

CONTEND

FOR THE

FAITH



A CRITICAL REVIEW OF

*WHY THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE
SHOULD BE FULLY LGBTQ+ AFFIRMING*

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Introduction

In April of 2023, SacraSage Press published *Why the Church of the Nazarene Should Be Fully LGBTQ+ Affirming*, a collection of essays edited by Thomas Jay Oord and Alexa Oord. To be clear, by “fully LGBTQ+ affirming,” the editors do not merely mean that the Church of the Nazarene should extend the love of Christ to those who identify as LGBTQ+. No, the volume is advocating for “the full acceptance of LGBTQ+ people, their identities, orientations, and healthy sexual expressions.”¹ The editors do not specify what these “healthy sexual expressions” might be, but homosexual marriages are clearly included.²

The book, which weighs in at 472 pages, contains about ninety essays that are divided into three sections (page ranges in parentheses):

Part I: Queer Voices (5–94)

Part II: Ally Narratives (95–319)

Part III: Scholarly Perspectives (321–444)

The authors of the essays are generally Nazarenes, ex-Nazarenes, or have some relationship to the Church of the Nazarene (e.g., having attended or taught at Nazarene schools). The volume concludes with an appendix that contains a glossary, a list of further resources, and a response by Thomas Oord to accusations

¹ Thomas Jay Oord and Alexa Oord, “Introduction,” 3.

² Oord and Oord, “Introduction,” 2.

of misconduct brought against him by members of the Church of the Nazarene.³

The purpose of this review is to provide a critical assessment of *Why the Church of the Nazarene Should Be Fully LGBTQ+ Affirming* that can serve as a resource to denominational leaders, pastors, and laypeople who are trying to decide whether to read the book and/or how to respond to it. I begin with a general assessment and go on to engage with each part of the book and Thomas Oord's response to accusations.

General Assessment

One thing the volume does not lack is self-confidence. "This book fundamentally changes the conversation," declares the back cover. This is a bold claim, especially for a volume whose essays are on average less than five pages long. "But perhaps," thinks the generous reader, "the book is carefully constructed, each essay making a small but strategic contribution to a larger whole." A glance at the table of contents, however, crushes this hopeful hypothesis. As one inspects the titles, it is difficult to discern any linear development from one essay to the next. "Well," says the reader, "maybe the essays fit together better than their titles." No such luck. The essays are generally short opinion pieces that are connected only insofar as they claim that the Church of the Nazarene should be fully LGBTQ+ affirming. The

³ These are the formal accusations described in the *Church of the Nazarene Manual 2017–2021* (Kansas City, MO: Nazarene Publishing House, 2017), §606–606.3.

book, in other words, is not a carefully designed mosaic, but a series of randomly ordered beads on a thin string. As a result, the authors tend to repeat the same points (one hesitates to call them arguments) over and over from different angles. Only history will tell whether such a book will fundamentally change the game. But in my view, it should not.

The structural difficulties, however, are only the beginning of the problems. I will review the major parts of the book below, but at the outset let me note three overarching reasons that it fails to convince.

1. It wrongly equates love with affirmation and portrays anything else as harmful and hateful.

The authors in *Why the Church of the Nazarene Should Be Fully LGBTQ+ Affirming* repeatedly assume that to love someone simply *is* to affirm their feelings and actions as being morally right. And—they assert—anything less than full affirmation is harmful and hateful. Consider, for example, the following statements:

The idea of “love the sinner, hate the sin” needs to be thrown away and forgotten. There is no sin. . . . Complete acceptance is the only appropriate choice.⁴

Non-affirming doctrines and policies harm queer folks—Nazarene or otherwise. Affirmation is the path to the love of God and neighbor to which we by the Spirit have been called.⁵

⁴ Deanna L. Andree, “Who Should be Part of the Church’s Story?,” 109–10.

⁵ Kadee Wirick Smedley, “We’re Harming People in Jesus’s Name,” 281, emphasis removed. Cf. Megan Madsen, “Do No Harm as a Wesleyan Ethic for Inclusion,” 217.

The book therefore issues an ultimatum: Affirm the sexual feelings and actions of those who identify as LGBTQ+, or you will be breaking the second greatest commandment. Yet when one asks, “Why?” the reasons given are surprisingly thin. Nowhere do we find a robust biblical or theological argument for this conclusion. Nor do the authors take seriously the fact that Scripture teaches that all sorts of actions are wrong and that there are certain feelings one should not act upon. The real logic seems to be psychological: If you do not affirm the feelings and actions of someone who identifies as LGBTQ+, you are causing psychological damage that may lead them to harm themselves. We will examine the evidence for this claim below, but for the moment I will simply note that this is an utterly novel way of doing Christian ethics. Christian orthodoxy has never decided to affirm feelings or actions simply because failing to do so *might* cause psychological distress or lead to self-harm. Why, then, do the authors in *Why the Church of the Nazarene Should Be Fully LGBTQ+ Affirming*—some of whom are trained theologians—believe that this is a compelling, even necessary, way of approaching the issue?

I suggest that we find the answer in Carl R. Trueman’s *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*.⁶ In this book, Trueman seeks to explain how we have reached a place in Western culture where

⁶ Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

the statement “I am a woman trapped in a man’s body” makes sense to a lot of people. He argues that the answer is not simply the sexual revolution, but rather key shifts in the modern view of the self that occurred over the last several centuries and led to the sexual revolution. Trueman focuses on three shifts in particular:

- **Psychologization:** The self becomes defined by feelings. Instead of seeing the world as having an order and meaning that one must discover and conform to, people begin to view their feelings-defined self as the fundamental reality and the world as raw material for creating their own meaning. This leads to what Trueman calls “expressive individualism”: “each of us finds our meaning by giving expression to our own feelings and desires.”⁷
- **Sexualization:** The psychologized self becomes defined particularly by feelings about sex and sexuality. Sigmund Freud is the key thinker here: “Before Freud, sex was an activity, for procreation or for recreation; after Freud, sex is definitive of who we are, as individuals, as societies, and as a species.”⁸
- **Politicization:** Karl Marx’s notion of political oppression becomes psychologized and sexualized. Obstacles to sexual expression are equated with political oppression.

Why the Church of the Nazarene Should Be Fully LGBTQ+ Affirming is essentially a shrine to the modern self. It treats the sexual feelings of those who identify as LGBTQ+ as prime reality, and one must affirm those feelings and actions based on them or be guilty of violence.

⁷ Trueman, *Rise and Triumph*, 46.

⁸ Trueman, *Rise and Triumph*, 221.

The problem, of course, is that the logic of modern self is not the logic of the gospel. We will return to this below, but for the moment the key point is that, according to Scripture, love is *not* the same as affirmation. The gospel declares that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23) and calls us to acknowledge our sinfulness and receive salvation by faith in Jesus. To be sure, there is a certain kind of acceptance in this—God offers the grace of Jesus to those who are unworthy. But the gospel also exposes our sinfulness and calls us to offer our bodies to God as a living sacrifice and to receive transformation by the renewing of our minds (Rom 12:1–2). Whereas the modern self says, “Come as you are; stay as you are,” the gospel says, “Come as you are; leave different.” The love of the gospel is anathema to the modern self. But by the same token, the so-called love of the modern self is anathema to the gospel.

2. It naively assumes that if someone has a feeling, it must be right.

A closely related assumption that appears numerous times throughout the book is that if someone experiences a certain feeling (e.g., same-sex attraction, gender dysphoria), this must be right. Some authors nuance this claim to say that if someone “was born this way” or has a propensity to feel a certain way, it must be right. Here are a few examples:

All people—no matter where they are on the sexual spectrum—are exactly how they are supposed to be in the eyes of God. Even more importantly, all people are created to be with others. . . . It is not loving to deny anybody the

right to love and be loved, commune with others or have intimate loyalty with a life partner.⁹

To deny [our LGBTQIA+ siblings] full affirmation of their own relationships is to deny the very core of their bearing the *imago Dei*.¹⁰

The authors seem to think that if someone is born with a propensity toward same-sex attraction or gender dysphoria, then their feelings and actions based on these feelings must be morally right. The problem, of course, is that this neglects the doctrine of original sin. Because of Adam and Eve's sin, all humans are born with a corrupted nature, and none of us can look at our feelings and say, "This must be right." Imagine how this would play out in the case of rage or heterosexual lust! We all have to submit our feelings to the truth of God's will as revealed in Scripture and allow him to define what is good and what is evil. Appeals to creation or the *imago Dei* to legitimize LGBTQ+ feelings and actions are therefore compelling only if one denies the doctrine of original sin—a non-negotiable for Christian orthodoxy in general and the Church of the Nazarene in particular.¹¹

⁹ Andree, "Who Should be Part of the Church's Story?," 108–9.

