



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 The Long Defeat
(*Chastity*, pp. 20-31)

Suggested Article:

📖 Christian Sexual Ethics in
an Age of Individualism
(*Chastity*, pp. 89-93)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

Institute for Faith and Learning
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97270
Waco, TX 76798-7270
Phone 1-254-710-4805
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2016 Institute for Faith and Learning

Living “The Long Defeat” Together

Within a sexually-sodden culture, the life of chastity may seem like a lonely, long defeat, especially to gay and lesbian believers. How can churches provide the good company which celibate, same-sex attracted believers need for their Christian pilgrimage?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Romans 8:18-25

Meditation†

Vibrant Christian communities where married couples and celibates live side by side in deep friendships could be a powerful counter-cultural sign, witnessing to the fact – almost unbelievable to many of our contemporaries – that clear limits set to the bodily expression of love do not keep one from finding happiness and fulfillment.

Brother John of Taizé

Reflection

“As someone who has not received one iota of the promised ‘change’ in my sexual orientation that some Christians have held out to me, and as someone who also has not been able to embrace a more progressive understanding of same-sex marriage, I often feel like I am fighting a kind of long defeat,” Wesley Hill writes. He borrows “a long defeat” from J. R. R. Tolkien, who used it in *Lord of the Rings* and later embraced it to depict his own life of faith. Tolkien was sure of God’s final victory but prepared to endure his Christian walk with only glimpses of it.

Hill says that Paul’s view of the Christian life in Romans 8:23 “goes a long way toward explaining how I and many of my fellow celibate gay friends view our discipleship. We are fighting a long defeat, not necessarily expecting to find a satisfying substitute in this life for the marital happiness we are choosing to live without and instead pinning our hopes for spousal union on the future marriage supper of the Lamb. We are groaning and waiting, often without much natural ‘fulfillment,’ and counting on a future weight of glory that will far surpass our present groans.”

Yet the long defeat is “meant to be lived in good company, with other guests who are bound for the same Wedding Supper that is to come,” Hill notes. Thus, he commends ministries that welcome LGBT believers and provide good company to them and all disciples on their pilgrimage. The most helpful ministries

- ▶ do not underestimate the power of small gestures that recognize same-sex attracted believers. Among “people who are not afraid to raise the issue,” Hill says, “gay and lesbian Christians can be honest without fear of judgment or disgust.”
- ▶ do not make one-size-fits-all assumptions about the causes of same-sex attraction. “Helpful ministries have assumed my story is unique, my gayness is not the same as anyone else’s, and this uniqueness is worthy of attention and respect and dignity.”
- ▶ know sexual orientation affects the entire person, but does not define a person. “Our sexuality is more like a facet of our personalities than a separable piece of our behavior,” Hill notes. Yet realizing “sexual orientation as we know it is culturally constructed,” rather than a “fixed script” one must follow, lets him “explore historic Christian,



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, is Senior Scholar in The Institute for Faith and Learning at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2016 Institute for Faith and Learning

chaste ways to express [his] love for men.” Admittedly, “opting out of the dominant way of understanding ‘gay’ often feels more like martyrdom than freedom. But if traditional Christianity is true, then self-denial – taking up one’s cross and following Jesus – is, in fact, regardless of how it feels to us, real freedom.”

- ▶ *value Scripture and theology.* Since they “must make concrete choices about how to ‘glorify God in our bodies’ (1 Corinthians 6:20),” many same-sex attracted believers “are impatient with hasty arguments and shallow scriptural reasoning.” They “want to know whether the church’s historic opposition to gay sex is just about cultural prejudice or it is rooted in the Bible’s basic view of human nature and redemption.”
- ▶ *imagine how hard it is to be gay and stay single and, thus, create paths to spiritual kinship and friendship.* Hill is consoled by a friend’s view: “We ask our homosexual brethren, and our divorced brethren without annulments...to live as celibates in a sexually-sodden culture where they may never find the alternative of deep, committed friendships. We ask them to risk loneliness we don’t risk.” Ministries that “refuse to look down on celibacy as ‘second best’” have helped him “imagine a single life overflowing with familial ties and hospitality and ‘thick’ kinship commitments.”
- ▶ *nurture the gifts of all believers and focus on gospel basics.* They view LGBT Christians not as “pitiable or ‘broken’ ... but as complex, in-the-process-of-being-redeemed persons – ‘glorious ruins’ (in Francis Schaeffer’s fine phrase) – whose experiences of temptation, repentance, grace, and growth” give them “unique perspectives” and “a certain sensitivity that can be drawn out for the good of the church.”

“The kind of ministry I most crave – because it most helps – is the regular, bog-standard ministry of Word and Sacrament,” Hill concludes. “Sitting under preaching that points me to Jesus and receiving Communion (which is ‘Jesus placing himself in our hands so we know exactly where to find him’) are the hallmarks of the ministry I need. Kneeling at the altar rail is where I receive the strength to keep going on this long journey.”

Study Questions

1. What does Wesley Hill mean by living “a long defeat” in community? Do you agree that God would require believers to experience life as “a long defeat” or “a long loneliness”?
2. Discuss Hill’s view that “Too often the possibility of chaste, committed friendship goes unexplored because of we are determined to get as far away as possible from singleness.”
3. How does your congregation support celibate, same-sex attracted believers? Do some features cited by Hill characterize your efforts? Which ones do you want to develop?
4. Consider how the arc of God’s love, flowing through human beings from their creation to final consummation, is depicted in Terry York’s hymn, “Intense the Love God Molded.”

