

The Bible's Yes to Same-Sex Marriage: An Evangelical's Change of Heart



BOOK STUDY

To the Leader

Welcome! In leading a study of this book, you have the opportunity to engage persons in Mark Achtemeier's own journey, in his own words, ". . . from a personal stance of judgment and exclusion to a changed heart that longs for the day when the church will fully celebrate and participate in God's blessing of same-gender relationships" (p. xii).

As Achtemeier notes in the introduction, churches continue to be in turmoil over questions of sexuality. His goal in writing the book is to interject some light into the midst of all the heat that is being generated by the discussions. Any discussion of issues related to sexuality will stir up a range of emotions and opinions in a group. Perhaps this is because our sexual identity is inextricably bound up in our identity as human beings. Yet it is just because this is true, and because our sense of identity as children of God cannot be separated from our understanding of the sum of who we are, that such a conversation is so important. The following may be helpful guidelines:

1. This book study will be most fruitful if persons come with a broad range of understandings and opinions about the issue of same-sex relationships. Diversity of age and background will also make for a richer study. If persons all basically agree on this issue—that is, if everyone in the group is in favor of same-sex marriage or, conversely, if everyone is opposed—then the study has the potential to degenerate into an exercise in gathering ammunition for one’s position. A diversity of viewpoints and perspectives offers the most potential for the Holy Spirit to enter into the conversation.
2. A diversity of viewpoints, though, is fraught with the possibility for conflict and even hurt feelings and alienation among group members. The last thing the author would want is for the book to deepen the divide between Christians. It will be important for the leader to begin the study by getting the group’s commitment to engage with one another with honesty and sensitivity. The following are suggestions for establishing a climate of trust and respect:
 - Invite the group to formulate a covenant that includes guidelines for respectful dialogue. The Presbyterian Peacemaking Program has a helpful resource, *Seeking to Be Faithful Together: Guidelines for Presbyterians during Times of Disagreement*, available as a download at <http://www.pcusa.org/resource/seeking-be-faithful-together/>. Check your own denominational website for similar resources.
 - A group process called Mutual Invitation, developed by Episcopal priest Eric H. F. Law, can be helpful in diverse groups where some persons may be reluctant to share and others may monopolize the conversation. Find out more about it and download a PDF at www.kscopeinstitute.org/2007-05_Kaleidoscope_newsletter_final.pdf.

Preparing for the Study

- Pray for the leading of the Holy Spirit as you prepare to facilitate the study. Pray for discernment for yourself and for each member of the study group.
- The study has been divided into four sessions, with opening and closing prayers and suggested questions. You may decide to have more or fewer sessions based on the needs of your group and the time available.
- Read the book yourself in advance of the first session. Before each session, familiarize yourself again with the content by rereading the relevant chapters.
- Read the suggested questions and decide which of them to use, or pick other questions that come to mind.
- Prepare carefully, but allow space for the Holy Spirit to move in and through the content, the group members, and you as facilitator.
- Prepare the meeting space so that it will enhance interaction and openness. Ideally, group members should have comfortable seating around a table or in a circle so that each can see all the others. Also make available simple refreshments, such as coffee, tea, and fruit juices.
- Having available a variety of translations of the Bible may be helpful.

Shaping the Learning Environment

- Create a climate of openness, encouraging group members to participate as they feel comfortable. Remember that some persons will jump right in with answers and comments, while others need time to process what is being discussed.
- If you notice that some members of the group seem never to be able to enter the conversation, ask them if they have thoughts to share, but don't insist. Some people prefer to listen, especially if the issue is one they are struggling with personally. Give everyone a chance

to talk, but keep the conversation moving. Moderate to prevent a few individuals from doing all the talking.