¹⁰ Kristi J. Attwood-Seaton, "We Dance the Dance," 413. Cf. Michelle Gill, "Hey Nazarenes! Why Can't Everyone Be in Your Big Tent?," 175.

¹¹ See Article of Faith V, "Sin, Original and Personal," in *Church of the Nazarene Manual 2017–2021*, §5.

3. It stubbornly refuses to engage with opposing views and experiences.

A final overarching weakness is that the authors consistently refuse to engage with anyone who disagrees with them. Parts I and II of the book focus significantly on experience and repeatedly assert that the classic Christian view of human sexuality is unloving and harmful. Given this, one might expect to find some engagement with people who have experienced same-sex attraction or gender dysphoria but have chosen to live within the bounds of orthodoxy and found this to be life-giving. Think again. Nowhere in the book do the authors interact with experiences that might problematize their paradigm. And this is not for lack of material. Below is a list of recent books by individuals who have experienced same-sex attraction and have either received grace to pursue a biblical marriage or have chosen to be celibate out of reverence to Christ. Not a single one of these authors receives even a mention in *Why the Church of the Nazarene Should Be Fully LGBTQ+ Affirming*.

Butterfield, Rosaria Champagne. *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor's Journey into Christian Faith*. 2nd ed. Pittsburgh: Crown & Covenant, 2014.

Coles, Gregory. *Single, Gay, Christian: A Personal Journey of Faith and Sexual Identity*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017.

Hill, Wesley. *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010.

Perry, Jackie Hill. *Gay Girl, Good God: The Story of Who I Was, and Who God Has Always Been*. Nashville: B&H Academic, 2018.

Yuan, Christopher, and Angela Yuan. *Out of a Far Country: A Gay Son's Journey to God. A Broken Mother's Search for Hope*. Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2011.

Similarly, while authors in the book repeatedly mention biblical teaching on homosexuality and (to a lesser extent) transgenderism, they refuse to interact with scholars who disagree with them. What follows is a sampling of major books on human sexuality in the last few decades whose conclusions align with Christian orthodoxy. Again, not a single one of these receives even a footnote in the book.

Gagnon, Robert A. J. *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2002.

Hays, Richard B. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament—Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996.

John Paul II. *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*. Translated by Michael Waldstein. Boston: Pauline, 2006.

Sprinkle, Preston M. *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality Is Not Just an Issue*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015.

Sprinkle, Preston M. *Embodied: Transgender Identities, the Church, and What the Bible Has to Say*. Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2021.

Tennent, Timothy C. *For the Body: Recovering a Theology of Gender, Sexuality, and the Human Body*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020.

West, Christopher. *Our Bodies Tell God's Story: Discovering the Divine Plan for Love, Sex, and Gender*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2020.

Yarhouse, Mark A. *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2015.

Yuan, Christopher. *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel: Sex, Desire, and Relationships Shaped by God's Grand Story*. Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2018.

To add insult to injury, the authors repeatedly claim to occupy the intellectual high ground—in the same paragraph(s) where they ignore significant scholarship that disagrees with them! Daniel Rodriguez Schlorff illustrates the irony well. Schlorff characterizes the non-affirming view of homosexuality as being based on fundamentalist and flawed biblical interpretation. He goes on to say,

In closing, I'd like to plug biblical scholarship. Tools like historical and cultural criticism of the Bible would go a long way in helping people understand the complexities of the six clobber passages [six biblical passages often cited regarding homosexuality]. In 1980, John Boswell became the first scholar that I'm aware of that took a look at the clobber passages and applied all manner of hermeneutical tools to them. Without his book, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, I might not be here today.¹²

Note how Schlorff suggests that “biblical scholarship,” represented by John Boswell, supports the affirming view. What Schlorff

¹² Daniel Rodriguez Schlorff, “The Parable of Y2K,” 51.

neglects to mention is that subsequent scholarship has largely discredited Boswell's arguments that support homosexual practice. Boswell, for example, argues that *arsenokoitai* (1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10) does not refer to men who engage in homosexual practice.¹³ However, David F. Wright, Robert Gagnon, and others have shown that Boswell is simply wrong on this point.¹⁴ Paul or another Jew likely coined the term based on the Greek translation of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 as a way of referring to active partners in homosexual intercourse. The weight of "biblical scholarship," then, supports not the affirming view, but the orthodox one, and for Schlorff to pretend otherwise is at best ignorant and at worst deceptive.

A further area of scholarship that *Why the Church of the Nazarene Should Be Fully LGBTQ+ Affirming* fails to engage with is psychological and sociological research on homosexuality and transgenderism from an evangelical perspective. I am no expert in this area, but it is telling that Mark Yarhouse, a leading evangelical clinical psychologist who has published numerous books and articles on homosexuality and gender dysphoria, is cited nowhere in the volume.

¹³ John E. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 335–53.

¹⁴ David F. Wright, "Homosexuals or Prostitutes? The Meaning of ΑΡΣΕΝΟΚΟΙΤΑΙ (1 Cor. 6:9, 1 Tim. 1:10)," *VC* 38 (1984): 125–53; Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 303–26; Preston M. Sprinkle, *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality Is Not Just an Issue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 103–20.

In sum, the fundamental reason that *Why the Church of the Nazarene Should Be Fully LGBTQ+ Affirming* fails to change the conversation is that it refuses to engage in the conversation. It demands that one redefine love as affirmation or be branded as harmful and hateful. It insists that one regard all sexual feelings (or at least the ones in vogue at the moment) as right and good. And it ignores any voices that dare to disagree. To the modern self, all of this makes good sense. To Christian orthodoxy, however, it does not.

In what follows, I offer more detailed engagement with the three parts of *Why the Church of the Nazarene Should Be Fully LGBTQ+ Affirming* and Thomas Oord's response to accusations. For each part, I will describe its overall character, discuss major issues that arise in it, and interact with representative essays.

Part I: Queer Voices

Part I: Queer Voices contains essays from authors who generally identify as LGBTQ+ and share their stories. Two key issues emerge here: (1) the role that experience should play in formulating doctrine; (2) the question of whether a non-affirming position (like that of the Church of the Nazarene) harms those who identify as LGBTQ+ by increasing their rate of suicide. We will engage each of these in turn, discussing relevant essays along the way.

First, what role should experience play in formulating doctrine? By devoting a significant portion of the book to the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals and their "allies" (Parts I and 12

II), the editors seem to suggest that these experiences constitute a major reason that the Church of the Nazarene should be fully LGBTQ+ affirming. Numerous authors seem to share this conviction, and some appeal to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral (Scripture, tradition, reason, experience) to support it. For example, S. Vondale Allen states in an essay from Part II,

In my experience, the stance of the Church of the Nazarene, concerning homosexuality, predominantly influenced [sic] by scriptural interpretation, reason, and tradition, but overlooks the role of experience, which continues to show us something vastly different than what we have believed from the other three aspects.¹⁵

Allen interestingly seems to concede that Scripture, tradition, and reason support the current Nazarene stance on homosexuality but is willing to overrule all these with experience. Of course, not all authors in the book would give up Scripture, tradition, and reason so easily,¹⁶ but the question remains: What role should experience play in formulating doctrine? Two things must be said here: First, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral is not John Wesley's own formulation, but a term coined by Albert Outler in the twentieth century to describe Wesley's theological method. The Quadrilateral may be helpful when understood in this way, but it is not normative for Wesleyan theology. Second, many people wrongly understand "Quadrilateral" to mean that

¹⁵ S. Vondale Allen, "Damn Time," 104–5.

