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Being Equipped: A Review of *Homosexuality and the Christian* Mark A. Yarhouse

Yarhouse, M.A. (2010). *Homosexuality and the Christian: A guide for parents, pastors, and friends.* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers).

Reviewed by Joshua Canada

“I am gay.”

The phrase came as a surprise to my ears. I was not shocked at the actual words or the student identifying as homosexual. Friends have uttered these words to me, and I have relationships with folks who identify as homosexuals: sexuality was not what caught me off-guard. My surprise was rooted in the context and plainness of the words. Our meeting was not about relationships or sexuality; it was about a discipline situation. I asked Adrian* why he volunteered this information so openly – we did not know each other well; our interactions were limited to casual “hellos.” He looked up and responded, “You are safe.” I was at once thrilled and terrified. As a Resident Director, I thrive on the intimacy that comes with life together with students. But professionally, same-sex attraction was something I only knew in anecdote and through a patchwork of sermons and academic articles. Caring for and understanding the complexities of those who experience same-sex attraction and the developmental aspects of that attraction were foreign.

Mark Yarhouse, psychology professor at Regent University, has written a straightforward text which provides a framework for Christians to understand and approach same-sex attraction. *Homosexuality and the Christian* is not explicitly for those serving in Christian higher education; however, Yarhouse is quite familiar with the cultures of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCUs) and has been invited as a speaker and consultant to a number of faith-based institutions.

Yarhouse (2010) does not skate around his beliefs on homosexuality. He clearly states, “homosexual behavior is not appropriate for the Christ-follower” (p. 35). Yarhouse realizes that the articulation of his belief is important. He acknowledges the pressure to change the historic, orthodox Christian position on homosexual behavior, but also believes that the Christian task is living out one’s belief in a way that harmonizes truth with love.

Yarhouse’s analysis of Christians’ perspectives on homosexuality mirrors that of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral – an epistemological method utilized by many Wesleyan traditions. One Wesleyan tradition defines the quadrilateral as such:

Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason. Scripture [however] is primary, revealing the Word of God – so far as it is necessary for our salvation. (Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2008 – 2012, 2008, p. 77)

Similarly, Yarhouse utilizes a balance of Scripture, Christian tradition, reason, and personal experience as places of epistemological authority. As with the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, the primary source of truth rests within Scripture, but the other quadrants maintain relationships with one another. After a brief presentation of

the quadrilateral, Yarhouse returns to discourse and asks the reader to consider which of the four ways of knowing is most used by them and those around them. Yarhouse contends that the answer to this question has a significant impact on what one believes about same-sex attraction, as well as how we manifest those beliefs. However, Yarhouse's argument is that all the lenses, with Scripture as primary, need to be utilized equally in order to have a robust understanding of same-sex attraction.

Perhaps most helpful in *Homosexuality and the Christian* is a presentation of how same-sex attraction manifests. Yarhouse uses the phrase "sexual minorities" to clarify that same-sex attraction is more complicated than popular images of the lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, trans-sexual, and questioning (LGBTQ) community. Sexual minorities include everyone who experiences same-sex attraction, regardless of how that affects their life and identity. Yarhouse suggests that in order to have a holistic grasp of the experience of sexual minorities, it is imperative that attraction is viewed in a three-tiered categorization.

The first of these tiers is *same sex-attraction*. This level consists of homosexual attraction. Same-sex attraction is a descriptor of one's feeling but not a determinate of one's identity. Some in this category may be happily heterosexual in identity and may primarily experience heterosexual attraction, but also find themselves having some attraction to the same sex.

Second is *homosexual orientation*. This level exhibits a heightened attraction toward those of the same sex, which is close to or more than one's attraction to the opposite sex and is enough to become a factor in identity – the former often manifests as bisexuality and the latter as homosexuality. This level does not necessarily mean one will be active in their orientation; it is again descriptive of one's feelings. Recently within the Christian community, individuals like Wesley Hill (Hill, 2010) are identifying as homosexual, yet living as celibate because of their Christian convictions; others are in heterosexual marriages but acknowledge a primary attraction to the same sex.

The third level of Yarhouse's (2010) categories is a *gay identity*. This is a prescriptive position that "people use to describe themselves, and it is a label that is imbued with meaning in our culture" (p. 42). This third level is a modern, western phenomenon. Homosexual behavior has always existed, but it is only in the modern age that it has become a factor in one's identity.

