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Frequently Asked Questions
about
**Sexuality,
the Bible,
and the Church**

Ted A. Smith, editor



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*With thanks for the ministries
of Sue Goodrich and Andy Robinson,
and prayers for a church that can welcome them.*

- T.A.S.

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What are the questions? And what is this booklet?

Ted A. Smith ✕
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This booklet is an offering to the church in a season of discernment. It comes from 26 scholars who care deeply about the church. Twenty-four of us are members of the Presbyterian Church (USA), and most of us are ordained. We serve at 19 different academic institutions, including eight seminaries affiliated with the denomination. We write because we love the church and long to help it live more faithfully as the body of Christ.

This booklet grows out of a realization – a confession – that many of our debates about sexuality and ordination have grown thin, stale and mean. We need something more than slightly better answers to the questions we already have. We need questions that help us find better ways of listening together for the Word of God. We need answers that lead us not just on to victory for one side or another, but back more deeply into the heart of the Gospel. And we need to find ways of praying, thinking, writing, talking, and listening together that are themselves a sign of that Gospel.

The short essays in this booklet do not pretend to answer those needs completely. But they represent a good-faith attempt to deepen the church's discernment of the work and will of God. They begin with the assumption that discernment will require questions and answers that are thoroughly theological, widely accessible, intentionally diverse, and open to further conversation.

These essays seek to take debates about ethics, policies and practices and restore them to a broader theological context. Christian discernment requires theological thinking, for it

recognizes that lives of faith unfold in response to what God is already doing. Reformed churches have therefore insisted that we cannot begin with the question, "What is the right thing to do?" Instead, as theologian H. Richard Niebuhr argued, the first question of Christian ethics must be, "What is God doing?" Only in light of that question can we begin to ask, "How shall we respond?"

Our debates go sour when we forget the priority of God's gracious action in Jesus Christ. Both liberals and conservatives have slipped into proclaiming ethical principles that float free from larger understandings of who God is and what God is doing. Conservatives have too often recited a law prohibiting same-sex love without connecting that prohibition to Jesus' table fellowship with people the Pharisees called sinners (Luke 5:27-39), the early church's realization that the Holy Spirit moved among those the law declared unclean (Acts 10-15), and Paul's reminder that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). Liberals have too often insisted on a free-floating mandate for inclusivity without connecting that mandate to Jesus' insistence on the enduring significance of the law (Matt. 5:17) or Peter's reminder that God is working to form a holy people (1 Peter 2:9). And both sides have appealed to ideas of what is "natural" without adequately considering the Reformed tradition's deep wariness about appeals to the natural order as a revelation of the will of God. When we forget that we are seeking to discern what God is doing and how we might respond - when our conversations cease to be theological - our debates become shallow and spiteful, like church versions of political talk shows.

It seems easier to debate "abomination" versus "inclusivity" than to seek to name the work of God in the world. And attempts to say what God is doing can end in foolishness and arrogance. But God's ways with the world are not an utter mystery to us. In Jesus Christ the Word became flesh and lived among us, eager to know and be known. And we trust that by the Holy Spirit, the Scriptures are "the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ," and that the confessions offer "authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do" (Book of Order, G-14.0405). That Word, that witness, and those expositions do not invite us to glib and all-knowing speech. They lead instead to patience and to prayer. They lead us to test interpretations in Christian community.

They call for penitent listening – even as they demand that we risk bold proclamation.

Our listening and our proclamation are best when they engage the whole of the gospel. Even theological discernment goes wrong when we consider tiny slices of Scripture and doctrine apart from our best sense of the whole. The essays in this booklet therefore range more widely than many recent discussions of sexuality and ordination. The essays here address both questions that are in fact “frequently asked” and questions that should be frequently asked. They ask questions about the short list of Bible verses around which so many debates have revolved. But they also ask questions about parts of Scripture these debates have neglected, like the Wisdom literature and, remarkably, the Gospels. The essays take up familiar questions in theology, like ordination and the authority of Scripture. But they also ask questions about relevant topics that our debates have neglected, like sanctification, baptism and marriage. This broader range of questions can enrich the church’s discernment, for discernment demands that we think in light of all that we know about God and God’s ways with the world.

Discernment is not the work of a few experts, but of the whole church. And so the essays here are accessible to a wide readership. They are all fairly short. They use minimal jargon. They reach out to readers from many different backgrounds. While the essays are clear, they cannot be reduced to soundbites. Readers who want to skim and pick up a few “talking points” will be disappointed. The essays aspire to the very best of contemporary scholarship, and they do not back away from complexity. But these careful, scholarly essays remain accessible because the authors understand the issues so well that they can consider complex questions clearly.

Because faithful discernment requires attention to many voices, the essays in this booklet reflect many kinds of diversity. All the authors believe the church should affirm the ministries of gay and lesbian Christians with ordination, but we differ in significant ways. We differ not only in gender, race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and institutional location, but also in the ways we understand sexuality, ordination, Scripture, and the church. We use different language, and we work out of different traditions within an overlapping Reformed heritage. The booklet concludes by

reprinting two important statements in which scholars speak with unified voices, but it offers no single statement in itself. Instead it serves as a sign of hope that church people need not agree on every point in order to find ways of living together that recognize the gifts of all those God calls to ministry.

The diversity within this booklet is significant, but it only begins to present the whole of the church's conversation. It invites and even requires other voices. This collection of essays makes no claim to be complete in itself. It lacks the voices of people who are opposed to ordaining gay and lesbian Christians. It lacks the deeper racial and ethnic diversity of the church we hope for. It lacks the wisdom of people who do not teach in seminaries, universities, and colleges. And it includes too few Christians who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered. But the authors of the essays make room, I think, for voices that respond and even disagree in good faith.

As the booklet invites other authors, it also invites other questions. Beginning to expand the questions we ask only shows how much more work there is to do. This booklet features an essay on baptism but not on the Lord's Supper, on the Wisdom literature but not on the prophets. The booklet is not a final word, but an invitation to deeper and broader conversation about what God has done in Jesus Christ and how we are called to respond.

In its openness to more conversation this booklet presumes that the Holy Spirit still rests upon the body of Christ. It is offered in trust that God is already moving in the church, already drawing into the great work of redemption all the grace, violence, pettiness and loveliness of our life together. Offered in that confidence, these essays do not seek to end discussion and make irrelevant the deliberative bodies of the church. Instead they seek to build up those bodies in a season of discernment, that we may all respond to the Gospel with more faith, hope and love.



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What do Presbyterians believe about the authority of Scripture?

William C. Placher 
Wabash College

The most honest answer would be: different Presbyterians believe many different things. People in our church today have different understandings of Scripture's authority, and that's not a new development; it has been in some degree true throughout the history of our tradition. But there is a core of shared beliefs. What follows are some fairly consistent themes, drawn particularly from Calvin and the *Book of Confessions* (most of the language is not at all inclusive, but I've left it as it is in the interest of historical accuracy).

Necessity. We will not understand God rightly if we do not turn to Scripture. Calvin believed that creation itself ought to reveal God to us, but that sin so distorted our vision that we could not see how clearly the world points to its creator. We need the Bible to function like eyeglasses, to help us see God at work in the world. The light of nature, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* explained, is "not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation" (*Book of Confessions*, 6.001), and therefore we need the Holy Scripture to guide us.

Sufficiency. In the face of Catholic appeals to the authority of the church and its tradition alongside Scripture, the *Scots Confession* emphasized that the Scriptures alone are "sufficient to instruct and make perfect the man of God." (3.19). Likewise, the *Second Helvetic Confession* began by declaring that in Scripture the church "has the most complete exposition of all that pertains to a saving faith, and also to the framing of a life acceptable to God." (5.002). We do not need other authorities to provide additional information. Moreover, we do not need any human authorities to vouch for Scripture's authority—its authority (quoting the *Scots*

Confession) comes “from God” and does not “depend on men or angels.” (3.19).

The Witness of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit, Calvin taught, inspired those who wrote Scripture, and the decisive reason to accept Scripture’s authority comes not from “human reasons, judgments, or conjectures” but from “the secret testimony of the Spirit.” Just as “God himself spoke to the fathers, prophets, [and] apostles,” the *Second Helvetic Confession* confirmed, so God “still speaks to us through the Holy Scriptures.” (5.001). “Our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof,” according to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, is “from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.” (6.005).

Interpreting Scripture by Scripture. If the meaning of one biblical passage is obscure, and it’s something important for us to know, the point will always be made more clearly somewhere else in Scripture. *The Second Helvetic Confession* asserts that the best way to interpret the Scriptures is “gleaned from the Scriptures themselves (from the nature of the language in which they were written, likewise according to the circumstances in which they were set down, and expounded in the light of like and unlike passages and of many and clearer passages)” (5.010). Likewise the *Westminster Confession of Faith* maintains that “the infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself” (6.009). When something isn’t clear, we should look for other passages which address the matter more clearly. *Westminster* again: “Those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them” (6.007).

Correct Translation. Obviously, in believing what the Bible says, we have to make sure we get its meaning right. As a scholar influenced by Renaissance humanism, Calvin carefully sought correct texts and accurate translations. Sometimes, of course, translation is a complicated issue. In the United States before the Civil War, for instance, defenders of slavery noted that many admired Old Testament figures had slaves and that Paul sent the runaway slave Onesimus back to his owner Philemon. Thus, they said, the Bible

approves of slavery. Critics of slavery, however, pointed out that the institution the Bible calls “slavery” was very different from what existed in the United States: it was not based on race, slaves could often achieve their freedom, and so on. Eventually, that recognition of historical difference carried the day among Presbyterian interpreters. We recognized that the slavery of biblical times was a different thing from slavery in the United States. The Bible wasn’t approving the latter. Correct translation of words describing human activities and institutions involves understanding what those activities or institutions really were in their original context.

Accommodation. Calvin’s doctrine of “accommodation” stated that the Bible often expresses things in simple form so that its original readers could understand them—like parents speaking “baby talk” to their children. Thus there are biblical passages that assume that the world is flat or that the sun and moon are the two great lights in the sky (though of course the stars are really much bigger than the moon). In such cases, Calvin wrote, their author “did not treat scientifically of the stars, as a philosopher would; but he called them in a popular manner, according to their appearance to the uneducated, rather than according to the truth.” No need to explain several thousand years of scientific theory in order to make a simple point: “He who would learn astronomy, and other recondite arts, let him go elsewhere.” When the Bible takes the worldview of its original audience for granted as background, accepting the authority of the Bible need not mean accepting the truth of that worldview.

Focus on Teaching. Calvin recognized that the biblical writers “were not very exact as to the order of dates, or even in detailing minutely every thing that Christ said and did.” Their concern was to teach their readers about who Jesus is and how he saves us; they were not much worried about chronological details. He thought, for instance, that Matthew had probably drawn together material Jesus had preached on a number of different occasions to form the Sermon on the Mount, rather than reporting exactly a sermon delivered at one time. As Charles Hodge, the greatest theologian of Princeton orthodoxy, would say centuries later, the Bible is trustworthy in what it teaches, not in everything its human authors may have believed or assumed. They took for granted the

geography, science, and other beliefs of their time and place; such things were not the faith they were teaching.

Conclusion. We must not pick out the parts of the Bible we like and ignore the rest. Scripture speaks with *authority*. But we should be sure we understand what it means. Sometimes we translate terms which referred to an activity or institution in biblical times as if they referred to a very different activity or institution in our time; that leads to misunderstanding. Sometimes Scripture presupposes the view of the world that would have been taken for granted by its original readers so they could understand; such presuppositions are not what it *teaches*. When we have doubts about such matters in a particular case, we should use Scripture to interpret Scripture—we should look at any one passage in the light of the rest of the Bible, not in isolation.

With respect to current debates on homosexuality, for instance, we should start by looking at the biblical passages where the Bible talks, or seems to talk, about this issue. What exactly do the words mean? Are the activities or institutions being discussed the same as activities or institutions today? Is what is said about homosexuality what the passage means to teach, or something assumed in order to make a point about something else? When we have doubts about such matters, what do we learn from setting these passages in the larger biblical context – the whole story of covenant, redemption, and bringing more and more outsiders into the covenant? In asking questions like these, we are faithful to the Presbyterian tradition with respect to biblical authority. ✕



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What does Genesis 1-3 teach about sexuality, and how should we live in response?

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The first three chapters of Genesis do not directly address the church's questions about sexual relations between persons of the same sex. But the creation narratives do say much about God's hopes and purposes for the world. And they do begin to suggest the shape of faithful human responses to God's great, generative act of love in creation – especially when read as part of the whole canon of Scripture. In particular, they describe the centrality of relationships between men and women in the created order. These crucial chapters of Scripture therefore offer important indirect guidance for questions about same-sex relations. But what do they teach?

Genesis depicts a created order in which women and men are created good and placed in relationship with one another and with all of creation. Maleness and femaleness belong to this created order. The image of God is found in the human being as male and female (1:26-27). And the Genesis story clearly joins man and woman together in responsibility for filling and ruling the earth, for procreating and controlling God's creation (1:28-30).

I take that Genesis story very seriously. But taking seriously what it says does not immediately tell us what it teaches. The history of the church and of the larger society gives us good reason to pause for reflection before assuming that we know the moral meaning of God's created order. Church and society both have appealed to scriptural accounts of a created order to fix norms for roles and relationships. We have read scripture as declaring that God created a world in which women should be subordinate to men, men should cut their hair and women should not, women should not speak in

church, subjects should obey their kings, and slaves should submit to their masters and obey them with the same fear and trembling with which they obey Christ.

The church is still in the process of repenting of its collusion with these systems that claimed to be grounded in God's created order. And we are right to do so. The church has heard in the gospel and in the prophetic and liberating words of both Old Testament and New Testament a counter word that does not fix people in roles and relationships and does not let cultural and social mores become final definitions of who and what we are in the church and kingdom. In this counter word we have heard what the scriptures teach.

A church that takes scripture seriously therefore faces today the same task that has faced communities of faith in every generation. We must interpret the stories of creation as guides and direction for our thinking and acting. But the presence of interpretive questions does not mean that we are bereft of answers. God does not leave us alone for each one to do what is right in his or her own eyes. For generations Reformed Christians have confessed our hope that the Holy Spirit quickens faithful reading. And we have taken as our guides the rule of faith and the rule of love.

The Rule of Faith and the Rule of Love

Interpretation of scripture in the church should not happen without attention to the rule of faith and the rule of love. The **rule of faith** suggests that our individual interpretations are placed against the community's understanding of scripture in past and present. In the Reformed community, that interpretive backdrop is found particularly in the creeds and confessions, though not only there. The subject of homosexuality has not been a special focus of attention in these documents, and the contemporary possibility of committed same-sex partnerships runs beyond what they can imagine. But it is also the case that the majority of Christian thinkers over time have regarded same-sex sexual activity as sinful. The tradition thus places the present interpreter in a kind of tension. On the one hand, there is inattention to the issue; on the other hand, where the tradition has dealt with the matter, it has generally condemned the practice of same-sex activity.

In that context, it is important that the present interpretive activity of the church be a communal one, that our efforts to think about this issue afresh and in reference to what has been thought already be a corporate engagement and not simply a matter of individual proposals for reading texts. Our interpretation happens in community, and what the community experiences in faith is more significant than the experience of any individual. What we say and do together is more to be attended to than idiosyncratic readings of texts by one or a few individuals. This means listening to a broad range of interpretive judgments in the church, including its gay and lesbian members.

The **rule of love** reminds us that our interpretation of scripture stands under the divine command to love God and neighbor. Thus, what we hear from scripture should not lead us away from the expression of love for others. Or, in the words of the document, "Presbyterian Understandings of the Use of Holy Scripture," adopted by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church ((USA) in 1983,

All interpretations are to be judged by the question of whether they offer and support the love given and commanded by God. When interpretations do not meet this criterion, it must be asked whether the text has been used correctly in the light of the whole Scripture and its subject ... No interpretation of Scripture is correct that leads to or supports contempt of any individual or group of persons either within or outside of the church. Such results from the interpretation of Scripture plainly indicate that the rule of love has not been honored (pp. 19-20).

Measured by the rule of love, the church has fallen far short in its use of scripture in dealing with homosexuality – including those texts that deal with the topic indirectly, like Genesis 1-3. The rule of love, which says that our interpretation is correlative with the way we live, raises serious questions about what we have done with the plain sense of scripture. If it is a means by which we inflict pain and put down other Christians – or other human beings of any stripe – then our interpretation is under question.

We therefore need to ask about the preeminence of the gospel and of the grace of God as a guide for our proper response to scripture. That response may not be the same as what the plain sense of some texts would indicate. We are not to lose sense, however, of what it is that “the Scriptures principally teach,” as the Catechism puts it (*Book of Confessions*, 7.003). The *answer* to that question is what we are to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of us. It is no accident that the verses accompanying the Westminster documents are Micah 6:8, John 3:16, and John 20:31. These are fundamental formulations of the gospel, of the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ, and of our responsibility to “do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with your God.” It is precisely the manifestation of justice and kindness that in this, as in all instances, is a fundamental criterion of our interpretation of scripture. What is ultimately at stake is the triumph of grace in the church.

A foundation, not a limit

Genesis 1-3 gives no direct, plain-sense teaching about contemporary same-sex relationships. But how might the church understand its indirect teaching, if we read in ways that are guided by the rule of faith and the rule of love?

The Genesis stories picture an ideal of enduring companionship of man and woman – one that features sexual relationship for procreation – as central to the human story. The Apostle Paul will articulate a different vision, but the Genesis stories tell us something very fundamental about who and what we are. The defining relationship in the human community is man and woman. That relationship often is manifest in the establishment of a commitment between a man and a woman that perdures and is fruitful in every respect.

Of course, for many human beings that particular ideal is not their experience. They may be single and so do not know the man-woman relationship as one of enduring and intimate companionship, sexual and otherwise. They may be childless and so do not know the procreative fruit of the relationship that God intends. They may be homosexual and so do not know the experience of existing in sexual relationship with a companion of opposite gender.

Yet all of these persons, whose numbers are legion, are truly members of the human community God has made and of the community of faith. As persons who in their varied ways and relationships live out lives of service to God, lives of faithfulness, love, and justice, caring for one another and loving God, their place in the community of faith and my judgment of them are not determined by their conformity to the kind of relationship given central place in Genesis.

In *The Decalogue and a Human Future*, Paul Lehmann acutely perceives the different possibilities for receiving and drawing upon the Genesis account of the creation of man and woman. His comments are indicative of the fact that what the text says does not yet tell us what it teaches; that happens only when the text is perceived from some angle of vision. For Lehmann, as it should be for us all, that angle is the gospel, which he described as what God was and is doing to make and keep human life human. Lehmann teaches us how to read Genesis from the angle of the gospel, guided by the rule of faith and the rule of love.

Lehmann reads Genesis 1-3 as giving a norm in the form of what he calls a *foundational instance*. Lehmann describes a foundational instance as a normative center. He contrasts it with what he calls a *limiting instance*. If a foundational instance establishes a center, a limiting instance draws a boundary. Lehmann argues that Genesis describes a created order in which a generative, enduring sexual relationship between a man and a woman plays a central role. *But the centrality of one kind of relationship does not imply the sinfulness of every other kind of relationship.* The sexual relationship between woman and man provides a foundational instance – but not a limiting one. If the woman-man relationship were a limiting instance, it would draw a line that excluded every other kind of relationship from participating in God’s great work of love. But there is nothing in the Genesis narrative to demand that we read a heterosexual relationship as a limiting instance.