¹⁶ E.g., Gill, "Hey Nazarenes!," 177–78; Randall Hartman, "But the Bible Says' Is Not Enough," 183–84.

for Wesley Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience were equal as sources for theology.¹⁷ Outler himself is clear that for Wesley Scripture is the “preeminent norm” and that tradition, reason, and Christian experience are “dynamic and interactive aids in the interpretation of the Word of God in Scripture.”¹⁸ The idea that experience is on par with Scripture (let alone that it could trump Scripture, tradition, *and* reason) is utterly foreign to Wesley and the Wesleyan tradition. Therefore, while we may be able to learn much from the experiences narrated in *Why the Church of the Nazarene Should Be Fully LGBTQ+ Affirming*, they do not constitute an independent source for formulating doctrine.

In my view, the experiences related in Part I are the most valuable part of the book—not because they demonstrate that the Nazarene statement on human sexuality is wrong but because they expose areas where Nazarene leaders and churches have misapplied the statement or ignored it altogether. Below are a few of the key insights that emerge. For the sake of simplicity and continuity, I include a few points from Part II as well.

¹⁷ Outler notes, “More than once, I have regretted having coined [the term ‘quadrilateral’] for contemporary use, since it has been so widely misconstrued” (“The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in Wesley,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20.1 [1985]: 16).

¹⁸ Outler, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in Wesley,” 9. Randy L. Maddox comments, “Wesley’s so-called ‘quadrilateral’ of theological authorities could more adequately be described as the unilateral *rule* of Scripture within a trilateral *hermeneutic* of reason, tradition, and experience” (*Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* [Nashville: Kingswood, 1994], 46, emphasis original).

- **Weak teaching on singleness.** Part I contains several essays by women who experience same-sex attraction but married men not because they were primarily attracted to men but because this was the expected thing to do.¹⁹ The authors do not express a desire for stronger teaching on singleness, but their stories seem to suggest that the Church of the Nazarene did not sufficiently present singleness as a good and valid option for their lives (cf. Matt 19:10–12; 1 Cor 7:6–9, 25–38).²⁰
- **Ignorance and insensitivity regarding intersex conditions.** Paige Tilden shares her experience as someone with an intersex condition.²¹ She does not give a medical term for the condition, but she apparently had some ambiguity in her biological sex, received a reconstructive surgery before age one, and was treated as a male child afterwards. However, she says that in her mid-twenties she experienced a second puberty that involved a female development.²² It seems that her church jumped to unfair conclusions rather than providing care and support in this difficult circumstance: “Many in that church, including the pastor, were gossiping behind my back—spreading lies that I was a trans person instead of asking me the truth directly.”²³ Tilden does not say that the

¹⁹ E.g., Kara Hudson, “Scandalous Woman”; Nancy R. Kelso, “Just as I Am”; Mindy Oldenkamp, “Unconditionally Me”; Jan Shannon, “Were You Wrong?”

²⁰ Jessica Hiatt’s essay in Part II also supports this conclusion. Hiatt tells the story of a young woman who experienced same-sex attraction, and when she shared this with her youth pastor, “She was told to marry young, have plenty of sex, and trust in the Lord to bring sexual desire for her husband” (“Please Just Love,” 187). The young woman followed this advice but never received the sexual desire for her husband.

²¹ Paige Tilden, “Shutting Out Sparrows,” 63–66.

²² Tilden, “Shutting Out Sparrows,” 64.

²³ Tilden, “Shutting Out Sparrows,” 64.

church in question was Nazarene, but such a response is certainly out of step with the Nazarene statement.

- **Lack of grace.** Rose (which seems to be a pen name) describes her experience growing up gay in the Church of the Nazarene. “So often,” she says, “the message is that ‘you need to get your junk together, then we can talk.’”²⁴ As she notes, such a message is inconsistent with Nazarene position.
- **Failure to distinguish between attraction and actions:** Justin Barksdale describes Rachael, who “would not be welcomed in church leadership because of her sexual orientation.”²⁵ Lisa Perry says that her son, who experiences same-sex attraction, “staunchly held to evangelical theology and believed that God hates queers and that you couldn’t enter heaven if you were gay.”²⁶ Perry is unclear about whether her son was raised in a Nazarene church. Nonetheless, both authors illustrate the need to distinguish more clearly between experiencing same-sex attraction (which is not a sin) and engaging in homosexual practice (which is).
- **Derogatory language.** James E. Copple relates a conversation in which a Nazarene missionary used language for gay people that was “harsh, vile, and degrading” and eventually “referred to the LGBTQIA+ community as a community of ‘f*gs.’”²⁷ Similarly, Lisa Perry describes how her gay son’s church “spewed hateful speech about anyone LGBTQ,” calling them “pedophiles and groomers.”²⁸ As noted above,

²⁴ Rose, “Around the Table, An Offering of Sorts,” 77.

²⁵ Justin Barksdale, “Our Father, Who Art In?,” 114. Cf. Jennifer R. Jensen, “Love Does No Harm,” 201, though one would need more information to determine if the cases Jensen describes were actually mishandled.

²⁶ Lisa Perry, “Testimony of a Mother,” 260.

²⁷ James E. Copple, “I’ll Love You . . . IF,” 137.

²⁸ Perry, “Testimony,” 260.

Perry is unclear about whether the church was Nazarene, but such language is absolutely inappropriate.

Let us be clear: If the points above and the stories behind them are true, we—the Church of the Nazarene—need to repent. We have fallen woefully short of being faithful witnesses for Christ, and we need to do a far better job of living out our stance on human sexuality. However, the points above do *not* demonstrate that the Nazarene human sexuality statement is fundamentally wrong. Therefore, while the experiences related in the book are valuable in the sense that they expose areas where Nazarenes need to renovate our praxis, they do not achieve their intended goal of substantiating that the Church of the Nazarene should become LGBTQ+ affirming.

A second major issue that arises in Part I is the charge that a non-affirming stance harms those who identify as LGBTQ+ by increasing their likelihood of self-harm. Keegan Osinski, for example, states,

It is clear, as demonstrated in much social scientific research, that non-affirming churches are indeed harmful to LGBTQ+ people, especially youths.²⁹

Osinski cites one article to substantiate this claim, but the article does not actually support her point.³⁰ And this is par for the

²⁹ Keegan Osinski, “Liberation Toward a Fresh and Faithful Nazarene Theology,” 43.

³⁰ Osinski cites Eric M. Rodriguez, “At the Intersection of Church and Gay: A Review of the Psychological Research on Gay and Lesbian Christians,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 57.1 (2009): 5–38. Rodriguez discusses various psychological theories for explaining how gay and lesbian Christians integrate their sexual

course. Over and over throughout the book, authors repeat the “affirm or harm” mantra but rarely provide any sources for the claim.³¹ When they do cite a source, it is typically The Trevor Project, an organization that focuses on suicide prevention for LGBTQ youth.³² The most commonly cited statistic is this one from a Trevor Project research brief: “LGBTQ youth who report

identities with their faith (conflict, cognitive dissonance, stigma, identify conflict). Some or all the theories may assume that the Christian view of homosexuality (rather than the gay or lesbian identity or behavior) is the problem to be mitigated, but this is not the same as demonstrating that it is harmful. Rodriguez himself does not explicitly argue that non-affirming churches are harmful to LGBTQ+ people. Indeed, his article only addresses lesbians and gays, not all LGBTQ+ individuals.

³¹ For the claim with no sources see Taryn Eudaly, “Because I Want My Children to Live,” 7; Hudson, “Scandalous Woman,” 15; Allen, “Damn Time,” 104; Andree, “Who Should Be Part?,” 109; Tyler Brinkman, “Bodies Are Holy—Even Transgender Bodies,” 118; Katie A. Donaldson, “The Spirit Transforms,” 139; Karl Giberson, “The End of Othering,” 163–64; Hiatt, “Please Just Love,” 185; Jensen, “Love Does No Harm,” 200–203; Kadee Wirick Smedley, “We’re Harming People in Jesus’ Name,” 281–83; Michael Joseph Brennan, “In the Image of Perfectly Cis-Het-Rule Followers,” 331–35; Bryan P. Stone, “Holiness Is Queer,” 425; Leeroy Tomas, “Created in the Image of God: A Polemic Against Today’s Crusade,” 431–34.