These three tiers create a distinction between manifestations of homosexuality and enable a more astute understanding of the differences of those who experience homosexual feelings. Adrian is somewhere in the third tier of gay identity. His questions about how he might stay at an institution that does not permit homosexual behavior exhibited a complex issue, and thus required my articulation of Christian truth to be done with care. I was not challenging merely a belief or feeling, but something he saw as central to his identity. This intersection of theory and practice is where understanding the three-tiered model is vital for student development professionals. My conversations with Adrian about his sexuality looked different from the ones I have had with students in different tiers of their sexual identity.

In addition to the three-tiered framework, *Homosexuality and the Christian* engages the idea of social scripts and considers the impact of the cues and instruction sexual minorities receive from those around them. All of us interact with a variety of scripts that influence our decisions and psychosocial development. Yarhouse (2010) believes that there is a salient "gay script" within our culture which promotes

(1) a naturally occurring “intended by God” distinction between homosexuality, heterosexuality and bisexuality; (2) same-sex attraction as the way you know who you “really are” as a person; (3) same-sex attraction at the core of who you are as a person; (4) same-sex behavior as an extension of that core and (5) self-actualization of your sexual identity as crucial for your fulfillment. (p. 49)

Conversely, Yarhouse suggests that the Christian community has been misguided in warring with the LGBTQ community and has not adequately offered an alternative script for sexual minorities. Thus, in the desire to establish an identity, some Christian sexual minorities choose to live and act on their same-sex desires, while others – Yarhouse argues a substantial number – feel marginalized and lonely within the Christian community in which they wish to belong.

Yarhouse’s research and conclusions push Christian colleges to embrace the complexity of our engagement with sexual minorities. Students come to our institutions at varying levels of Christian maturity; at some institutions they come without a Christian faith. We care for students in all three tiers of same-sex attraction. It is a challenge for us to create safe places for students who identify as gay. Moreover, finding a place for students who disagree with the institutions’ stances and believe that their Christian faith and engagement in same-sex behavior is congruent is a precarious position. We must be careful not to become entangled in the politics of the homosexuality debate, while maintaining the integrity of our beliefs about same-sex attraction. Numerous students disagree with our institutions’ stances on sex outside of marriage, marijuana, alcohol, off-campus co-ed living, etc. Some of these students participate in these activities despite the institutions’ stances, while some choose to abstain. We engage the tension that these students bring to the community with discourse and patience. Genuine engagement also means that we honestly engage with what it means to be a community member and truly care for those who wish to be part of our institutions.

Yarhouse finds that there are groups of sexual minorities who do not want to change the institution; rather, they want to experience the benefit of living in community. It is too simple to view sexual minorities as primarily a threat. Sexual minorities seek community and mentorship just as sexual-majority students.

Christians who are sexual minorities may often choose traditional Christian colleges and universities because they share the values that are reflected in those institutions’ policies. They are not secretly hoping to be freed from these policies; rather, they want the institutions themselves to be places in which they can be more transparent about their experience and receive more support in the context of their struggles. (Yarhouse, 2010, p. 161)

Homosexual practice has been against the policy and the ethos of CCCU institutions, but within this new era, which highlights a deeper connection between sexuality and both social and personal identity, homosexuality is a complicated reality that cannot be monolithed into stereotypical images or perceptions. Some CCCU institutions and student development departments may have not honestly examined their beliefs about same-sex attraction and how they approach sexual minorities. This position prevents difficult conversations and forces institutions to be reactive toward students struggling with their sexuality identity as well as toward those who feel the need to express their sexual attractions.

The heart of student development is based in the fact that college students are actively engaged in identity development – including sexuality. At times this process is chaotic and students often flirt with – and indeed make – decisions that are detrimental to their maturation. It is imperative that student development professionals uphold their role in helping students achieve positive identities, regardless of the difficulties. This requires not only helping students make good decisions, but entering into the culture, personal realities, and decisions that have already impacted their identity and development.

Yarhouse's contribution provides a guidepost in understanding the diversity of same-sex attraction and offers insights from which Christian colleges can learn.

Christian colleges and universities cannot afford passivity. Sexuality, as well as other moral and social issues of our day, must be addressed with a clear voice and Christian imagination, which acknowledges complexity and offers the truth with love.

Contributor

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References

Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2008 - 2012. (2008). Nashville, TN: Abington Press.

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**Identifying details, including names, have been changed.*