On the contrary, the story of creation stresses plurality, fullness, and the rich variety of God’s creative power. The man-woman relationship instead appears as a foundational moment, what Lehmann calls “the liberating instance in relation to which divergent possibilities may be pursued and assessed” (174). Read in light of the gospel, under the rule of faith and the rule of love, Genesis

depicts a created order in which procreative sexual relationships between women and men are a central – but not the only – faithful response to God’s work of keeping human life human.

Because we read by the rule of faith, I am glad to place my interpretation in conversation with other readers, past and present. But however we interpret Genesis 1-3, we must read the story of creation by the light of the gospel and by the rules of faith and love. For me, it is no less than the power of the gospel in the church that is at stake. ✕

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For what sin did God destroy Sodom and Gomorrah?

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The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is the first text that many people think about when we talk about homosexuality and the Bible. This is striking because the narrative is not, in fact, about homosexuality, and certainly not about private, consensual acts of same-sex love. Rather, Genesis 19 illustrates the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah as sexual violence against men and women, as brutality against persons the community ought to protect. Such behavior reveals a society that no longer observes “the way of the LORD” — namely, righteousness and justice (Gen 18:19)—and thus receives God’s judgment.

Genesis 18 sets the stage. The chapter opens with a depiction of Abraham as gracious host to three angelic messengers. Abraham runs to meet them, offers them shelter and the best food he has available, stands alongside them as they eat (18:1-8), and accompanies two of them on their way (18:16). His behavior exemplifies hospitality, an eagerness to serve others, even, and here particularly, unexpected strangers. That hospitality continues when God, who lingers after the meal, reports there is a great outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and invites Abraham to help adjudicate the gravity of the sin (18:16-21). Without missing a beat, Abraham intercedes for the sake of the righteous (18:22-33). His questions of God are direct and relentless: “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?” “Will not the judge of all the earth do justice?” Seven times he refers to the righteous. Twice he cautions God “far be it from you to do such a thing!” He is so persistent that God ends their exchange and departs, leaving Abraham standing there. We readers stand with him, wondering as we turn to Genesis 19 what grave sin we will find at Sodom and Gomorrah and whether there are enough

righteous to save the cities. Will there be ten? Will God find even one?

The description of Abraham's hospitality in Genesis 18 heightens the inhospitality and injustice we discover at Sodom and Gomorrah. When the two angelic messengers arrive in Sodom, they meet Abraham's nephew Lot. Lot initially welcomes them with hospitality like Abraham's, but his graciousness falters and ultimately fails amid the shouts of a gathering crowd. "The men of Sodom, young and old, all the people to the last man" (19:4) surround Lot's house and demand he bring out his guests "so that we may know them" (19:5). The Hebrew verb "to know" may refer to sex (e.g., Gen 4:1, 17, 25; 1 Kgs 1:4), and Lot indicates that he understands their demand as such when, much to our horror, he offers instead his daughters who have not yet "known" a man (19:8). The scene is replete with threat and chaos: Lot with his back to the door and pleading with the crowd ("I beg you, my brothers, do not do this evil," 19:7), his guests cornered inside, the crowd's increasing stridency, the men pushing and shoving against Lot in an attempt to break down the door, the messengers' last minute rescue of Lot. With each verse, the volatility of the crowd intensifies. No consent is asked for. No consent is given. This is not a matter of private, consensual homosexual sex. The mob's demand—their intended evil—is gang rape.

The mob's demand for homosexual gang rape is paralleled by Lot's disturbing counterproposal: the heterosexual gang rape of his two virgin, betrothed daughters (19:8). In his efforts to protect the male guests inside his house, he suggests he bring the women of his house outside—where they will be without physical protection and arguably, because he offers them to the men to rape, without legal recourse (Deut 22:22-27; cf. Judg 19-20). Telling the mob to "do to them as you please," Lot exemplifies the very depravity about which he has just admonished the Sodomites. He offers his daughters as sexual objects (ironically a fate soon to be his own, cf. 19:30-38). If we hoped that Lot might be the one righteous person (so 2 Pet 2:5-8) who would motivate God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah, we now know there is no hope. The society is utterly corrupt. Indeed, God spares Lot and his family because God remembers Abraham (19:29).

Whereas Genesis 19 depicts the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah as sexual violence, other biblical texts that refer to the cities charge them with inhospitality and injustice generally. Notably, not one mentions the homosexual aspect of the mob's demand. (The obscure reference to "strange flesh" in Jude 7 suggests the sin is men violating angels.) Isaiah, for example, likens Judah to Sodom because they practice injustice ("crushing [God's] people...grinding the face of the poor") and, in their arrogance, do not even try to hide it (3:1-15). Ezekiel similarly identifies Sodom's sin as arrogant disregard of those in need: "[Sodom] and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy" (16:49). Jeremiah warns that prophets have become like Sodom and Gomorrah because "they commit adultery, walk in lies, and strengthen the hands of evildoers so that no one turns from wickedness" (23:14). Matthew names the sin of Sodom as inhospitality (10:5-15; cf. Luke 10:1-12) and attributes its destruction to unrepentant disobedience of God (11:23-24). This larger tradition with regard to Sodom and Gomorrah suggests that Genesis 19 points to just one example (i.e. gang rape) of how egregiously the community was out of step with the "way of the LORD". That such inhospitality and injustices persist in our own communities should give us pause if we ever locate ourselves alongside Abraham early in the morning, looking down at the smoldering landscape that was Sodom and Gomorrah, thinking God's justice has been rightly served against "them" (19:27-29).



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What does Leviticus teach about same-sex relations, and how should we live in response?

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Some laws in Leviticus are important to all of us. The commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18), for example, was essential to Jesus and remains so for us. On some others we may not agree. One example would be, “You (a man) shall not lie with a male as with a woman: it is an abomination” (18:22). (An “abomination” was an act that violated the categories that Leviticus used to make sense of the world, an impurity; for example, since bleeding made a woman impure, a man who had intercourse with a menstruating woman committed an abomination – 18:19, 24-30.)

There are many laws in Leviticus that practically no Presbyterian follows. The law that comes immediately after the command to love your neighbor forbids wearing clothing that mixes different kinds of material, such as a shirt made of cotton and polyester (19:19). Another law prohibits clipping one’s beard at the edges (19:27). Others prohibit crossbreeding animals (19:19 – leaving unclear what constitutes a “breed”), eating meat with blood in it (17:10-13), eating pork or lobster (11:7, 10-12), ordaining anyone who can’t walk or has poor eyesight (21:17-20), and much more that we would probably regard as irrelevant or contrary to an ethical life. Some might appear positively abhorrent. Leviticus imposes the death penalty on children who dishonor their parents (20:9). And on a man lying with another male, in the only other verse in Leviticus on the subject: “they both shall be put to death” (20:13).

On what basis do we decide to obey one verse in Leviticus and not another? Selecting only the verses we agree with seems arbitrary. Some have suggested that we should keep laws in Leviticus that are reaffirmed in the New Testament. But the church does not apply this standard consistently. In Acts 15, early church leaders waive most of

the Jewish dietary restrictions for Gentile Christians, but they agree that Gentiles should not eat any meat with blood. This law from the covenant with Noah (Gen 9:4) and from Leviticus is reaffirmed in the New Testament, but we don't believe it is necessary for holiness.

Even if we accepted all of the Levitical prohibitions reaffirmed in the New Testament, they would not include the prohibition of same-sex love. Jesus makes no mention of same-sex relations, and Paul's apparent censure of homosexuality in Romans 1 differs significantly from the prohibition in Leviticus. Paul writes about same-sex relations among Gentile men and women. But the Levitical prohibition of same-sex relations applies only to Israelites, only to males, and only to the land of Canaan. Whatever Paul intends, he does not mean to reaffirm a few favorite passages of the law in Leviticus. This should come as no surprise: Paul's entire life was turned upside down by the realization that God's new covenant does not depend on the laws of the Torah, even though as a Jew he continued to honor them.

The purity laws in Leviticus were developed out of the priestly account of creation in Genesis 1 and the categories that unfold there, beginning with the disposition of blood and the unqualified command to procreate. (For example, Leviticus does not mention lesbianism because it involves no waste of male "seed.") Other than the eating of blood as described in Acts, however, Paul rejects the notion that the Mosaic food restrictions derived from the blood taboo apply to Gentiles, and he like Jesus urges celibacy, not procreation. The capstone of both creation and the laws of the Mosaic covenant in Leviticus is the Sabbath. But Jesus subordinated even this treasured mark of holiness to doing good.

Presbyterian Christians affirm Jesus' emphasis in our Book of Order. "Truth is in order to goodness; and the great touchstone of truth, its tendency to promote holiness, according to our Savior's rule, 'By their fruits ye shall know them.'" Like Jesus and Paul, this Historic Principle of Church Order (G-1.0304) takes the measure of holiness to be goodness defined by love of neighbor, not the structural abstractions of Leviticus. Such abstractions – male vs. female (what about the intersexed?), same vs. different (what about "interracial" marriage and offspring?), saved semen vs. lost semen (is shared sexual pleasure not a mark of a strong marriage?), with blood vs. without blood (should women be defined by menstruation?) – will not serve a church committed to holiness defined by love of neighbor. Calvin called holiness "our advance in piety through the course of our life." Holiness is to be

gauged by the ethics of love and justice, not by categories and patterns tied to a tabernacle, altar, blood sacrifice, temple, city, and holy land that have ceased to define the Christian life.

The law against same-sex love fails the test of holiness laid down by our church's Constitution. It arises not out of response to God's command to love your neighbor as yourself, but out of a need to organize the world into categories of clean and unclean. The belief system that categorizes people on the basis of an identification of sex and gender, exploiting the binary nature of sex to provide a spurious moral righteousness, is still dominant among us. Not only has the church continued to embrace this aspect of the dominant culture's modern-day moral pollution code, but we have remained its chief advocate. The church's appeal to purity and pollution categories to support the continued disparagement of same-sex love serves the same purposes that anthropologist Mary Douglas (*Purity and Danger*) described for pollution thinking in any culture. Pollution beliefs function culturally to uphold a moral convention in the midst of moral uncertainty or a perceived shortage of moral indignation.

Intolerance or moral uncertainty and disagreement may provide a cultural excuse for unfair discrimination, but it scarcely represents fidelity to the Lord who triumphs over all barriers of status, intolerance, and inequity. As the earliest church avowed, "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, not male and female - for all are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). The church has betrayed this baptismal ideal many times over, but it remains the ideal. ✕



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On matters of sex, what kind of “textual orientation” does the wisdom literature provide?

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The wisdom literature is perhaps the most open-ended yet thoroughly didactic corpus of the Old Testament. Even the books themselves are remarkably diverse: Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. They are the product of centuries of accumulated wisdom and insight, the result of sustained inquiries into the nature of reality, its anomalies as well as its regularities, for the purpose of figuring out how we are to lead our lives in “righteousness, justice, and equity” (Prov 1:3b). In their quest for wisdom, the sages were not reluctant to extend their investigations *beyond* the particularities of their faith. They, in fact, borrowed from the wisdom of surrounding cultures, adapting it and transforming it. Case in point: Proverbs 22:17-23:11 is actually an adaptation of the Egyptian “Instructions of Amen-em-ope” (ca. 1100 BCE). The biblical sages were convinced that *all* truth came from God, even truth at odds with itself.

The diversity of approaches espoused in the wisdom literature is the result of the sages’ struggle with the wisdom of the past (tradition) and the truth of present experience. Job, for example, resists the wisdom of his friends, who have sold their souls to a rigidified tradition, for the sake of the truth he knows from his own experience, namely, that he remains righteous before God and neighbor, despite all evidence to the contrary. The sage behind Ecclesiastes quotes traditional sayings and then contradicts them with his own experience-based insights. In short, within biblical wisdom itself there resides a generative tension between tradition and experience. Neither can be dismissed.

Although the wisdom books do not specifically address contemporary concerns about sexual identity and conduct, specifically homosexuality, they may provide a helpful “textual orientation” for gaining insight into such matters.

Proverbs is a collection of collections of didactic sayings, from extended lectures to pithy apothegms, brought together in self-correcting ways. The search for wisdom, according to Proverbs, is a dynamic enterprise, one based on observation and study in which no final word concludes, once and for all, the quest for understanding. As testimony to this, Proverbs bears its own self-critique, indicated in part by the myriad incompatible sayings it contains (see, for example, Prov 26:4-5). The book describes wisdom as both contextual and dynamic. Wisdom is a “pathway,” and a pathway is formed by the passage of many feet.

As for appropriate sexual conduct, the book of Proverbs is unequivocal on at least one matter, sexual fidelity. Proverbs calls people to spousal fidelity not through the language of law or sanction, but through the language of pleasure and blessing:

*Drink water from your own cistern,
 flowing water from your own well.
 Should your springs be scattered abroad,
 streams of water in the streets?
 Let them be for yourself alone,
 and not for sharing with strangers.
 Let your fountain be blessed,
 and rejoice in the wife of your youth,
 a lovely deer, a graceful doe.
 May her breasts satisfy you at all times,
 may you be intoxicated always by her love. (5:15-20)*

Within the marital context of lifelong commitment, sex is deemed a gift to be enjoyed by both partners. (Sex as the means of procreation is not mentioned in these texts.) Those who break the covenant of marriage through adultery are deemed “strange” and are to be avoided at all costs (2:16-19; 5:3-6; 6:24-29, 32, 35; 7:6-25). (The phrase translated as “loose woman” in the NRSV is better translated as “strange woman.”) If one could reduce Proverbs’ view of sexual fidelity to a motto, it would be “Adultery is dangerous.” It is dangerous not because it incurs the wrath of God—nowhere does Proverbs cite the Seventh Commandment (Exod 20:14; Deut 5:18)—but because adultery is a betrayal, one that results in confusion, mistrust, anger, vengeance, and even violence. Whereas adultery is dangerous, fidelity is delightful and life-sustaining!

Neither Job nor Ecclesiastes espouses a sexual ethics. But they do broach larger issues that relate to the topic. **Job** is demonized by his

friends and family; he is found to be morally anomalous and physically repugnant (19:15-17). His friends impugn him with all manner of moral perversion (22:5-11), to which Job proclaims his innocence by taking an oath of moral purity that includes sexual fidelity (31:1-40, see vv. 9-12). Before he reaches that climactic point, however, Job struggles mightily with who he is in the wake of both his sense of being godforsaken and the “friendly fire” of his accusers: “I am blameless; I do not know myself; I loathe my life” (9:21).

*My relatives and my close friends have failed me;
the guests in my house have forgotten me;
my serving girls count me as a stranger;
I have become an alien in their eyes. (19:14-15)*

Whereas Proverbs castigates the “strange woman” for her marital betrayal and sexual promiscuity, relegating her beyond the bounds of normative conduct, the central character of the book of Job is himself the quintessential “stranger.” Condemned by his friends, who accuse him of “doing away with the fear of God” (15:4a), Job insists that “I have understanding as well as you” (12:3). Job finds from his own experience a repository of truth, a truth that his friends and family cannot accept, namely, that he is innocent. Indeed, it is Job’s growing realization of his innocence, his persistence in righteousness, that ultimately renders his friends speechless. Job has become a hopeless, irredeemable alien to them.

The resolution of Job’s plight is found in God’s answer, which reveals a world full of strangeness. God proudly points out exotic creatures from the margins, from ostriches to onagers, a wild kingdom unaffected by human norms and influence yet legitimated and cared for by God. Though Job is decentered in this strange world, God shows him to be in solidarity with the wild animals in their fierce freedom, dignity, and dependence upon God. God cares for the stranger, whether animal or human. Whereas Job once lamented that he had become a “brother of jackals, and a companion of ostriches” (30:29), God shows him that he is actually in good company! Job has found himself sharing company with strange beasts, with the denizens of the margins, shunned by the human community yet dignified and sustained by God.

For **Ecclesiastes**, wisdom remains out of reach: “That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?” (7:24). Despite his concerted efforts of inquiry, the “Teacher” (aka Qoheleth) comes to the realization that God’s purposes are ultimately inscrutable. Both world

and God remain impenetrable to mortal eyes. Life is full of uncertainties; it is ephemeral and futile (NRSV “vanity”; Hebrew *hebel*), and even the most meticulous planning cannot anticipate, much less control what may come next. For all the ingenuity and power exercised by human beings, there are some things that cannot be changed:

*Consider the work of God;
who can make straight what he has made crooked?* Eccl 7:13 (cf. 1:15)

Qoheleth’s theological rationale is clear:

I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him (3:14).

What appears “crooked” to us may not be to God. God makes the “crooked” as well as the “straight,” and all attempts to straighten “what God has made crooked” will only meet in failure and frustration, so Qoheleth confesses.

Qoheleth does not provide specific examples about what constitutes “crookedness,” but he is specific about how to live amid the “crooked” and the “straight,” and that is to cultivate a life of acceptance and gratitude for life’s simple joys, fleeting though they may be, including a good meal, moments of warmth and intimacy (4:11; 9:9), and enjoyment in one’s work (2:24-26; 3:12-14, 22; 5:18-29; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:9-10). In short, what truly makes life worth living need not be discerned by extensive inquiry and meticulous planning. It may be right in front of our nose, and everything else, including our anxieties over sexuality, pale in comparison. ✕



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What do the Gospels say about sex and sexuality?

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Those who seek guidance from the Gospels about sex and sexuality may be surprised to discover their relative silence on these matters. Where we moderns are preoccupied with sex, the Gospels seem little interested. Seekers will find these ancient writings to be quite forceful on questions about duties within heterosexual marriage. On questions about people marginalized because of their sexual status, however, they show both compassion and a readiness to affirm their place in the work of God. And one of the strongest themes in the Gospels is the extent to which the requirements of biblical law come under consistent questioning by Jesus himself.

Heterosexual marriage is the “default” sexual relationship in the New Testament. It is not so much argued for as presumed. John’s Gospel reports Jesus’ attendance (and wine-making) at a wedding (John 2:1-11). While this text is frequently used to avow Jesus’ approval of such legal contracts, Jesus expresses neither approval nor disapproval in this story. If anything, the larger example of Jesus’ own life as an unmarried person, coupled with the itinerancy to which he calls his disciples, calls into question the centrality of heterosexual marriage for Christian life.

More forceful directives on the matter of marriage – or, better, on the matter of divorce – can be found in Mark 10:2-12 (with parallels in Mt. 19:3-9 and Lk 16:18). In this frequently cited text, Jesus – in response to a question posed to him by religious men – cites Genesis as the basis for his injunction against divorce. Jesus argues that the joining of the created beings into “one flesh” is an act of God that should not be torn apart by any human being. Here Jesus is not advocating that all should marry; rather, he is arguing against the divorce of those who do. And he is arguing against a

practice that, in the ancient world, was overwhelmingly the prerogative of the husband, and overwhelmingly risky to the economic and social well-being of the wife. Far from prescribing marriage as a legalistic norm for all people, Jesus is, as usual, arguing against interpretations of the law that crush the ones who are most vulnerable.

The question of divorce is accompanied by that of adultery. The Gospels seem to presume the accepted definition of their day, considering as adultery sexual intercourse between any man and a woman who is either betrothed or married to another man as a wife or concubine. Because a wife or concubine became the property of her husband, adultery became a matter of grand theft, and of shaming (thus Absalom rapes David's concubines as a means of shaming him (2 Sam. 16:19-23)). Adultery was thus potentially a capital offense, as is evident in the narrative of the woman caught in adultery in John's Gospel (8:1-11). While Jesus refuses to cast a stone at the woman, he does not endorse adultery. On the contrary, in Matthew's Gospel, at least, he internalizes and intensifies the definition of adultery. Even a man who looks at a woman with lust in his heart could be guilty of adultery (5:27-32). (Ironically, nowhere does Jesus counsel against male lust toward other men or against any female lust whatever.)