³² Buffy Fleece, “Judging the Fruit,” 144; Gill, “Hey Nazarenes!,” 178; Madsen, “Do No Harm,” 217; Janel Apps Ramsey, “The Unknown Bundle,” 275; Sharon Stueckle, “Hear My Heart,” 294. Adam Wallis (“Let Anyone Accept This Who Can,” 314) cites Anne Harding, “Religious Faith Linked to Suicidal Behavior in LGBQ Adults,” *Reuters Health*. Harding summarizes findings from Megan C. Lytle et al., “Association of Religiosity with Sexual Minority Suicide Ideation and Attempt,” *American Journal of Preventative Medicine* 54.5 (2018): 644–51. Lytle et al. describe their results as follows: “Overall, increased importance of religion was associated with higher odds of recent suicide ideation for both gay/lesbian and questioning students.” Note that the higher odds of suicide ideation are associated with the importance of religion (to the student), with no distinction between different religions or affirming versus non-affirming stances. The study therefore does not seem to address how non-affirming Christian churches in particular impact LGBQ students.

having at least one accepting adult were 40% less likely to report a suicide attempt in the past year.”³³

The idea that a non-affirming stance causes increased suicide rates among LGBTQ+ individuals is problematic for at least three reasons. First, the Trevor Project brief and the survey behind it are imprecise about what constitutes an “accepting adult.” The brief describes the survey as follows:

Youth were first asked whether they had disclosed their sexual orientation to any of the following adults: parent, family member other than a parent or sibling, teacher or guidance counselor, and doctor or other healthcare provider. As a follow-up, *youth were asked to what extent they were accepted* by the adult(s) to whom they disclosed their sexual orientation. A variable was created that indicated whether *youth felt accepted* by one or more of the adults to whom they disclosed or did not feel accepted by any adult(s) to whom they disclosed.³⁴

It seems that for the survey an “accepting adult” is one by whom a student felt accepted when they shared their sexual orientation. Such a definition, of course, is highly subjective. Some students might only feel accepted by an adult who affirms that their sexual feelings and actions based on them are right. But others might

³³ The Trevor Project, “Accepting Adults Reduce Suicide Attempts Among LGBTQ Youth,” <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/research-briefs/accepting-adults-reduce-suicide-attempts-among-lgbtq-youth/>. For references to this statistic in *Why the Church of the Nazarene Should Be Fully LGBTQ+ Affirming*, see Madsen, “Do No Harm,” 217; Ramsey, “The Unknown Bundle,” 273, 275; Stueckle, “Hear My Heart,” 294.

³⁴ The Trevor Project, “Accepting Adults,” emphasis added.

feel accepted by an adult who acknowledges the reality of their feelings, encourages them to submit themselves to the lordship of Christ, and promises to love them regardless. The oft-cited Trevor Project statistic therefore in no way proves that a non-affirming stance causes increased suicide rates among LGBTQ+ individuals.

Second, let us consider a hypothetical: What if research did show that LGBTQ+ individuals who encountered a gracious, non-affirming, Christian view had a higher rate of suicide? In my view, this would not necessarily mean that Christianity was at fault. For two thousand years, Christian orthodoxy has held that homosexual practice is wrong and that there are two sexes: male and female. Yet it is only in the last fifty to seventy years that concerns about high suicide rates among LGBTQ+ individuals have arisen. Why is this? It is not Christian orthodoxy that has changed. Rather, the modern self has come into its own, and the number of people who identify as LGBTQ+ and act accordingly has skyrocketed. In such a milieu, will some LGBTQ+ individuals find it psychologically unbearable that Christians refuse to affirm their sexual feelings and actions as being morally right? Quite possibly. But when LGBTQ+ individuals and their allies cry, “Foul!” the church may rightly respond, “We stand where we did before. It is you who have changed.”

Third, several essays in Part I inadvertently destabilize the idea that a non-affirming stance is necessarily harmful. Rose, for instance, identifies as gay but declares that she has decided to live

according to Nazarene doctrine.³⁵ She goes on to note that this decision involves a significant personal sacrifice, but it is apparently a cost that she is willing to pay. It is also worth recalling that Rose is the one who wrote that the church's message to her was "you need to get your junk together, then we can talk." How many others like Rose might choose to live within the bounds of orthodoxy, especially if that orthodoxy were infused with far more grace and love? Part I also contains essays from Naomi Mackey and Jennifer Crowder Noricks, both of whom married men, realized that they were attracted to women, and have nonetheless remained with their husbands.³⁶ Noricks even claims to be "happily, monogamously married."³⁷ It does not seem that Christian orthodoxy has harmed these two by upholding the sanctity of biblical marriage. And are we really to believe that it would be better for Mackey and Noricks to divorce their husbands or engage in adultery or polygamy to actualize their same-sex attraction? Surely not. Such experiences give the lie to the claim that the historic Christian view of human sexuality necessarily hurts people.

³⁵ Rose, "Around the Table," 77.

³⁶ Naomi Mackey, "Why Can't the Nazarenes I Know Be More Like the Knitters I Know?," 21–23; Jennifer Crowder Noricks, "The Rejected Calling," 29–33.

³⁷ Noricks, "The Rejected Calling," 31.

Part II: Ally Narratives

Part II: Ally Narratives consists of essays by authors who—as the title suggests—write as “allies” of the LGBTQ+ community. Part II is by far the longest part of the book—longer than Parts I and III combined—but adds little to the overarching case. Much of what the authors say depends on the two issues we dealt with above in Part I (the role of experience in formulating doctrine, the “affirm or harm” claim). The authors do, however, raise two further matters that are worth engaging: (1) divorce; (2) women’s ordination. The authors contend that if the Church of the Nazarene applied the same hermeneutic to human sexuality as it has to divorce and women’s ordination, the Church would become fully LGBTQ+ affirming. We will examine each of these issues in turn.

First, divorce: Michelle Gill highlights the tension well.

The church must revisit this subject [human sexuality] with the humility to consider that we have not gotten it right. . . . There was a time that divorce was acceptable only in cases of “biblical grounds” (adultery). . . .

Now the church evaluates these issues on a case-by-case basis. . . . Did the church abandon scripture or simply take note that their former hardline position on divorce was harmful both to those dealing with that reality and the church herself, by disqualifying qualified, gifted ministers?³⁸

³⁸ Gill, “Hey Nazarenes!,” 178–79. See also Murphy L. Gill, “Be Careful Who You Choose to Exclude, They Might Be Someone You Love,” 170; Lon Marshall, “The Jesus Lens,” 224; Wallis, “Let Anyone,” 316; Bruce Balcom, “The Case for Marriage Equality,” 321–24; Patti L. Dikes, “A LGBTQIA+ Proposal to Fix the

On one hand, Gill makes a fair point. The statement on divorce in the current *Manual* says that divorce “falls short of God’s best intentions” and that the church “must take care in preserving the marriage bond where wise and possible,” but it nowhere discusses biblical grounds for divorce.³⁹ The lack of clear teaching on biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage forces pastors and credentialing boards to make case-by-case decisions that (as Gill notes) are often inconsistent.

On the other hand, however, Gill and others are incorrect that the Nazarene position on divorce provides precedent for an affirming view of homosexuality and transgenderism—for at least three reasons: (1) The biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage are not an essential Christian doctrine. All Christians everywhere have always believed that divorce falls short of God’s ideal, but the church has never achieved complete unanimity on the biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage.⁴⁰ One cannot say the same for homosexuality and transgenderism. For two millennia, the church has consistently taught that there are two sexes (male and female), that marriage is between one man and one woman, and that homosexual practice is a sin. (2) While the current Nazarene position on divorce is vague, it does not

Nazarene Church Manual,” 341; K. Steve McCormick, “See No One as ‘Other,’” 381.