- If no one answers at first during discussions, allow for an interval of silence; then say something like, “Would anyone like to go first?” If no one responds, venture an answer yourself and ask for comments.
- Model openness as you share with the group. Group members will follow your example. If you limit your sharing to a surface level, others will follow suit.
- Encourage multiple answers or responses before moving on.
- Ask, “Why?” or “Why do you believe that?” or “Can you say more about that?” to help continue a discussion and give it greater depth.
- Affirm others’ responses with encouraging comments such as “Great” or “Thanks” or “Good insight”—especially if this is the first time someone has spoken during the group session.
- Monitor your own contributions. If you are doing most of the talking, back off so that you do not train the group to listen rather than speak up.
- Remember that you do not have all the answers. Your job is to keep the discussion going and encourage participation.
- Perhaps more than most other issues, those related to sexuality and sexual identity touch people where they live. In popular culture, sexuality is treated as a commodity, albeit one that is fascinating to most. In the church, sexuality has often been off-limits for discussion, even while so-called sexual sin is often dealt with as though it were somehow more evil than other sins. Within your group, there may be divorced persons and persons who have engaged in adulterous behavior, as well as others with sexual secrets they are fearful will be discovered. All these factors will have a significant impact on how people approach the book.

- Any dialogue on same-sex relationships will benefit from the insights of the LGBT persons most deeply impacted by the issue. As Mark Achtemeier reveals in the book, conversations with faithful LGBT persons were key in his transformation from an anti-gay activist to one who supports same-sex marriage. If your group includes LGBT persons, it will be important to not only hear their voices but also to avoid pressuring them into speaking when they choose to remain silent. Avoid at all costs making any person the poster child for gay marriage.

Planning Each Session

Each session offers an opening prayer, followed by a number of suggested questions for the chapters covered. It then provides a closing prayer and has you remind participants to read the chapters for the next session. Please read through all the questions prior to the session and select ones your group will most enjoy discussing, including any additional questions that you feel are relevant and valuable for your particular group. Do not feel you need to ask all the questions, as there will surely not be enough time for that.

SESSION 1



Opening Prayer

Loving God, you have promised that where two or three are gathered together, your Spirit will be present also. Come, Holy Spirit. Open our hearts and minds as we seek to better understand your will for your people. Amen.

Chapter 1: The Harvest of Despair

1. Mark Achtemeier was troubled by the deep distress evident in the story his friend Kristi related of her struggle to be faithful. Beyond his concern about her distress, her testimony was quite disturbing to him. Why?
2. “The abiding presence of God, strengthening and upholding the faithful through times of hardship and suffering, has been a nearly universal feature of Christian experience from biblical times down to the present day” (p. 5). What examples of persons who experienced the blessing of closeness to God in the face of supreme sacrifice does Achtemeier cite? What others can you name?

3. What was the result in Kristi's spiritual life and in the lives of other gay and lesbian persons whose personal stories were recounted to Achtemeier, when they turned from following the church's teaching on homosexuality and instead took another path?
4. Author and blogger Andrew Sullivan observes that you can't ask someone to suppress what makes them a whole human being and then expect them to lead blameless lives. He notes that in asking gay people to suppress who they are, the church is asking them to be warped (see p. 6). Achtemeier suggests that perhaps what the church is asking isn't true faithfulness. How do you define faithful living? In what ways is it related to being authentic to who you are?
5. A gay friend suggested to Achtemeier that her marriage is the part of her life that brings out the very best in her, where she learns the most about love, giving, and self-sacrifice (see p. 7). Where in your life are the most fruitful areas of spiritual growth? Are your relationships arenas for spiritual growth, or does spiritual growth occur elsewhere in your life?
6. About his gay friend who was in a committed, covenanted marriage, Achtemeier poses the question: Was it really God's will for people like my friend to abandon a beloved life partner and get a divorce? Read the Scripture passages cited in this discussion, Ezra 9–10 and Malachi 2:13–16. What was the result of the mandatory divorces imposed on those rebuilding the nation of Israel? Consider how you would respond if the church's teaching indicated that the only way you could find favor in God's eyes would be to divorce your spouse. How do you think this might affect your spiritual life? Your view of God?

