may appear as the Bible does not support slavery or racial discrimination but does place careful boundaries around sexual expression as we will discuss further.

Davison notes the way this approach reflects cultural moral priorities (2016, p.87), but we will see that the historic and biblical calling of God's people is to be prophetically counter-cultural. We must confront the moral instincts of those living in disobedience to God and show them what life with Jesus as king looks like.

Gushee rightly maintains that "human dignity, love, mercy and justice" (2017, p.159) are important considerations in sexual ethics, but they must not be used to determine sexual mores apart from God's revealed will. We must get sexual ethics right for the sake of human dignity, love, mercy, and justice. We do that by remembering that God is the moral authority: "God is holy, and nothing is good in a moral sense unless it fits the holiness of God." (Heimbach, 2004, p.142).

2.3.1.9 Lack of positive theology of SSS relationships

In contrast to the traditionalist position on holy sexual relationships, there is sparse literature exploring a positive theology of gay relationships. Much revisionist literature has concentrated on the few passages that specifically mention homosexuality (Genesis 19; Leviticus 18–20; Romans 1; 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1) without trying to build a Scripture-wide justification for SSS behaviour. Even if a case can be made that the 'clobber' passages do not address modern gay relationships (Brownson, 2013, p.44)—which itself is debateable—that leaves the Bible essentially silent on homosexual relationships. Much more work is needed to build a positive biblical case for them, as Archer acknowledges (2016, p.32).

Various criteria for holy SSS relationships have been proposed, but no convincing case has been made. Elements such as permanence, faithfulness, stability, and consent are all honestly discussed, as are the difficulties with using these criteria alone to justify relationships (Ozanne, 2016, p.18, p.52, p.55, p.68; Brownson, 2013, p.48; Gagnon, 2010, p.33).

Gushee (2017, p.101) supports the covenantal-marital ethic but doesn't make a persuasive biblical case for extending it to SSS partnerships. Therefore, his commitment to a covenantal-marital ethic ultimately undermines his support of SSS relationships.

Unlike Gushee, Song (2014) argues that marriage requires different genders because of the procreation element but proposes a third alternative to marriage or celibate singleness, namely a permanent and faithful covenant partnership. However, his attempt to present a biblical case to

support this falls short as he does not address the binary presentation of states in 1 Corinthians 7:7 or the relationship between Christ and the church in Ephesians 5:22–33. The main discussions of marriage as imaging Christ and the church are all found in traditionalist literature (Heimbach, 2004, pp.147–9; Allberry, 2020, pp.124–135; Shaw, 2021, pp.22–5).

The question of what constitutes sinful sexual behaviour is clear in traditionalist literature—it is any sexual activity outside of a marriage between one man and one woman—but far less clear in revisionist writings. If we are to call people to sexual holiness, we must know where the boundaries lie, and this is difficult for revisionists. We will return to this in chapter five.

2.3.1.10 Hypocrisy and the wider context of sexual morality

Multiple writers from both traditionalist and revisionist perspectives agree that the current crisis around homosexuality in the church has not happened in a vacuum. Mohler helpfully tracks the progression of moral shifts around issues of birth control and contraception, divorce, advanced reproductive technologies, and cohabitation (2015, pp.17–30). We have been gradually separating sex and reproduction to the extent that couples who cannot biologically reproduce without scientific intervention are considered viable for the first time in history.

Collins (2016, p.47) helps us understand how the traditional concept of marriage as one man with one woman for life, for the procreation of children has been weakened. Widespread divorce has undermined the requirement for life-long commitment, and contraception has enabled sex without procreation. Collins uses this insight to justify rethinking the requirement for gender complementarity in marriage. The alternative, however, is to revisit our teaching and practice on divorce, remarriage, cohabitation, contraception, and artificial reproductive technology. We will return to this in chapter six.

Churches are rightly accused of hypocritically holding LGB people to higher moral standards than others (Ozanne, 2016, pp.22, 35, 66; Gushee, 2017, p.39). As Harrison states: “Another area of rank hypocrisy among traditionalist Christians has been the reality gap between convictions and behaviour, between the standards we impose on others and those we are willing to accept for ourselves.” (2017, p.85).

Where revisionists and traditionalists diverge is on what needs to be done in response. Traditionalists like Gagnon (2010, p.442) hold that we should all be called to live out a higher standard of biblical sexual morality (although this is rarely explicitly stated and needs much more development).

Revisionists like Gushee note that most Christian preachers and teachers are "out of compliance with historic Christian sexual ethics in one way or another" (p.10) but do not present the same challenge for reformation because of its implications for the endorsement of SSS relationships.

The argument I will develop is that celibate same-sex Christians are at the vanguard of challenging the church to more faithful sexual holiness for the sake of God's mission in the world.

Evangelicals taking a traditionalist position also need a robust theology of sexual morality. It is not enough to recognise what we believe the Bible says. We need to know why and see the overarching biblical structure that makes sense of the specific moral imperatives. There is increasing embarrassment in the evangelical church about traditional beliefs on sexuality which are being attacked both outside and inside the church. In my research into MH and sexuality, I will show how we can have confidence that a traditionalist sexual ethic demonstrates the goodness of the gospel and the holy character of God to those who do not yet know him.

2.4 Conclusion

There has been much important work around homosexuality over the last decade, and valuable contributions from revisionists and traditionalists. The literature is strong on exegesis of passages specifically about homosexuality and I will not make a detailed case for a traditionalist sexual ethic.

Most of the literature fails to discuss plausibility structures for living out a holy sexual ethic in the church, or address singleness, celibacy, community, and friendship. Our answer to wrongful genital sex is often 'no' without any plausibility structure for a 'yes' to flourishing in obedience to God.

In the next two chapters, I will explore what it means to be God's holy, covenant people—set apart from the nations to live counter-culturally—to develop a missional sexual ethic, shaped by the character of our holy God. I will propose a sexual ethic that is grounded in MH and calls all Christians, regardless of sexual orientation, to more costly discipleship in attractional community.

CHAPTER 3

Missional holy sexuality in the OT

To some extent, MH runs throughout Scripture and therefore any text would be worthy of consideration. We have seen that ME involves God's people being holy to make God known among the nations for their blessing and creation's redemption. Numerous passages are discussed in the literature which I lack space to examine (including Genesis 18:18–19; Deuteronomy 4:5–8 and Ezekiel 20). I believe a robust biblical sexual ethic must be rooted in our missional identity (Hannon, 2012) and so this chapter will explore some key features of MH and understand the missional importance of sexual holiness. Accordingly, I have selected Exodus 19:3–6, Leviticus 18–20, and Ezekiel 36:16–28 because I believe they best highlight MH and connect it with sexual purity. Each section is necessarily brief, focussing on the missional nature of holiness.

3.1 Purpose of the law: Exodus 19:3–6

God's pronouncement in Exodus 19:4–6 is fundamental to the calling and identity of Israel. It begins with summarising how God rescued and secured them as his treasured possession. This is solely down to his grace and not their worthiness. The response required from them is to "obey me fully and keep my covenant" (19:5) so they can fulfil their specific God-given role to convey his saving grace to the nations. The order of grace, faith then obedience is crucial, as Wright notes: "Grace came first, faith next, and obedience to the law a necessary third, as a believing response in action to what God had already done." (Wright, 2010, p.117). Obedience was not a prerequisite for salvation, but is vital for mission. (Ibid., p.126). God chose them and gave them their identity, but they must live out that identity for the sake of the *missio Dei*. Obedience is needed for an ongoing relationship with Yahweh and blessing for them and the nations (Cole, 1973, p.144).

There is debate about how much this priestly role is mirrored nationally by Israel, but 19:3 and 19:6 suggest *all* the people of Israel are to be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (19:6). Priesthood requires both representing God to people and people to God (Rowe, 2013, p.15; Johnson, 2016, p.20)

and the qualification is holiness (being set apart for God and being pure, undefiled by sin). Representing God to surrounding cultures requires God's people—corporately and individually—to reflect God's holy character. As Dean correctly states, "God wants us, his people, to be holy so that others may see that he is holy." (2014).

The purpose of Israel's priestly role is to make God known and reconcile rebellious nations to him for the ultimate regeneration of all creation. As such, "Holiness is a gospel issue that cannot be sidestepped." (Peterson, 2004, p.3). Without holiness, God's people cannot fulfil their missional role as God's representatives in the world. The heart of the gospel is at stake. This is crucial when considering whether we can 'agree to disagree' on matters of homosexuality and sexual ethics. If sexual holiness is integral to our witness, then it is fundamentally important. We will return to this in chapter five.

The purpose of the law, then, is to mark Israel as Yahweh's possession, set apart from other nations to reflect God's holy character and represent him to the nations.