Closely related to adultery is *porneia*, frequently translated as "fornication." *Porneia* is like adultery, in that it is an action perpetrated by men on women. The difference here is that these women are not married or betrothed to another man. *Porneia* is generally not deemed as serious an offense as adultery. In Deuteronomic law, a man committing such an act with an unattached young woman must marry her and pay her father fifty shekels (Deut. 22:28-29).

The New Testament also uses *porneia* to describe sexual acts with prostitutes. In the ancient world, prostitution was a common, established practice. This was particularly the case in temples of the fertility goddesses of the ancient world. *Porneia* and its cognates all refer to prostitution. A *porneion* is a brothel; to *porneu_* is to prostitute; a *porn_* is a prostitute; the *pornikos* was the tax normally paid by brothel-keepers; to *pornoboske_* is to keep a brothel; the trade of "brothel-keeper" was known as *pornoboskia*; and a man who loved harlots was known as a *pornophilas*. Any translation of *porneia*, then,

should include not only “fornication,” which has come to take the meaning of any sex outside of the legal contract of marriage, but also a particular association with “engaging in prostitution.” The Gospels say very little about *porneia*, except that it comes out of the heart of a person (Mk 7:21; Mt. 15:19) and can thus defile that person. There is no clear directive about whether what defiles the person is the thought of sex, the desire to exploit another person for sex, or something else.

Given the Gospels’ strong stances on divorce and adultery, and to some extent on prostitution, it may come as a surprise that the Gospels show great sympathy for first-century sexual minorities (that is, persons who live outside of reproductive heterosexual marriage). In fact, sexual minorities and sexually marginalized persons figure prominently in positive roles in the Gospels.

Matthew’s genealogy (1:1-17) features four women, the only four women in either genealogy of Jesus in the Gospels. All of these women are known for dubious sexual morality: Tamar, who gets pregnant by her father-in-law after playing the prostitute; Rahab, a prostitute and traitor to her nation; Ruth, a foreign woman who “lies down at the feet” of a strange man while he is drunk in order to obtain financial security for herself and her mother-in-law; and the wife of Uriah, who is raped by King David, is forced to marry him, and bears him Solomon. These four women, along with Mary, whose pregnancy looked for all the world to be adulterous, are the mothers and grandmothers of the Christ.

Another category of sexual minorities and marginalized people is unattached and/or infertile women. Unattached women were considered to be “loose,” whether or not there was any evidence to support that allegation. Infertile women were considered cursed by some sin they had committed. Yet Luke, in a clear parallel with the stories of Sarah and Hannah, holds up barren Elizabeth as one who is righteous exactly in her barrenness. She goes on to become the mother of John the Baptist (1:1-25). All three of the Synoptic Gospels hold up widows – particularly widows who have no sons – as models of faith (Mk 12:42-44; Lk 21:1-3) and as persons for whom Jesus particularly cared (Mt. 7:11-17).

And Mark shows the clearly unattached Gentile woman, the one he calls the Syrophenician, in a toe-to-toe argument with Jesus for the life and sanity of her daughter. She not only challenges Jesus, but also wins the argument – even after Jesus dismisses her with the slur “it is not right to take the food of the children and feed it to the dogs” (Mark 7:24-31). Indeed, Matthew’s Jesus quips that prostitutes would enter into the kingdom of heaven before the religious leaders of his day, because the women, at least, believed John. (Mt 21:31-32). The pattern is clear: Unattached and infertile women may have been marginalized in the wider society because of their sexual status, but they play essential roles in the Gospels’ vision of the work of God in the world.

On the subject of same-sex sexual activity, Jesus says nothing – either positive or negative. Some scholars have argued that Jesus encounters a same-sex sexual relationship when he is asked to heal the *entimos pais*, the beloved male “servant” or “slave” of the centurion. The *entimos pais* may or may not have been having a sexual relationship with his boss/owner. Such relationships were common at the time, but there is no specific evidence here. When confronted with the request for healing, Jesus cures the slave/servant without comment about or investigation into the nature of the relationship between this centurion and his *entimos pais* (Matt 8:5-13; Lk 7:1-10). Where modern readers might be full of questions, Jesus and the Gospel writers are silent.

Other scholars have detected a hint of homoeroticism in talk of “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” the one privy to secrets to which even Peter has no access and to whom Jesus gives over care of his mother after his death (John 13:23, 19:26-27). There is no evidence of any sexual dimension to this relationship. At the same time, though, there is no special effort in the Gospel to explain, clarify, or justify the relationship. Once again, the authors of the Gospels are far less concerned about how such a narrative might appear than we moderns might be if we were to write these narratives ourselves. Questions about same-sex relations simply are not very important to writers trying to pass on the Good News.

What does concern the Gospel writers is the question of what it means to be a faithful servant of the living God, especially in light of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E. All four

Gospels were penned in the wake of this catastrophe. In light of such massive destruction, what did it mean to faithfully follow the law? What parts of the law were relevant and what parts had been superseded by events of the recent past, or – in the case of the Jesus movement – by the teachings of Jesus? With these questions in mind, the Gospel writers remember Jesus not as a pious, scrupulously lawful, religious man, but rather as a man in constant conflict with the religious establishment about the meaning and purpose even of such central tenets as Sabbath and the laws of *kashrut*. (Cf. Mat 12:1-14; 15:17-19 ; Mk 2:23-3:6; 7:17-23; Luke 6:1-10; 13: 10-17; 14:1-6; John 5:2-18; 9).

The Gospels remember that in the midst of great social chaos, Jesus was asked what the most important law was. He responded, as have Jews for generations before and since, with the words of the great *Shema*: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” And then, without missing a beat, he added a second: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39). Perhaps, finally, even on this issue of sexuality, that is all that needs to be said.



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What does Romans 1 teach about homosexuality, and how should we live in response?

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In the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans, we find an extended attack on humanity for its failure to live in a properly creaturely relationship to God. Among the things Paul says in this long accusation is that "their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error" (Romans 1:26-27). Understandably, these lines prompt many Christians to regard Paul as unequivocally opposed to homosexual relationships.

As with any text, however, whether an e-mail message or the Gettysburg address, we need to examine the literary context in which these verses appear. Having opened the letter by characterizing the gospel as God's own power for the salvation of all human beings, Paul in this section begins a relentless indictment of humanity. The indictment, which he puts forth in 1:18-23, is that human beings rejected the very godliness of God: they suppressed God's truth (1:18), they did not honor God or give God thanks (1:21), they worshipped things of their own making instead of worshiping God (1:22-25). This, in Paul's analysis, is the fundamental sin of humankind.

Because of humanity's implacable refusal to acknowledge its own creatureliness in the face of the God of heaven and earth, God "gave them up." Three times Paul repeats this terrifying

assertion that God handed humanity over (1:24, 26, 28) to a whole series of actions. The behaviors include out-of-control passions, such as those mentioned in vv. 26-27, but they also include all the attitudes and actions itemized in the remainder of the chapter, such as envy, murder, gossip, foolishness, faithlessness, and a host of others. In their literary context, then, vv. 26-27 depict same-sex relations as the *result* of human sinfulness, a sinfulness involving all humanity, a sinfulness rooted in human rebellion against God. What Paul is writing here constitutes a sweeping depiction of fallen humanity; this is not an exhortation, much less an early church order.

New Testament scholars – highly learned individuals of good will who are deeply shaped by these texts and who strive to serve the gospel faithfully – have serious disagreements about the cultural and historical factors that influence Paul’s comments in Romans 1. Out of the complex discussion, a few points are crucial.

First, Paul does not operate with a notion of a homosexual (or heterosexual) “orientation” in the contemporary sense; instead, his language reflects the Greco-Roman world’s understanding of sexual relations among people of the same gender as discrete acts rather than a homosexual orientation or lifestyle. A number of ancient writers speak of same-sex acts not as indications of an orientation or a preference, but as symptoms of passion that has simply gone out of control. For instance, they would not say that a man who was married to a woman but also enjoyed sex with men was bisexual, or wrestling with two different orientations. They would say that he had a super-abundance of what they took to be a single, gender-indifferent, sexual passion. We need to understand that Paul is addressing a different question than the ones we are asking.

Second, when Paul speaks of “natural” and “unnatural” actions, he reflects the rigid hierarchy of Greco-Roman understandings about gender and sexuality. To put the matter directly, the sexual penetrator is regarded as superior to the one who is penetrated, so that a man who allows himself to be penetrated is regarded as unnaturally passive and women who engage in sex with one another are regarded as unnaturally active. Before finding ourselves compelled by this argument, we would do well to remember that what seems “natural” or “unnatural” is not fixed for all people and all

times. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul claims that it is “unnatural” for women to have their heads unveiled and for men to have long hair, but few contemporary Christians feel compelled to agree with Paul’s understanding of nature in that case.

Third, and perhaps most important, in this passage Paul seems to be playing, perhaps even deliberately, on some stereotypical Jewish accusations about Gentiles. For example, most annotated Bibles will refer to the Wisdom of Solomon 13-15, a Jewish text of the late first century B.C.E., which in several important ways parallels Romans 1. There also the author claims that Gentiles should have known about God from observing the world around them, that they instead made their own gods, and that the result is that their lives are mired in wickedness, including sexual promiscuity.

Addressing gatherings of Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome, gatherings in which there may have been conflicts both theological and ethnic, Paul appears to be using this stereotype of the godless, wicked Gentile to draw in his audience. As the chapter proceeds, the audience will surely understand that the “they” to whom Paul refers are those outside the congregation, and the audience will imagine itself to be siding with Paul in his sharp attacks on godlessness and immorality. By the time he reaches the end of the chapter, with its declaration that those who commit such acts deserve death itself, the audience may have reached a frenzy of outrage.

In an instant, however, the outrage is undone, for Paul’s next comment is this: “Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things” (2:1). No longer does the indictment point outward to “those people over there,” now it points directly to the Roman congregations who have joined him in condemning others. Paul has pulled the rhetorical rug out from under the audience, equating their judgment of others with the rest of the godless rebellion depicted in Romans 1.

Where does Romans 1 leave us with the question of homosexuality? The passage does not address homosexuality as an orientation, and it certainly does not address ordination or leadership in Christian communities. In common with many of his

contemporaries, Paul assumes (but never actually argues) that same-sex relations are symptomatic of human sinfulness. Even those who conclude faithfully that this text requires Christians to condemn contemporary forms of same-sex relations must nevertheless hear in Romans 2:1 a powerful word of caution: we too stand under judgment, especially when we stand in judgment of others.



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What does 1 Corinthians 6:9 teach about sexuality, and how should we live in response?

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In 1 Cor. 6: 9-10, Paul gives a long list of “wrongdoers [who] will not inherit the kingdom of God.” Presbyterian New Testament scholars Paul Achtemeier and Marion Soards, whom I hold in high esteem, think that when 1 Cor 6:9 uses the Greek terms *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, Paul *clearly* is speaking about same-sex erotic behavior among males and excluding such people from being heirs of God’s kingdom. Thus, in the contemporary debate about the ordination of non-celibate gays and lesbians, they use this text to limit the issue to “homoerotic practice” aside from any other criteria that make people hold interpersonal relationships dear.

But is it really so clear that 1 Cor 6:9 is about “homoerotic practice” and is it really so clear who is excluded from being heirs of God’s kingdom? I suggest that there is actually a lack of clarity. The lack of clarity shows up in several ways. One is in the variety among translations. Another is the difficulty we have in making direct correlations between biblical texts and the way we construe reality today. Most importantly, however, the argument about clarity does not adequately consider the context in 1 Corinthians 6, and this context is eye-opening with respect to how Paul deals with sexual behavior among the Corinthians.

Translations. Though *malakoi* literally means soft, it is often used in Greek to describe effeminate men, and many interpreters suggest that this identifies receptive partners in same-sex erotic

behavior among males. One would be hard pressed to deduce anything about a receptive partner from the King James translation which simply says “effeminate” or from Luther’s translation quite literally as “weakling.” The Revised Standard Version combines the two terms *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* into one translation as “sexual perverts,” a questionable move in translating, which the New Revised Standard Version tries to “correct” by reverting to two terms. With respect to *malakoi* the NRSV translation is “male prostitutes.” When the translation tradition moves between the extremes of “weakling” and “male prostitutes,” this indicates lack of clarity in our understanding of the term. Simply the variety in translations is one indication that the church has no sustained tradition of clarity about the meaning of *malakoi* in 1 Cor 6:9.

The problem of clarity is perhaps even more difficult with *arsenokoitai*. 1 Cor 6:9 is the first place we know of in all of Greek literature in which this term is used. Paul apparently coined it. So how does one know what a word means the first time it ever appears? Granted, we know some things from the formation of the word. It is compounded from a term for “bed” and a term for “male” with an agency ending—implicitly one who beds a male. Again, a quick review of translations shows the uncertainty in the meaning. The King James Version has “abusers of themselves with mankind”; Luther has an equivalent of “violators of boys,” perhaps implying pederasty; and the NRSV introduces “sodomites,” an astonishing innovation in the translation tradition.

Correlation. A further difficulty is attempting to correlate our interpretations of the biblical text with the way we interpret reality. For example, the list in 1 Cor 6:9-10 includes the word *methusoi*, translated in the NRSV as “drunkards.” But what kind of present reality are we able to correlate with Paul’s word *methusoi*? People who drink alcohol in any quantity? People who occasionally drink to excess? People who drink too much on a regular basis? Further, how much is too much? The text itself does not enable us to know with certainty what present reality we should correlate with *methusoi*. Similarly, it is not at all clear how we should correlate *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* with realities of our time. Do the words refer to men who engage in promiscuous sex with men? Do the words refer to women at all? Can they be stretched to include men and women in same-sex relationships marked by mutuality and covenant fidelity

in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow – relationships that Paul could scarcely imagine? The church faces uncertainty not only in translating *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* but also in knowing how to correlate these terms with sexual behavior today.

Context. The context is eye opening. 1 Cor 6:9-10 lists categories of human beings who are excluded from being heirs of God's kingdom. But in 6:11 Paul says that even though some of the Corinthians used to belong to these categories, they no longer do: "And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God." At first glance it appears obvious that when the Corinthians became believers, they changed their behavior. But as true as this may be, Paul spends the rest of the chapter dealing with the sexual behavior of some heterosexual males in the Corinthian Christian community. Even after being washed, sanctified, and justified, some of the Corinthian believers were still engaging in sexual intercourse with prostitutes.

The remainder of the chapter is Paul's attempt to deal with their behavior. His argument is triadic. He reminds the Corinthians of their relationship to Christ, to the Holy Spirit, and to God. "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?" he asks (6:15). In order to deal with sexual behavior that Paul considers to be problematic, he first reminds the Corinthians of their relationship with Christ.

But then he reminds them also of their relationship with the Holy Spirit: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?" (6:19). Unfortunately, this has often been interpreted only in individualistic terms, as if each believer's body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. But this is all in the second person plural, so that the emphasis is on the community as the body of Christ, as is evident elsewhere in 1 Corinthians (e.g. 11:29 with respect to the Lord's supper). The meaning is something like: "Do you not know that your [corporate] body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who [lives] among you." Not only does Paul remind them of their relationship with the Spirit but also of their place in the corporate body of believers.

Paul's thought then moves to the third part of the triad:

“. . . [your corporate body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who lives among you], which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body” (6:19-20). Here Paul reminds the Corinthians of their relationship with God. This is not altogether apparent because Paul uses a divine passive. That is, he expresses “you were bought with a price” in the passive voice, but had he expressed it in the active voice, he would have said, “God bought you with a price.” Here again the “you” is plural, and Paul’s exhortation to glorify God in “your body” is also plural, that is, it is addressed to the corporate body.

In sum, when Paul is faced with sexual behavior from some believers in the Corinthian congregation which does not fit his own expectations, he does not fit these Corinthian believers into the categories of 6:9-10, which would exclude them from being heirs of God’s kingdom. On the contrary, his way of dealing with their behavior is to remind them of their relationships with Christ, with the Holy Spirit, and with God with the expectation that they would live out their sexuality as members of a community that lives in dependence upon the grace of God.

1 Corinthians 6 distinguishes two groups of people – those who are excluded as heirs of God’s kingdom in 6:9-10 and those who in the community of believers stand in a relationship with Christ, with the Spirit, and with God (6:12-20). Surprisingly, some Corinthians whose sexual behavior does not fit Paul’s expectations are still included in the second category.

The analogy to our own struggles about sexuality is strong. Even if this text suggested that all same-sex erotic activity were sinful – and it is by no means clear that it does – it still would not offer grounds for a categorical exclusion of non-celibate gay and lesbian Christians from the ministries of the church. As with all Christians, gay and lesbian Christians live their lives as part of a community in relation to Christ, to the Spirit, and to God. All of our lives, including our sexual lives, are caught up in and transformed by this relationship. 1 Corinthians 6 reminds us of this good news. It reminds us of the importance of sexual ethics. It calls us to glorify God in our bodies. But it offers no support to our attempts to exclude from ministry those whom God has bought with a price and joined to the body of Christ.





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Since the Bible seems only to condemn same-sex relations, how can some Christians affirm same-sex marriage or the ordination of openly gay and lesbian Christians? Where is there any support for this approach in the Bible?

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This is a crucial question that calls for a constructive response. A *constructive* response is one that helps to build and to edify the church as the body of Christ (see, e.g., 1 Cor 12-14). A *constructive* response also means that as faithful Christians we are seeking precisely to *construct* an answer that addresses competing claims that we feel must be included in any response. What does it mean for us to discern God's Spirit as we seek to construct a faithful response to the question of the status of lesbian and gay Christians in our midst?

We are not the first ones to ask comparable questions about a constructive response that seeks to discern God's Spirit in addressing controversial and divisive issues. The history of the church is full of such struggles, whether we look to the Apostle Paul, the split between Eastern Orthodoxy and the Roman Catholic tradition, the fights between the Protestants and Catholics, or the debates in the

United States over slavery and the status of women in the church. In all of these debates both sides appealed to the witness of Scripture, church tradition, reason, and experience in light of God's Spirit to argue positions that were exactly the opposite of one another. As we address the current crisis regarding the recognition of openly gay and lesbian clergy and same-sex relationships, we must do so in light of the church's long history of heated debates over discerning the leading of God's Spirit. It is our challenge, our responsibility, and our opportunity to be engaged in such discernment where, to be sure, we do our best to see through a glass darkly as we work out our salvation in fear and trembling.

To the question at hand, then. Since the Bible seems to condemn same-sex relations, how can some Christians on the basis of Scripture argue that the church should endorse same-sex relations of any kind, whether by celebrating gay marriage or by ordaining openly gay clergy?

There are basically two responses to this question, both grounded in Scripture. First, we must be clear about what Scripture condemns and why. We must be aware that the notion of "homosexual orientation" is a modern notion (as is sexual orientation in general), and that the term "homosexual" is never found in Scripture – even though some translations anachronistically and misleadingly render the original Hebrew and Greek words from Scripture as "homosexual." Such translations read our modern understandings back into Scripture and fail to understand Scripture on its own terms. For example, in Paul's letters, the passing references that condemn same-sex relations (Rom 1; 1 Cor 6) are addressed to the context of Paul's day, where same-sex relations were typically and understandably seen as exploitive, especially given that pederasty and slave-prostitution were the primary forms of same-sex relations with which Paul would have been familiar.

To condemn all modern-day homosexual relationships on the basis of the exploitive same-sex relations of Paul's day would be the same as condemning all modern-day heterosexual relationships on the basis of David's adulterous relationship with Bathsheba. Just as there is no blanket condemnation of all heterosexual relations because of some inappropriate heterosexual actions (rape, incest, adultery), so also we may ask if it is correct to issue a blanket

condemnation of all same-sex relations because those referred to in Scripture were exploitive and thus inappropriate relations (e.g., rape & pederasty).