7. In addition to accounts such as Kristi's, with positive outcomes, Achtemeier heard heartrending testimonies of the spiritual devastation that resulted from persons trying to conform their lives to a God they experienced as judgmental. What experiences have you had with LGBT Christians who are seeking to live committed, faithful lives? What have you seen of spiritual devastation and alienation?
8. It is clear to the author that Kristi's sexual orientation is not something she can choose or reject for herself. The traditional path of heterosexual marriage is not available to Kristi and other LGBT persons, and many cannot embrace a lifelong commitment to celibacy without crippling consequences. What has traditional Protestant teaching had to say about celibacy?
9. How would you respond to the question posed to the author by the single person who approached him following his speech to a conference (see p. 10)? Do you believe there is a double standard? Why does the author say traditional church teaching imposes requirements on gay and lesbian people that are far more drastic and far-reaching than anything it asks of those who are single?
10. Why does the author say that sex is not the only issue on the table for gay and lesbian persons? What does he mean when he says that, for gay and lesbian persons, it is literally a situation of "damned if you do and damned if you don't" (p. 13)?
11. In summing up, Achtemeier states that his encounters with Kristi and others like her laid bare two striking contradictions. What are they? In what way was hearing the life experiences of gay and lesbian people key to the transformation the author underwent in terms of his understanding of this issue?

Chapter 2: Jesus and the Law

1. What is the “fragment method” (p. 18), and how has it been employed in the past with respect to the issues of slavery and the subordination of women?
2. Many faithful people characterize the Bible as a book of rules. How would you describe the Bible? How does it function in your life of faith?
3. Achtemeier notes: “[T]he New Testament is . . . shot through with the recognition that people who faithfully and conscientiously strive to follow all the rules—the Law of God—can still wind up straying very far afield from God’s will and intention” (p. 21). He discusses in detail two dramatic examples from the New Testament of people trying valiantly to follow biblical law and still completely failing to align themselves with God’s will. First, read Mark 7:1–5 and John 9:1–41. What was it about Jesus that caused the scribes and Pharisees to conclude that Jesus could not be the real Messiah?
4. The second example is the life and experience of the apostle Paul, who was saved from his disastrous course by the direct intervention of God (see Acts 9:2–22). Why does Paul refer to the written Law as “the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8:2)? What is the force that overcomes the limitations of written code?
5. Achtemeier observes that our devotion to written rules is insufficient to align us with God’s will. In Paul’s case, his experience of the post-resurrection Christ opened his eyes to God working in and through the life of the church. In your view, what is happening in the life of the church today that is evidence of God working in and through its ministry? How might God be working in the controversies that surround gay marriage? What have you observed in the testimony of gay Christians about their lives in the faith?

6. In the end, says the author, biblical law does not have the power to refashion hearts in ways that are required for truly faithful living. Why? What does the encounter on the road to Emmaus (see Luke 24:13–35) say to us about how Jesus viewed the Law?

Closing Prayer

Gracious God, we have experienced your Spirit moving among us. Some of us have been stirred up, made uncomfortable or restless. Some have experienced you as Advocate, supporting and sustaining us. And some have been comforted. Continue to move in and through us as we go from this place. Amen.

Prepare for Next Session

Thank participants for coming and encourage them to read chapters 3, 4, and 5 for the next session. Consider asking them to bring any questions that arise for them to the session.

SESSION 2



Opening Prayer

Your word, O God, is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.
Guide us as we seek to be faithful, honest, and open with one another. Amen.

Chapter 3: With All Your Mind

1. The early Christian priest Irenaeus, in dealing with the Valentinian Gnostics, used the example of a skilled artist creating a beautiful mosaic portrait with colored stones. How did Irenaeus use this analogy to explain how the Valentinians were using Scripture? How does this apply to the fragment method of Scripture interpretation?
2. Achtemeier lays out in this chapter a series of important principles for interpreting the Bible, developed by the church over the centuries. About the first principle—“that faithful interpretations of the Bible should make coherent, good sense”—he poses the following question: “What would be the effect on the life of faith if God had simply scattered arbitrary commandments across the landscape

of our lives?” (p. 30). The author observes that a great many people seem to think about biblical teaching in just this way, especially when the topic at hand is sex. Do you agree? If so, why do you think our approach to sexual matters is prone to this approach?