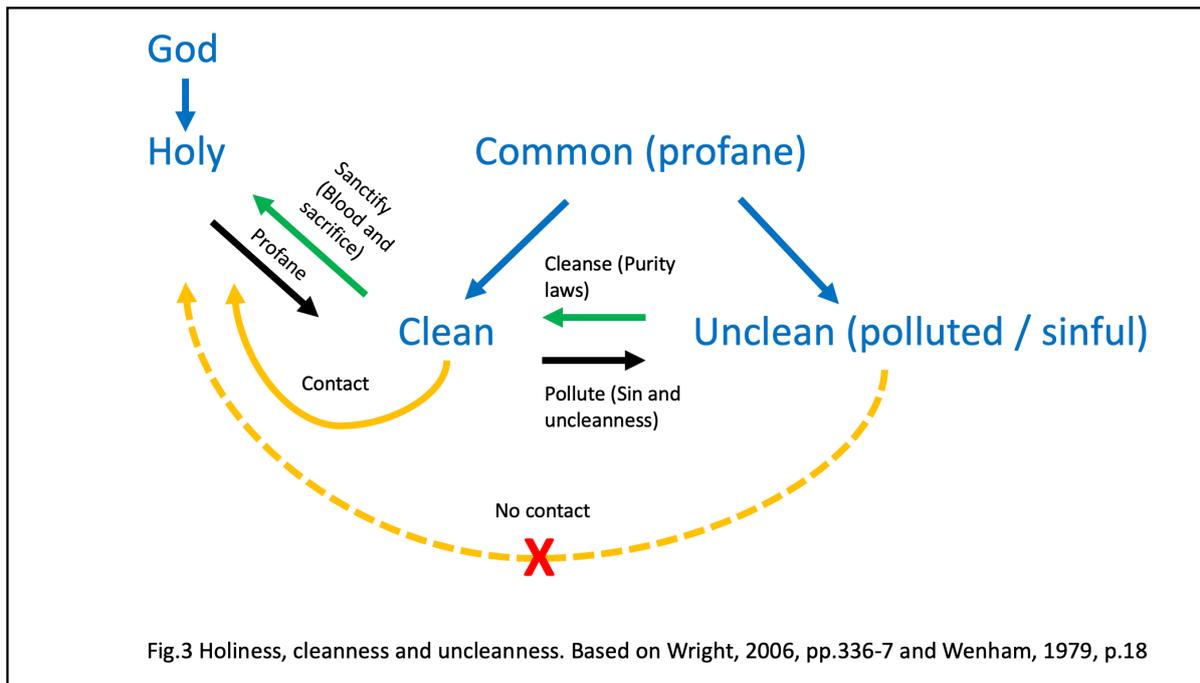
This is such a foundational text that Salter's decision to omit detailed discussion of it is surprising. Even though he focusses on Deuteronomy, the major Prophets and Luke-Acts, he draws parallels between Exodus 19:5-6 and Deuteronomy 26:16-19, so more discussion of the Exodus passage would have been instructive.

3.2 Pattern of the law: Leviticus 18-20

Gushee's contention that "almost no Christian ever quotes the Old Testament book of Leviticus today." (2017, p.65) is surprising given that Leviticus 19:18 is the most quoted OT verse in the NT (eight times). Rather than being an out-of-date book of defunct laws, Leviticus importantly calls for God's people—then and now—to live holy lives for the sake of the nations. It is a manifesto for holiness and a reminder of the seriousness of sin.

Leviticus explains Torah law, showing what a holy nation should look like. Wright perceptively calls Leviticus 19 "the finest commentary we have on Exodus 19:6" (2010, p.124). It clearly expands upon the Ten Commandments which certainly apply to Christians today (Matthew 5:17).

The central theme of these chapters is summarised in 19:2b: “Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.”. Yahweh’s people must reflect his character and be holy to maintain relationship with him, as "holiness is intrinsic to God's character." (Wenham, 1979, p.22) and therefore God and uncleanness cannot mix. Detailed discussion of purity and impurity laws is outside my remit, but Fig.3 summarises the connection between holiness, cleanness, and uncleanness.



An eschatological tension exists in the holiness of God’s people—they are both already holy and being made holy, as Johnson observes: “Israel's sanctification is both a fact – since God has set them apart from other nations (Lev 20:26) – and a job description to fulfill (Lev 18:2-4)” (2016, p.21). Holiness is both a conferred status and a standard to embody.

Clearly, holiness is a universal call to *all* God’s people (Milgrom, 2007, p.1603). It pervades every area of life including work, relationships, religious life, public life, and home life. Chapter 18 demonstrates that sexual morality is not limited to personal, private ethics. Rightly-ordered sexuality is integral to family, community and missional life. Sexual ethics are not just about what two consenting adults do in private. We will return to this in chapter five.

There is no space for a full discussion of homosexuality here and it would be unwise to build a biblical case concerning homosexuality around two verses in Leviticus (18:22 and 20:13). We will examine Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 in chapter four but note here that Gagnon’s arguments that

Levitical prohibitions are not restricted to cultic prostitution, and therefore carry over to the NT, are compelling (Gagnon, 2010, p.117). Brownson, Gushee and Heimbach also provide helpful analysis. Milgrom's exegesis of Leviticus includes many valuable insights, although his contention that the prohibition of homosexuality only applies to Israel is weak and too tied to the pragmatic concern of population (2007, p.1786. See Gane, Cole and Walton's helpful critique in 2004, pp.326-8).

There are two important points to note. Firstly, homosexuality was practiced and accepted in both the Egyptian culture the Israelites had left and the Canaanite culture they were confronting. The call in Leviticus (18:3, 24, 27, 30), and a key feature of MH, is for God's people to live lives that are "markedly different from those of the peoples around them." (Goheen, 2011, p.39). They are to be a contrast people who live differently because they worship the one true God who is different from all other gods. Distinctive living is one way God's people perform their priestly duty of representing the true God to the world.

Secondly, homosexuality is framed in the larger context of forbidden sexual relations (Gagnon, 2010, p.113) and not singled out, as it often is in today's church (Gushee, 2017, pp.65-7). I will explore the teaching that we are all sexually sinful and that homosexuality should not be elevated above other sins in chapter six.

I agree with Gagnon's central point that gender discomplementarity violates the created order (2010, pp.135-42). This explains the big picture symbolism of marriage as a metaphor for Christ's relationship with the church (Ephesians 5:32), progressing from Genesis 2:23-24 through Isaiah 62:5, Matthew 9:15 and Mark 10:7-8 to its ultimate culmination in Revelation 19:7-8. The regulations about not mixing items of different types signify the importance of a properly ordered creation as God designed it. As Goheen notes, "The life of Israel points back to the creational design and intention for human life. It also points forward, to God's final goal of a restored creation." (2011, p.40). Interestingly, Brownson concedes that if purity is about establishing original creation norms, then SSS relationships may not be legitimate (2013, p.198).

The comparison of homosexuality to eating prawns or wearing two types of cloth is regularly made by revisionists (TRP, 2021b; NLMCC, n.d.) and raises the important question of which Levitical laws apply to Christians today. Many matters of ceremonial purity do not still apply (Gagnon, 2010, p.121) but we cannot dismiss the Holiness Code due to Jesus' teaching about the law (Matthew 5:17-20). As Gushee maintains, NT affirmation of a law significantly increases its authority (2017, p.73). Although

Scripture does not differentiate between ceremonial and moral law (Brownson, 2013, p.182; Balentine, 2011, p.142; Wenham, 1979, p.261) the OT is clearly fulfilled in Jesus in different ways. Allberry helpfully differentiates between cleanliness and food laws which Jesus ended (Mark 7:19) and moral requirements which Jesus perfectly embodied so we could live righteous lives empowered by the Spirit (Rom.8:4) (Allberry, 2021a). Wenham explains that salvation and the sacrificial system have changed since Jesus initiated the New Covenant (1979, p.261), whereas the moral obligation to reflect God's character remains. As Wright perceptively comments: "While the ritual badge of Israel's separation from the nations (the clean-unclean food laws) has gone, the necessity of spiritual and moral distinctiveness of the people of God certainly has not." (2006, p.338).

18:4 clarifies that God sets the standards people should follow. One can seek rational reasons to follow or discard certain laws, but ultimately, the reason for obeying God's commands is that they are *God's* commands. As Gagnon notes, "The commands of God, and not the consensus of the surrounding culture, must shape the behavior of God's people." (2010, p.117).

However, this does not mean they are arbitrary. 18:5 shows that obedience to God's laws is its own reward as it is how we are designed to thrive. We cannot be blessed with life if, by disobedience, we separate ourselves from the source of life. As Milgrom perceptively observes: "'the laws themselves have the inherent power to grant life.'" (2007, p.1523). We can counter the narrative that prohibiting homosexuality is harmful by remembering that "obeying the maker's instructions is likely to bring the best out of us and lead us to live life to the full." (Tidball, 2005, p.219).

Christians must see biblical sexuality as a blessing rather than embarrassingly restrictive. There are claims both inside and outside the church that biblical sexual ethics cause harm and oppression (Fensham, 2019; Vines, 2017, p.XXVI, CI, 2020), but I will show that biblical sexuality is a pattern for human flourishing. As Salter says, referring to Ezekiel 20, "YHWH wants to show his people the contrast between the destructive laws of the nations (v.26) and his own life-giving laws (vv.11, 13)." (Salter, 2019, p.229).

3.3 Hope in the face of broken law: Ezekiel 36:16-28

As the OT sadly records, Israel failed to challenge the idolatry of the nations and rebelled against Yahweh, becoming unclean and separated from God's holiness by their sin (sexual and otherwise).

Their desire to be like other nations (1 Samuel 8:19b-20a; Ezekiel 20:32) is the ultimate rejection of their missional role and calling as God's holy (set apart) people.

That their unfaithfulness is analogous to adultery (Jeremiah 3:8; Ezekiel 23:37) highlights the covenantal husband–bride picture of God and his people and the importance of rightly-boundaried sex to the gospel. As Ezekiel 36 makes clear, the resulting exile—the just result of their disobedience (Leviticus 18:28)—damaged Yahweh's reputation and the credibility of the gospel in the nations. I will explore “the anti-mission of immorality” (Rowe, 2013, p.13), focussing on sexual holiness, in chapter five.

The separation of land and people leads the nations to assume that Yahweh has abandoned his people or is powerless to defend them (Block, 1998, p.348). For the sake of Yahweh's holy name and mission—which was the purpose of Israel's calling—Yahweh graciously restores Israel. The rich symbolism in v.25 reflects Levitical purity rituals, but also foreshadows the complete cleansing that Messiah Jesus brings (1 Corinthians 6:11). Verses 26-7 highlight the need for total transformation of heart, mind, will, thoughts and conduct (Taylor, 2009, p.232). Note that Israel's prior inability to keep the law does not make it obsolete but necessitates the coming of God's Spirit (Acts 2) to empower his people to obey him (v.27). Only then can God's people enjoy covenant relationship with him and showcase his holy character and love to the world. “Then the restored, gathered, and purified Israel will fulfil its vocation to be a light to the nations.” (Goheen, 2011, p.67).

This passage does not simply look backwards at a restoration of blessings once forfeited, but also forward to Christ and Pentecost, and further to the new creation when all nations will gather to worship God. We will explore this further in chapter four.