Further, in Paul's time such homoerotic expressions were viewed as being against nature (cf. Rom 1). But what counts as natural or unnatural varies from age to age and culture to culture. (Consider Paul's comments on hair length in 1 Cor 11.) In our present age we have come to understand that individuals are born with a sexual orientation of which they become aware as they mature. Sexual orientation is as natural and unchosen as left-handedness or brown eyes. It is simply part of the rich diversity of God's creation.

Thus, first and foremost it is important to understand Scripture on its own terms, with its own cultural assumptions and perspectives – some of which views we regard as inapplicable in our time. Perhaps the best example of this is the Presbyterian Church's stance on the role of women in church leadership. Scripture is quite explicit in its rejection of women for such leadership positions (1 Cor 14; 1 Tim 2), and yet the modern church argues (correctly) that the Spirit of God has led us to recognize that women have been gifted by God just as men, and therefore are appropriate candidates for positions of ordination and church leadership. This current position stands in significant tension with many biblical evaluations of women as being subordinate to men and of less value than men. And yet we are confident as a church that we are being faithful to the call of God's Spirit, even though the inclusion of women in leadership roles caused tremendous conflict in the church.

This observation leads to the second biblical response to the question posed above. It is one thing to say that the Bible's passing references to practices significantly different from modern practices do not amount to an outright ban. But does Scripture provide any reasons to affirm same-sex relations or ordination of openly gay/lesbian Christians? I think it is important to state clearly that Scripture offers no *direct* evidence for such a case. But this is not the end of the story, as Scripture does not offer direct evidence for any number of concerns crucial to Christian faith and practice (e.g., various issues of modern bioethics).

Scripture did not provide Paul with all he needed to know, nor did he always have a "word from the Lord" regarding

important new situations. But Paul did think he was able to discern the Spirit. For example, Paul appeals to the Galatians to reflect on their own communal experience of God's Spirit (Gal 3:1-5) as the most important guide regarding whether or not they should observe the Jewish ritual law. Paul broke with established custom and even, arguably, with the teachings of Jesus in this regard (cf. Matthew 5:18-19). But Paul felt himself led by the Spirit and believed that the experiences of Gentile Christians confirmed their reception of the Spirit apart from the law.

The author of the Acts of the Apostles made the same kind of argument in his narrative of God's inclusion of the Gentile Cornelius in Acts 10. Cornelius did not have to become a law-observant Jew in order to have proper faith in Christ. This went completely against early Christian tradition, as the controversy of Acts 10-11, 15, and Galatians 2 richly attests. God startled Peter with the rooftop vision and the firm declaration, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane" (Acts 10: 15). God was doing what appeared to be a new thing. Paul and Peter were calling on the church to acknowledge what God was doing, even though it scandalized the church and seemed to go against scripture and tradition.

In short, then, while Scripture does not provide direct testimony of God's blessing of same-sex relationships or of gay clergy, Scripture does provide clear and direct testimony of God's call to pay attention to the inclusion of the faithful whom the church has often failed to see as welcomed by God. Peter paid attention to Cornelius' faithful response to God's Spirit, even though he was a Gentile. Paul paid attention to the Galatians' faithful response to the Spirit, and made a point that their experience was to guide them in matters of faith and practice even against the testimony of time-honored interpretations of Scripture and tradition.

Scripture calls upon us in the church today to pay attention to the testimony of God's Spirit as we have experienced the profound faith of gay and lesbian Christians in our midst. As Peter told the Jerusalem assembly, "If God gave [Cornelius's household] the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" (Acts 11: 17). Surely we must see them first of all as brothers and sisters in Christ who are baptized in the same Spirit that all Christians share, brothers and sisters

who do not cease to be gay or lesbian by virtue of their Christian faith.

So does the Bible provide positive evidence for the inclusion of gay and lesbian Christians in the church? Does the Bible give Christians reason to affirm same-sex relationships and the ordination of gay/lesbian Christians? In my view the answer is a resounding *yes*. We need to listen to the voices of our sisters and brothers in Christ whose sexual orientation in no way hampers their ability to form loving and committed relationships, just as it in no way hampers their capacity to serve God and the church in ordained ministry. To this Scripture, tradition, reason, and especially Christian experience bears witness as we seek to discern and to embody God's loving and healing Spirit in a broken world. Let us welcome all to the community of faith and the community of ministry in this Spirit.

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What does Christian baptism have to do with the current controversy in the church about sexuality and ordination?

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To see how the theology of Christian baptism speaks to a contemporary issue like sexuality and ordination, we must first understand baptism itself, and to do that is to grapple with the symbols of water and fire. Whether in a font, a pool, or a river, water is the central symbol of baptism, just as bread and wine are the central symbols of the Lord's Supper. But to the symbol of water, Jesus added the symbol of fire. John the Baptist said that his baptism was of water, but that Jesus would baptize with "the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matthew 3:11).

Water and fire. What do these two basic symbols mean? They point to the deep truth that baptism means not one thing, but many things. Water is the fluid that surrounds us in the womb, water makes an oasis of life in the desert, water slakes our thirst in a parched land, and water washes us clean. So it is with the water of baptism. Baptism is about birth, and to be baptized is to signify that we are "born again," that we have become a new creation in Christ. The life-giving water of baptism is a living spring in the midst of the wilderness, and to be baptized is to be brought into the place of true life in Jesus Christ. "Give me this water," said the Samaritan woman to Jesus, "that I may never be thirsty..." (John 4:15). Baptism is also about being washed clean in the pure water of God's mercy, and to be baptized is a sign that by the grace of God we are forgiven, cleansed of our sins, and called into the fellowship of the redeemed.

As one of the Presbyterian confessions, the Second Helvetic, beautifully states it, "We are baptized with water...washed or sprinkled with visible water. For the water washes dirt away, and cools and refreshes hot and tired bodies. And the grace of God performs these things for souls, and does so invisibly or spiritually" (*Book of Confessions* 5.188).

Christian baptism is not only about water, though; it is also about fire, which means that it is about the power of the Holy Spirit to bring energy, power, warmth, and light to our lives. It is the Holy Spirit who stirs up the love of God, burning in our hearts. It is the Holy Spirit who fills us with fiery passion for the gospel, it is the Holy Spirit who causes good gifts to flame up in our lives, and it is the Holy Spirit who lights up the way of Christ and beckons us to follow. When Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit descended like a dove upon him, and the voice of God announced that Jesus was "my Son, the beloved." Our baptism is a sign that the same Spirit falls upon us, declaring us to be the beloved daughters and sons of God. "Baptism signifies...being sealed by God's Spirit," states the Presbyterian *Book of Order* (W-2.3004), a statement that draws upon the language of Ephesians: "When you heard the gospel of your salvation...you were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory" (Eph. 1:13-14). To understand baptism is not only to think about water, but also to think about fire.

Putting together the meanings we discern in these two symbols, water and fire, we see two important insights about the relationship between baptism and the debate about ordination. First, the pure water of baptism reminds us that this sacrament is about God's purity and not ours, God's grace and not our righteousness, that it is about something that God does toward, for and with us, to which our Christian lives are a response. As Calvin insisted, "Christ's purity has been offered us in [baptism]; his purity ever flourishes; it is defiled by no spots but buries and cleanses away all our defilements." This means that all baptized Christians stand on the same moral ground, namely the righteousness of God. We are, as the old hymn puts it, "standing on the promises of Christ" and not on our own good works.

We are able, then, to see every baptized person as a treasure, as one who has been claimed by the mercy of Christ, and as one

whose flourishing and whose full participation in the church is our duty and delight. We are called to help each other grow into our baptismal identity, to help each other along the way of discipleship and obedience as fellow pilgrims who have been graced by light along the path, to find together as brothers and sisters how to allow our lives to conform more and more to the way of Jesus Christ. Any talk in the church of who belongs and who doesn't, of who is in the circle and who is out of the circle, of who is morally pure and who is impure, is not mere political incorrectness. It is instead a denial of the deep truth of baptism, a denial of the promise of God to Israel and to the church: "I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you..." (Isaiah 43:1-2).

Perhaps even more pointedly, the symbol of fire and the promise of the Holy Spirit remind us that the sacrament of baptism is itself an ordination service. All baptized people are already ordained. Through baptism, God creates a new community, a priesthood of all believers, a nation of ordained ministers. In the words of 1 Peter (a letter that many scholars think contains portions of an early baptismal sermon), "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet 2:9).

It is well known that in the worship of the early church, those who were not baptized were dismissed before the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. When they were eventually baptized, they would then be welcomed to the feast of the faithful. But it is less well known that, as Presbyterian church historian Catherine Gunsalus González notes, the non-baptized were dismissed not only before the Lord's Supper but also before the prayers of the people. Praying this prayer, she says, was considered to be a priestly act, and "baptism gave a priestly role in intercession that has been lost" (*Reformed Liturgy and Music*, Winter, 1994, 5). In other words, the early church knew that baptism was not only an act of initiation into the church; it was also an act of ordination into priestly ministry.

The issue before the church is not whether persons of this or that sexual orientation can be ordained to ministry. They are already ordained to ministry by virtue of baptism. As is the case with ministers of the Word, elders, and deacon, all baptized Christians have

had hands laid upon their heads as a sign that they are set apart as ministers of Christ and as a sign of the presence, power, and blessing of the Holy Spirit. That same Spirit has given to the baptized all the gifts and graces the church needs to sustain its life and engage in its mission, and the whole church is called to be good stewards of these charisms and gifts.

So the real question that baptism places before us is not who shall be ordained. That one has already been decided at the font. The real question is one of the stewardship of gifts. If the Holy Spirit gives to this one among us the gift of teaching, and to another among us the gift of preaching, and to still others the gifts of discernment, leadership, and care, who are we to turn these spiritual gifts away? What we are truly summoned to decide is not who among the baptized receives these spiritual gifts or who is entitled to exercise them. The Holy Spirit decides that. We are summoned, rather, to receive these gifts with joy and gratitude and to be the kind of church that orders its life in such a way that these gifts are honored, exercised, and nourished to the glory of God and the blessing of the world.



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What do the Confessions teach about sexuality? And how do they inform the ethical commitments of Presbyterian Christians?

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In Presbyterian debates over the inclusion of non-heterosexual persons it is often assumed that the *Book of Confessions* gives unequivocal support to traditionalists and thus is entirely bad news for those who want to see a more welcoming church. Many believe that the *Book of Order's* call for candidates for ordination to repent of all practices “which the confessions call sin” (G-6.0106b) effectively excludes “self-affirming, practicing homosexuals” from the church’s ministry. But in fact same-sex relations are by no means at the center of the practices “which the confessions call sin.” By some counts there are more than 600 such practices, including forming a visual or mental image of God or Jesus (4.097, 7.219), opposing government policy on taxation or war (5.258), and working or playing on Sunday – or causing others to do so (7.229). Amid the many words of the eleven documents of the *Book of Confessions*, there are very few references that can be construed as pertaining directly to same-sex relations. We can look briefly at these.

1. “Homosexual perversion”? A passage in the *Book of Confessions' version of the Heidelberg Catechism* (which was written in 1563) suggests that those guilty of “homosexual perversion” will not be saved (4.087). The problem is that this passage does not appear in the catechism as originally written. Nor does it appear in

any translation other than this one, produced in 1962. In 1997, when it came to light that the original version had been tampered with, one of the translators defended inserting these words because, in light of the sexual revolution of the 1960s, "it would be well to be more specific ... than [the author] had been in his day." Edward Dowey, professor at Princeton Seminary and chair of the committee that brought this catechism to the Presbyterian General Assembly (which adopted the entire *Book of Confessions* in 1967) was appalled to discover, too late, that his committee had missed what he called an "illicit change." Because the church never deliberated over the "updating," it is unclear what force the translators' unorthodox rendering has for Presbyterians.

2. "Sodomy"? The Westminster Larger Catechism (of 1647) lists "sodomy, and all unnatural lusts" among a great many specific sins forbidden by the seventh commandment (including "the keeping of stews," or public baths; 7.249). In understandings of sodomy common to the 17th century, this ban would include sexual relations between two men (and possibly between two women). But it would include a good deal more than that, including any form of sexual expression (even heterosexual) that violates "nature's aim" of procreation.

3. "One man and one woman": The Westminster Confession defines marriage as between "one man and one woman" (6.131, 6.133) so as to exclude the possibility of polygamy (of which there are plenty of biblical examples). Its authors did not mean to address same-sex marriage (hardly conceivable in the 17th century). And yet this definition does show the way that many confessions assume that the Bible establishes monogamous heterosexuality as the norm for human relations. The cultures out of which the confessions were produced could not have conceived of the moral possibility of healthy, stable, committed and covenanted relationships between partners of the same sex. Is such an assumption binding in a very different context - one in which there is no longer general agreement about the "facts" that were once thought to uphold the assumption? This is not clear. For a parallel example: The confessions' accounts of the creation of the universe include assumptions that today could be called "creationist" (e.g., 6.022-23). But they were written well before the advent of modern biological science. Do these accounts require Presbyterians to oppose evolution?

As we can see from these few examples, when we turn to the confessions for proof-texts to support one or another position on the moral standing of same-sex relations we end up with little to show for our efforts. That is because it is only very recently that the church has seriously confronted new questions about sexual partnerships, and it is unreasonable to expect our confessions to yield direct answers to questions that did not arise in any serious way in the times for which they were written.

Perhaps, then, another approach is called for – one that asks after the larger theological convictions that guide our ethical reflection on sexuality in our time. Here are a few broad themes that pertain to our current reflections on sexuality:

1. The limitations and necessity of confessional witness:

Presbyterians resist any slavish dependence on the prejudices of the past. Our confessions themselves subordinate their authority to that of “Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him” (9.03). They require us to look critically at all human doctrines, to continue to reflect together on the way the Holy Spirit speaks to us in scripture, and in this way to contribute to the Spirit’s work of continually reforming the church (6.010). This is one reason why we have a *Book of Confessions*: no single human document witnesses to God’s Word perfectly and this witness needs to be done afresh for the new challenges of new days.

2. A guide to reading scripture: On the basis of the confessions, Presbyterians reject narrow, literalistic readings of the Bible. They take account of history, language, and culture in interpretation; they seek to ground their reading of the Bible in the overarching story of God’s work of reconciling the world to Godself in Christ (the rule of faith); and they work to understand scripture so as to increase the love of God and neighbor rather than diminish it (the rule of love). They recognize, also, that understanding scripture requires the illumination of the Spirit and the shared insights of a faithful community of readers.

3. The primacy of grace: Presbyterians believe that we are entirely dependent on God’s grace for salvation. Therefore they reject interpretations of scripture or the human condition that serve self-righteousness, or the false confidence that we do not require God’s forgiving and reconciling work in every aspect of our life.

4. The tendency to idolatry: Our confessions sensitize us to a primary way in which we experience sin: our inclination to place our trust in ourselves or our condition of life or in anything else that is not God. Whenever we elevate one element of our experience – be it our race, nation, culture, gender, class, or sexual orientation – and give it ultimate loyalty or see it as the mark of special divine favor, we reject the whole claim of God on our life.

5. The good gift of human sexuality: Confessions written by Protestant reformers rejected the idea that human sexuality was a necessary evil. Almost all persons have a sexual urge. To encourage anyone to deny this fact or to require a celibate life was viewed as potentially disastrous. Indeed, the Larger Catechism forbids “entangling vows of single life” (7.249). Therefore, it is best to make use of God’s gift of marriage, which should be open to as many persons as possible; and not only for the purpose of procreation and child rearing, but for the sharing of love and comfort (5.246, 7.248). Marriage is a treasured sign of God’s intention for life together (9.47). Some persons, however, may have a special gift of celibacy. But the confessions are adamant that celibacy should not be imposed on anyone as a requirement for ministry, and those who choose to be celibate should not view themselves as holier than others (5.245). Sexuality, as a good gift, calls for wise use; what we do with our bodies matters and thus all, whether married or single, sexually active or abstinent, are called to a chaste or pure life (4.108).

6. Discipleship as the thankful glorifying of God: Presbyterians do not seek to be saved by a moral life. Rather, the quest to live morally comes through our thankful obedience to the God who has already embraced and redeemed us. Our chief end is to glorify God in all we do. But how do we do this given the mystery of our complex desires and affections? Obviously, this requires careful discernment. Reformed confessions treat the law, in the form of the ten commandments, as a primary means to test our progress in discipleship. The law aids us in loving God and loving neighbor. It does not cause us to ask, Do I have the right affectional and sexual orientation? But rather, Am I, through God’s grace in Christ and as enabled by the Spirit, living out through the capacities and orientations that are God’s gift to me a witness that contributes to the glory of God and that embodies God’s care for the world?

The confessions give no final answers on matters of human sexuality. That is not their purpose. But they do provide us with historic principles of interpretation that may help Presbyterians become better attuned to the Reformed Christian witness in its breadth and diversity, and perhaps also help us speak together despite our differences.



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What has ordination implied for Reformed Christians, and how might Reformed theologies of ordination inform our current debates about ordination and sexuality?

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The theology of the Reformation fundamentally reshaped the doctrine of ministry, and the practices surrounding ordination in Reformed churches. In the Roman Catholic as well as the Eastern Orthodox Churches, ordination as a sacrament ritually distinguished one group of people from another within the church. Priests, it was argued, by virtue of an “indelible character” conferred on them through valid ordination in the apostolic succession, were elevated to the role of mediators on behalf of the laity. Especially in their consecration and offering of the sacrifice of the Mass, which was said to “re-present” the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, those holding ordained office were viewed as a special class of members within the Body of Christ.

For the Roman Catholic Church, the unity of the church’s whole ministry is secured by the Bishop of Rome – the Pope – who is the ruler over the whole Church, standing in the place of Christ, and as the successor to St. Peter. Under the Pope, the entire

leadership of the church is hierarchically organized, with metropolitans over bishops, bishops over priests, priests over deacons.

A quick glance through our *Book of Confessions* will confirm just how completely the Reformed churches rejected this theology of the ministry. In the first place, they did not recognize a fundamental distinction between priests and the laity. On the contrary, they saw the church as a communion of the faithful who have all been made priests and kings in Christ and are therefore able to offer up spiritual sacrifices to God through Christ. Thus understood, the priesthood includes all believers. This was a crucial insight, because it undercut the hierarchical understanding of ministry inherited from patristic and medieval times. The priestly work of interceding before God on behalf of others is a common work of the people of God.

If every believer can function as a priest before God, then ordained ministry must not be primarily about such priestly mediation performed by a special class of hierarchs. In the Reformed understanding, ministry is conceived rather as service. Ministers are servants of the Word of God, stewards of the mysteries of God, and shepherds or pastors of the people of God. They are not a separate class of citizens in God's Kingdom, set apart by an indelible mark. They are those who receive a call and are set apart for a special work of leadership in the church, of which they too are simply members. They are set apart for the sake of good order in the church, and no one minister stands "over" another.

Our confessions also explicitly reject the claim of any person to stand in the place of Christ in the church. As the Second Helvetic Confession puts it, "Christ the Lord is, and remains, the only universal pastor, the highest Pontiff before God the Father; and . . . in the Church he himself performs all the duties of a bishop or pastor, even to the world's end; and therefore does not need a substitute for one who is absent. For Christ is present with his Church, and is its life-giving Head" (5.131).

In Reformed understandings of ministry, the notion of a *call* to ministry is crucial. John Calvin and the Reformed Confessions speak of two parts of a call to ministry: the "internal call" or "secret call" that the individual receives from God in his or her conscience, and the "external call" that the candidate receives from the church.