3. Tim Challies describes the single-minded approach of some evangelical congregations to the issue of remaining a virgin until marriage (see pp. 30–31). In your view, what are some of the effects of approaching virginity arbitrarily? It seems the standard is applied unevenly and in a much stricter way to young women than young men. Has this been your experience, and if so, why do you think this is so? What is your opinion of so-called purity balls—formal dances attended by fathers and their daughters, during which daughters make a virginity pledge to remain sexually abstinent until marriage? What does Achtemeier say about biblical moral teaching that is distilled to arbitrary rules?
4. Summarize the “slippery slope” argument (see pp. 31–33). Why does the author believe that rethinking same-sex relationships presents no threat to the church’s teaching about other sexual practices such as bestiality?
5. Achtemeier gives the analogy of earthly parenting as a way to clarify the good-sense principle of scriptural interpretation (p. 34). What reason does he give for guidance in the form of commandments? What does he suggest as a good test for whether we have understood the Bible’s teaching correctly?
6. The author states that the command to love the Lord your God with your mind “is not just a peripheral concern of the Scriptures” (p. 37). Discuss the argument he uses to buttress this idea. What does the coming of Jesus Christ, the Logos, have to do with a commonsense approach to the interpretation of Scripture?

7. A second principle of scriptural interpretation is that it be grounded in Christ and Christ-centered. What does it mean that Jesus said, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9), and how does this apply to interpreting Scripture?
8. Interpreting Scripture by Scripture, that is, seeking to understand God’s will for LGBT people by grounding our understanding in the big picture of scriptural testimony about God, is a third important principle. Using Irenaeus’s analogy of the mosaic portrait of colored stones, what portrait of God would you say is created by using the whole of Scripture, not fragments? What picture of God do you think is created by using the scriptural fragments that seem to condemn same-sex relationships?
9. Achtemeier discusses the application of a fourth principle, understanding the biblical and historical context of a passage (see pp. 39–40), by using the example of slavery. How does he explain its context?
10. John Calvin’s observation that one must understand the purposes of God behind a commandment is the foundation for the fifth principle. Achtemeier gives the contemporary example of understanding the legislative intent of a law. As the group moves to considering the next chapter, reflect on the questions the author poses in the final paragraph about the purposes of God that stand behind biblical teaching about love and marriage, bodies and sexuality (p. 41).

Chapter 4: “This Is My Body, Given for You”

1. The author notes that our “tendency to place life in the body in opposition to spirituality and religious life actually runs counter to the message of Scripture” (p. 45). Where does the perception that bodies and spirits are in opposition originate? Do you find yourself uncomfortable

speaking about God and sex in the same breath, and if so, what is the source of the discomfort?

2. “God is the inventor of sex in the scriptural account” (p. 45), says Achtemeier. Discuss what the Genesis accounts have to say about this. What evidence do we find in these accounts that God’s plan for communion with a partner involves physical intimacy?
3. The author attests to a striking pattern that emerges in Scripture: the language of love and marriage is used to describe not only human connections but also the connection between God and humankind (see p. 47). Read some of the Scripture passages Achtemeier uses to support this argument. What positive and negative aspects of marriage emerge in the comparison? Do these recurring images seem shocking in any way? Why? If group members who are married choose to do so, ask them to describe their own experiences, both positive and negative, with the marriage bond.
4. Achtemeier observes that the comparison is not that God’s love is like the love that binds a husband and wife together; rather the comparison runs the other way. He notes that marriage is designed to help our human love grow into the image of God’s love for us—the kind of love that united Christ to the church. What is your response to the passage from Ephesians (5:21–33) and to the author’s explanation of how to interpret it in the light of first-century assumptions about marriage? What happens when Christians interpret this passage using the fragment method instead of sound principles of biblical interpretation?
5. Refer to the title of this chapter. The author observes that Jesus’ loving gift of himself for us includes the gift of his body. What do you make of this interpretation of the Eucharist? Some commentators have described sex as a

sacrament, and the Catholic Church speaks of sex within the sacrament of matrimony as sacramental. In what ways might that be true?