3.4 Conclusion

We have seen that holiness—being set apart from the nations and dedicated to God in moral purity—is essential for Israel's missional role. We have also seen that sexual holiness is important, both as a mark of distinction from surrounding cultures, and a reflection of God's creational design and pattern of relationship with his people. Rightly-boundaried sex is integral to MH.

In the next chapter we will develop these themes further in the NT.

CHAPTER 4

Missional holy sexuality in the New Testament

We now turn to missional sexual holiness in the NT. A heavier emphasis on the OT than the NT is a feature of much MH literature. There is surprisingly little discussion of Matthew 5-7, and the Great Commission is almost dismissed by Rowe (2013, p.13) despite having missional obedience at its heart. Passages like Romans 15:15-16; 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1; 2 Corinthians 9:13, 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 and Hebrews 12:10-14 would provide fruitful further discussion but are beyond my scope.

I will focus on Scriptures I believe most clearly highlight the missional thrust of sexual ethics. Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 6 are both central to debates around homosexuality and therefore I will contextualise them in Peter's call for God's people to be a holy priesthood and Revelation's picture of God's holy people in the new creation.

4.1 A holy priesthood: 1 Peter 1 and 2

Our OT analysis concluded with Ezekiel looking forward to the restoration of God's scattered people. In Peter, the words of Leviticus 19:2 and Exodus 19:5-6 are spoken over a new community of people who would not have ordinarily belonged together (Jenson, 2013a, p.99)—both Gentiles and some Jews (McKnight, 1996, pp.23-4)—united and made holy in Christ.

The church's calling is the same as for Israel: "Those who are in Christ are in Abraham, called for the same purpose, redeemed by the same God, committed to the same response of ethical obedience." (Wright, 2010, p.387). The church is to continue the role of priesthood, with all believers living holy lives for the sake of the world. Believers are to worship the one true God rather than worldly gods (including sex) and "their morals are part of their mission." (Rowe, 2013, p.15).

Churches embarrassed by the Bible's dissonance with culture on homosexuality often feel it hampers mission (Jenson, 2013a, p.95). The Methodist decision to affirm SSS relationships was precipitated partly by a "fear of people leaving the church because they do not believe that God loves them." (Premier, 2021b). However, as Flemming astutely observes, "The church's call to be holy in 1 Peter does not live in tension with the church's mission to the world. On the contrary, the two are inseparable." (2015, p.66). If salt loses its saltiness, it is useless (Matthew 5:13). If the church loses its holiness, its mission and God's glory is compromised (1 Peter 2:12).

The language of exiles (1:1; 2:11) highlights the diasporic nature of believers—mirroring Israel's history—and also their counter-cultural character. They should be strikingly different, so observers are drawn to worship God (2:12). Good deeds—which include a holy, Christlike character—lead people to salvation and praise of God. As Salter says: "The believing community's behaviour—their ethic—is in and of itself missional." (2019, p.11).

There is surprisingly little emphasis in the literature on the inevitable suffering and cost of this counter-cultural life. Although Wright (2006, pp.387-8) and Yuan (2018, pp.141-2) touch on 1 Peter, there is no exploration of the persecution obedient followers of Christ can expect (John 15:18-19; 2 Corinthians 4:8-9).

Peter is clear that suffering is inevitable for Christians because we are sinful people whose desires rebel against God's will (1 Peter 1:14; 2:11; Romans 7:18). We are also engaged in spiritual battles (Ephesians 6:12). However, this passage emphasises the suffering caused by having completely different values and priorities that often clash with our culture.

I will return to the importance of costly, suffering discipleship in influencing a rejection of traditionalist sexuality in chapter six.

4.2 Missional sexual holiness: Jesus, Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 6

Next follows a short survey of NT teaching on homosexuality but more for more detailed analysis see Gagnon, Loader, Brownson and Heimbach.

Brownson correctly observes that NT purity is defined by inner transformation rather than external rule-keeping (2013, p.189). However, this does not mean OT law is set aside (Matthew 5:17-20).

Some of Jesus' clearest teaching on sexual morality demonstrates its importance and the need for a transformed heart (Matthew 5:28; 15:17-20). Outward behaviour matters, but it can only come from inward transformation through God's grace and not human efforts (Ephesians 2:8-9). We can be sexually holy because Jesus is sexually holy and his Spirit lives in us (Romans 15:6). There is not space to thoroughly examine Jesus' sexual ethics, but note that revisionists and traditionalists agree that Jesus does not introduce new, less restrictive, sexual ethics: "There seems little doubt that on the spectrum from leniency to strictness Jesus was to be found at the latter end in matters sexual." (Loader, 2012, p.491). Nolland helpfully observes that "Where [Jesus] is silent he is affirming earlier scriptural teaching." (2009, p.21). Indeed, in Mark 10:6-9 he restates Genesis's pattern for sexual relationships and in speaking of *porneiai* (Matthew 15:19), he would have had in mind Leviticus 18-20 (Gagnon, 2010, p.191). This is the foundation for understanding Paul's teachings.

Romans 1 is perhaps the most significant Scripture in the homosexuality debate, and I lack space for detailed analysis, but there is much scholarly work for further reference (Loader, Gagnon, Rogers, Siker, Schreiner, Moo). There are three broad interpretative approaches: (i) A traditionalist acknowledgement of Paul's condemnation of homosexual activity (Gagnon, Sprinkle, Heimbach, Peterson), (ii) A revisionist reading of Paul as not condemning homosexual practice (Brownson, Gushee, Vines, Lee) and (iii) An acknowledgement of Paul's condemnation of homosexuality leading to a rejection of Paul's authority (Johnson, L.T., Wink). I will discuss the first two within my evangelical remit.

This chapter exposes the rebellious culture that surrounded the missional early church, and we can identify parallels and principles for our mission. Significantly, Paul describes his apostolic mission as calling Gentiles to obedience (1:5) and explains they are called to be holy (1:7). In 1:18-32 and 2:19-21 we see both Gentiles and Jews defying God's holy rule but Paul's missiological focus is preaching the gospel to both (1:16 and see Wan. 2007?).

Peterson (2004, p.9) and Song (2014, p.66) correctly observe that 1:18-32 centres on the subversion of the created order. We have seen that Christians are to be a contrast community, and Paul exposes that contrast by showing what life in rebellion to God looks like (Wright, 2010, p.40). God is the source of life and rejecting him means self-imposed death, manifested in myriad ways, some of which are described here. Christians must avoid this behaviour because of their missional calling to holiness, to bring light and life to the nations.

1:26-27 are the most cited Scriptures in the LGB debate, and a significant question is whether the word “natural” is addressing humankind in general or particular individuals. Gushee (2017, p.86) argues that it refers to heterosexual people who have embraced homosexual relations and that this prohibition does not apply to those for whom homosexuality is ‘natural’. However, even though some people only experience SSA, those attractions are not the normal pattern for humanity (Sprinkle, no date a). The creational context of Romans 1 shows that everything—even our genetics—were corrupted by the fall. From a biblical perspective, many ways we experience and express our sexuality are not part of God’s original vision for humanity, but the consequence of corrupted desires. Vines argues that Paul is only talking about people who can choose heterosexuality and so "what Paul was describing is fundamentally different from what we are discussing." (2014, p.103). This is based on the same false assumption the ex-gay movement made, that having heterosexual desires is the goal of holiness. We will discuss how this devalues celibate singleness in the next chapter.

The second key text is 1 Corinthians 6:9-20 and Barram helpfully reminds us that it is also a missional text: “From Paul's perspective, every moral reflection has a missional function. Virtue and vice lists are tools of mission (e.g., 1 Corinthians 6:9-10).” (2005, p.149). When Christians are not holy, they misrepresent God’s character. People in surrounding cultures no longer see something distinctive about God’s people, and not only are opportunities to communicate the gospel message lost, but the message itself is compromised. Johnson’s insight is valuable: “For the Gentiles turning to God to engage in such sexual immorality would make their individual lives and their communal life together indistinguishable from much of the society around them. It would, therefore, threaten their character as a community set apart from its culture as an instrument of the *missio Dei*.” (2016, p.124).

Earlier, Paul warned that sexual immorality has "a contagious, polluting potential for the community as a whole." (Ibid., p.146) and the Corinthians must avoid sexually immoral believers (1 Corinthians 5:9-11) both for the sake of the holy community and individuals, so they will ultimately repent (Peterson, 2004, p.23). Kok rightly observes that “Paul makes room for ethnic and cultural plurality, but Paul has clear boundaries when it comes to ethical plurality.” (2012).

Debate continues over Paul’s choice of the words *malakoi* (μαλακία) and *arsenokoitai* (ἀρσενικοῖται) in 1 Corinthians 6:9 as Table 2 indicates.

Translation	<i>Malakoi (μαλακία)</i>	<i>Arsenokoitai (ἀρσενοκοῖται)</i>
Tyndale (1526)	Weaklings	Abusers of themselves with mankind
KJV (1611)	Effeminate	Abusers of themselves with mankind
Darby (1890)	Those who make women of themselves	Those who abuse themselves with men
RSV (1952)		Sexual perverts
Philips (1958)	Effeminate	Pervert
NASB (1971)		Homosexuals
NKJV (1982)	Homosexuals	Sodomites
NIV84 (1984)	Male prostitutes	Homosexual offenders
NRSV (1989)	Male prostitutes	Sodomites
CEV (1995)	[Someone who] is a pervert	[Someone who] behaves like a homosexual
NLT (1996)	Male prostitutes	Those who practice homosexuality
NET (2005)	Passive homosexual partners	Practicing homosexuals
ESV (2001)		Men who practice homosexuality
CEB (2011)		Both participants in same-sex intercourse
NIV (2011)		Men who have sex with men

Table 2 Different translations of *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* in 1 Corinthians 6:9

Thiselton’s helpfully thorough survey of the scholarly positions concludes that there is near consensus that *μαλακία* denotes the passive partner in male homosexual sex. (2001, p.449).