In general, far more emphasis is placed on the importance of this latter external call. That is because the Reformers rejected the notion that anyone could simply appoint himself or herself to leadership in the church. The call to leadership ultimately comes from God the Holy Spirit. It comes in recognition of the fact that a particular individual is blessed with certain gifts that could be used for the benefit of the broader community and for the glory of God.

“Hearing” a call to ministry, therefore, is a complex process of discernment. Faithful discernment involves prayer and obedient discipleship from the candidate, but also thorough examination of that person by the broader church – examination that can culminate in the public recognition of the candidate as a deacon, elder, or minister in ordination. This is why our *Book of Order* outlines such a long and complex process of candidacy – especially for those who are to be ordained as Ministers of Word and Sacrament. The many steps in this process allow ample opportunities for both the candidate and the church members who know him or her best to “discern the call.”

It is clear in our confessions that ministry is not a sort of “civil right” of baptism. Not all members of the church are blessed with the particular gifts needed for ordained office. On the other hand, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers would seem to overrule any attempt to consider a particular group of people categorically ineligible for ordained ministry simply because of some aspect of their human identity (such as age, disability, gender, or sexual orientation). If all believers are called into the Body of Christ through baptism, and joined in the royal priesthood, then surely it is possible that the Holy Spirit can raise up ordained leadership from anyone within the Body.

In the process of candidacy and examination that all ordained officers go through, the church’s judicatories rightly consider whether individuals appear to possess gifts for the particular office to which they are to be ordained, and the right kind of educational preparation and formation to use their gifts wisely and effectively. The session and presbytery also rightly examine candidates on their moral integrity. We are all aware that scandals involving the church’s leadership can seriously damage its ability to bear witness to the Gospel of Christ in the world. So church leaders must be

persons seeking to live lives of earnest and exemplary faithfulness. Finally, the judicatories examine candidates on their understanding of the faith, since they will be entrusted with the task of instructing others in the faith, and ordained leaders maintain the church's identity through their use and application of Scripture and the liturgical, confessional, and theological resources handed down from our forebears.

Given the Reformed tradition's great emphasis on thorough examination and its complex process of discerning God's call to ministry, it is not surprising that our church order has traditionally entrusted this task to the closest relevant judicatory – to the session in the case of deacons and elders, and to the presbytery in the case of ministers. This makes very good sense, because only those who are closely familiar with a candidate will be in a good position to make sound judgments about the subtler qualities necessary for effective leadership. While church-wide standards for ordination are also demanded and upheld (for example, an M.Div. degree, knowledge of biblical languages, knowledge of the church's constitution and liturgy as demonstrated in ordination exams), it is hard to judge from a test (or from a great distance) things like a person's holiness of life or earnest obedience to the call of God. These equally important standards require the kind of knowledge that only close and long-term acquaintance can afford.

The Reformed churches slowly came to recognize that the Holy Spirit's call went out to a wider group of people than they originally imagined in the 16th century. Our Scots Confession strongly rejects any kind of ordination of women. In the Scots Confession's view, the mere fact that women are allowed to baptize (under certain very special circumstances) by the Roman Catholic Church provides sufficient proof of the total corruption of the ministries of that church (3.22). But our most recent confession, the Brief Statement of Faith, explicitly affirms that God calls both women and men to all the ministries of the church (10.4).

This expansion of who might be considered for ordination may be an important lesson to remember from our own history. As the Westminster Confession states, "the Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private

spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture” (6.010). As Reformed churches, we have had the experience – always somehow surprising – that the Holy Spirit may have a new thing to say to the church, if only we will listen attentively. ✠



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What do Presbyterians say about marriage?

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Biblical Foundations

For Presbyterians the primary resource for understanding marriage is Scripture. The creation story implies one purpose of marriage, companionship: “it is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as a partner” (Gen. 2:18). This purpose is connected, though not synonymous, with the earlier injunction for humanity to be fruitful and multiply. The subsequent forms of marriage recorded in the Old Testament are surprisingly wide. Many OT writers, for example, assume polygamy as part of God’s blessing for humanity. Some marriages occur as the result of morally reprehensible actions, such as abduction (Judg 21). And, in the longest sustained passage of human relationship in Scripture, the Song of Solomon celebrates the sexual love between a man and a woman without referring to marriage directly. These varied depictions suggest that God’s blessing is not confined to particular forms of marriage, but extends across culture and redeems fallen relationships whenever persons live in faithfulness to God’s covenant together. As God redeems humanity, no one cultural form of marriage emerges as normative for all others.

The New Testament specifically blesses singleness and marriage, at times favoring the former. Jesus’ own singleness does not come at the expense of binding personal relationships, but intensifies them as they are directed to God’s Reign. Paul prefers singleness to marriage in much of his writing because God’s Reign is imminent: “So then, he who marries his fiancée does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better” (1 Cor. 7:38). Jesus’ sayings against divorce are stronger than anything found in the Old Testament (Mk. 10:11-12),

indicating that the bonds of marriage endure throughout time. Yet Jesus also claims that the demands of the gospel may pit family members against one another (Mt. 10:35-7). However strong the covenant of marriage is between partners, the covenant between God and humanity initiated in Jesus Christ is primary and may cause ruptures in the former. In the NT, the promises of marriage are always provisional in comparison to the promise of God's Reign.

Reformed Confessional and Theological Heritage

Reformed theology serves as aid in interpreting the primary witness of Scripture, yet an overarching theology of Christian marriage does not exist in our tradition. Calvin and the Reformers rejected the notion of a *sacrament* of marriage, because it is not a "visible word" by which God expresses the promises of grace and communion in and through Jesus Christ. They preferred to call marriage an *ordinance* instituted by God, profitable for God's people (Second Helvetic, 5.171). One way of approaching a Reformed theology of marriage is to claim that its traditions understand marriage as both a *sign* of grace and a *response* to grace already given. Marriage represents a journey shared by two persons, in covenant before God and the community of faith, pledged over a lifetime. In this sense, a married couple, in the Reformed tradition, is always *on the way* to Christian marriage.

John Calvin devotes surprisingly few words to marriage in his *Institutes*. He married somewhat late in life, and wrote comparatively little – and then only reservedly – about his own marriage and family life. Calvin celebrates marriage as a blessing for human happiness and as an antidote to sin: "Man has been created in this condition that he may not lead a solitary life, but may enjoy a helper joined to himself...Therefore, the Lord sufficiently provided for us in this matter when he established marriage, the fellowship of which, begun on his authority, he also sanctified by his blessing...The companionship of marriage has been ordained as a necessary remedy to keep us from plunging into unbridled lust" (*Institutes* 2.8.41). For Calvin, the *restraint* of marriage is also a joy.

Following Calvin, the Westminster Confession of Faith contains a clear endorsement of marital union as a public good: "Christian marriage is an institution ordained of God, blessed by our Lord Jesus Christ, established and sanctified for the happiness and welfare of mankind, into which spiritual and physical union one man and one

woman enter, cherishing a mutual esteem and love, bearing with each other's infirmities and weaknesses, comforting each other in trouble, providing in honesty and industry for each other and for their household, praying for each other, and living together the length of their days as heirs to the grace of life" (6.131).

Notably absent from this ringing chorus are injunctions of procreation. The good of marriage is not tied directly to the rearing of children. Its underlying purpose is neither to propagate the species, nor to establish a seal of sexual union. In this sense, Westminster de-mystifies both sexual intercourse and the raising of children, anchoring both in the public goods of happiness and human welfare. Sexual union and children are the fruits of that wider good rather than their source. They are gifts that may occur in the context of a marriage. Indispensable gifts, however, they are not. In our age that glorifies sex as a means of spiritual union and overburdens children as means of parental happiness, this Reformed emphasis is a decidedly counter-cultural strain.

Contemporary Reformed theology has extended Westminster's emphasis on the public good, intimating the healing of brokenness and heralding the relationship that God establishes with creation. Shirley Guthrie suggests an analogy, where marriage is "a partnership that reflects the covenant relationship between God and the people of God." Glimpsed in this light, the covenant of marriage extends not only to the couple, but to the entire community of faith. As Guthrie writes, "Marriage is never a purely private relationship between two individuals...[It] is thus a social and communal matter...and a wedding is the public recognition, acceptance, and commitment to this fact." A Christian marriage attests to neither the private choice of one couple, nor the apotheosis of courtly love. Rather, a marriage expresses public claims of God's covenantal love, witnessed in mutual human love.

A Christian marriage, then, is an anticipatory event, offering a foretaste of the heavenly banquet and assurance of our present participation in Christ's covenant with the world. A prayer from the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* expresses this hope for marriage, not only for the church, but for all creation: "Make their life together a sign of Christ's love to this sinful and broken world, that unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy conquer despair."

Interpreting Our Heritage Today

The biblical authors and Reformed heritage both assume that a marriage covenant is between a man and a woman. The question of same-sex marriage simply does not enter their interpretive world. Since the church must continually re-interpret its heritage in light of new questions in the attempt to be faithful to the Good News of Jesus Christ, Presbyterians are warranted in asking whether or not the distinctive strands of our tradition would allow for or prohibit same-sex unions or marriages. The burden for either side, in my opinion, lies in whether proposals for same-sex unions meet the theological criteria for marriages outlined in our tradition: May such unions, as Westminster stresses, serve the common good? Are they dim reflections of God's covenant with humanity, as the Old Testament suggests? Do they direct human persons to one another and to the ultimacy of God's Reign as the New Testament upholds? Do they, as Calvin urged, model restraint from sin *and* joy in companionship? Do they, however imperfectly, anticipate God's communion with all creation in Christ, as our liturgy celebrates?

If the church refuses to entertain these questions, then we fall under the judgment outlined in the Confession of 1967: "The church comes under the judgment of God and invites rejection by man when it fails to lead men and women into the full meaning of life together, or withholds the compassion of Christ from those caught in the moral confusion of our time" (9.47). Marriage, in the Reformed tradition, stresses covenant, God's desire for communion with all persons, mutual restraint and joy, the response of God's people, and the public good. Whenever we debate same-sex marriage, those themes – not sex, procreation, and gender roles – demand our greatest attention. 



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Is gender complementarity essential to Christian marriage?

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With the movement to legalize same-sex marriage, much discussion has centered on what defines marriage. Some have argued that marriage is an unchanging tradition. Historically, however, this is simply not accurate. The U.S. definition of marriage, for example, has changed radically over the centuries. This is especially so for women, who have suffered the most from traditional definitions. In colonial times marriage was an economic and political arrangement between families. For centuries in the South it was a legal privilege only available to whites. One of the most enduring traditions of marriage has been the husband's right to his wife's body, which only changed recently when the marital rape exception was removed in the 1980's. And these examples are only the beginning. The meaning of marriage has changed over time, even in the relatively short history of the United States. And changes have typically enhanced the moral character of marriage.

Opponents to gay marriage, however, would say the real unchanging requirement for marriage is gender complementarity - the idea that men and women are different from one another in essential ways, and that Christian love depends on the pairing of just those differences. "Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve," as the expression goes. Since Scripture can be made to support both sides of the debate, it is useful to think about the implications of this notion that a covenant relationship can only be made between two persons of different genders. Not only does gender complementarity require male and female, it means that without these two halves, there cannot be a whole. As a model for human wholeness, gender complementarity is a dangerously exclusive one. On its terms a person who devotes his or her life to service of God - Jesus, Paul,

Mother Teresa - is only half of a person, i.e., is not fully created in the image of God. To be sure, a man and woman are necessary for biological procreation. However, Protestants eliminated procreation as the defining purpose of marriage in the 16th century.

Another implication of gender complementarity - that there are fixed natures for masculinity and femininity - is also troubling. To begin with, this notion is historically inaccurate. Just as the definition of marriage has changed, so have accounts of masculinity and femininity. Early Church Fathers defined women's nature as less rational and more easily corrupted than men's. By contrast domestic images for U.S. white women at the turn of the century represent them as naturally more spiritual than (white) men. Accounts of male and female natures have always differed according to a subject's race and class position in society. An African American woman in earlier centuries was expected to drive mules and pick cotton. Seen as a natural-born breeder, not a mother, her young could be sold just like animals. Her white upper class counterpart, by contrast, was cast as a spotless, pure mother, fragile and in need of protection.

The identification of nurturing and relational skills with females may seem intuitively true. Centuries of assigning childrearing to women has enabled many women to develop the skills that support human development. However, as historically caused rather than biologically essential traits, capacities to nurture, to love and support the young are traits that Christians should covet for their male children as avidly as their female. Dividing up these traits not only idealizes stereotypes to which few people actually conform, it refuses to honor the unique gifts and potential of each child of God.

Then there is the problem that few people actually fit the idealizations. Countless boys and men have internalized images of what it means to be a "real man" that they are never able to live up to. A boy who is smart in math and science (as opposed to poetry and social work) will be lauded in our culture. A boy who prefers classical music to football, who is diminutive in size, or who would like to care for children, however, will inevitably be labeled a "sissy." By insisting upon gender complementarity, his church will continue to underwrite his fear that he is not a "real man."

Speaking of embarrassing failures to “measure up” to gender complementarity ideals, there is Jesus. On complementarity’s terms the Biblical portrait of Jesus of Nazareth makes him something of a misfit. Having never married, he would have been only half a person. Several of Jesus’ character traits are typically “female” - caring compassion, strength in weakness, and sacrifice. These images have so worried gender complementarians that more than once in U.S. history they have attempted to rescue Jesus from “effeminate” representations. “Muscular Christianity,” a turn-of-the-century movement, remasculinized Jesus by imaging him as a red-blooded and virile, manly man - the opposite of a wimp. More recently Promise-Keepers insist upon calling Jesus a “Tender Warrior” to keep his style of caring from sounding too feminine. But if Jesus doesn’t fit our notion of what a man should be, we would be better off broadening our understanding of gender roles than trying to change the story of Jesus.

If cultural definitions of maleness and femaleness cannot be essentialized, neither should the match of male and female sex organs be taken as proof that God only blesses heterosexual matings. Biologists now know that there are not just two kinds of people. The so-called “natural divisions” of humanity into those with XY sex chromosomes and those with XX is no longer accurate. Over 5.5 million people on the globe are not “male” or “female” according to these chromosomal patterns, and many of them cannot be defined by genitalia. To ignore such science is akin to agreeing with Aristotle that women are physiologically misbegotten males.

But what about complementarity *without* sex/gender essentialism? As the balancing of one person’s strengths and weaknesses by those of another, complementarity can truly enhance Christian marriage. It means that differences harmonize, not that only certain differences are allowed (I Cor.12-13.) An outgoing personality in one partner might be complemented by the analytical skills of his shy partner. Rightly understood, complementarity suggests that differences can function to supplement and enhance, not divide people.

Jesus never defined sexuality. Indeed, his singleness, admiration of eunuchs (Mt.19:12), and admonition to give up family (Lk.11:27f) are good grounds to call the heterosexual nuclear family arrangement into question. However, Jesus does call us to God’s

radical vocation of love. This vocation requires honoring the unique gifts of everyone. It calls us to repent of this new form of “works righteousness” where I must be a “real woman” married to a “real man” in order to be saved.



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Can God use sex for our sanctification?

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Conservative Christians object to same-sex marriage because they want marriage to show visible holiness. That idea is useful because it prompts all Christians to reflect on the sort of holiness that marriage teaches and displays. Here I reflect on the theology of marriage under the rubric of sanctification. This approach owes much to the tradition of the Orthodox Church, which regards marriage as a way of participating in the divine life not by way of sexual satisfaction but by way of ascetic self-denial for the sake of more desirable goods. Theologically understood, marriage is not primarily for the control of lust or for procreation. It is a discipline whereby we give ourselves to another for the sake of growing in holiness – in short, for God. Marriage is a way in which God can train human beings – bodies and all – to “glorify God and enjoy him forever,” as Westminster puts it.

In this respect marriage and monasticism are two forms of the same discipline, as the Orthodox writer Paul Evdokimov has argued. They are both ways of committing ourselves to others – a spouse or a monastic community – from whom we cannot easily escape. Both the monastic and the married give themselves over to be transformed by the perceptions of others; both seek to learn, over time, by the discipline of living with others something about how God perceives human beings.

Rowan Williams has written, “Grace, for the Christian believer, is a transformation that depends in large part on knowing yourself to be seen in a certain way: as significant, as wanted. The whole story of creation, incarnation, and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ’s body tells us that God desires us, as if we were God, as if we were that unconditional response to God’s giving that God’s [Son] makes in the life of the Trinity. We are created [and we marry] so that we may be caught up in this, so that we may grow into the wholehearted love of God by learning that God loves us as God loves God.” Like

all forms of asceticism, this is a high-risk endeavor. It can expose the worst in people – so that it can be healed.

Sexuality, in short, is for sanctification, that is, for God. It is to be a means by which God catches human beings up into the community of God's Spirit and the identity of God's child. Monogamy and monasticism are two ways of embodying features of the triune life in which God initiates, responds to and celebrates love.

Monasticism is for people who find a bodily, sexual sanctification first and foremost in the desirous perception of God. Marriage is for people who find themselves transformed by the desirous perception of another human being made in God's image. In a marital or monastic community, the parties commit themselves to practicing faith, hope and charity in a situation in which those virtues get plenty of opportunity to be exercised.

This way of understanding the Christian life obviously takes seriously the embodied character of human life. And embodiment implies diversity. The Holy Spirit characteristically rests on bodies: the body of Christ in Jesus, in the church, in the sacraments and in the saints. As the Spirit forms the bodies of human beings into the body of Christ, she characteristically gathers the diverse and diversifies the corporate, making members of one body.

We can see the Holy Spirit working for a harmonious diversity as she hovers over the waters in creation. Let us suppose that "Be fruitful and multiply" applies to the commands "Let the earth put forth vegetation" and "Let the waters bring forth swarms" and "Let the earth bring forth everything that creeps upon the ground" (Gen. 1:26,1:11, 1:20, 1:24). In all these cases, the earth and the waters bring forth things different from themselves, not just more dirt and more water. And in all these cases, they bring forth a variety of things: one might almost translate the phrase as "Be fruitful and diversify."

What kind of diversity or otherness does the Spirit evoke? Does it evoke the diversity represented by homosexual persons? Clearly, the majority opinion of the church has said no – that sort of diversity in creation is not the work of the Spirit. But it is not at all clear that such a judgment is necessary.

Conservatives will suppose that by invoking the diversity of creation I am begging the question. And yet, if the earth is to bring forth not according to its kind (more dirt) but creatures different from dirt

and from each other, then the burden of proof lies on the other side. It needs to be shown that one of God's existing entities somehow cannot do its part in communicating and representing God's goodness and do so precisely in its finitude, by its limitations. What are the limits on accepting diversity as capable of representing God's goodness? Conservatives and liberals would agree that a diversity evoked by the Holy Spirit must be a holy diversity, a diversity ordered to the good, one that brings forth the fruits of the Spirit, primarily faith, hope and charity.

Given that no human beings exhibit faith, hope and charity on their own, but only in community, it is hard to argue that gay and lesbian people ought to be left out of social arrangements, such as marriage, in which these virtues are trained. In the words of Gregory of Nazianzus, our human limitations are intended for our good. So too, then, the limitations ascribed to same-sex couples, or for that matter cross-sex couples: in Gregory's words, their "very limitations are a form of training" toward communicating and representing the good. The trick is to turn these created limits toward the appreciation of the goods represented by others. Our differences are meant to make us yearn for and love one another. Difference is for blessing.

Under conditions of sin, otherness can lead to curse rather than blessing, to hostility rather than hospitality. Certainly there has been enough cursing and hostility to go around in the sexuality debates. But as created, otherness is intended for blessing and hospitality.

For large sections of various Christian traditions, blessing does not float overhead. Sanctification comes through concrete practices of asceticism, a discipline or training through which lesser goods serve greater ones. To reflect Trinitarian holiness, sanctification must involve community. It involves commitments to a community from which one can't easily escape, whether monastic, nuptial or congregational.