6. Describe the example of the “Crowning Ceremony” in the marriage rite of the Orthodox Church (see p. 53). Achtemeier, in speaking of self-sacrifice, says this: “The self-giving communion of a good marriage leads us into the death of the self-enclosed ego and the offering up of the autonomous individual. It is only as we put to death these fallen, earthly aspects of ourselves that we are freed for growth into the divine image” (p. 54). To what degree do you agree with these statements? Can you imagine any unintended outcomes if a couple affirms this stance wholeheartedly?
7. What examples and arguments does Achtemeier give us in support of the single life as a valid vocation for some (pp. 54–56)?

Chapter 5: Special Blessings

1. In examining the case for same-sex marriages, Achtemeier first addresses the question of procreation and whether or not it is essential to God’s purposes for marriage. Discuss the scriptural passages that address both procreation and barrenness. How do the biblical writers view each? The author notes that “while procreation is a wonderful gift with which God blesses some people, its absence does not undermine the value or legitimacy of particular marriages in God’s eyes” (p. 60). How do you view procreation? What does the author have to say about adoption and its significance in marriage?
2. Opponents of gay marriage sometimes point to Genesis 1:27, 2:24 and refer to a “one-flesh union” (p. 62) that is a natural outcome of our creation as male and female. The author notes that these critics point to Jesus’ quotation of

these verses in Matthew 19. What is the logical fallacy on which this argument is founded? What is Jesus' conversation actually about, and why is it ironic that opponents of gay marriage use this passage as ammunition to support their case?

3. The author notes that the argument based on human "plumbing" goes astray in that it asserts that the mere existence of a majority path for love and marriage automatically means that alternative paths are out of bounds. What analogies does Achtemeier use to support what he is saying (see p. 63)? What other examples could you give?
4. In terms of sexuality, what is "natural" for human beings? What does the author argue when he says that "anatomy isn't everything" (p. 64)? Discuss what Justin Lee of the Gay Christians Network has to say about natural and unnatural activity in his example of how those who are deaf use their bodies in alternate ways to communicate (pp. 64–65). What other examples come to mind? In your opinion, what are the reasons behind celebrating the alternative use of their bodies by persons who are deaf, while at the same time excoriating gay persons for similar responses?
5. In seeking to find biblical grounding for supporting departures from the majority pattern for human life, state what Achtemeier identifies as the key questions to be answered with respect to the biblical narrative. What examples does he give to support the idea that God is a God who delights in confounding standard expectations and conferring blessing outside of the majority way of doing things (see pp. 65–68)?
6. Read the story of the conversion of the Gentiles in Acts 10:1–11:18. How did traditional Jewish attitudes and condemnations toward Gentiles resemble attitudes toward

gay people today? What does the author state is the really surprising feature of the story—what does not occur in it—and how does this reflect a major theme of the New Testament (see p. 69)?

7. Achtemeier notes that Paul argues that God has provided a “superior” (p. 70) path for the Gentiles to grow in grace and faithfulness. Do you agree that the path is superior to the standard norms and expectations for blessing, and if so, why?
8. Achtemeier points to the virgin birth as an example of God’s willingness to travel a less traveled path in order to bring about blessing from situations that stand outside traditional marriage (see p. 71). Together, discuss his argument. Do you find it compelling? Why or why not?

Closing Prayer

In encountering you in Word and in dialogue, we have sought to love you with our whole minds as well as our whole hearts. Continue to work in us, minds and hearts, as we reflect on all we have heard. Amen.