³⁹ *Church of the Nazarene Manual 2017–2021*, §31.

⁴⁰ I suspect that the current Nazarene statement on divorce is intentionally broad to allow for a range of positions similar to what one finds across the Christian tradition.

contradict Scripture. To affirm homosexual practice and transgenderism, by contrast, directly contradicts Scripture. (3) Even if one could show that the Church of the Nazarene is inconsistent in how it applies Scripture to divorce vis-à-vis homosexuality and transgenderism, the way to fix this would not be to reject biblical teaching on the latter, but to embrace biblical teaching more fully on the former.

Second, women's ordination: The following statement from Randall Hartman is representative.

The "Bible says" a lot of things that we conveniently ignore. . . . The Bible says women "are not permitted to speak" [1 Cor 14:34]. Why does the Church of the Nazarene allow women ministers? . . .

Do you see the point I'm making? In these examples the thoughtful person says, "But there are things to consider such as context and culture." Exactly. Why are we reluctant to apply this same logic to the few passages used to vilify members of the queer community?⁴¹

Such an argument, however, seriously misunderstands the Nazarene position on women's ordination. The Church of the Nazarene does not "ignore" passages like 1 Corinthians 14:33–34 and 1 Timothy 2:11–12. Rather, it interprets them in line with passages in Paul's letters and elsewhere in Scripture that clearly affirm women in leadership roles, including ones that involve

⁴¹ Hartman, "But the Bible Says' Is Not Enough," 182–83. See also Noricks, "The Rejected Calling," 31; Dikes, "An LGBTQIA+ Proposal," 341–42; Forest Fisk, "Negotiating a Positive Interpretation," 345; Robert Grider, "My Interpretative History of Romans 1," 353; McCormick, "See No One as 'Other'," 382–83.

speaking.⁴² The Nazarene position on women’s ordination therefore arises not from ignoring the Bible but from reading it in canonical context. We will discuss the biblical witness on homosexuality and transgenderism in more detail below, but suffice it to say that no such canonical (or cultural) context supports an LGBTQ+ affirming view.

Therefore, Parts I and II together fail to provide a compelling answer to the question, “Why should the Church of the Nazarene be fully LGBTQ+ affirming?” While the essays in Parts I and II are diverse, most of them depend in some way upon one of the four issues that we have engaged with above (the role of experience in formulating doctrine, the “affirm or harm” claim, divorce, women’s ordination). Once one sets these points aside, it is difficult to find any coherent argument for the book’s overarching thesis. But perhaps Part III will be able to salvage the case.

Part III: Scholarly Perspectives

Part III: Scholarly Perspectives seems to be so-named because of the credentials of the authors. It is certainly not because of the contents of the essays. To the reader who has been thirsting for

⁴² *Church of the Nazarene Manual 2017–2021*, §501: “Acknowledging the apparent paradox created by Paul’s instruction to Timothy (1 Timothy 2:11–12) and to the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 14:33–34), we believe interpreting these passages as limiting the role of women in ministry presents serious conflicts with specific passages of scripture that commend female participation in spiritual leadership roles (Joel 2:28–29; Acts 2:17–18; 21:8–9; Romans 16:1, 3, 7; Philippians 4:2–3).” Particularly important for interpreting 1 Cor 14:34–35 is 1 Cor 11:5, where Paul describes women prophesying.

some serious rational arguments after traversing the desert of Parts I and II, Part III appears as a welcome oasis on the horizon. The oasis, however, turns out to be a mirage. While some essays in Part III are marginally more academic in subject and presentation, none of them qualify as scholarship in any meaningful sense. I do not say this because I disagree with them but because they fail to do two basic things that scholarly writing is supposed to do: (1) engage with previous work in the area and (2) contribute something to the discussion. The problem is most glaring in discussions of Scripture. In what follows I address this issue and then engage with two further essays.

Scripture appears as a significant issue throughout Parts I and II of *Why the Church of the Nazarene Should Be Fully LGBTQ+ Affirming*.⁴³ However, authors in Parts I and II generally mention Scripture in passing and do not provide exegetical evidence for their interpretations. Given the experiential focus of Parts I and II, this is perhaps excusable. “But surely,” one thinks, “someone will do some significant biblical exegesis in Part III.” Not so. Several essays in Part III focus on Scripture.⁴⁴ But none of them

⁴³ E.g., Hudson, “Scandalous Woman,” 13–14; Schlorff, “Parable,” 50–51; Bethany Raya, “An Open Letter to My Church Family,” 46–48; Andree, “Who Should Be Part?,” 107–8; Terry Clees, “Following Our Attractions,” 125; Donaldson, “The Spirit Transforms,” 139; Ken Garner, “They Are Not Hurting Anyone, We Are Hurting Them,” 158–60; Gill, “Hey Nazarenes!,” 176–77; Rand Michael, “The Spirit’s Leading Me into More Truth,” 242; Ramsey, “Unknown Bundle,” 274; Phil Stout, “The Stakes Are High,” 285–86.

⁴⁴ Laurie J. Braaten, “Some Scriptural Reflections on Same-Sex Relations,” 325–29; Fisk, “Negotiating,” 345–48; Grider, “My Interpretative History,” 349–53;

engage in anything that can be regarded as scholarly exegesis. Rather, the authors repeatedly demonstrate their ignorance of (or willfully neglect) major scholarly work on the passages in question, parroting pop theology adages that have been debunked for decades. As one reference point, Robert Gagnon's *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* is widely regarded as one of the most significant works on its subject. It is 500 pages long, exhibits rigorous scholarship, discusses every relevant biblical passage, and arrives at orthodox conclusions.⁴⁵ And not a single author in *Why the Church of the Nazarene Should Be Fully LGBTQ+ Affirming* mentions or cites it. This is inexcusable. Below I catalogue and counter some of the major misnomers that authors in Part III could have easily avoided had they taken time to engage with the work of Gagnon and others.

- **Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 no longer apply.**⁴⁶ The issue of how Christians should apply OT law is certainly complex. However, Christians have traditionally observed the vast majority of the commands in Leviticus 18. And the authors who claim that Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 no longer apply conveniently neglect to mention that one of the terms Paul

Dana Robert Hicks, "The Sin of Sodom," 359–63; Samuel M. Powell, "Dialog," 387–93.

⁴⁵ There is, of course, a body of LGBTQ+ affirming biblical scholarship. Thomas Oord cites many of the key sources in a footnote ("Thomas Jay Oord's Response to Accusations Brought by Signatories Outside the Intermountain District but Reformulated by an Intermountain District Board," 464 n. 10). Yet to my knowledge none of the affirming works provide an adequate response to Gagnon, let alone to non-affirming scholarship beyond Gagnon.

⁴⁶ Braaten, "Some Scriptural Reflections," 327–28; Grider, "My Interpretative History," 350; Powell, "Dialog," 388; Young, "True Colors," 443.

uses to refer to homosexual practice (1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10) is based on these prohibitions in Leviticus, which suggests that he thinks they still apply (see below).

- **David had a sexual relationship with Jonathan.** Robert Grider (a penname) claims that David's words in 2 Samuel 1:26 ("your love to me was extraordinary, surpassing the love of women," ESV) allude to a sexual relationship between David and Jonathan.⁴⁷ He goes on to assert that "this probably indicates that the ancient Israelites had a rather permissive attitude toward same-sexual relationships in the sixth century BC (when David's eulogy was added to Israel's scriptures) than it did a hundred years later in the fifth century BC (when the Levitical prohibitions were added to Israel's scripture)."⁴⁸ There are two problems here. First, as Gagnon amply demonstrates, none of the texts about David and Jonathan, "taken singly or as a collective whole, provide persuasive support for a homosexual relationship between Jonathan and David."⁴⁹ Second, the inclusion of 2 Samuel 1:26 in the canon undercuts rather than supports Grider's argument. It is highly unlikely that the Judaism that received Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 as law would include a positive portrait of a homosexual relationship alongside these passages in the Scriptures. Gagnon sums up the matter well: "Only in our day, removed as we are from ancient Near Eastern conventions, are these kinds of specious connections made by people desperate to find the slightest shred of support for homosexual practice in the Bible."⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Grider, "My Interpretative History," 350–51.