Gay and lesbian people who commit themselves to a community - to a church, or to one another as partners - do so to seek greater goods, to embark upon a discipline, to donate themselves to a greater social meaning. Living out these commitments under conditions of sin, in a community from which one can't easily escape - especially a community such as marriage and monasticism - is not likely to be straightforwardly improving. The community from which one can't easily escape is morally risky. It tends to expose the worst in people. The hope is that community exposes the worst in people in order that the worse can be healed.

Christians will see such healing as the work of Christ. Many Christian traditions portray Christ as a physician who must probe people's wounds in order to heal them. The probings of Jesus, the Great Physician, occur most readily in communities to which people bind themselves. The healing work of Christ in community brings both great risk and the promise of holiness.

For the risk of commitment to be worth it and to have the best chance of success, the community must have plenty of time and be made up of the right sort of people. Growth takes a lifetime. The right sort of people are those who will succeed in exposing and healing one another's flaws.

For gay and lesbian people, the right sort of otherness is unlikely to be represented by someone of the opposite sex, because only someone of the apposite, not opposite, sex will get deep enough into the relationship to expose one's vulnerabilities and inspire the trust that healing requires. The crucial question is, What sort of created diversity will lead one to holiness?

The answer is no doubt as various as creation itself. But certainly same-sex couples find the right spur to vulnerability, self-exposure, and the long and difficult commitment over time to discover themselves in the perceptions of another – they find all this in someone of the same sex. Theologically, says David McCarthy, a homosexual orientation is this: "Gay men and lesbians are persons who encounter the other (and thus themselves) in relation to persons of the same sex." Some people, therefore, are called to same-sex partnerships for their own sanctification. Opposite-sex partnerships wouldn't work for them, because those would evade rather than establish the right kind of transformative vulnerability.

The difference between members of a same-sex couple is not "merely psychological," but also an embodied difference, if only because sexual response is nothing if not something done bodily. But even embodied difference cannot be reduced to male-female complementarity, because that would leave Jesus a deficient human being. Jesus did not need a female other half to be fully human. (This point raises the issue of what singleness is for, but that's a question for another day.)

If this account is correct, then it turns out that conservatives wish to deprive same-sex couples not so much of satisfaction as of

sanctification. But that is contradictory, because so far as I know no conservative has ever seriously argued that same-sex couples need sanctification any less than cross-sex couples do. It is at least contradictory to attempt in the name of holiness to deprive people of the means of their own sanctification.

Conservatives often claim it's dangerous to practice homosexuality, because it might be a sin. I want to propose that the danger runs both ways. It is more than contradictory, it may even be resisting the Spirit, to attempt to deprive same-sex couples of the discipline of marriage and not to celebrate same-sex weddings. As the king asks a guest in the parable of the wedding feast, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?" (Mt. 22:1-13).



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What can we learn about the texture of Christian ethics by observing how African American congregations have historically dealt with issues related to sexuality?

Gayraud S. Wilmore ✕
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It should be clear to anyone who keeps up with such things that the majority of African American Christians, if asked to vote yea or nay tomorrow on the ordination of lesbian and gay people to the ministry or to important lay offices, would vote nay. Most Blacks in all-Black denominations (comprising about 80% of all African-descended Christians in the U.S.) and most (but perhaps a smaller percentage) in predominantly white denominations are strangely traditional and almost puritanical when it comes to imposing formal, even stringent, moral and ethical standards upon those who are presumed to be emissaries of Jesus Christ in his church.

I consider my mother and father, both deceased, and most of my relatives of their and my generation (strong Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists), fairly typical in this respect. Mother and Dad were strong on civil rights and justice for the poor, the incarcerated and disabled; passionately concerned about equal and non-segregated public education; supporters of soldiers, sailors, and marines, but wary about wars; committed to legislation for welfare mothers, full employment, controlled abortion, open and affordable housing, the prudent regulation of laissez faire capitalism, government sponsorship of universal medical care, health insurance and social security. But they were also believers in an inerrant Bible that, to all intents and purposes,

condemned the sexual behavior of lesbians, gays, bi-sexual, and transgendered persons – albeit, God love them all!

That is the kind of Christianity some of us assimilated from the right wing of the Great Awakenings of the 19th century. That's what the white Baptists and Methodists of the South, the Quakers from Pennsylvania, and the doughty Congregational and Presbyterian missionaries from New England and Ohio taught us in the church-sponsored schools and mission stations below the Mason-Dixon Line. We learned that cleanliness was next to Godliness, and that sex was dirty – even between a married man and woman – so you know what it had to be between people of the same gender! Our preachers found the inerrant proof-texts in the big pulpit Bible and the congregation nodded its heads and said, “Amen, Reverend. Ain't that the truth!”

Nevertheless I will always admire those courageous white women and men who followed the Union army and gathered the newly freed slaves into make-shift congregations, one-room school houses, boarding schools, and who were frequently members of the faculties of our first fledgling colleges and universities. They taught us more than reading, writing, and arithmetic. They taught us middle-class manners and morals. Many an awkward and timid young Black boy or girl caught a glimpse of a wonderful life as a freeborn, full-fledged American citizen. Some of these young people became eager, enterprising migrants to the cities of the South and North because of the band of Northern missionaries and teachers, both white and Black, who told the white population of the former Confederacy what Joseph told a man in Shechem: “I am seeking my brothers.”

But for all the good they did, they also messed us up. They overlaid the pragmatic spirituality of our African inheritance with the unctuous, privatistic, feel-good, and moralistic religiosity of an evangelical Protestantism that the missionaries themselves didn't practice. They made us feel guilty about sex. They loaded us with biblical laws and ordinances, and conventional Anglo-Saxon mores that they themselves abrogated whenever it suited them. Throughout the 20th century some of our boldest and brightest religious leaders sought to free us from bibliolatrous piety and helped some of us to adopt a faith that defined and sanctified our experience of a continuous struggle for humanity in the face of unremitting dehumanization and indignity.

But the effort has borne little fruit thus far. What is called the Black Church in America is, for the most part, a hyper-conservative

institution when it comes to human sexuality and recognition of the amazing grace and responsible freedom in the bedroom that all Christians have been given in Jesus Christ.

However, this conservatism of the mainline Black churches, and their sisters and brothers who remained in the predominantly white denominations, is nuanced in some peculiar ways that even Black scholars are aware of but do not fully comprehend. The churches made notable exceptions when communal values overrode moralistic constraints. Here, a gay assistant pastor or choir director was cherished and people kept their thoughts to themselves, their mouths shut, and turned their heads so as not to see. There, an old maid lesbian Sunday School teacher and the young college girl who lodged with her during the school year were discreetly ignored if they made no open display of affection. Here, a preacher who was known to be sleeping with a woman leader in the congregation was quietly persuaded by a group of husbands to mend his ways or give up the church. There, a bisexual artist or musician who was suspected of promiscuity with men and women was spared from having the matter dragged into public view. Rather than ruin the lives of everyone involved and shame the community, the church chose to quietly remove him from his position and recommended that he seek private counseling. Different cases were resolved in different ways. The point is that Black churches have many times let communal values override moralistic legalism.

This kind of finely discriminated and nuanced observance of Biblical literalism regarding matters of sexual impropriety points to a deep-lying humanism, and even pragmatism, in African American religion. To those on the outside it may smack of hypocrisy (and often it can be explained in no other way), but I think more frequently it shows that in the windy interstices of a rigid structure of conservative Christian ethics, built up over years of Bible-thumping sermons on Sunday mornings, sawdust trail revivals, and unrelenting prayer bands and evangelistic efforts of all kinds, there is a common sense and unsanctimonious realism in the faith of African Americans that tends toward the *shalom* of the community, toward forgiveness, toward inclusivity and prudential tolerance.

That is what Black liberation theology, which flourished in the latter days of the civil rights movement and came to full throttle with the rise of Black Power between 1964 and 1970, attempted to reinstate and unleash as a counterpoint to the influence of white theology in the institutional Black churches. The effort has not been abandoned. Today

more Black clergy are graduating from seminaries where they have learned that justice, liberation, and inclusiveness are at the core of the gospel and the Black religious experience. Large national gatherings of Black ministers, unencumbered by ecclesiastical certification and oversight – like the annual Hampton, Virginia pastors’ conference and the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Pastors and Lay Convocations of the past three years – are beginning to listen to Black biblical scholars and theologians. Today a new breed of scholars in religion are cautiously pressing for an orthodoxy that avoids consigning the LGBT community to hell. They are reminding Black church members to “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. . .” (Deut. 5:15).

Nevertheless, the reinterpretation of human sexuality in the Black church moves slowly against the currents of Protestant fundamentalism. But the commitment to cultural autonomy and radical freedom in Christ espoused by 20th-century Black liberation and womanist theologians reinforces the ethos of a Black Christianity which naturally resists any form of orthodoxy connected to exclusivity and racism while still clinging to many traditional values. There is nothing particularly Black about this theological and ethical inconsistency, but it at least gives the lie to the allegation that born-again African Americans are inflexible Bible-idolaters and wholly bound to an outmoded orthodoxy. We have introduced some significant changes to American churches and to this society in the past, and may again in the future. ✕



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If the church accepts
homosexuality, what is to
keep us from accepting
sins like adultery, incest,
bestiality, and sex with
children?
Don't we have to draw the
line somewhere?

Mark Douglas ✕
Columbia Theological Seminary

This question raises a legitimate concern that all Presbyterians ought to take seriously: if we accept one form of sexuality that is sinful, what's to keep us from accepting other sinful forms of sexuality? Yet while the question is legitimate, the assumption behind it may not be. For the question assumes that one form of sexuality – namely heterosexuality expressed within the context of marriage – is nonproblematic while other forms are sinful. But if the Reformed tradition teaches us anything, it is that sin pervades every part of our lives – including all our sexual lives. Or, said more directly, there are *no* sinless expressions of sexuality.

And here, examples from divorce and adultery to pornography are so easy that we need to get beyond them without forgetting them. Think, instead, about all the frustrating awkwardness of trying to know what one's lover is thinking and trying to please him or her without asking mood-shattering questions; all the vulnerable embarrassment we feel in exposing our bodies to others; all the maddening frustration of unfulfilled or – perhaps even worse – partially fulfilled desire; all the absurd psychological games we play with ourselves, our lovers, or those we hope may one day be our

lovers; all the selfish motivations that are so likely to drive human actions while intimate; that abrupt realization that sex and intimacy and orgasms may be absolutely splendid but sometimes seem hardly worth the trouble it takes in getting to them. Where do all these feelings come from if not from a deep sense that what sex is and what we imagine sex should be aren't the same? What do all these examples point toward if not sin? How could any of us be so filled with *hubris* as to think that our sexuality is sinless sexuality?

So while the concern behind the initial question is legitimate, it needs to be reframed: If we recognize sinfulness in all sexual relations, how are we to distinguish between those that the church finds room for and those that the church rejects? Or, to frame that question a bit more theologically: Given that God created us in love and for love but that all of us have sinned by attempting to deny, refuse, contort, or abuse that love, how are we, as the church, to engage sinners and sins? Framing the question theologically in this way opens it up to the church's rich, deep, and broad vocabulary for thinking about engaging sin and sinners: the vocabulary of sin and grace, justification and sanctification, gospel and law. Using this vocabulary is neither automatic nor easy, and its use leads to neither automatic nor easy answers. However, if the church is to think as a church rather than some other type of gathering of persons, it is vital that it speak through its native theological language. Toward that end, let me make two initial - and initiating - comments about what I understand God to be doing in dealing with sin and what I believe the church is called to do in response.

First a word on justification. For those within the Reformed tradition, God's work of redemption must be the starting point for our thinking about sin and grace. The witness of the New Testament is that God deals with sin by being born as one of us, living with us and teaching us, dying for us, and being resurrected that we might have new life and, eventually, so that we might become like God. Or, said differently, God deals with sinners neither by accepting us nor by damning us but by redeeming us because we cannot redeem ourselves. The one who could condemn all of us has chosen to redeem us instead. In God's desire for us, he used the cross and the empty tomb to restore intimacy with us.

And all this happens to us in our bodies. Redemption does not remove us from our bodies, but restores them to us so that we can use them for the purposes for which they were created: to glorify God and enjoy God forever. Whatever moral lessons we sinners might learn from God's great act of justification and no matter how much we might disagree about those lessons in their particulars, it seems to me that the way we deal with ourselves and other sinners ought to bear some coherent relation to the way God has chosen to deal with sinners: with an eye toward neither acceptance nor damnation, but redemption.

Second, a word on sanctification. If it is true that the purpose for which we are embodied is to glorify God and enjoy God forever, then that purpose pervades all the ways we use our bodies – including the ways we use them sexually. It follows that the purpose of sex isn't procreation or intimacy per se – though those things are gifts that may come with sex – but a way in which we work with God because God is working in us so that we might become closer to God. In sanctification, we learn to trust our bodies to the one who is sovereign Lord of them – and to refuse to trust our bodies to anyone or anything other than God. Said differently, having sex – theologically understood – should, like all other acts by which we relate to others, become a way we learn to express through our bodies the desire God feels for us and has created us to feel for each other. And this desire, at least according to Scripture and the Reformed tradition, is a desire shaped by and revealed in publicly affirmed, non-breakable covenants of mutual love. (This is, I think, the very reason that the church has, can, and must continue to relate sex to marriage and the reason the church, like Jesus, should be deeply troubled about far-too-easy understandings of marriage and the far-too-common event of divorce.)

All of which returns us to the legitimacy of the initial question. For while thinking of some expressions of sexuality as sinful and others as not sinful is an error, we are right, I think, to recognize that some sinful expressions of sexuality are far more problematic than others because while all expressions of sexuality fail to live up to their primary purpose, some expressions cannot live up to that purpose because they stand in opposition to it. Or, to say that more affirmatively, some expressions of sexual desire at least begin to mirror the way God expresses divine desire – and thereby become part

of the process by which we learn to become holy – while others do not. Since God has expressed God’s desire for us by covenanting with us, so our sexual lives ought to conform to covenantal patterns of commitment. Since God has made these covenants public, so the covenantal patterns of our sexual lives ought to be public. And since God’s desire for us is that “we will be like him for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2), so our sexual lives ought to be shaped by visions of mutuality and equality.

Where desire is allowed to come and go without commitment, where it must remain private, where it cannot be mutually expressed: these expressions of sexuality actively inhibit our ability to participate in our sanctification. These criteria clearly exclude the kinds of sins – adultery, incest, pederasty, bestiality – that some fear would necessarily follow on acceptance of covenanted same-sex relationships. Where desire can be publicly expressed in binding covenants of mutual love: there we find persons learning to use their bodies to love God and enjoy God forever. ✕



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How does the struggle for full inclusion of gay and lesbian Christians relate to the civil rights movement and other struggles for freedom and equality?

J. Herbert Nelson, II ✕
University of Memphis

Growing up in South Carolina, my male peer group and I measured our maturing into manhood on the basis of girls and sports. We often talked about our likes or dislikes for certain girls. Some boys boasted about losing their virginity. (In retrospect, it is clear that many of the stories were contrived; nonetheless, they were always fascinating.) The rest of us talked about sports. Our recent performance in high school athletics or the latest playground “juke” of an opponent served as validation for our stories.

In our own strange way we never became preoccupied with hatred of gay or lesbian people. Our uncomplimentary names for them were most often used to reassure ourselves and others that we were not gay. We did not understand much about them, but lesbian and gay people were our grade school companions. They lived next door, down the street, and around the corner from us. We knew their parents and played sports with their older brothers and dated their sisters. Therefore, the relationship waters were muddied and many connections remained in place. We simply viewed the obviously gay brother as different. I did not realize at the time that this was the beginning of subtle categorization and intense alienation that would

accompany these childhood friends for the remainder of their lives in this society.

The Gospel of John's account of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11) describes relationships of power that are reminiscent of the power structures in our own society. Forget for a moment that this woman is an adulteress. I ask you to forget, because it is obvious that the men who bring her to Jesus and raise the question regarding the right to stone her based on the Law of Moses have forgotten. If sin was the major issue, some man or men caught in the act with her would also be facing capital punishment. However, the text represents a male-dominated, hierarchical context in which men are exempt from the death sentence based on the power structure of their culture. Categorized as an adulteress and alienated from power, this woman's sin is now to be punished by a march to death. The emerging religious leader's approval is now needed as a cursory nod to the established powers before the crowd performs the execution. Wait! Jesus writes on the ground. Did he write the names of the accusers who had been with this woman? If so, was it the son of one of the Pharisees who had not sown all of his wild oats? Or was this woman the unacknowledged daughter of one of the men in the crowd? Although we will never know what Jesus wrote on the ground that day, we do know that the men dropped their rocks and went home when confronted with their own sinfulness. Jesus' writing changed the way power was construed in that particular situation.

As we discuss ordaining lesbian and gay Christians, it is important that we too remember power as a central issue. Although traditional interpretations of the story of the woman caught in adultery focus on sin and Jesus' openness to grace, both power and gender construction are also central issues. Male domination is also at issue, because the participation of the man in an adulterous relationship is overlooked. Just so, the question of whether or not to ordain gay and lesbian Christians is not just a question about what counts as sin or grace. It is also a question about power. And so it is related to other struggles for freedom, equality, and full participation.

We have to remember that slavery and the refusal to ordain women were both defended on biblical and theological grounds. But I shudder to think what the Presbyterian Church (USA) would

have become had we not fought for women to be ordained fifty years ago. Or, what would have happened to our denomination if the leadership of the Presbyterian Church in the United States had not taken a stand on principle to move the 1965 General Assembly meeting from Memphis, Tennessee to Montreat, North Carolina? The meeting was moved because the session of the local church (Second Presbyterian) that was to host the General Assembly prohibited African Americans from being admitted to worship. We have shown at least some ability to name the power issues at work in biblical and theological conversations. And we need to do the same thing now.

The Church of Jesus Christ has participated in gender and race domination and exclusion throughout history. Therefore, we must view the biblical record and our interpretation as to who is in and out with both theology and history in mind. Theology presses our faith perspectives to higher and better hopes. But history reminds us of our frailty in accepting God's expectation for an inclusive Christian community based on love for all humanity. We must examine how our interpretations of scripture have led to the acceptance of some and the alienation of others. We need to study who gains from exclusion. We need to ask who desires power and who is genuinely seeking righteousness. We need to trace the ways that questions of sin hide questions of power.

Jesus repeatedly rejects human attempts to exclude people who get labeled as "sinful." Blind Bartimaeus receiving his sight (Mk. 10: 46-52) is another example of grace pressing against the edges of society's power arrangements. While the established host guides Jesus through the polished main streets, an inappropriate beggar cries out for healing, disrupting the hospitality committee's tour. The crowd rebukes him, but Jesus confronts the established theology that legitimates the blind man's segregation and exclusion. Jesus heals him. In so doing, Jesus raises a community's awareness of redemption by lifting the veil of historical domination of the poor and proclaiming a new ethic of restorative justice. He reaches beyond the boundaries of the established order to redeem Bartimaeus and forces the community to view Jesus, Bartimaeus and itself differently. As an old parishioner told me a few years ago, "When you really see Jesus, you cannot see yourself or the world the same anymore." Presbyterians must bring Jesus into our present

arrangements of power constructed by white males so that we may unbind ourselves from the categorization, alienation, and separation that has caused centuries of pain.

Oftentimes we struggle with the word “power” in the church. We like to pretend that there is no exercise of power in the household of God. But power is a reality that exists even in the church. And lesbian and gay Christians have discovered the real obstacles that power poses to their broader participation in the Church. They are not the first to do so, and they will not be the last. Lesbian and gay activists sometimes compare their struggle to the struggles for women’s suffrage and racial desegregation against a prevailing power structure. But many persons who fought in older movements for freedom and equality find it difficult to see the correlation between these struggles. It can be difficult to see the connections for at least three reasons.