The term *ἀρσενοκοῖται* probably came from the Septuagint translation of Leviticus (Song, 2014, p.70; Gagnon, 2010, p.315) and reaffirms the Torah’s identification of homosexual behaviour as morally wrong and therefore inappropriate for God’s holy people. Thiselton observes that “writers are virtually agreed that its component aspects signify *sleeping with, or having sexual relations with...males.*” (2001, p.448 italics original). Some, for example Scroggs and Boswell, argue this is restricted to pederasty or male prostitution (Ibid., p.449), but the evidence and wider context suggest that Paul had broader equal and consensual homosexual relationships in mind (Garland, p.218).

We observed earlier that, whilst food laws have been repealed for Christians, OT sexual laws have been reaffirmed, and in vv.12-20 we see Paul’s reasoning for this distinction in his refutation of popular Corinthian sayings. Paul’s definition of sexual immorality—grounded in the Genesis framework—is any sex outside of one-man-and-one-woman marriage as the reference to “one flesh” in 6:16 demonstrates.

Lee argues the case against homosexuality hinges on the word *arsenokoitai* (2004, p.168) but his fellow revisionist Song is more astute, saying, “It is sometimes said that the Bible’s teaching on same-sex relationships could be discerned even if none of these verses had been written. I am tempted to

agree.” (2004, p.62). Verses 12-20 beautifully set the Bible’s sexual prescriptions in the wider context of Christ’s union with the church—the ultimate purpose of sexual holiness. That the body is “for the Lord” (v.13), not our own (v.19), bought at a price (v.20), united to the Lord (v.17) and inhabited by the Lord (v.19) to be raised to an eternity with him (v.14) is reason to “flee from sexual immorality.” (v.18).

Vines (2014, p.118) and Gushee (2017, p.74) identify ten groups who will not inherit God’s kingdom, but we must avoid equating behaviour with identity. Paul is condemning behaviour not people. These passages do not identify particular sinners, as all are “wrongdoers” (6:9). They emphasise that no-one can enter God’s kingdom without being washed by Christ. We have seen that all are sexually immoral and so these verses are universal good news that everyone—no matter what their background—is welcomed into God’s kingdom through Christ (6:11). SSA *people* are not outside God’s kingdom, but rather those who refuse to cease SSS *behaviour*, as with all who refuse to repent. Freedom in Christ involves freedom from identities characterised by sin. As Fee helpfully summarises, God’s people “are to *be* and *behave* differently from the wicked, because God in mercy has already removed the stains of their past sins.” (2014, p.273, italics original).

4.3 Future hope: Revelation 5:9; 7:9

ME courses through all Scripture (Salter, 2019, p.37; Tennent, 2011, p.100). It concerns the restoration of shalom—the return to life as it should be for humans and all creation (Johnson, 2016, p.18). ME is integral to God’s project of un-corrupting a creation polluted by sin (Romans 8:21).

The moral prescriptions Christians must live by are derived from God’s original purposes in creation (Goheen, 2011, p.195). Christian ethics concern “the confirmation of the world order which God has made.” (O’Donovan, 1994, p.14) and they are binding on all creation, not just those who choose to be bound by them: “Because biblical teaching has the same divine source as creation itself, it reflects a true understanding of the moral order of moral goods.” (Rowe, 2010, p.2). This is particularly significant in a pluralistic culture where sexual ethics are increasingly privatised and relativised. We should not judge those who have not submitted their lives to Christ, but one day God will judge everyone against his moral standards. As we saw in Ezekiel, only Christ makes it possible to stand under that judgement.

Revelation presents a compelling picture of God's fulfilled mission. God's people will not just be a multi-cultural multitude, but a *holy* multitude from all nations (7:9). The purpose for sexuality—the one-flesh union of one man and woman in marriage—will be fulfilled when Christ is united with the church, his holy bride (19:7-8). This is surprisingly overlooked by Loader and Brownson, despite being integral to the biblical narrative (Isaiah 62; Jeremiah 2:2-3; John 3:29; 2 Corinthians 11:2; See also Engen et al. p.35).

Johnson helpfully summarises: "God's ultimate desire is to draw all into the abundant, Spirit-saturated life of the new creation where he dwells directly with his people in a holy place, with his redeemed people functioning as the priests and kings he made them to be at the beginning of the biblical story." (Johnson, 2016, p.185).

4.4 Conclusion

We have seen that holy sexuality is integral to mission in the NT, as a reflection of God's holy character, a counter-cultural lifestyle, a patterning of God's creational design, a symbol of his relationship with the church and a source of hope for the renewal of all creation.

Having traced the importance of missional holy sexuality in the OT and NT, we will apply our findings to some issues raised in chapter two.

CHAPTER 5

Missional sexuality today

Having looked at the importance of missional sexual holiness in the Bible, I will now apply our learning to our context in 21st century Britain. We have seen that homosexuality is a core missional concern about which irreconcilable views are held, so I will start by summarising the missional stakes. Various issues underpin approaches to homosexuality as outlined in chapter two, including the Bible's authority, identity, justice, and liberty. In this chapter, I will focus on two features of ME that are fundamental to this question—distinctiveness and blessing—before offering a definition of missional holy sexuality. In the following chapter I will propose some positive ways forward.

5.1 The missional stakes

Much debate around homosexuality exposes a concern about mission and highlights sexuality as a key missional issue. For some Christians, an affirming stance is a missional priority because they view the church's traditional teaching on sexuality as homophobic and harmful to LGB people (Leonard, 2020), which in turn excludes them from church life and gospel hope. For traditionalists, a revisionist position undermines mission because it compromises holiness, denies the need for repentance, and traps people in sins which Jesus died to save them from (Heimbach, 2004, p.123). As we have seen, holiness is integral to, not separate from mission.

Given these incompatible standpoints, an 'agree to disagree' approach clearly cannot work for either side. Mohler argues "There is no integrity in the resignation to simply "agree to disagree" on an issue in which the gospel and the authority of Scripture – and ultimately the eternal state of human beings – are at stake." (2015, p.158). There are different views on the importance of the homosexual issue to salvation, which I will not evaluate, but we saw in 1 Corinthians 6:9 that sexual immorality has discipleship ramifications, and Revelation 2:20-22 also teaches that leading others into sexual sin—like any sin—should not be tolerated.

There is a fundamental clash about what is good for mission. The Methodist affirmation of two mutually incompatible definitions of marriage (Methodist Church, 2021b, Section 96) highlights the shortcomings of compromise and makes the call “for unity going ahead irrespective of the decision.” (Methodist Church, 2021a) difficult to put into practice. Similarly, one wonders how the CofE ‘Living in Love and Faith’ project can reconcile incompatible viewpoints on sexuality.

Others adopt a posture of ‘avoidism’ hoping the matter will resolve itself, but this is also an untenable strategy which compromises mission by abdicating responsibility for making a decision integral to gospel witness (Gushee, 2017, pp.23-4). However difficult, church leaders and denominations must be clear about biblical teaching and live accordingly.

5.2 Distinctiveness

Whilst being counter-cultural is itself morally neutral, where God’s rule is rejected Christians are called to be distinctively obedient to the Lord, even when costly (John 15:18-19). To ANE cultures with their Baal-worship and child sacrifice, and Roman culture throughout the Mediterranean with its emperor-worship, the lives of Christians would have been starkly different. Similarly in our own culture, MH in believers demonstrates a completely counter-cultural way of living which highlights our society’s rejection of a holy God. Our moral distinctiveness is effectively saying, “We are different because who we worship is different.” (Wright, 2010, p.94).

If contrast and distinctive living are hallmarks of missional Christian community, then one striking contrast should be our sexual holiness. Whereas non-Christians are involved in poverty-reduction, environmental issues and justice for refugees, few non-Christian groups or individuals question our cultural sexual ethics in the secular West.

Western culture has moved significantly away from traditional biblical ethics on homosexuality over recent decades. Homosexuality has gone from moral bad to moral good in a few generations, as the Sexual Offences Act 1967, the repeal of Section 28 in 2003, the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act 2013 and the Government’s relationships education mandates in 2020 demonstrate. In 1967 homosexuality was illegal. Since 2020 it is illegal not to promote it as equally valid alongside heterosexual marriage.

The modern Western morality of sex is broadly founded on consent between adults, with shifting boundaries around gay relationships, adultery, and polyamory over the last decade (Gushee, 2017, p.101). Some would add mutual love / commitment to the criteria.

In chapter two we noted the conflation of sex and intimacy, to the extent that putting boundaries around sexual expression is often seen as limiting a person's access to legitimate intimacy (Schafer, 2019, Location 103). This view considers it unhealthy and even immoral to deny two consenting adults the right to a sexual relationship. The argument can be framed thus:

- **Premise 1 - Everyone has the right to express love and experience intimacy.**
- **Premise 2 - Sexual relationships are the only context in which to express love and experience intimacy.**
- **Premise 3 - Denying the legitimacy of certain types of sexual relationship means denying some people the right to express love and experience intimacy.**

Conclusion - Therefore, all sexual relationships must be permissible because to deny any would be to deny certain people love and that would be cruel and morally wrong.

Fig.4 The right to sex. From Witton, *The C Word: Why Is Celibacy So Misunderstood and Undervalued?* Available at <https://www.livingout.org/resources/posts/24/the-c-word-why-is-celibacy-so-misunderstood-and-undervalued>

Following the logic of our cultural narrative, we can see why—if sex is necessary for intimacy and fulfilment—celibate people and virgins should be pitied or derided (Tanner, 2018; Colón and Field, 2009, p.22). For many, a romantic relationship is a rite of passage into adulthood, and it is inconceivable to forgo sex long-term. Clearly, we have arrived at what Gane, Cole and Walton call “the notion that sexual fulfilment between consenting adults is an “inalienable right”. (2004, p.329). Sexual fulfilment is idolised in our culture and, sadly, often in our churches. We have often sought to Christianise sexual idolatry by idolising marriage (Lee, 2014, pp.215-6; Callaway, 2018, pp.77-82) which led to equating heterosexuality with healing for SSA people in the misguided ex-gay movement mentioned in chapter two. We have failed to be distinctive regarding cohabitation, divorce, and valuing singleness. Revisionists and traditionalists have rightly exposed a double-standard in the

application of sexual ethics (Runcorn, 2016, p.66; Harrison, 2017, p.85; Mohler, 2015, p.23), which I will address further in chapter six.