Prepare for Next Session

Thank participants for coming and encourage them to read chapters 6 and 7 for the next session. Consider asking them to bring any questions that arise for them to the session.

SESSION 3



Opening Prayer

God of the ages, we affirm that the story of your mighty acts in the Old and New Testaments is a living word, ever fresh and new, and always challenging. Guide us as we seek to discern your word for today. Amen.

Chapter 6: Reclaiming the Witnesses 1

1. Like the joke Achtemeier relates, which illustrates the hazards of reading our modern-day worldview into the biblical text, he observes that there are also more subtle ways of distorting the Bible's meaning. Why does he say that the notion that the Bible would condemn a person for having a same-sex orientation is an anachronism on a par with finding references to Honda Accords in Scripture (see p. 77)?
2. Read Genesis 18:20–21; 19:1–29. What is the significance of the phrase, “That we may know them” (Gen. 19:5)? How does the ancient Near Eastern code of hospitality

influence what happens in this account? How do you account for the fact that this hospitality is not extended to women? What sexual behavior does Achtemeier identify in this narrative, and what is its motivation?

3. Read Judges 19. What similarities do you find in this account with the story in Genesis? What is different? Achtemeier contends that it make little sense to use this story of a horrific crime as the basis for across-the-board condemnation of loving, faithful, same-sex partnerships (see pp. 80–81). Why?
4. Read Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. Why does Achtemeier say that “[T]o read scriptural passages referring to same-gender sexual activity and think they apply to modern gay relationships is very much like finding references to Honda Accords in the Bible” (p. 82)? Read Deuteronomy 23:17; 1 Kings 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; and 2 Kings 23:7, other references with unambiguous references to males lying with males. To what do they refer? Why does Achtemeier say that to read marriage into these texts involves “fractured logic” (p. 82)? How does he explain the ambiguous reference in the story of the drunkenness of Noah in Genesis 9:20–29?
5. In sum, Achtemeier finds that when he reads all these passages in their proper historical context, he can “wholeheartedly affirm their condemnation . . . without casting the slightest doubt on [his] positive conclusions about same-sex marriage” (p. 83). Can you agree with his conclusions? If not, what points can you cite to support another view of their interpretation?
6. The author also discusses two other ambiguous texts from the Old Testament, the story of Ruth and Naomi in Ruth 1, and the account of the relationship between David and Jonathan in 1 Samuel 18–23 and 2 Samuel 1 (see pp.

84–85). What is your opinion of the kinds of relationships these stories describe?

Chapter 7: Reclaiming the Witnesses 2

1. Read Jude 5–7. The author notes (see pp. 88–90) that New Testament writers were all deeply influenced by the Old Testament, which is confirmed in this fragment; the writer of Jude makes explicit reference to Sodom and Gomorrah. What new twist does Jude introduce to an understanding of this account? What does Achtemeier suggest might be an explanation for this additional charge against the men of Sodom? In your opinion, is this explanation credible? Can you think of another explanation? Regardless of the explanation, Achtemeier contends that the threatened violence by the men of Sodom is the product of a lust that has spun completely out of control. What examples can you name in our contemporary society where you see evidence of similar lusts?
2. Read Romans 1:24–27. Achtemeier notes (pp. 90–92) that this chapter contains the most extensive reference to same-sex behaviors and is part of Paul’s larger argument that because all people have fallen under the power of sin, all stand in need of God’s grace. The author contends that the reference to same-sex relationships is a part of a “got-cha!” (p. 90) argument aimed at first-century Christian readers. Discuss Paul’s theme for the argument he is making. Why does Achtemeier believe it is extremely ironic that this argument is used by so many Christians to pass judgment on gay and lesbian persons?
3. Since there was no concept of sexual orientation or same-sex committed relationships in New Testament times, what are the same-sex behaviors named in this chapter? How would you characterize each of these behaviors?
4. In assessing Paul’s argument, Achtemeier contends that the only category available to Paul’s readers for

understanding same-sex relationships is “out-of-control lust” (p. 94). What argument does he use to support his view that it makes no sense to use Paul’s condemnation of these behaviors to condemn committed same-sex relationships? What, in his view, is the sense of Paul’s logic here? In your own experience or using examples you know of, what separates a person’s sexual life from God’s purposes? What “gods” in contemporary life tend to seduce persons away from making God the center of their lives?