First, none of these movements has been built on a consciousness of the intersections of various kinds of oppression. Many African-American women would argue that the civil rights movement and its leaders were sexist and chauvinist. Similarly, women’s suffrage was concerned with women and their rights as human beings and not translated to the larger society as a movement that also included lesbian women. Our movements have focused on one use of power or another, sometimes to the neglect of the “intersectional” nature of exclusion.

Second, many persons in older civil rights movements do not believe in extending the rights of gay and lesbian persons. As Gayraud Wilmore has aptly stated in his article for this booklet, African Americans have not understood the lesbian and gay struggle for inclusion in Christendom in the same vein as the civil rights movement. Although we African-Americans live in the contradictions in church life by hiring church personnel and ordaining clergy and officers who are lesbian and gay persons, our theology remains stagnant with regards to full public acceptance. But why should this be? We can support a movement against exclusive power structures even if we do not think it is exactly like our own struggle as African-Americans.

Finally, it is difficult to connect the struggles because each movement has a tendency to slip into the “empire thinking” that has

been born out of Western theological construct of oppression. Simply put, the empire mind believes that someone has to be left out so that the powerful may prosper. The imperial mindset leads excluded groups to compete with one another, as if full acceptance of gay and lesbian people would come at the cost of real equality for African-American Christians. But the imperial mindset serves only the empire. The truth is that we're all in this struggle together.

People involved in *every* struggle for freedom and equality should ask questions about the power relations at stake in this debate. Is this issue really about sin – or is it centered on maintaining the “good ole boys” club through conservative control of the denomination? Can liberal ideals of inclusion be accomplished through passive-aggressive strategizing? Will moderate waffling raise effective ways of declaring Jesus’ real desires for the Church, or simply appease both sides with watered-down rhetoric in the name of Church unity? What do opponents to lesbian and gay ordination have to gain? And in what ways can proponents of lesbian and gay ordination use their power so that it is effective for the gospel and promotion of the Church? How can we make stronger connections – practically, politically, and theologically – between these movements for equality and inclusion?

In retrospect I know that my friends and I teased and demeaned the gay boys we grew up with because we needed to affirm our own superiority. Sports and girls were simply mechanisms by which we affirmed our maleness as it had been defined by our culture, society and rearing. It was a poor choice and I was wrong! Women were also degraded in our boyish conversations. Even when I did not participate, I stood by and quietly or laughingly approved “kiss and tell” stories or demeaning characterizations. Growing older has allowed me to both experience and witness the ways that cultural power constructs have damaged and scarred the souls of human beings through labeling, categorizing and defaming. I have committed myself not to participate in power mongering that debilitates the possibilities for a community that embraces all of God’s children.

Judgment can be harsh in this world we live in. And it can be a tool for the already powerful against the already powerless. I believe that is why judgment and exclusion remain God’s business.

Participating in the building of the Kingdom of God with all the weaknesses, frailties and human faults that all of us possess is the business God assigned to me. And that is difficult enough. I believe I will leave the business that belongs to God in God's hands. Jesus had the formula correct. The wheat and the weeds are to be separated at the harvest. And it is not harvest time yet!



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What do Presbyterians teach about sexuality?

Su Yon Pak ✕
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Education happens everywhere, intentionally or unintentionally. It happens in church basements, in the pews, in Session meetings and in women's gatherings. Education happens in positive as well as in negative events. As educator Lawrence Cremin asserts, "What is taught is not always what is desired, and vice versa; what is learned is not always what is taught, and vice versa. Moreover, there are almost always unintended consequences in education; indeed, they are frequently more significant than the intended consequences. Hence, educational transactions are often marked by profound irony." It is because of this all-pervasive and surprising nature of education that it is important to pay special attention to the *process* of education. If we want to know what Presbyterians teach about sexuality, we will have to look at the whole process: curriculum, practices, and silences.

Curriculum. The word "curriculum" comes from the Latin word *currere* which means "to run." The work of the curriculum is the forming and re-forming of the course the church will run. There are three types of curricula operating in any educational situation: explicit, implicit and null. The *explicit* curriculum is what is explicitly being taught – the written and the spoken contents. It refers to things like sermons, the Book of Confessions, and written Sunday School materials. The *implicit* curriculum is less obvious. It refers to elements such as the location of the Sunday School class, organization of the room, what gets rewarded, and whose opinions are valued. The *null* curriculum is a paradox. It teaches by way of not teaching. It refers to what is absent, left out, and silenced. Whose stories are not heard? Who is not present in the leadership? What are "taboo" subjects never talked about in churches? The null curriculum teaches as powerfully and formatively as the explicit curriculum. What are some of the null curricula of your church?

Practices. Christian practices are an important part of the church's curriculum. In fact, Craig Dykstra would say that curriculum

itself is “the practice of a people.” Many communities through many generations have participated in Christian practices, not only as a way to embody faith, but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, as a way to come to faith. Why? Practices are activities that people do together over time. They form a way of life that is lived out in the world in response to God’s reconciling love. Christian practices address fundamental human needs in ways that reflect God’s purpose for humankind. These human needs – the need for healing, the need for community, and the need to be fed and cared for, for instance – are fundamental and universal for every living human being. At the same time, different historical, political, racial, economic, cultural and social contexts create different and particular ways in which the needs are met. And certain needs are more urgent and prominent in one community than others. What are the urgent practices necessary in your community?

Silences. Sexuality – Null Curriculum of the Church? For many Presbyterian churches, the topic of sexuality belongs in the category of null curriculum. That is, Presbyterian churches teach about sexuality by not teaching about it. What does that silence teach?

First, it teaches that sexuality is not in the realm of the sacred – that it is not considered to be even potentially holy. In this way, the Church teaches that our spirituality does not include sexuality and sexual desires. But if we believe that the whole person is made in the image of God, we should embrace sexuality as an essential aspect of what it means to be human. In this null curriculum, the church gives up its opportunity and responsibility to form a member to be a whole embodied person. In the absence of explicit teaching and formation from the church about sexuality – except in the form of “don’t do it before marriage” – people are forced to look outside of the church. The point here is that by not teaching about sexuality, except in limited and negative ways, the church loses its voice and therefore its authority in this central aspect of human life.

Second, the church’s silence teaches that sexuality is shameful. Shame has a role in making a person aware that certain actions betray their personhood. But when it is used as a tool to make sexuality forbidden or dirty, it has a detrimental effect on a person’s human development. When the church speaks about sexuality, it does so in the context of morality, usually in terms that define sexuality as shameful, disgraceful and embarrassing. The church’s null curriculum teaches that all sexual acts are shameful. This shroud of shame clouds our clarity about what is good and what is not good.

But here is the irony: While sexuality is usually a null curriculum of the church, it becomes an explicit curriculum in practices and teaching that condemn homosexuality and bisexuality. The broader background of a null curriculum of silence and shame does much to shape the ways the church talks about homosexuality. When the topic of sexuality is “taboo,” practices and sexualities different from what is considered to be the norm challenge people to think about their own sexuality. This makes us uncomfortable. And this discomfort with sexuality breeds discomfort with homosexuality.

We should also think about the implicit curriculum of the church’s teaching about same-sex relations. Dedicated and committed persons of homosexual and bisexual orientations are explicitly and implicitly prohibited from leadership positions, from ordination, and from creating a family through Holy Unions. What does this teach? What does this teach our young people? It teaches implicitly that there is a double standard operating in the church. While all are called in baptism to service to God, and some are called to serve the community in ordained capacity, these calls are not affirmed as valid for gay and lesbian Christians. While the labor of gay and lesbian people in the church is acceptable and even encouraged, public leadership affirming that labor is not acceptable. While joining together in love to form a committed relationship and a stable family is considered a virtue, when persons are of the same gender, that same desire is considered to be an abomination. The double standard implicitly teaches that some Presbyterians are of more value in the eyes of God and the church community than others. And this becomes an explicit curriculum of discrimination.

What can the church do? The church must affirm sexuality as an important aspect of what it means to be human. One powerful way to affirm sexuality is to promote Christian practices for honoring the body. Providing an open space and hospitality where young people’s bodies and their desires are welcomed, honored and discussed as a practice of honoring the body can be one way to affirm sexuality. As Stephanie Paulsell writes in *Honoring the Body*, “It is only through learning to honor the body in every aspect of our embodied life that we will be able to honor our bodies’ sexual feelings and desires.” Sexual desires are part of other desires which need to be checked and harnessed. Just because we have desires does not mean that we should act on every desire that comes to mind. This balance of openness and boundaries is taught and learned so that it can become a moral compass for young people negotiating their own sexualities. This is especially important

for young gay and lesbian people trying to come to terms with their sexualities in a world that is hostile to their being.

The church also needs practices and rituals that mark and affirm sexual development. The church ritualizes various markers in a person's life: birth, first communion, marriage and death. What would it mean for the church to recognize markers of sexual development such as the onset of menstruation, the changing of a boy's voice, and menopause? For many people these changes bring much shame and embarrassment. Ritualizing the celebration of sexual development could turn a sense of shame into a sense of what is holy, sacred. It would affirm that sexuality is indeed holy, a part of the realm of God.

In sum, teachings about sexuality cannot be left by default to be an unintended consequence of the church's education. The church needs to educate explicitly and implicitly that the body and its desires can be good and are a fundamental part of life as a human being. This message can then help to focus the church community to think more positively about gay and lesbian issues. If sexuality can be good and positive, then homosexual acts done within the same moral guidelines can be seen as good and positive.



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Is there room in the PC(USA) for those of differing orientations?

Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner ✕
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Anne Lamott tells of a seven-year-old child who was lost one day in the big city. She was frantic and confused until a police car stopped to assist. The officers offered to drive her around adjacent neighborhoods until something looked familiar. Suddenly the small child recognized a steeple. With relief, the child instructed the officers to stop the car at the building with the steeple. Happily she announced: “You could let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here” (*Traveling Mercies*).

This story brings life to Webster’s definition of “orientation” as a “homing faculty or instinct.” The hushed question that we are cautious to articulate is whether the church will be able to give bearings to and accommodate those of differing orientations. Will you and I and those who differ from you and me be able to find our way home from the landmark of our church? Is there room in our church for those of differing orientations, particularly differing sexual orientations?

Webster’s also defines “orientation” as “the planning of church architecture so that the altar is in the east end.” Facing the east positioned the worshipper for the rising of the sun. This definition reminds me of being positioned in just such a way at a Good Friday service many years ago in a retreat center outside Basel, Switzerland. The retreat center was the home of the Schwestern von Grandchamp, the female counterpart to the Brothers of Taizé; the retreat center was called *Sonnenhof*, meaning “halo around the sun.” I made the retreat in an attempt to heal from some ostracism I had encountered. The hostile exclusion had come from some men who

did not believe women should complete advanced degrees in theology, nor become ordained. I was very angry with their theological orientation and with them.

On this silent retreat, one of the Dominican nuns kept following me to ask, "Would you like to come talk?" My repeated negative replies did not deter her. Eventually, I gave up and met with her in the garden. As we say in clinical parlance, I ventilated. She heard my raw anger for one hour without saying a word. When I had finished, she made one comment about these hurtful men: "Christ died for them, too." I became angrier, and the anger did not subside until I found an ikon in the gift shop, an ikon of Mary Magdalene before the risen Christ in the garden, near the empty tomb (John 20). Mary Magdalene called him *Rabboni* or Teacher. I found my mandate to continue in my doctoral program and towards ordination; my orientation was towards the Teacher, towards the risen Son. On Good Friday at Sonnenhof, we knelt at the base of a large cross in the sisters' chapel. My struggles did indeed look different from that vantage point. I have gone back many times to that vantage point, in times of challenge and times of anger. Is there room in our church for those of differing orientations?

Orientation is adapting or adjusting to a particular situation. Dis-orientation occurs when we cannot adapt or adjust to a particular situation or person or position. Sociologist Georg Simmel dealt with the complicated cultural/sociological dynamics of the "stranger" or "wanderer" or "sojourner" always in a figure-ground relationship to the home or host country (*Soziologie*, 1908). In a 1977 article Donald N. Levine developed Simmel's thought in a typology of "stranger" relationships which included the following: guest, sojourner, newcomer, intruder, inner enemy, marginal man or marginal woman. Varying degrees of "social distance" are involved with the various categories, from the vantage point of those in the home country.

Varying degrees of theological distance occur in the church, when the stranger or intruder or enemy is considered in a figure-ground relationship with the host theology. This phenomena can be dis-orienting. When I encounter someone who is resistant to my position on an emotionally-laden topic, I ask myself silently the question Dr. Letty Russell taught me to ask: What is at stake here?

What would the individual have to lose if he/she saw the issue from my vantage point? This exercise and the insight that can ensue has often assisted me, not in agreement with, but in compassion for “the stranger.”

Orientation is technically “a position with relation to the points of the compass.” Yahweh is described in the Hebrew Bible as setting a compass upon the face of the depth (Proverbs 8:27b). Those who partake in the *basileia* and banqueting of God will come from many points of this compass: “then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the *basileia* of God” (Luke 13:29). We may well be feasting with those who were theological and sociological strangers. The cycles of violence with which strangers or enemies or intruders have sometimes been treated will be replaced with a compass of compassion. There is an ultimate orientation like the magnetic north that supercedes proximate orientations. H. Richard Niebuhr spoke on the distinction between proximate goals and the ultimate goal of our faith which is love of God and neighbor (*The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, 1956). Proximate goals are worthy; they include denominational issues and passionate causes involving sexual orientation. These proximate goals may even come close or very near to the ultimate goal of our faith; however, they must never be the central point or orientation of our faith, lest they become gods in themselves, and we become lost finding our way home.

Sexual orientation engenders a volatile debate in our church today. We seek desperately to understand the arguments from all angles. There are various theories as to the “why” of differing sexual orientations: socialization, genetics, and abuse. I would like to think if a sexual orientation has grown out of a reaction to abuse, the church would especially be a place in which to find safe haven. Theories regarding the source of sexual orientation are changing over time. For example, at Georgia Baptist Hospital in Atlanta, we residents were trained with the DSM III-R (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Third Edition-Revised, 1987). Homosexuality was considered a “sexual disorder not otherwise specified” (p.561). Today, residents in pastoral care and counseling train with the DSM IV. In this revised edition, homosexuality as a sexual orientation is no longer categorized as a sexual disorder by the medical/psychiatric field.

Is there room in the church for those with differing theories and orientations? I believe this is possible if we image ourselves as adopted children of God (I develop this idea more fully in *The Spirit of Adoption*, 2003). In the last three decades, social workers and sociologists have changed their understanding of families constituted through adoption. Three decades ago, families undergoing adoption were counseled to believe that an adoptive family would be the same as a biological family. That view has been called “rejection-of-differences” and led to dysfunctional and unhealthy families (David Kirk, *Shared Fate*, 1964). Adoptive parents were told by agencies that the adopted child “would be just like having a biological child.” We now know that is not so. Adopted children often have a differing set of genes, heredity, physical characteristics, and abilities than the adoptive parents. Social workers and agencies now counsel families into “an acceptance-of-differences,” if there is to be a healthy and functional family.

The church is a family constituted through God’s adoption of us. This adoption imagery of inclusion into God’s family is mentioned in Ephesians, Galatians, and Romans. The metaphor of adoption into God’s family is used more often than the birth imagery, or second birth imagery, as in John 3. That means we may not look like each other, we may not vote like each other, and we may not have the same sexual orientation. However, we have been adopted as God’s children through Jesus Christ, the Firstborn; our inheritance has been sealed with the guarantee of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1). Perhaps if we can move into an acceptance-of-differences that an adopted family must have to be healthy and functional, we can actualize some of that inheritance.

Here is my revised version of Anne Lamott’s story:

There were three small children who were lost one day in the big city. They were frantic and confused until a police car stopped to assist. The two officers offered to drive them around adjacent neighborhoods until something looked familiar. The officers had a hard time believing they were from the same family; one child had been adopted from China, one from Guatemala, one from Nebraska. They looked very different. They also couldn’t agree on their directions. The three adopted children, sisters and brothers, huddled together in the back seat of the patrol car. With relief, the

children instructed the officers to stop the car at the building with the steeple. On this one point they finally agreed: “This is our church. As a family, we can always find our way home from here.”



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Can people change their sexual orientations? Should the church require gay and lesbian Christians to try to change their orientations in order to be ordained?

Nancy J. Ramsay ✕
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In *The Spirit and the Forms of Love*, Daniel Day Williams suggested that “love has communion in freedom as its goal.” Sexual orientation refers to the way women and men self-identify in our sexual attraction to others. But it is more than a matter of preferred sexual partners. Sexual orientation is part of persons’ core identity. It shapes the ways we seek to satisfy deep God-given needs for communion and intimacy – sexual, emotional, physical, and spiritual. Sexual orientation is not simply sexual behavior. Persons who self-identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual in their sexual orientation are not simply naming preferences for sexual partners. Rather, many would say sexual orientation refers to a more encompassing aspect of a person’s being in the world.

The best model for understanding sexual orientation acknowledges a continuum between heterosexual and homosexual orientations, despite urgent concerns for heterosexual conformity. Indeed, only about ten percent of the population of the United States think of ourselves as exclusively heterosexual or homosexual.

Sexual orientation, like other aspects of our identity, may become more complex in our self-understanding. Some adults find, for

example, that their orientation is more truly satisfied in a homosexual orientation after they initially identify as heterosexual. Some studies suggest that women's sexual orientation may be more fluid, allowing them to choose a partner based more on emotional attachment, while men's orientation usually finds expression in more fixed terms. However, even this capacity for some fluidity in sexual orientation does not mean that sexual orientation ought to be reduced to a lifestyle choice.

Rather, such occasions describe a struggle to discern the relationship that will bring the most integrity to one's identity and desire. It is also the case that for some persons who move from one location on the orientation continuum to another in their behavior, this shift may reflect a growing strength to resist the oppressive environmental effects of heterosexism and homophobia that they may also have internalized. The forces of such change will vary, but the liberative dynamics of such change cannot be overlooked. They would suggest that such change is less a "choice" than a developmental freedom to be who one is despite the oppressive forces at work against valuing one's true orientation.

The question of whether persons whose sexual orientation is predominantly or singularly gay, lesbian, or bisexual should undergo conversion therapy presumes that such sexual orientations are pathological. In 1973 the American Psychiatric Association took the action of removing homosexuality from the official manual listing mental and emotional disorders after careful research confirmed that homosexuality is not an illness, mental disorder, or emotional problem. In 1975 the American Psychological Association followed suit. Since that time both organizations have advocated against stigmatizing homosexuality and have encouraged their members to become educated about sexual orientation and to correct any biases they may bring to their practice of therapy. Both organizations have focused attention on the distortions of heterosexism and homophobia as they undermine the well-being and safety of gay and lesbian and bisexual persons.

Conversion therapy advocacy groups such as Exodus International, Transforming Ministries, and OneByOne (Presbyterian Renewal Network) presume that homosexual and bisexual orientations are a matter of dysfunctional and sinful choice and disordered desires. Such groups reduce homosexual orientation to addictive disordered sexual behavior and desire. Proponents argue that changing one's sexual orientation is difficult but possible. Conversion or change therapies vary in strategies; but their primary means involve religious

instruction, group counseling, and exploration of various possible psychosocial origins for distorted desire such as absent fathers or mothers or sexual abuse. These therapies also try to help participants develop heterosexual desire. If that fails, these approaches encourage abstinence.