Christians face a choice: either accept the cultural assumptions and adapt our hermeneutics and praxis to them or challenge the ideology which underpins culture's view of sexuality. If we accept the validity of the second and third premises in Fig. 4 above, the revisionist position looks attractive, compassionate, and fair. However, I believe those premises rest on false, unbiblical beliefs, which I will revisit later.

That the church's traditional teaching is so at odds with culture, is the reason many are revising their understanding of the Bible. I believe this is a tragic mistake which undermines our missional calling to be distinctive. We saw in chapter four that if the church loses its holiness, then its whole mission is jeopardised (Matthew 5:13; 1 Peter 2:12).

We have noted the strong connection between sexual immorality and idolatry, for example in Isaiah 57:7-8, Romans 1, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and Colossians 3:5 (See also Johnson, 2016, p.122; Peterson, 2004, pp.6-7). A significant biblical theme is Yahweh as the faithful bridegroom and Israel as the unfaithful bride, a theme that continues in the NT (Matthew 9:15; John 3:29; Ephesians 5:32; Revelation 19:7; 21:9) and emphasises how marriage and sexuality are central to our relationship with God (Jenson, 2013a, p.107).

God's people are challenged to confront idolatry in culture without succumbing to syncretism. Wright highlights the perils of idolatry: "*Idolatry is the first and greatest threat to Israel's mission (and ours)*" (2006, p.381, emphasis his). Idolatry not only causes harm but is an "'anti-witness' to YHWH in the sight of the nations" (Salter, 2019, pp.230/164). The cost of defying God's standards for our purity is high.

Tracking the story of Israel makes it clear they failed to live out their calling, and the prophets issued dire warnings about their rife idolatry (Jeremiah 3:20; Ezekiel 39:23). As Yarhouse and Zaporozhets observe, the same applies to the church today: "Much of contemporary Christianity in the West cannot be described as "countercultural". Instead, the witness of the church has been diluted by compromise with the broader culture." (2019, p.202).

Rejecting the first commandment and turning to idol worship is disastrous for the church's witness. Wright makes the compelling point that if the watching world cannot differentiate between our lives and theirs, they have no reason to heed our claims about God. (2006, p.380).

5.3 Blessing

In Genesis 18:18-19 God promises Abraham all nations will be blessed through him, and that promise is ultimately fulfilled in the worshipping community from every tribe and tongue in Revelation 7:9. God's people are set apart, not closeted away from the culture, but living holy lives within the world for the sake of the world (Matthew 5:15).

We saw that God's people are called to live distinctive, counter-cultural lives. It is only by being distinctive that God's people can be a blessing. If they fail to live as holy people, they fail to be the blessing to the nations God has called them to be (Wright, 2010, p.86; Salter, 2019, p.95).

The clear purpose of Israel's priestly role as a holy nation (and the church's mandate for holiness) is to glorify God and make him known. God's pattern for sexuality is good news and integral to the gospel itself. O'Donovan warns against 'Antinomianism'—divorcing the gospel from its ethical demands and holding a Christian faith but not making morality part of the good news. He states that "certain ethical and moral judgements belong to the gospel itself... the church can be committed to ethics without moderating the tone of its voice as a bearer of glad tidings." (O'Donovan, 1994, p.12). I would go further and argue it must be committed to ethics. Ethics are part of the good news of salvation from the polluting nature of sin, not just its consequences.

Many traditionalists and revisionists wish to bless and love LGB people but the crux of the dispute is *how* to love them. Christians agree that the gospel is for everyone, but the life the gospel calls LGB people to is disputed. Traditionalist sexual ethics have often been considered 'anti-gay' because they prohibit SSS behaviour, but I want to demonstrate that they are actually a blessing for four main reasons.

5.3.1 God sets the standards

God knows best what is good for us and he has revealed that in his word (Micah 6:8a). We are "inheritors not inventors" (CEEC, 2020, 00:23) of a pattern of right sexual relating. In examining

Leviticus 18-20 and Romans 1 we saw that sexual morality is rooted in creation design, for the purpose of blessing the nations and glorifying God (Peterson, 2004, p.34; Yuan, 2018, p.6). We cannot redefine sexual morality according to our own understanding (Proverbs 3:5). The question of whether gay relationships are 'capable of being sanctified' (Brownson, 2013, p.201) is not about whether they meet our criteria of love and faithfulness, but whether God deems them holy. Biblical evidence demonstrates he does not. We must allow the one who created our sexuality to determine how we use it.

In Exodus 19:3–6 we saw that God saves his people for them to enjoy his blessing and share it. Salvation brings with it a call to holiness and transformation and the nature of this changed life is crucial for Christian discipleship and mission. The call to live by God's standards is part of the good news of the gospel, and we dishonour God and LGB people when we jeopardise their salvation and discipleship by rejecting biblical teaching on sexuality (Romans 1:32). A revisionist message causes harm because it affirms people in their sin and traps people in behaviours which separate them from God. Without a universal call to repentance from whatever sinful behaviours ensnare people, the 'gospel' is not good news.

As Bennett helpfully articulates: "If [the Church of England] changes the doctrine of marriage it is actually oppressing a group of LGBTQI people who have chosen to follow Jesus Christ... It would mean that our obedience wouldn't be celebrated in the church, that we would have no safe space to be." (Bennett in CEEC, 2020, 23:18).

5.3.2 God's standards are good

God's moral laws are not arbitrary, and we cannot pick and choose which ones we will obey. Rowe rightly states that "the revelation of God must be central to Christian ethics" (Rowe, 2010, p.3) as we cannot always discern the right thing, or do it once identified. Indeed, the desire to decide for ourselves between good and evil and to question God's goodness precipitated the fall (Genesis 3:5-6) and a reversing of the polarity of good and evil is a recurring theme in Scripture (Isaiah 5:20; Micah 3:2. See also Rowe, 2013, p.23). God's people must remember that God is good and desires to give his followers good things. (Matthew 7:10; John 10:10).

Central to the homosexuality debate is a fundamental questioning of whether what God prescribes is good or harmful. The goodness of marriage, its importance for community, stability and the raising of

children, is acknowledged across literature (Anderson, 2021), but the call to widen its definition to include same-sex couples rests partly on damaging assumptions about singleness and celibacy, as mentioned in chapter two. The argument is that 'enforced celibacy' (i.e., that required for single SSA, indeed all single people) is damaging and burdensome (Newman, 2016, p.62; Vines, 2014, p.175). Curiously, there is no exploration of unwanted celibacy amongst heterosexual people, as this would expose the inadequacies of this reasoning. We could argue that Christian living entails 'enforced' holiness because a moral life is something all Christians are called to, whether or not they feel able. The Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount give a pattern for how Christ-followers are to live. We do not talk of 'enforced' forgiveness or 'enforced' enemy-love but rather acknowledge that these behaviours reveal God's heart to the world. Just as holiness is a universal calling for all Christians, celibacy is a universal calling for all unmarried Christians, whatever their sexuality (for more on the biblical arguments, see Glahn and Barnes, 2020, Ch.9-10).

This anaemic view of 'burdensome' singleness is compounded by a marriage idolatry and devaluing of singleness in many traditionalist churches (Runcorn, 2016, p.70; Jenson, 2013a, p.107). Marriage is often seen as 'difficult but worth it' whereas singleness is seen as a deprivation to be endured for the Lord.

In contrast, the Bible's view of singleness and celibacy is radically positive (1 Corinthians 7; Matthew 19:11), and by modelling this the church can be missionally attractive. The most comprehensive study of celibate gay Christians to date shows they are not 'experiencing celibacy as an undue hardship' (Yarhouse and Zaporozhets, 2021). We must recapture the biblical and counter-cultural vision that singleness and celibacy are wonderful ways to flourish. We will return to this in chapter six.

5.3.3 God's standards are different

Revisiting the premises on which a cultural view of sex is built, we can see that a traditionalist, rather than a revisionist ethic, radically challenges the assumption that sexual relationships are the only or main place to experience intimacy (and therefore to deny people the right to sexual expression is to deprive them of legitimate intimacy). We will examine how churches can promote healthy non-sexual intimate relationships in the next chapter but focus here on how revisionist approaches to homosexuality propagate the harmful ideologies that underpin cultural sexuality, rather than challenge them. We saw that the ex-gay movement promoted an ideal of heterosexual partnership because of a damaging sexual idolatry. Unfortunately, revisionists make the same mistake. The notion

that a romantic partner can fulfil all your longings is as hopelessly damaging for LGB people as for heterosexual people (the film *Same Love* (2019) is a gay mirroring of a traditional Hollywood romance but bears little relation to biblical sexuality). The undervaluing of singleness and non-sexual friendship which drives much support for gay marriage is immensely damaging. Mirroring our culture's idolatry of sex is not good news to those fractured by family breakdown and experiencing the ill effects of the sexual revolution.

The whole church must accept responsibility for embracing sexual idolatry. Even when traditionalist theology has been preached, as Kuruvilla observes: "In a world besotted with sex, the church unfortunately has lost her way. She too has fallen into the trap of conceiving of this drive and its fulfillment as one of the greatest goods and ends of humanity." (in Glahn and Barnes, 2020, p.167).

In stark contrast, biblical marriage and singleness both uniquely point beyond themselves to a God who so loved the world that he gave his only Son. Marriage reflects the faithful, committed, and exclusive relationship between Christ and his bride, the church. Similarly, singleness points to our new creation reality (Yarhouse and Zaporozhets, 2019, p.209) and showcases the faithfulness and sufficiency of Christ. (Allberry, 2019, p.120).