Departing Hymn: “Intense the Love God Molded”

† Brother John of Taizé, *Friends in Christ: Paths to a New Understanding of the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 153-154.

Living “The Long Defeat” Together

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To appreciate how the life of discipleship for all Christians might be characterized as “a long defeat” lived in good company.
2. To consider how congregations and ministries can be the good company that celibate LGBT believers need for their pilgrimage.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Chastity (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with Stories

Wesley Hill writes, “I have come to think about my life as a gay, celibate believer in terms of what J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973) calls ‘the long defeat.’ His regal character Galadriel in *The Lord of the Rings*, surveying the long years of her immortality and all the seasons of mingled loss and triumph she has witnessed, says, ‘... through the ages of the world we have fought the long defeat.’ And Tolkien himself identifies with her: ‘I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic, so that I do not expect “history” to be anything but a “long defeat” – though it contains (and in a legend may contain more clearly and movingly) some samples or glimpses of final victory.’”

Hill notes that, “Much of what Dorothy Day (1897-1980) says in *The Long Loneliness*, a memoir of her conversion and activism for social justice through the Catholic Worker movement she founded with Peter Maurin, dovetails with what Tolkien calls ‘the long defeat.’” When Day entered the Church, she had to relinquish her common law marriage to a man named Forster who wanted nothing to do with her newfound faith. Hill is especially drawn to Day’s story because she “improves on Tolkien’s vision of the ‘long defeat’ when she stresses that surrendering to God in this way – by giving up hope of ‘natural’ fulfillment – paradoxically does not lead to a life without human love: ‘We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community’” (*Chastity*, pp. 20-23).

In this study we follow Hill’s exploration of how Christian congregations can become the loving communities that will support LGBT believers in their Christian pilgrimage.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking the Holy Spirit’s guidance to be a loving community that supports all believers in their Christian pilgrimage.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Romans 8:18-25 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

Features of contemporary Western culture are making a life of chastity seem especially onerous for single adult believers, particularly for those with same-sex attraction. In this study Wesley Hill's testimony to the difficulties of living a celibate, gay Christian life becomes a springboard to considering how congregations and ministries can best welcome and support celibate singles generally and LGBT believers in particular.

If members would like to explore Wesley Hill's perspective on traditional Christian sexual ethics further, encourage them to study together one of his short books *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality*, enlarged edition (Zondervan, 2016), or *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian* (Brazos Press, 2015). The latter book is one of three recent works that Julie Morris commends in *Christian Sexual Ethics in an Age of Individualism* for their examination of the role faith communities play in supporting both married couples and celibates in faithful sexual behavior.

Study Questions

1. Living "a long defeat," a phrase Wesley Hill borrows from J. R. R. Tolkien, describes living in expectation of God's victory, but being prepared to endure much difficulty along the way with only "some samples or glimpses of final victory." Alan Jacobs calls this perspective "the ideal one for anyone who has exceptionally difficult, frustrating, even agonizing, but nevertheless vitally important work to do." Hill uses it to characterize the spiritually difficult, costly obedience of celibacy that God calls him to give as a gay believer. The burden of this "long defeat" is meant to be shared by all believers in faithful community.

"I suspect that many of our debates about 'mandatory gay celibacy' in the church today involve, at the end of the day, differing understandings of the character of God. Would God in Christ ask his children to embrace a lifelong loneliness, a long defeat?" Hill writes. "Can some of our disagreement about whether gay sex is morally appropriate for Christians be traced back to differing beliefs about whether God might ask us to do what feels well-nigh impossible: to give up the one thing that our 'natural' selves most want?"

2. The avoidance of celibate singleness crosses political lines. Hill notes, "Many people on the left side of the spectrum want same-sex marriage rather than celibacy, while those on the right favor ex-gay approaches that hold out the promise of opposite-sex coupling rather than celibacy." Consider why we seem unable to imagine, or unwilling to support, "a single life overflowing with familial ties and hospitality and 'thick' kinship commitments."
3. Create small groups to discuss some clusters of the features cited by Hill. Identify the features that characterize your efforts and those that need to be developed. If there is a feature that do not seem important to members, discuss why Hill values it so much.
4. The Holy Spirit pours God's love into our hearts (Romans 5:5; cf. 15:30). In the first stanza of Terry York's hymn, "Intense the Love God Molded," this divine infusion of love begins when God's breath/spirit that enlivens "the dust of the ground" (Hebrew: "adamah") to form the first human (Hebrew: "adam") (Genesis 2:7). From this beginning, humanity's love is oriented toward God: "The Holy Spirit is that Breath / and guides the love to God."

In the second stanza, this human love, expressed variously through "marriage, friendship, [and] deepest prayer," is described as a form of praise and worship offered to God.

The final stanza reminds us that in Christ we can see the model of this love which flows from and returns to God: it is "chaste and freely shared," "shaped by sacrifice," and characterized by "compassion" until death. The final couplet beautifully depicts the *telos* or consummating goal of this divine process: "Then shall we in new bodies rise / to breathe not air, but Love."

Departing Hymn

"Intense the Love God Molded" is on pp. 55-57 of *Chastity*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.