5. Achtemeier states that Paul is not using the terms “natural” and “unnatural” in a biological or anatomical sense but to describe behaviors that are broadly in line with prevailing customs and expectations (see pp. 95–98). In the light of that clarification, what other behaviors can you name that first-century Christians might have considered unnatural? What kinds of behaviors does Achtemeier name that would be contrary to nature? In referring to women exchanging natural intercourse for unnatural, what is his explanation?
6. Read 1 Corinthians 6:9–10. Using a technical discussion of the somewhat obscure meanings of the Greek words used in Paul’s vice list, Achtemeier suggests that the important thing to recognize is that the words refer to behaviors that do not resemble committed marriage relationships (p. 99). In his argument, Paul uses lists of vices as illustrations to refer to the kinds of behaviors Christians are called to leave behind. In Achtemeier’s opinion, why does it make sense that Paul includes same-sex behaviors? Why does it *not* make sense to use this passage to block gay persons from committed relationships?
7. Read 1 Timothy 1:9–10, a passage that also contains a list of vices. Summarize the larger point the writer of the letter is making. Achtemeier comments that the grouping of Greek words together may be a reference to the sex trade of young boys that developed using those captured by the

military in conquered territories (see p. 101). To whom does he suggest that the terms *fornicator*, *sodomites*, and *slave traders* refer? If true, then what are the implications for the interpretation of the lists of vices?

8. In chapter 6, we noted that when reading the Old Testament passages in their proper historical context, Achtemeier wholeheartedly affirms their condemnation of sinful acts while at the same time affirming his positive conclusions about same-sex marriage. He comes to the same conclusion about these New Testament passages (see pp. 101–2). After considering his arguments for the biblical texts, discuss the degree to which you can agree. What questions remain in your mind about these texts?

Closing Prayer

Thank you, God, for opening your word to us in new ways.
Thank you for new insights and for faithful Christians with whom we can seek to encounter you anew. Amen.

Prepare for Final Session

Thank participants for coming and encourage them to read the remainder of the book for the next session. Consider asking them to bring any questions that arise for them to the session.

SESSION 4



Opening Prayer

In your word and in our interactions together, O God, we seek to discover your will for us. Give us the trust in you and in one another to examine even our most cherished beliefs in the light of the story of your loving will for us. Amen.

Chapter 8: Testing the Spirits

1. Achtemeier notes that his conclusions are “the product of multiple, biblically grounded arguments all ending up at the same place” (p. 105). Summarize the points of his argument that God desired to bless and sanctify same-gender relationships no less than those that are heterosexual.
2. The author uses the example of Jan of Leyden (see the chapter epigraph, pp. 103–4) to make the point that many times over the course of history, sincere, well-meaning Christians have come away from a Scripture encounter with conclusions that were “disastrously wrongheaded” (p. 106). What examples can you cite from history or the present day of such persons or groups? What damage

was done or is being done by these misguided Christians?