This is wonderful news, especially considering the bankruptcy of the alternative. We are not calling people from lives of sexual freedom and contentment to lives of repression and misery, but rather calling people out of darkness into light (1 Peter 2:9).

A worldly idolatry of sex has not led to increased human happiness and fulfilment, as the increase in divorce and family breakdown, sexual violence and porn use demonstrate. (See Harrison, 2017 for a helpful cultural critique). In wonderful and radical contrast, a counter-cultural traditionalist sexuality affirms and includes everyone and challenges all to submit our sexualities to God's will in lives of communal holy obedience characterised by deep love for God and one another.

5.3.4 God's standards are possible

We mentioned earlier that one criticism of traditionalist sexual morality is that it is too difficult, and therefore unfair, particularly for SSA people. I argue this does not go far enough and it is impossible for anyone to live out God's commands *without his help* (Matthew 19:26; Romans 8:8; Hebrews 11:6; Galatians 5:16-23). Indeed, who feels able to "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is

perfect.” (Matthew 5:48)? Ezekiel 36 showed us it is only God’s initiative and transforming work in our hearts that enables us to live out his commands.

Many celibate gay Christians testify to God’s faithfulness and the power of the Holy Spirit as they have submitted their sexualities to Christ: “The lives of gay celibate Christians who embrace this costly obedience, embodying gospel teaching on suffering and grace, provide an outward witness of faithfulness to Christ to the surrounding culture.” (Yarhouse and Zaporozhets, 2019, p.193).

The cost of discipleship for all Christians is high (Luke 9:23; Matthew 19:16-30; Luke 14:26; Philippians 3:7-8) but many have failed to live in a costly counter-cultural way, especially sexually. Mohler helpfully tracks our shifting attitudes on birth control, divorce, advanced reproductive technologies, cohabitation, and sex outside marriage (2015, pp.17-31) to show how we have arrived at a position where it seems we are asking gay people to surrender too much because for too long the church has been giving up too little. We will return to the church’s hypocrisy on sexual matters in chapter six.

Faithful celibate SSA Christians know the cost of following Jesus but also the rich rewards:

“When I read the Bible...it continuously seemed to be a message of dying to ourselves, of sacrifice that overcomes every personal ambition and desire.” (Luke in CEEC, 2020, 02:11).

“They are aware of the nature of the commitment they are making – one that may not be resolved in this lifetime, one that may require an enduring faithfulness and persistent sacrifice. They are also aware of the benefits of such obedience.” (Yarhouse and Zaporozhets, 2019, p.193).

We will explore some recommendations for how the church can live out life-giving biblical sexual ethics in the next chapter, but first we must define missional holy sexuality.

5.4 Missional holy sexuality: a definition

Traditionalists can articulate what holy sexuality looks like very clearly, as a lifelong marriage between one man and one woman (which reflects Christ’s relationship with the church) or celibate singleness (which demonstrates Christ’s sufficiency and deep love for all). Revisionists rightly say you cannot build a whole sexual morality around a few disputed verses of Scripture (Davison, 2016, p.40), but

there is a tendency amongst many to focus on those same disputed passages and claim their disputed nature is enough to overturn a traditionalist sexual morality. There is very little attempt to build a positive biblical case for SSS relationships. Even the most generous interpretation can say, at best, the Bible is silent on these relationships whilst being positive about heterosexual marriage and singleness.

The onus on revisionists who claim to uphold the Bible's authority is to credibly define marriage and sexual immorality. Several attempts have been made (Song, Brownson, Gushee) and more are required (Archer, 2016, p.32) but a convincing biblical case for the holiness of SSS activity in a gay marriage cannot be made given the prohibitions we looked at previously and the wider pattern and purpose of God's design for marriage. Revisionists also face difficulties in how to exclude immoral behaviour such as incest if the foundation for moral sexual behaviour is defined as a loving and faithful consensual commitment between adults. Schafer puts it well: "The methodological choice to equate sexual desire with love, combined with the description of humans who image God through expressing love, leaves the revisionists no room to discuss the existence of disordered love/ desire." (Loc.125). Indeed, the Methodist Church has demonstrated this difficulty in their revised stance on cohabitation given their endorsement of gay marriage (Methodist Church, 2021b, Section 84).

Revisionists also contend that many gay relationships are unlike the lustful, debauched sexual immorality they say characterises the homosexual activity condemned in the Bible, and that gay relationships can point people to the holiness of God and manifest his characteristics through mutual love, faithfulness, and commitment (Heron, 1963; Vines, 2014, p.105; Brownson, 2013, p.197). However, it is not the love, faithfulness and commitment of relationships that are in question, but specifically the same-sex *sexual* element that lacks biblical support. The Bible clearly upholds love, to the extent that we are commanded to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44) but this cannot be equated with sex, as is often done in our culture (e.g., Amnesty's 'Love is a human right' LGBTQ+ merchandising (Amnesty, 2021) implies that sex—albeit still not more controversial forms like incest and polygamy for now—is a human right.) The burden of proof is on revisionists to show how gay sexual relationships can demonstrate the characteristics of a holy and separate God whilst reflecting the pattern of sexuality throughout Scripture from creation to new creation. I do not believe this has been or can be done.

We have seen that MH encompasses God's people fulfilling a holy, priestly role amidst the nations to reveal God's character and bring God's salvation and blessing to the world. We saw that they are called to live distinctively by challenging and rejecting the idolatry of surrounding culture, keeping

themselves pure by living out God's commands. We observed the sweep of ME from creation to new creation and noted that MH involves living according to the created order which will be fully re-established in the new creation. Missional holiness is both a conferred status and a calling to live out (Peterson, 2004, p.34). God makes us his people, then commands us to live out that identity, becoming what we already are (Wright, 2006, p.375).

Clearly, ME is multifaceted, as acknowledged by Draycott and Rowe: "The scope of missional ethics is broad, involving living well in creation." (2013, p.279). However, there is room for a more focussed definition specifying some key themes already mentioned.

Although not presented as a definition of ME, Wright's distillation of 1 Peter 2:9-12 is helpful: "If this is what you are (your *identity*, through election, redemption and covenant) then this is how you must live (your *ethics*), and this is what will result in the nations (your *mission*)." (2006, p.389, italics original).

Salter notes three specific areas: "although missional ethics is a broad category, there is a particular emphasis on the themes of justice, charity, and worship" (Salter, 2019, p.290). We have seen that sexual ethics are also central to MH. They are among the most culturally contested areas of our day and among the biggest areas of idolatry.

We have seen the importance of God's people living counter-culturally and rejecting the idolatry of the surrounding culture. We have also observed the strong link between sexual immorality and idolatry. My definition of missional holy sexuality, drawing on Yuan's helpful definition of holy sexuality (Yuan, 2018, p.47), is: *God's people living in celibate singleness or faithful opposite-sex marriage reflecting God's holy character to a watching world for the sake of God's glory and the salvation and blessing of the nations.*

This is a vision for purity of Christ-centred, counter-cultural worship of the one true God which offers gospel hope to the nations. This is what all Christians, regardless of their sexuality, are called to. (Ibid., p.48).

5.5 Conclusion

We have seen that sexual holiness—faithfulness to traditionalist biblical sexual ethics—is vital for missional effectiveness, an uncompromised gospel, and blessing the nations. Sexual expression and fulfilment are arguably the most powerful idols of our age. Not bowing to them is the most compelling missional ethic we can live.

Sexual holiness involves stewarding our sexualities in rich community, friendship, worship, and intimacy with God and each other. In the next chapter we will explore ways the church can live out its calling to missional holy sexuality.

CHAPTER 6

Recommendations

We have looked at the importance of sexual holiness to mission and considered what this means for the church in debates around homosexuality. We have seen that much is at stake and we must get our theology and practice right to enable genuine gospel witness.

The gospel is wonderful news for gay people, but sadly the church often is not. In chapter two, we exposed some shortcomings of the church's response to homosexuality, which have caused some to revise scriptural teaching. In chapter five I outlined a biblical and compelling missional holy sexuality that shows God's goodness and love. Here I will focus on how celibate SSA Christians can help the church embrace costly discipleship and true inclusion, challenging hypocrisy and sexual idolatry that often pollute communal life and hamper mission. Our traditionalist *theology* does not need to change, but revisionists have helpfully highlighted ways in which *we* need to change.

6.1 Hypocrisy

Hypocrisy is a repeated charge from affirming Christians and non-Christians and they—along with some honest traditionalists—have a very valid point (Ison, 2016, p.22; Gushee, 2017, p.39; VanderWal-Gritter, 2014, p.113; Richardson, 2017; Mohler, 2015, p.32). Many conservative Christians re-marry divorcees and would attend the wedding of a Christian and non-Christian but would be hard-line on homosexuality. Double standards are rife. In chapter two I argued that the right response is not to revise our teaching on homosexuality, but rather to call everyone to higher standards of obedience.

As we saw in chapters four and five, rightly-ordered sexuality is central to a healthy missional community and therefore we need mass repentance of the widespread idolatry of sexuality in the

church. While the church celebrates divorced people getting re-married, turns a blind eye to pre-marital sex, idolises marriage and marginalises singleness, has a porn and masturbation problem and is lenient on dating non-Christians, it is not living out its calling to missional holy sexuality. While heterosexual Christian couples spend vast sums on IVF, get promoted to leadership and get celebrated for their nuclear family milestones whilst SSA people are marginalised, the church is not good news for gay people. While friendship is trivialised or sexualised, while community is anaemic and involves going to meetings, while there are ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ sins and struggles, while we lie to each other, while we lack healthy physical affection, we are not showcasing the goodness of God’s design for sexuality.

Whilst some traditionalists recognise that we must teach truth on all biblical sexuality (Mohler, 2015, p.148), there is insufficient challenge to eradicate sexual and marriage idolatry, celebrate celibacy and call all to the highest standards of sexual purity. We cannot just teach the right doctrine on sexuality, we must live it in all its fulness. A much more radical change is needed than revisionists suggest. It is not about changing our minds (to use Gushee’s phrase), it is about changing our lives. We must be holy in all the ways we have failed to be holy so far, so our individual and community lives “reflect and, thus, present the character of God to the nations.” (Cho, 2020, p.44) for the sake of blessing the nations.