⁴⁸ Grider, "My Interpretative History," 351.

⁴⁹ Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 153.

⁵⁰ Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 154.

- **Romans 1:26–27 does not prohibit homosexual practice.** Grider asserts that Paul condemns homosexual practice as being “contrary to nature” (Rom 1:26) merely because it conflicted with the fallen social structures of his day.⁵¹ Grider leverages this interpretation to argue that Romans 1:26–27 no longer prohibits monogamous homosexual relationships because these are socially accepted today. There are at least four problems with Grider’s interpretation. First, Grider says that he adopted his view because “I had studied the ancient meanings of the Greek words which are normally translated as ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ in Romans (*physikos* and *aphysikos*).”⁵² However, *aphysikos* does not occur in Romans (or anywhere in the New Testament, for that matter), so Grider cannot have studied this word in the way he describes. The Greek phrase usually translated as “unnatural” or “contrary to nature” in Rom 1:26 is *para physin*. But if Grider had studied this phrase he would have arrived at a very different conclusion (see below). Second, Grider ignores the Jewish background of Paul’s polemic against homosexual practice. When Paul describes lesbian relationships as “contrary to nature” (*para physin*, Rom 1:26 ESV), he is echoing a common Jewish critique of homosexual practice. Gagnon demonstrates at length that Jews viewed homosexual practice as “contrary to nature” because (1) it was unable to achieve procreation and (2) it lacked the biological and anatomical complementarity of heterosexual relationships.⁵³ In this context, “contrary to nature,” refers to transgressing the created order, not acting against one’s own sexual prefer-

⁵¹ Grider, “My Interpretative History,” 352–53.

⁵² Grider, “My Interpretative History,” 352.

⁵³ Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 159–83.

ences or cultural norms.⁵⁴ Third, Grider wrongly assumes that homosexual practice was socially unacceptable in antiquity. It is true that Judaism unanimously rejected homosexual activity.⁵⁵ But as noted above, the reasons that Jews rejected homosexual practice undermine rather than help Grider's case. And some Greeks viewed homosexual relationships as good (even better than heterosexual relationships) and grounded same-sex attraction in nonbiblical origin stories (see, e.g., Plato's *Symposium*). Therefore, one cannot assume that Paul prohibited homosexual practice simply because it conflicted with contemporary social structures. Fourth, Grider's argument seems to be a necessarily slippery slope. Grider (1) asserts that Paul's teaching is based on fallen social structures (without any evidence for this point); (2) notes that society now views the prohibited activity positively; (3) dismisses the prohibition and recommends acting according to current social structures. It seems that one could use this argument to dismiss virtually any biblical prohibition.

- **1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 do not prohibit homosexual practice.**⁵⁶ Authors in Part III assert that these texts do not prohibit homosexual practice for two reasons that do not stand up to scrutiny.
 - **The meaning of the Greek terms.** Authors throughout the book (including Part III) claim that “homosexuality”

⁵⁴ It is also important to note that lesbian relationships (Rom 1:26) were typically consensual in antiquity, and Paul says that the men “likewise ... were consumed with passion *for one another*” (1:27 ESV, emphasis added), so he is not merely describing exploitative homosexual practice.

⁵⁵ Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 160, 163.

⁵⁶ Grider, “My Interpretative History,” 351; Powell, “Dialog,” 389–90; Young, “True Colors,” 443.

language was wrongly introduced into the Bible in 1946.⁵⁷ They typically go on to suggest that the passages in question (i.e., 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10) condemn exploitative homosexual practice rather than the adult, consensual homosexual relationships we know today. Similarly, James Travis Young asserts that “every New Testament reference to what is called ‘homosexuality’ in English translations actually condemns non-consensual acts between adults and children rather than adult same-sex intimacy.”⁵⁸ Such claims are fundamentally mistaken. The point about “homosexuality” language entering the Bible in 1946 is, quite simply, irrelevant. One does not determine the meaning of a word in the Greek New Testament by studying how older modern editions translate it, but by surveying its usage in ancient Greek literature and selecting the most likely meaning in context. Here is a summary of what we find when we do this: The phrase “men who practice homosexuality” in 1 Corinthians 6:9 (ESV) translates two Greek terms: *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. *Malakoi* (plural of *malakos*) can mean “soft,” “delicate,” or “effeminate.” *Arsenokoitai* (plural of *arsenokoitēs*) is a compound noun constructed from *arsēn* (“male”) and *koitē* (“bed”). These two terms occur together in the Greek translation of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. Since 1 Corinthians 6:9 is the earliest known occurrence of *arsenokoitēs*, it seems likely that Paul or another Jew coined the term based on the prohibitions of homosexual practice in Leviticus. Together, *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* likely refer

⁵⁷ Raya, “An Open Letter,” 46–47; Garner, “They Are Not Hurting Anyone,” 160; Gill, “Hey Nazarenes!,” 176–77; Fisk, “Negotiating,” 347.

⁵⁸ Young, “True Colors,” 443. Grider (“My Interpretative History,” 351) and Powell (“Dialog,” 389–90) suggest that the meaning of the terms is uncertain.

to the passive and active partners in homosexual intercourse, respectively—hence “men who practice homosexuality” (ESV) or “men who have sex with men” (NIV). First Timothy 1:10 uses only *arsenokoitai*, presumably with a similar meaning to 1 Corinthians 6:9.⁵⁹ Nothing in either context suggests that the conduct described by these words is limited to exploitative homosexual acts.

- **The nature of homosexual relationships in antiquity.** As noted above, the authors suggest that that Scripture only prohibits exploitative homosexual practice. It is true that there were forms of homosexuality in the Greco-Roman world that were exploitative. One notable one was pederasty, a sexual relationship between an adult man and an adolescent boy. But there were also plenty of adult, consensual homosexual relationships.⁶⁰ Preston Sprinkle is therefore correct: “We cannot assume . . . that Paul only had nonconsensual, unhealthy, exploitative same-sex relations in view when he wrote about same-sex relations.”⁶¹

In sum, the biblical case for homosexuality that we find in Part III is embarrassingly weak. Virtually all the points that the authors make were discredited by Gagnon over twenty years ago. And—we recall—the book is supposed to tell us why the Church

⁵⁹ For more on 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10, see Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 303–26; Sprinkle, *People to Be Loved*, 103–20.

⁶⁰ Plato’s *Symposium* contains many examples. See further Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 350–61; Sprinkle, *People to Be Loved*, 55–64; Preston M. Sprinkle, “Did Adult Consensual Same-Sex Relationships Exist in Bible Times?” (Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender, n.d.), <https://www.centerforfaith.com/resources>.

⁶¹ Sprinkle, *People to Be Loved*, 64.

of the Nazarene should become fully *LGBTQ+* affirming, not just lesbian (L) and gay (G) affirming. Yet no essay in Part III attempts to mount a substantive biblical case for bisexual (B) practice or transgenderism (T).⁶² Oord and Oord therefore seem to expect the reader to second their motion that the Church of the Nazarene overturn two millennia of Christian doctrine without any compelling biblical case. And this is telling.

Before leaving Part III, I wish to engage with two further essays from authors who are not only ordained Nazarene elders but have also taught at Nazarene institutions: Michael Lodahl and K. Steve McCormick. Lodahl serves as Professor of Theology and World Religions at Point Loma Nazarene University. McCormick is Emeritus Professor of Historical Theology and William M. Greathouse Chair for Wesleyan-Holiness Theology at Nazarene Theological Seminary and has also taught at Eastern Nazarene University, Mount Vernon Nazarene University, and European Nazarene College. Lodahl and McCormick's credentials, positions, and experience suggest that their essays should be as strong as any in Part III, so they provide good soundings in the overall depth of the essays.