3. Achtemeier concludes that the broad sweep of Scripture testifies to God's intention that love, marriage, and sexuality should help us grow more and more into the divine image, leading us to more fully offer the gift of our whole self to another person. He suggests that activities and situations that promote this possibility find approval in Scripture, while those that hinder it tend to be forbidden (see pp. 106–8). What examples does he give of such activities and situations, and what reasons does he give? Can you add other examples that would hinder either love or mutuality in a relationship? In your opinion, has Achtemeier responsibly used the classic principles for interpreting Scripture (see p. 108)?
4. In the author's opinion, contemporary questions about gay marriage have forced the church to face a new situation (see pp. 109–11). The Bible does not speak directly to the issue of gay marriage because such a possibility was not practiced in biblical times. Achtemeier presents the precedent of the biblical teaching about usury, the practice of receiving interest payments on loans and deposits, as an example of a time in the church's history when across-the-board biblical prohibitions were scaled back in the light of modern developments (see pp. 111–15). Upon studying the broader witness of the Bible, what did Calvin conclude was the divine purpose behind the prohibitions? What had changed? How did his conclusions limit the scope of a biblical prohibition previously viewed as universal?

Chapter 9: The Word of Life

1. Achtemeier characterizes a certain kind of discipleship as “minefield ethics” (p. 119). Explain what he means. What are the hazards of this kind of black-and-white view of the

world? How is this type of discipleship at odds with the New Testament view of the Christian life? How does it distort the church's witness?

2. In chapter 3, the author stated that God's commands are given for our good. Here he fleshes out what it might mean for our intimate relationships to thrive (see pp. 121–22). He suggests that a yearning for this kind of connection expresses itself in our popular culture. What picture of relationship do you see painted in contemporary music, film, and other media? How does it compare or contrast with the Bible's guidance, what the author calls "God's road map for satisfying our hearts' deepest yearnings" (p. 122)?
3. Achtemeier suggests that our calling as Christians is to accept the incredible gift of God's grace in faith and live thankfully in response to it, knowing that we will all fall short of perfection. How does this compare with the black-or-white, righteous-or-sinners view of discipleship?
4. Achtemeier characterizes our life's journey as a joyful walk through a field of God's blessings rather than a fearful passage through a dangerous minefield (see pp. 122–24). Discuss how this metaphor might play out in life, particularly when we fail to fully mirror Christ-like love, as we all will. In contrast to a purity pledge or a chastity ring—such as those young people are often challenged to accept by those who take the black-and-white approach—what kind of symbol or step might you encourage teenagers to take?
5. In addition to the potentially serious consequences that accompany some types of sexual activity, the author expresses another caveat: "We . . . ignore at our peril the deep and complicated ways in which sexual expression is bound up with our emotional attachments and sense of

self” (p. 123). In what ways have you experienced the close bond between body and spirit? Referring to the discussion in question 2, how might the message of faith counter the messages adults and young people receive from the culture about sexuality as a commodity?

6. Achtemeier summarizes the three “Uses of Biblical Law” (p. 124), laying out ways an impossible scriptural ideal can help us even when we cannot hope to fulfill it completely. Discuss how approaching the ideal as a life-giving path can help us thrive.
7. How does an understanding of forgiveness and grace help us frame our guidance with respect to our sexuality?

Conclusion

1. In the introduction to the book, Achemeier relates that he had been an anti-gay activist who, at one point, penned an article in opposition to the ordination of gays and lesbians, an article that proved to be key in his denomination’s denial of the call to ordained ministry for gay and lesbian persons. As he concludes the account of his journey from that understanding to where he is today, he affirms his awe of the Bible’s continuing ability to be a living Word, “one with the power to address us in ways we did not expect, change parts of us we didn’t think needed changing, and lead us to places we never expected to go” (p. 127).

Summarize the steps along the way in his journey. If you feel comfortable in doing so, relate where you are on this journey. What new understandings can you affirm? What questions still remain?

2. What steps will you commit to take in order to continue your encounter with God’s Word and with those with whom you agree, those with whom you differ, and those most affected by a biblical understanding of the issue?

Closing Prayer

God of love, we thank you for your living Word. We affirm its power to address us in ways we did not expect, change parts of us we didn't think needed changing, and lead us to places we never expected to go. Thank you for the testimony of the persons here who have witnessed to your love with respect and trust, even in places where we have disagreed. By your Spirit, continue to be present with us on this journey as we seek to understand more fully your will for our lives. Amen.