We have seen that MH encompasses every aspect of life (Leviticus 18-20), so there is a challenge to traditionalists who claim moral superiority to enact Christlike morality in every way. Unholy behaviour concerns not just sexual immorality, but also persecution, rejection and judgementalism of the ‘other’. An imperative for traditionalist conservative evangelical Christians is to confront homophobia and bullying and campaign for freedom for globally oppressed LGB people (Witton, 2021a). Perhaps then traditionalists will be known for being ‘on the side’ of gay people.

6.2 Costly obedience for everyone

Many revisionists agree that following Christ comes at a cost (CofE, 2020, p.258; Vines, 2017, p.XXV), yet would not contend that this cost includes sexual abstinence outside heterosexual marriage. We have seen that one thing driving the revisionist movement is the perceived unacceptably high cost of celibacy. Yet celibacy is what all unmarried Christians are called to, regardless of their sexuality. For many SSA Christians—and numerous heterosexual Christians—following Jesus means a commitment to singleness and celibacy as part of the cost of submitting one’s life to Christ’s rule. This is a

wonderful opportunity to display the overwhelming goodness of God to the wider church and world, as Yahouse and Zaporozhets note, “Celibate gay Christians, by virtue of the costly obedience they live out every day, bring to the body of Christ a sincerity and maturity to their walk with Christ that could strengthen the larger church.” (2019, p.162).

An inevitable part of the calling to live as citizens of heaven and therefore exiles in this world (1 Peter 1:1), is that we will suffer as our kingdom values clash with worldly values. However, suffering is not permanent for Christians as we confidently anticipate a time when the earth will be fully transformed to pattern God’s purposes (2 Corinthians 4:17; Romans 8:18). In the meantime, we should expect to suffer in a world that rejects God and his rule.

Nevertheless, it is important not to sound too shrill a note of martyrdom as some celibate SSA Christians occasionally do. Living lives of obedience here and now is not just an investment in future reward, but the way Christians bear witness to the holy God in whose image they are made (Salter, 2019, p.326). Suffering is not a result of a mistake in God’s design for sexuality (Palpant Dilley, 2019). We need to regain confidence that holiness is a gift from God for our flourishing rather than a legalistic restriction for our diminishing. Living God’s way now brings blessings now (Peterson, 2004, p.5), even as it is misunderstood and criticised by wider society. Indeed, suffering and deep joy often go hand-in-hand (1 Peter 4:13).

Costly discipleship is not optional for Christians but sadly many do not take it seriously, making the gospel all about getting to heaven, rather than a Christ-transformed counter-cultural life that reflects God’s divine and holy character to the world. No wonder many outsiders survey the church and see hypocrisy, judgmentalism and double standards, and some sexual minorities within the church feel rejected or condemned. Gay Christians are not called to suffer any more than their straight brothers and sisters, but it is often easier for straight Christians to assimilate to the culture and adopt its values. The question is whether we want this for our LGB friends too, or whether we want to collectively call each other to deeper and higher discipleship. If we are not prepared to relinquish everything for Christ, including sexual gratification, then we must question how committed we are to following him (Luke 14:33).

We saw that ethical distinctiveness is key to MH and noted that Wright placed the ethical calling of God’s people at the heart of their mission (2006, p.369). Compromising God’s ethical standards makes us less missionally effective, not more. Central to MH is an uncompromising commitment to

model our lives on God's commands regardless of cultural norms and values, so we can reach our culture with Christ's love.

6.3 Inclusion

In chapter two I argued that a theology of welcome and inclusion must underpin a traditionalist view of sexual morality. I will elaborate with five points. Firstly, a stronger call to costly discipleship for all results in more people, particularly heterosexual people, feeling challenged by church teaching and not just hearing what they want to hear (2 Timothy 4:3). This is good. Inclusivity is not principally about ensuring everyone enjoys church. It is about ensuring everyone can encounter and be transformed by our holy God. We noted earlier that we are all sexually broken (VanderWal-Gritter, 2014, p.112-3) and therefore all need Jesus' forgiveness and the Holy Spirit's ongoing sanctification of our sexualities (Romans 3:23). There is no place for condemning or judging LGB people when we recognise our own sexual sin (Matthew 7:1-5).

Secondly, we need confidence that biblical sexual ethics reveal best who we are and how we thrive. We saw that God's commands are for blessing the nations which will ultimately be fulfilled in the new creation. We must not be embarrassed of traditionalist teaching but recognise it liberates everyone, including gay people, because it is the only narrative that challenges the faulty ideology and sexual idolatry on which culture and revisionism are founded. Only the sexual morality taught by the church for 2000 years equally dignifies single and married people, values virgins, dismantles the cultural pressure to have sex, encourages deep non-sexual intimacy and reflects the sufficiency and worthiness of Christ as a greater treasure than even one of humankind's most profound experiences. The church community we invite people into is real and life-giving. It is demanding, but also what we are made for. We will return to community life shortly.

Thirdly, we must follow Jesus' lead. Revisionists rightly recognise Jesus' compassion for the marginalised and our calling to emulate him (Schafer, 2019, loc. 103). However, they mischaracterise that compassion as acceptance of unholy behaviours. In contrast, when Jesus encountered the sexually broken (John 4; John 8:1-11) he demonstrated scandalous love and acceptance of people, without accepting their sin. Indeed, rejecting their sin was integral to his love just as removing cancer is integral to promoting a person's health. Nolland summarises well: "Prostitutes and tax collectors were drawn to Jesus not because he validated their life-style, but because his critical stance was

linked with genuine concern and compassion, not with distancing and dismissal.” (Nolland, 2019, p.29).

Fourthly, we must recognise that even ‘inclusive’ churches exclude many LGB people. Revisionists have undoubtedly made it harder for celibate SSA Christians to faithfully follow Christ as they are told their costly obedience is harmful to them and others, even homophobic. Ironically, many SSA Christians feel rejection most acutely from affirming Christians who seem unwilling to validate their stories. We noted that Lee is the only revisionist who has consciously tried to accommodate Side B gay Christians (2014, p.217). We also saw the irresolvable clash between revisionists and traditionalists which means that ‘inclusive’ churches will never truly be inclusive. Conversely, traditionalist churches can and should welcome and include everyone and expose all to the Bible’s life-changing teaching.

Fifthly, we must be consistent in our approach to church leadership, membership, and discipline (Gagnon, 2010, p.489). Our treatment of people in gay relationships should be the same as people co-habiting, having affairs, dating non-Christians, sinning within marriages, using porn etc. We must also emphasise other sins listed alongside sexual sin and ensure we hold leaders accountable in all areas. True equality and inclusivity mean spurring one another on to Christlikeness, whatever our particular struggles.

Central to MH is an invitation to all to participate in Kingdom life. We saw that Israel were chosen to bless the nations as an instrument of God’s renewal of all creation. Our life together must characterise that commitment to extend God’s life and love to all. (Matthew 24:14; 2 Peter 3:9).

6.4 Community

Clearly, the calling to MH—to both Israel and the church—is corporate. It is in their life together that God’s people most fully represent God’s nature and the goodness of his rule to surrounding peoples. We cannot love our neighbour as ourselves unless we are in relationship with our neighbour. Six of the ten commandments concern relationship with others. The law is given to a covenant community, to be enacted within that community. Clearly, that community should be both attractive to outsiders (1 Peter 2:12) and morally untainted (1 Corinthians 5).

Jenson astutely recognises a tension here, particularly concerning sexuality: “Homosexuality is an ecclesiological question... Many are tempted to abandon the church precisely for the sake of its mission.” (2013a, p.95). The question is how the church can maintain a sexual morality that contradicts, and offends, wider culture whilst remaining an attractive and welcoming community that introduces people to God’s goodness.

God’s people are not just to expose the idolatry of the surrounding culture, but to demonstrate an alternative, better way of living under God’s good rule. Their life together “bears witness to the wisdom of their law, and by implication the wisdom of their law-giver” (Salter, 2019, p.65). The very existence of the community is a powerful witness (Rowe, 2013, p.21) especially when it is somewhere “people who do not belong together, belong together.” (Jenson, 2013a, p.99). The Christian life of familial community, mutual love and belonging should be hugely attractive to a culture scarred by division, family breakdown, and loneliness. Christian teaching around sexual ethics has often been unhelpfully framed in the negative, but we must get better at painting a larger picture of God’s big purpose for sexuality, grounded in the sweep of his redemptive story. Yuan expresses this well: “A robust theology cannot be built on what we are *not* allowed to do, for the Christian life is much more than the avoidance of sinful behaviour.” (Yuan, 2018, p.4).

We have seen that holiness and mission are not antithetical but inextricably interwoven. However, tension remains around how the community welcomes everyone whilst also challenging everyone to live lives worthy of their calling (Ephesians 4:1). We saw earlier that discipleship is not simply a free pass to heaven, but a Christ-shaped life of spiritual transformation. The danger of unrepentant sinners being part of the community is that the community loses its distinctiveness and missional identity as it mirrors the surrounding world. Johnson reminds us that sexual immorality has "a contagious, polluting potential for the community as a whole." (Johnson, 2016, p.146). Peterson exegetes 1 Corinthians 5:1–13 to show the biblical case for excluding someone from the community so “the integrity of the holy community is protected so that its witness to the world can be maintained.” (Peterson, 2004, p.10).

Jenson opposes this perspective when he argues “the most pressing problems of discernment with regard to homosexuality do not concern whether it is right or wrong but how we are to live together as God's people in hospitable holiness.” (Jenson, 2013a, p.96).

I agree that as a global church we must learn how to live with the tension of divergent beliefs on sexual morality, but I believe that clarity over biblical teaching on sexuality, particularly in local church contexts, is crucial to enable witness amongst gay people and surrounding culture. The question is not just about reaching them, but about what we say about sexual holiness and how we live it out.