⁶² A few essays in the volume briefly mention biblical passages about eunuchs (e.g., Matt 19:11–12; Acts 8:26–40) in relation to intersex individuals or transgenderism. See, e.g., Tilden, “Shutting Out Sparrows,” 63; Jensen, “Love,” 203; Wallis, “Let Anyone,” 317. However, the biblical witness regarding eunuchs provides no support for transgenderism. See Preston M. Sprinkle, *Embodied: Transgender Identities, the Church, and What the Bible Has to Say* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2021), 95–112; Preston M. Sprinkle, “A Biblical Conversation about Transgender Identities” (Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender, n.d.), <https://www.centerforfaith.com/resources>.

Lodahl discusses an unpublished manuscript by now-deceased Nazarene theologian J. Kenneth Grider entitled “Wesleyans and Homosexuality.”⁶³ Lodahl acknowledges that he “was not terribly impressed with” the manuscript, but he nonetheless decides to “highlight some of the strongest passages . . . and lend my voice to his.”⁶⁴ Lodahl begins with Grider’s point that some humans have a genetic propensity toward same-sex attraction. Grider also notes that same-sex behavior occurs in animals and suggests that if this is so then “perhaps acting on such interests, in humans, is natural, based on an orientation, and is not unnatural.”⁶⁵ Lodahl comments, “This suggestion flies in the face of arguments based on Romans 1 that same-sex relations are contrary to nature (vv. 26–27).”⁶⁶ He goes on to question—referring to Nazarene Article IV on Scripture—whether the Bible is meant “to provide us scientific information . . . regarding human sexual attractions.”⁶⁷

Lodahl makes several elementary mistakes here. First, he assumes that if someone has a propensity or orientation toward same-sex attraction, it must be right to act on the attraction. As noted above, such reasoning fails to account for the reality of original sin.⁶⁸ Second, he altogether misinterprets Paul’s phrase

⁶³ Michael Lodahl, “Grider’s Gridlock: Shall We Honor His Life and Legacy?,” 373–77.

⁶⁴ Lodahl, “Grider’s Gridlock,” 374.

⁶⁵ Lodahl, “Grider’s Gridlock,” 375.

⁶⁶ Lodahl, “Grider’s Gridlock,” 375.

⁶⁷ Lodahl, “Grider’s Gridlock,” 375.

⁶⁸ See General Assessment, point 2.

“contrary to nature” (Rom 1:26)—see above. Third, he fails to observe that Scripture prohibits homosexual practice regardless of attraction. The question of whether the Bible is meant to give us scientific information about sexual attraction is therefore a red herring.

Lodahl concludes with an appeal to become a neighbor to LGBTQ+ people:

To become the neighbor literally means to draw nigh, to draw near, to the other. . . . And if we were to follow J. Kenneth Grider’s counsel, we would be running to help, to hear, to love.⁶⁹

Such a conclusion sounds nice but is less than forthright. Should Christians become neighbors to those in need? Certainly. But this is precisely what Christian orthodoxy has always taught. And to follow Grider’s counsel—or at least Lodahl’s summary of it—would not mean “running to help, to hear, to love” but affirming behavior that Christianity has regarded as sin for two millennia. And affirming sin is never helpful, caring, or loving.

McCormick opens his essay by describing how over nearly forty years of teaching he has seen “the God of our future arrive” in his students.⁷⁰ Such experiences lead him to assert, “Our doctrines must change, or our love together as a community of faith must die.”⁷¹ McCormick contends that the Nazarene founders “never expected Nazarene doctrine and faith to remain

⁶⁹ Lodahl, “Grider’s Gridlock,” 377, emphasis original.

⁷⁰ K. Steve McCormick, “See No One as ‘Other,’” 379.

⁷¹ McCormick, “See No One as ‘Other,’” 380.

permanently fixed.”⁷² Citing Phineas Bresee and John Wesley’s sermons as support, he says that the Nazarene founders “expected us to hold the tensions of faith *and* doubt, until the Church reaches faithful consensus at the General Assembly to change the Church’s Articles of Faith, . . . codes of conduct, etc.”⁷³ In short, McCormick wants the Church of the Nazarene to allow an LGBTQ+ affirming view until there is enough consensus to make a change.

At this point in the essay (and we are only two pages in), McCormick has already made several missteps that are, quite frankly, surprising for someone who should be an elder statesman among Nazarene theologians. Let us begin where he does: his students. McCormick seems to assume that things he has seen or heard from his students necessitate a change in Nazarene doctrine. McCormick does not say precisely what he has seen or heard, but let us suppose that his students are substantially more LGBTQ+ affirming than the Church of the Nazarene. Why would this be a reason for change? McCormick’s concern seems to be that the Church of the Nazarene will die out if it does not conform. But when has cultural acceptability ever been a good reason for changing doctrine? Furthermore, denominations that have become more LGBTQ+ affirming (Episcopal Church, Presbyterian Church USA, United Methodist Church) are generally *not* growing.

⁷² McCormick, “See No One as ‘Other,’” 380.

⁷³ McCormick, “See No One as ‘Other,’” 380, emphasis original.

Second, McCormick fails to recognize the difference between essential and nonessential Christian doctrines. While there are some things that Christians have historically agreed to disagree about (e.g., mode of baptism, understandings of the Lord's Supper), there are other things that all Christians everywhere have always believed. On these, we do not compromise. And the historic Christian teaching that there are two sexes (male and female) and that marriage is between one man and one woman clearly falls into the "essential" category. McCormick's suggestion that John Wesley and Phineas Bresee would be in favor of allowing an LGBTQ+ affirming view until consensus for change might be reached is altogether fantastic. Wesley and Bresee held orthodox views on human sexuality and would be deeply grieved to know that some of their theological descendants are rejecting historic Christian teaching on this subject.

Third, McCormick confuses doubt with denial when he says we must hold the tension of "faith *and* doubt." McCormick and the other authors in the book are not expressing faithful doubt of the Nazarene position (saying, e.g., "I believe, help my unbelief"); they are outright denying it and calling for radical change.

The rest of the essay fares no better. McCormick complains that the Church of the Nazarene has misinterpreted the seven "wounded texts" of Scripture that discuss homosexuality.⁷⁴ Yet he does not attempt to interpret any of these texts, and he

⁷⁴ McCormick, "See No One as 'Other,'" 381, citing Gen 19:5, 13; Lev 18:22; 20:13; Judg 19; Rom 1:26-27; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10.

strangely says that Nazarenes have used these “to justify our position on the sexual equality and identity of LGBTQIA+ people in the church.”⁷⁵ This is an odd claim, since these texts have nothing to do with transgender (T), intersex (I), or asexual (A) individuals, and to my knowledge the Church of the Nazarene has not applied them to these issues. McCormick continues to conflate the issues of homosexual practice and transgenderism throughout the essay.⁷⁶ The latter part of the essay is essentially an appeal not to see LGBTQIA+ individuals as “Other.” McCormick seems altogether oblivious to the fact that the Nazarene position on human sexuality *already* does not treat anyone as other. The last point in the human sexuality statement declares,

We affirm that, above all the virtues, the people of God are to clothe themselves with love. The people of God have always welcomed broken people into our gathering. Such Christian hospitality is neither an excusing of individual disobedience nor a refusal to participate redemptively in discerning the roots of brokenness. Restoring humans to the likeness of Jesus requires confession, forgiveness, formative practices, sanctification, and godly counsel – but most of all, it includes the welcome of love which invites the broken person into the circle of grace known as the church. If we fail to honestly confront sin and brokenness, we have not loved.

⁷⁵ McCormick, “See No One as ‘Other,’” 381.

⁷⁶ McCormick also makes a misleading claim that intersex conditions discredit the gender binary (“See No One as ‘Other,’” 381). On this issue, see Sprinkle, *Embodied*, 113–26; Sprinkle, “Transgender Identities.”

If we fail to love, we cannot participate in God’s healing of brokenness.⁷⁷

The only way to read this paragraph and conclude that it lacks love is to redefine love as affirmation. And this, I suggest, is precisely what McCormick has done.

Part III, then, falls woefully short of its title. What we find here are not “scholarly perspectives” but opinion pieces from authors with scholarly credentials. Throughout Part III, authors repeatedly misinterpret Scripture precisely because they fail to engage with major scholarly works. And the essays of Lodahl and McCormick—two of the more noteworthy authors—are poorly constructed and executed. If one is looking for a strong, or even plausible, scholarly case for the LGBTQ+ affirming position, this is not it.

Thomas Oord’s “Response to Accusations”

Although Thomas Oord’s “Response to Accusations” appears in the appendix rather than the body of the book, it deserves comment both because it is substantially longer than any of the essays and because it illustrates how at least one district has implemented the Nazarene position on human sexuality.

Oord states at the outset that the essay contains his responses to questions formulated by an Intermountain District committee based on accusations from Nazarenes outside the district.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ *Church of the Nazarene Manual 2017–2021*, §31.

⁷⁸ Oord, “Response to Accusations,” 457.

Oord says that District Superintendent Scott Shaw communicated the charges to him in November of 2021. Oord decided to face the accusations following the process in the *Manual*.⁷⁹ He apparently submitted a written response to the committee and later gave a verbal defense. According to Oord, the charges were of two sorts: (1) theological charges (regarding the existence of God, the deity of Christ, and the Nazarene Articles of Faith); (2) human sexuality charges. He gives the result up front: “The committee assigned to my case wisely set aside most theological charges leveled by the accusing group.”⁸⁰ Oord interestingly does not mention the committee’s decision on the human sexuality charges. However, the back cover of the book describes him as an elder in the Church of the Nazarene, which implies that he retained his ministerial credentials.

For the purpose of this review, I will leave Oord’s response to the theological charges aside and focus on his response to the human sexuality charges. Oord states his position clearly:

I am one among a sizable number of members of the Church of the Nazarene who are LGBTQ affirming. . . . By “LGBTQ affirming,” I mean many members of the Church of the Nazarene believe non-heterosexual (e.g., Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer) orientation, identity, and sexual behavior (expressed in covenant relationship) are compatible with authentic Christian faith.⁸¹

⁷⁹ *Church of the Nazarene Manual 2017–2021*, §606.

⁸⁰ Oord, “Response to Accusations,” 457.

⁸¹ Oord, “Response to Accusations,” 461; cf. 466–67.

Why does Oord think he should retain his status as an ordained elder when he clearly denies the Nazarene statement on human sexuality? In essence, Oord sees no difference between what he is doing and the normal process for doctrinal development. He gives an example of a paper that he delivered at Northwest Nazarene University in 2007 entitled, “Revisioning Article X: Fifteen Changes in the Church of the Nazarene’s Article on Entire Sanctification.” Oord notes, “No one thought I was a heretic or was teaching false doctrine when I suggested *fifteen* changes to the article widely regarded as the denomination’s distinctive doctrine.”⁸² Similarly, when some of the changes were accepted but others were rejected, no one required him to leave the Church of the Nazarene.

The problem with Oord’s analogy is twofold. First, like McCormick above, he fails to see that the teaching that there are two sexes (male and female) and that marriage is between one man and one woman is an essential Christian doctrine. I am passionate about entire sanctification and have gone on record to say that all Christians should believe in it precisely because it is “well grounded in Scripture, well-represented in the Christian tradition, and consistent with classic Christian teaching.”⁸³ Yet historically speaking, entire sanctification is not an essential Christian doctrine. The teaching on human sexuality sketched

⁸² Oord, “Response to Accusations,” 467, emphasis original.

⁸³ Matthew I. Ayars, Christopher T. Bounds, and Caleb T. Friedeman, *Holiness: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, forthcoming), 3.

above, however, is something that all Christians everywhere have always believed and is therefore nonnegotiable. Second, Oord assumes that all doctrinal changes are equal. I am not sure what revisions Oord proposed to Article X in 2007, but I assume that none of them involved an outright denial of entire sanctification. Yet this is precisely what Oord is doing with respect to the human sexuality statement. If Oord were to outright deny the doctrine of entire sanctification, his credentials should be removed immediately. And by the same token, because he clearly denied the human sexuality statement, his credentials should have been removed immediately.

Sadly, this is not what the Intermountain District committee decided. Why? One important factor to note is that the *Manual* currently states that “the decision of a Board of Discipline shall be unanimous.”⁸⁴ A split committee might therefore require significant compromises to reach a unanimous decision. Regardless, the fact that Oord clearly denied the Nazarene human sexuality statement in writing and was allowed to retain his credentials is appalling. Nazarenes worldwide should take note and hold our ordained ministers to much higher standards.

Conclusion

In the end, *Why the Church of the Nazarene Should Be Fully LGBTQ+ Affirming* fails to offer a single compelling answer to the question implied in its title. Why should the Church of the

⁸⁴ *Church of the Nazarene Manual 2017–2021*, §606.8.

Nazarene be fully LGBTQ+ affirming? The volume can rattle off a number of points:

- Because love equals affirmation.
- Because if someone has a feeling, it must be right.
- Because one can ignore all views and experiences to the contrary.

And so on. The book does not provide rational arguments; it makes unsubstantiated assertions and expects the reader to accept them without question or be branded as unloving and harmful. Across 472 pages, then, all we really learn is that ninety or so people with some relationship to the Church of the Nazarene *feel* like the denomination should be fully LGBTQ+ affirming. If the feelings of a vocal minority can justify overturning two thousand years of Christian orthodoxy, then I suppose the book will convince. But it should not.

Where do we go from here? Perhaps we can find guidance in these words from Jesus's half-brother Jude:

Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. (Jude 3–4 ESV)

Jude had intended to write a very different letter but found it necessary to exhort these Christians to “contend for the faith” against troublemakers among them. As we read through the letter, we find that one of the ways these opponents of the gospel

were perverting God's grace was through sexual immorality (Jude 4, 6–8; cf. 16, 18). It would have been easy for Jude and the apostles to look the other way, treating the perversions of the troublemakers merely as differences of opinion. If they had chosen this path of least resistance, Christianity as we know it would have died out within a few decades. But they did not. They contended for the faith that they had received so that they could pass it down to us.

We too have a choice. Will we allow certain people in our midst to pervert the gospel? Or will we contend for the faith that we have received? There is no middle ground. And time is short. The current state of the United Methodist Church provides a picture of our future if we tarry. What would it mean to contend for the faith? First, we should call Nazarenes who reject the denomination's stance on human sexuality to repent—including Thomas Oord and other Nazarene authors in this book. Second, we should remove the credentials of Nazarene clergy who refuse to repent—including Thomas Oord and the sixteen other authors in the book who are ordained Nazarene ministers.⁸⁵ Similarly, we should relieve any LGBTQ+ affirming faculty at Nazarene institutions of their positions and titles. Third, how-

⁸⁵ These are (by order of appearance in the book): Taryn Eudaly, Jennifer R. Jensen, Marissa Coblenz, Randall Hartman, Paul Dazet, Brian Niece, Lisa Ponczoch, Todd Ponczoch, Craig Keen, Selden Dee Kelley III, Michael Lodahl, K. Steve McCormick, Samuel M. Powell, Ryan Scott, LeeRoy Tomas, and James Travis Young. The count is based on the bios in the book and Lodahl's bio on the Point Loma Nazarene University website. Gloria M. Coffin describes herself as an ordained elder but does not mention the denomination or church.

ever, we need to renew our witness in the area of human sexuality. As noted in the review of Part I, this book highlights some areas where our orthopraxy has failed to meet our orthodoxy. The authors' general ignorance of the biblical and theological scholarship on human sexuality also suggests that we need to preach and teach on human sexuality with far greater depth and frequency. But if we are willing to contend for the faith in these ways, I am hopeful that the Church of the Nazarene can emerge stronger than ever. May it be so.

“As a movement, the Holiness Partnership stands in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition with a vision of reclaiming the message of holiness and resourcing the Church to be faithful and fruitful. There are junctions along the historic journey of the Church when men and women need to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. The Church in every generation faces false doctrines that are neither born of love nor true to the Holy Spirit. May this response be a tool for local churches, pastors, leaders, and those confronting one such errant teaching. We commend this response to you in the spirit of Christ.”

- the Holiness Partnership 

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