Jenson also states, “If the church is unwilling to be family to gay people, it has no business giving them the gospel.” (Ibid., p.105). This may be overstated for emphasis—and certainly highlights the importance of the church being real family to one another—but it could have the unintended consequence of suggesting that it is valid to avoid sharing the gospel with gay people because we have failed to create plausibility structures.

Clear biblical teaching goes alongside radical, compassionate community and grace-filled hearts for the world. Everyone must model sexual holiness, lived out in missional community, to witness to the nations as we are called to. Community is essential, both for mutual support and to fully bear witness to the one true God.

I have three recommendations for developing flourishing, holy communities into which to invite LGB friends, although more work is needed.

Firstly, the church is unique in uniting hugely diverse people as *family*. This demands commitment, sacrifice, security, and longevity—things largely only seen within nuclear families outside the church. Thus, we can wholeheartedly say that single people are not lacking intimacy and committed relationships. However, we have much to learn about fostering healthy non-sexual intimate relationships, especially in our hyper-sexualised culture. One recommendation is to intentionally cultivate inter-generational friendships where sacrificial love and service are given and enjoyed without some usual complications. In this context, gay people can discover that making same-sex relationships sexual diminishes rather than enhances them, and that deeper, truer connections to those of the same sex are possible.

Secondly, it is difficult for those of us ensconced in Western individualism to understand how to do community well, but much can be learned from Christians from collectivistic cultures. We must be humble and learn from the global church what it means to really belong to each other (Romans 12:5), to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn (Romans 12:15), to share possessions (Acts 4:32) and to extend generous hospitality (1 Peter 4:9). A huge blessing in welcoming

refugees into local congregations is that they can demonstrate how to do radically different life-changing community.

Thirdly, we must find better ways to celebrate and value singleness. As well as preaching the equality of singleness and marriage, we must demonstrate it in our communal life. Parents' sacrificial discipleship must include relinquishing expectations that their children will marry and produce grandchildren, instead prioritising missional holiness over marriage. We must celebrate the achievements and milestones of single people and publicly walk alongside them in difficulties. Although some important theological work on singleness exists (Danylak, 2010; Wehr, 2012; Cólón and Field, 2009) much more is needed on how church community can truly reflect the good of singleness and allow single people to thrive in all areas of leadership and service.

6.5 Eternity

We have seen that following God's blueprint for sexuality brings blessings now because it is how we were created to relate. However, it finds ultimate fulfilment and meaning in the context of eternity. In chapter four we highlighted that marriage reflects Christ's relationship with the church (Ephesians 5:32) and foreshadows the ultimate wedding in Revelation 19:7–8. Maintaining this perspective is crucial for Christians whilst being bombarded by a narrative that speaks of missing out if we forgo sex. In truth, no-one will miss out on the purpose of sex as all will be united to Christ on the perfect wedding day. The cost of discipleship—indeed the whole gospel—makes no sense if this life is all there is. Celibate SSA Christians are perhaps particularly alien in this culture and can remind the wider church of the dangers of becoming too comfortable in this world (2 Timothy 4:10; 1 John 2:15) and forgetting to live for eternity (2 Peter 3:11–13). As Yuan argues, correctly understanding holy sexuality “is tethered to God's grand story – creation, fall, redemption, and consummation.” (Yuan, 2018, p.6).

6.6 Conclusion

We have seen that celibate SSA Christians have a vital role in the redemption of MH and challenging the church to re-embrace its counter-cultural missional calling. Their costly discipleship models and challenges the church to reject hypocrisy and embrace holy sexuality. The church is called to be a truly inclusive and welcoming community that preaches the same message of forgiveness and sanctification to everyone whatever their sexual brokenness. The church must learn to be a family where relational depth and integrity are modelled across generations and cultures. Only when the

church lives out the beauty of traditionalist sexual ethics and offers much more intimacy, fellowship and belonging than our culture will LGB people see the goodness of God's design for sex, and the beauty of the gospel.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion

7.1 Summary

I set out to explore how a better understanding of MH might inform the U.K. church's engagement with homosexuality. We have covered much ground so here I will summarise some key findings, present brief personal reflections, and suggest areas for further research.

We recognised that for both revisionists and traditionalists, homosexuality is a crucial missional issue and that 'avoidism'—ignoring the topic—undermines mission and discipleship. My supposition was that approaching sexual ethics through a MH lens would help to untangle some difficulties in contemporary Christian approaches to homosexuality, expose some missteps and enable greater missional effectiveness.

I therefore explored, critiqued, and built on existing definitions of ME before proposing my own definition of missional holy sexuality. In chapter two I outlined some key areas of tension in debates around sexuality including harm, identity, inclusion, intimacy, singleness, religious liberty, and hypocrisy. In chapters three and four I turned to my research goal of theological reflection and considered works by missiologists including Rowe, Johnson, Salter, Wright and Goheen regarding texts in Exodus 19, Leviticus 18-20, Ezekiel 36, 1 Peter 1 and 2, Romans 1, 1 Corinthians 6, and Revelation 5 and 7 to expose some significant aspects of MH. We saw themes emerge such as priesthood, ethical distinctiveness, blessing for the nations, the corporate nature of MH and its scope from creation to new creation. We observed the importance of MH to the calling of God's people to live distinctively and "represent [Holy God] to the world and the world to him." (Rowe, 2013, p.15). This applies equally to the church today as to OT Israel and our challenge is to establish what MH looks like in our context.

Next, in chapters five and six, I examined the significance of these themes for the church's approach to homosexuality, focussing on distinctiveness and blessing. We noted the strong connection between sexual immorality and idolatry and examined some faulty ideology in our cultural view of sex. The missional church's call is to live in contrast to the idolatry around us and we concluded that rejecting false narratives on sexuality is part of that. Specifically, challenging the views that celibacy and singleness are undesirable and less valuable than sexual relationships; that intimacy is primarily found in sexual relationships and that inclusion involves full endorsement of behaviour. We saw that only the traditionalist sexual ethic refutes these claims and helps the church to recover her identity as God's holy people, living counter-culturally for the salvation of the nations.

With that in mind, we proposed this definition of missional holy sexuality:

God's people living in celibate singleness or faithful opposite-sex marriage reflecting God's holy character to a watching world for the sake of God's glory and the salvation and blessing of the nations.

The final question I addressed was of application: how might these reflections on MH inform our praxis? In chapter six, we made some specific recommendations to challenge both traditionalists and revisionists to live out their calling to missional sexual holiness with greater integrity. We saw that hypocrisy on sexual morality in traditionalist churches has damaged their witness, with standards of sexual holiness being lowered, e.g., around divorce and cohabitation, whilst homosexuality has been strictly judged. We proposed the right response is not to lower standards further, but to call everyone to deeper obedience and costly discipleship, with celibate SSA Christians leading the way.

We acknowledged the importance of inclusivity to faithful missional community and concluded that churches must imitate Jesus, welcoming everyone and calling everyone to the same high standards of sexual purity. Throughout, we have seen that holiness is a corporate enterprise and that—to faithfully live out a missional sexual ethic—the church must reflect the goodness of God's rule in community. This involves demonstrating a better way of life than the culture offers, which is attractive to outsiders (Acts 2:42-47). The most persuasive apologetic for the goodness of the gospel and biblical sexuality is God's people living his way in self-giving community. We made some brief suggestions of practical ways this can be achieved, but more work is necessary.

We saw the trajectory of MH from creation to new creation and that this outlook fully explains the biblical pattern for sexuality. An eternal perspective exposes the ultimate meaning of sexuality, and

unsurprisingly is anathema to a culture that lives for the immediate. We can only comprehend the beauty of sexuality in light of the eternal gospel.

We discovered that a better understanding of MH is very beneficial in helping U.K. churches engage with homosexuality. Both revisionists and traditionalists are challenged to reflect on how to “bear[s] witness, in the *imitatio Dei*, to the nature and character of God before a watching world.” (Salter, 2019, p.326). Clearly, we cannot avoid the issue but must develop and consistently apply a counter-cultural biblical sexual ethic to make the Lord known.

7.2 Personal reflections

As mentioned, SSA is a personal issue for me, and I often find myself caught in the crossfire in debates on homosexuality. I hoped this project would help me understand different perspectives more clearly and equip me to be more effective in my ministry. One particularly fruitful aspect was exposure to some intelligent, nuanced, and compassionate revisionists and appreciating their real heart for mission and LGB people. I am reassured that there is much we agree on like the rejection of homophobia, the need for radical inclusion, the missional importance of homosexuality and the need to take Scripture seriously. Engaging with a range of revisionist texts will help me be more gracious and Christlike with those whose theology opposes mine.

I expected to encounter biblical arguments from revisionists that would challenge my convictions but found the reasoning less persuasive than anticipated. This research has sharpened my conviction that traditionalist sexual ethics are truest to the Bible’s teaching, and we should not be embarrassed of or apologetic about them despite their increasing dissonance with surrounding culture. That said, traditionalists are challenged to repent of hypocrisy and strive to live according to that same sexual ethic in communities that make it attractive and achievable.

7.3 Recommendations for further research

There is much scope for further enquiry, and I suggest three areas worth developing:

1. My conclusions could be tested by conducting qualitative and quantitative research through questionnaires and focus groups. A focus on how churches understand inclusion and can coherently welcome everyone whilst maintaining their holy character would be worthwhile.

2. More work is necessary to establish how to live out biblical sexual ethics in community, particularly regarding valuing singleness and friendship.
3. I limited my enquiries to a Western evangelical context, but listening to global Christians—many of whom have much to teach about costly discipleship and counter-cultural living—would be fruitful.

7.4 Conclusion

We have seen that the emerging discipline of MH is valuable for the church's engagement with homosexuality as a missional and discipleship issue. The church's calling to live the attractive life of a contrast people (Goheen, 2011, p.40) is perhaps particularly relevant for U.K. sexual ethics today.

I pray that we all live out our identity as God's holy people, called to reveal him and bless the nations by the distinctive way we steward our sexualities for his glory.

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