Sexual reorientation tries to proceed in ways similar to Alcoholics Anonymous (Homosexuality Anonymous) in that it expects ongoing self-monitoring of desires and behavior. Those who seek conversion therapies are usually persons whose religious beliefs exclude the possibility of a right relationship with God if they self-identify in a homosexual orientation. For these persons there is a remarkable motivation to align their behavior with their faith. Often they have internalized homophobia and fear that their salvation is at stake in their conversion therapy.

For a relatively small number of persons, conversion therapy seems to have contributed to their ability to develop heterosexual desires and enter into lasting marriages. There are no studies that use commonly accepted scientific means to verify results. In one study of nearly 900 persons who sought to change their homosexual orientation, roughly two percent reported success in their effort to change their orientation. A larger number reported improvement in self-esteem and other relational and spiritual indicators. While numerous studies describe anecdotal reports of harm from these conversion therapies, the absence of empirical evidence of harm has kept national clinical and medical groups such as the American Psychological Association from preventing their members from engaging in such therapies.

Thus the APA's position is complex. Because there is no empirical evidence of harm, it does not forbid its members from participating in conversion therapy. But because it does not regard homosexual orientations as a disorder, it recognizes no need for conversion therapy. The American Psychiatric Association, the American Psychological Association, the American Psychoanalytic Association, the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the National Association of Social Workers all question the efficacy and utility of "change therapies."

The church does and should have standards of its own. Theologically we do well to wonder what notion of sin underlies the urgency for conversion therapy. Daniel Day Williams described sin as the refusal to effect love in life. Indeed, throughout scripture we are enjoined to look beyond a focus on form or the letter of the law and to

seek after those practices that better assure the flourishing of love embodied in relationships marked by authenticity, mutual respect, care, and joy. Sexuality that deepens the authenticity of our communion and joy in one another helps us to glimpse God's love and hopes for us regardless of the form that sexuality takes. The evidence gathered by clinical and medical specialists of the last forty years points not to homosexuality but to heterosexism as one of the sins that has caused the most distortion and pain.

We should not encourage gay and lesbian people to undergo conversion therapy. Rather, we do well to require of all who serve as religious leaders a commitment to honor their relationships of sexual intimacy as covenantal relationships in which authenticity, joy, mutual regard, hospitality, and love flourish. ✠



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How might we respond in debates among Christians on homosexuality when told to “love the sinner but hate the sin”?

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Princeton Theological Seminary

In most every charged discussion among Christians on homosexuality, someone will rise to insist that the church’s proper response is to *love the sinner but hate the sin*. This pithy saying draws from among the most potent words in the theological lexicon – *sinner* and *sin*, *love* and *hate*. Yet seldom does it further conversation or foster new insight or accord. More often it has the effect of closing down debate, in the way of the bumper sticker that declares, “*God said it, I believe it, and that settles it.*”

The injunction to *love the sinner but hate the sin* is heard so often as to lead many people to assume that God said it – that it is found in the Bible or was spoken by Jesus. Rather, the expression, or one very much like it, was penned several hundred years later – in the fifth century – by St. Augustine, the church father and bishop of Hippo. *Cum dilectione hominum et odio vitiorum*, “with love for humankind and hatred of sins,” Augustine wrote in a letter chastising a group of nuns upset with their newly-installed prioress (*Letter 211*).

The particular sin he was enjoining these women to “hate” at that point in the letter where the now-familiar injunction occurs was their own looking men directly in the eyes with desire in their hearts. In the same letter, he likewise condemns their sins of hoarding secret caches of food and clothing received from relatives or friends, that is, of not sharing all things in common in Christian community. Further, he decries their not fully covering their hair with a headdress and their desire to bathe more often than once a month.

Religious women looking men in the eyes, receiving new clothes, uncovering their hair, wanting a bath: it’s no wonder that given

its origins contending against activities like these, Augustine's directive to *love the sinner but hate the sin* continues to be conscripted, however unwittingly, in attempts by some in the church to keep sexuality in check today. Yet even they would notice that somehow the church's collective wisdom concerning sinners and sin has changed over time.

Certainly Christians today would affirm the importance of paying attention to sinners and to sin in their lives, relationships, and churches. We would do well to love sinners, including ourselves, and to hate sin, in which we all persist. In a similar way, most of us look back with gratitude or relief to moments in our own lives when a friend or mentor was willing to take the risk of confronting, challenging, or correcting us when we may have been losing our way. We therefore have reason to assume that many, even most, contemporary Christians would be inclined to agree with Augustine, at some basic level, on the need to love the sinner and hate the sin.

On another level, the vast majority of Christians today would take exception to at least some of what Augustine reckons in his letter as sin. The circumstances and nature of what constitutes a particular sin – apparently even those sins that relate to what we now might recognize in the broadest sense as sexuality – appear to have changed considerably since the time of his letter. We would see in a very different light issues concerning the number of baths allotted to nuns or, more tellingly, what we might understand as their struggle to appropriate their physical bodies and sexuality into their religious vocation. This gives us pause as we try to sort out and fill in the blanks of *sinner* and *sin* in our own current conversations around sexuality. How confident are we of getting our *loving* and *hating* just right? Will we know when we have loved or hated enough?

In *Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge* (1993), Patricia Beattie Jung and Ralph F. Smith point out that while some Christians see homosexuality as the vilest example of *sin* or *depravity*, others see it less severely, as an *affliction* akin to alcoholism, with abstinence the only sufficient response. The authors go on to note that still other Christians view homosexuality simply as a *difference*, one of countless signs of the diversity of God's creation, more like being left-handed. Smith and Jung recognize that our sexuality touches the depths of our mystery as persons much more than does being right- or left-handed. But they observe that in terms of the systemic qualities of a world organized around the norm of heterosexuality, the analogy to left-handedness proves apt: “[W]e clearly arrange our world in favor of right-handed people. We only

recently stopped advocating efforts to reorient people. We have gravely distorted our understanding of left-handedness by false myths for centuries" (see pp. 21-31).

Those who press for the full participation of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered Christians in the life of the church may find themselves *agreeing* with their critics on the value of loving sinners and hating sin. They nonetheless *disagree* with them on who or what in a specific case are sinners or sins. They remain skeptical, at a time when sexuality is viewed by many to be inseparable from who they are as persons, of anyone's faring well in actual efforts in this regard to distinguish *sinner* from *sin*.

Instead, at the point in conversations on sexuality when someone announces that one must love the sinners but hate the sin, the purported "sinners" in this instance, no doubt like the recipients of Augustine's letter, experience themselves not only as unloved but unheard. They sense that the discussion is effectively declared closed.

To acknowledge a change in perspective on what specifically comprises sin from Augustine's time to our own is not to say that there are no longer any moral truths or that there is no such thing as sexual sin. Neither does it mean that those who favor the full inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered Christians reject the principle of loving sinners and hating sin. It is instead to suggest that we as individuals, and the church as a collective body, would be wise to exercise great discretion and modesty in our claims to know, for every time, place, and circumstance, just who is and is not a sinner or precisely what is and is not a sin. When we are told, or tell others, to love the sinner but hate the sin, it would prove worthwhile to recall Jesus' own injunction to remove the log from one's own eye before attempting to take the speck from a neighbor's (Luke 6:42b). Honest self-scrutiny may be our last, best hope for a reconciling vision.



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Would inclusivity alienate our global partner churches?

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If the Presbyterian Church (USA) decides to recognize the Christian discipleship of gay and lesbian persons and offer them ordination to the ministry of the church, will it affect their ecumenical relations with their partner churches all over the world, especially the ones in the so-called Third World? I want to address this question as an individual Presbyter of the Church of South India (CSI). (I am *not* offering here any official position of the CSI). CSI came into existence in 1947 as an organic union of Anglican, British Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregationalist churches in South India. Since then, CSI has maintained a healthy partnership with churches connected to all the four denominational traditions, including the PC(USA). CSI values greatly its relation with those churches.

How would the people in the Church of South India react to the inclusivity of the PC(USA)? Given the spiritual climate of our congregations, one may guess three kinds of reaction. A majority of members of the Church of South India may have a knee-jerk reaction to your desire to be inclusive in matters of sexual orientation. They would see your inclusivity as something contrary to the teachings of the Bible and the church. The knowledge of the Bible has been one of our priorities in the congregations in South India, especially in Tirunelveli diocese that I belong to. Many read the Bible daily and carry a copy of the Bible wherever they go. On every Sunday children memorize the biblical verse assigned for that Sunday and recite it before the congregation during worship. Therefore, our people are very familiar with the biblical texts that

seem to prohibit homosexual relations. On the basis of those texts many would find themselves strongly condemning any attempt to be inclusive.

There are others in our churches who may be troubled by the controversy regarding sexual orientation for a very different reason. They would argue that this controversy is a distraction from what we are really called to do. The economically poor are right in our midst, and their needs are so great that we simply cannot afford to be distracted into considering matters of sexual orientation. "When people are dying of starvation and malnutrition on our streets, both in the USA and in India, can anyone possibly care about what people do in their bedrooms?" This is the kind of question they would raise. The question of inclusivity is a luxury that well-fed, well-clothed, and well-cared-for Christians can afford to have. If one takes seriously the mandate given by Jesus during his preaching in his home town Nazareth, we should be out there working for the liberation of people who suffer because of poverty, war, and oppression.

There is a small minority of people who recognize the ambiguity surrounding the biblical teaching on sexual orientation and wish to remain open on the issue. Such people want to listen more to the arguments on both sides before they make up their minds. To be inclusive, for them, is a gospel mandate, and therefore they cannot alienate a whole group of persons simply on the basis of a few selected texts from the Bible. They are also aware that homosexuality is a fact before it becomes an act – that is, it is a mode of being and not simply a way of acting. The stance against slavery and the ordination of women into the ministry of the church are instances where the church recognized the culturally conditioned nature of biblical teachings and moved away from merely depending on isolated texts. In a similar vein, perhaps the church should reinterpret the texts regarding sexual orientation taking into account the contemporary discipleship of gay and lesbian Christians.

It is clear that Christians in CSI – let alone Christians across the global South – do not all have the same kind of reaction to the issue of inclusivity. The question that we are addressing here makes an implicit assumption that the partner churches have a single monolithic view regarding sexual orientation and therefore that the

decision to be inclusive will alienate the partner churches. It is important to note that Christians in different parts of the world take a variety of positions when it comes to the question of inclusivity.

Much more important in this discussion is how we view ecumenical relations. Whether the partner churches will be alienated or not is dependent on our understanding of ecumenism. We, in South India, have learnt in our own history of church union that unity is not the same as uniformity. The four denominational traditions that came together to form the Church of South India were intentional in allowing the individual traditions to thrive within the united church. Anyone who travels to the various congregations of CSI will immediately notice the rich variety of practices, worship patterns, theological stances, and church governance within the CSI. If uniformity is the goal of unity, then CSI is *not* a united church at all.

But our vision of unity makes room for difference. A decision of the PC(USA) to ordain gays and lesbians, therefore, should not alienate the CSI, because we know that we can remain united without being uniform in our expressions of Christian discipleship. Our contexts are different and therefore our expressions of Christian obedience will also be different. If the task of each church is to “read” its context carefully and prayerfully, and in the name of gospel of Christ find ways to offer love and care to all those who are alienated and oppressed in that particular context, then your decision cannot and should not affect our ecumenical relations negatively. We are together in Christ with a variety of gifts, concerns, and patterns of discipleship.

There is an irony behind the question we are addressing. Do the churches in the West really care about the opinion of churches in the Third World when it comes to matters of theology, doctrine, and Christian practice? Are the theological and ministerial resources of the partner churches in the Third World readily and enthusiastically consulted in the seminaries and divinity schools in the First World? Or is it the case that some Christians in the West want to enlist the support of those in the Third World simply because it promotes their own theological agenda? A further irony is that many of the Third World churches are still so dependent on the economic resources of the churches in the West that they choose not to be

alienated even when decisions are made without any reference to them.

In all these considerations, one thing is clear to me. Our call, wherever we are, is to bear witness to the all-embracing love of God revealed in the face of Jesus the Christ. Such witness demands that we wrestle with the needs of our context and discover our particular contextual obedience to the gospel. In the Holy Spirit we are given the freedom of the children of God to choose those forms of obedience that fulfill the church's mission in our own context today. It is this freedom that unites us as one family of faith.



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What could bring
a person
to change his or her mind
about sexuality and
ordination?
What happened in
your case?

Jack Rogers ✕
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In 1993, a gay man, who had earlier been elected a deacon, asked Pasadena Presbyterian Church to consider becoming a More Light Church (i.e. a congregation willing to ordain lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people - LGBT). My wife Sharon and I worship at Pasadena Presbyterian Church, and I reluctantly agreed to serve on a task force charged with creating an educational program that would inform the whole congregation about the theological, social, and scientific issues involved in such a decision.

I had never before really studied homosexuality. I opposed ordination of LGBT people reflexively - it was just what I thought Christians were supposed to do. Serving on the task force challenged me to apply my Reformed theology and evangelical method of biblical interpretation to the issue of homosexuality for the first time.

I had a sabbatical coming and decided to research how the Presbyterian Church had changed its mind on other moral issues: slavery and segregation, the subordination of women to men, and divorce and remarriage. In each case the church initially selected isolated proof-texts to support a general societal prejudice. Then,

over time, we learned to interpret Scripture through the lens of Jesus' life and ministry. In that way we recognized the full humanity of people and our responsibility to support equal rights for all.

Studying the Biblical texts further, I learned that, for most people, there are, at most, eight passages that are purported to discuss homosexuality. None of them are about Jesus, nor do they include any of his words. In fact, many responsible scholars on both sides of the homosexuality debate have concluded that properly understood, seven of the eight passages have nothing to do with homosexuality as we know it today. That leaves some of those who oppose equal rights for people who are LGBT relying on one text, Romans 1. So I undertook a more thorough study of Romans 1-3.

It seems clear to me that the Gospel Paul is proclaiming in Romans focuses not on the issue of sexuality but on the universality of sin, and on the free grace of salvation through Jesus Christ. That is the essence of the Christian message. In Romans 1:18-32, Paul is writing about idolatry - worshipping, giving our ultimate allegiance, to anything in the creation instead of God, the Creator. Paul's point in Romans 1 is that we are all sinners.

Then, in chapter 3, Paul articulates the central idea of our Reformed theology - we are saved, not by our own acts, but by God's grace, "as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3: 23-24). To turn Romans 1 into a law, condemning, not the pervasive idolatry to which every one of us is susceptible, but rather the sexual expression of one group of people, seems to me to misrepresent Paul's point.

How then does Romans 1 become the central passage for those who oppose equal rights for people who are LGBT? Many of those who share the general cultural bias against people who are LGBT import a variety of theories, irrelevant to Paul's point, in order to interpret Romans 1 as an anti-homosexual text. The most egregious example of this is the book by Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (2000). The irony is that for Gagnon, one really doesn't need the Bible, because, according to him, everything it says about homosexuality comes initially from the observation of nature.

Gagnon says what many people who are heterosexual believe: “Acceptance of biblical revelation is thus not a prerequisite for rejecting the legitimacy of same-sex intercourse” (488). Behind all of the ancient sources, including the biblical ones, for Gagnon, was “the simple recognition of a ‘fittedness’ of the sex organs, male to female” (364). He goes on to say that the Old Testament Holiness Code “was responding to the conviction that same-sex intercourse was fundamentally incompatible with the creation of men and women as anatomically complementary sexual beings” (157). He refers to “Paul’s own reasoning, grounded in divinely-given clues in nature” (142). In each of these statements, Gagnon gives priority to nature over revelation.

Based on his observation of nature, Gagnon claims to know that people who are homosexual choose their orientation. He asserts that they are willfully idolatrous and sinful (254), and implies that they must behave like heterosexuals or be celibate in order to be saved (493 and 470). None of these theories has any basis in science or in Scripture.

In contrast to the use of non-biblical theories to oppose equal rights for people who are LGBT, the Bible contains a clear and direct analogy for our present situation. In the early days of the church, Gentiles were prohibited from becoming Christians. Jewish Christians considered Gentiles unclean by nature and polluted by idolatrous practice. But Acts 15 records the testimony of Peter and Paul that God’s Holy Spirit had fallen on believing Gentiles. These Apostles accepted Gentiles into the church with no restrictions. James then read the Torah to say that God had always purposed the conversion of the Gentiles. If the early Christian church leaders could find new truth in Scripture and change their minds about something of which they were once so sure, so can we.

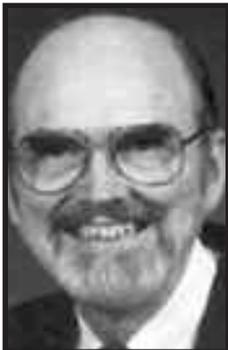
I had often said that I could not change my position on homosexuality unless I was convinced by Scripture. By studying the Bible in its historical and cultural context and through the lens of Jesus’ redeeming life and ministry, I have now been convinced that Scripture does not condemn, as such, the sexual expression of contemporary Christian people who are LGBT.

My professional focus of study and teaching has been creeds and confessions, especially those in the Presbyterian *Book of*

Confessions. There is nothing in the authentic texts of that collection of creedal statements that forbids a loving, life-long commitment of two people to each other, whether gay or straight. The phrase, “homosexual perversion,” that appears in the English translation of the Heidelberg Catechism in our *Book of Confessions* (4.087) was illegitimately inserted in 1962 by a pair of American translators who shared the general cultural bias against homosexuality – it does not appear in the original Latin or German.

The issue of granting equal rights to people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender has been a source of conflict in our denomination for 30 years. There is a biblical way to resolve the conflict in the church. Jesus said: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matt. 7:12). All we have to do is to apply the same hermeneutic, the same gracious interpretation of Scripture, to all people.

In the Reformed tradition we know that God’s first word to us is grace. Our thankful response is obedience to the leading of the Holy Spirit. When we finally accept Christian people who are LGBT as full and equal members of the church – as we will – we will be wonderfully blessed.



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Which side are you on? And are there more than two?

Cynthia M. Campbell



McCormick Theological Seminary

In the debate about the status of gay and lesbian members of the Presbyterian Church (USA), it sometimes seems as though the only options are “for” and “against.” Either one condemns homosexuality as contrary to God’s will or one affirms homosexual persons and puts discussion of appropriate behavior off limits. Like most issues, this never has been as simple as “for” and “against,” because in fact there are several different questions being asked at the same time ... about the nature of human sexuality as well as about what is right and wrong in sexual behavior. In this essay, I suggest that rather than two sides there is a range of responses to the issue of homosexuality, each of which is based on different theological ideas and ethical values.

At one end of the spectrum are those who see homosexual behavior as something that is always wrong. The reason most frequently given is that such behavior is contrary to nature or to the order of creation. This view holds that God created human beings male and female for the purpose of procreation. Because procreation is impossible for homosexuals, they and their relationships are “disordered” because they do not conform to God’s design. The only hope for homosexual persons is to become “reordered” or restored to the proper relation to the opposite sex.

Other essays in this volume have addressed some of the problems associated with this view. Leaving aside the question of same-sex relationships, it has long been argued that although procreation is surely one important purpose for human sexuality, it is wrong to reduce human sexuality to reproduction. The human experience of sexuality is also the opportunity for men and women to express values such as intimacy, companionship, mutuality, fidelity

and joy.

At the other end of the spectrum is a view that also begins with creation. According to this view, God created everything, and everything that God created is by definition good. As children of God, created in God's image, all persons are loved by God just as they are: male, female, gay, straight, of every ethnic or racial background, able-bodied or not. On this view, homosexuality is part of God's good creation to be celebrated without further question.

Sometimes persons who hold this view want to end the discussion at this point. That is to say, they want to set aside questions of what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behavior. But such a position fails to recognize that all humanity and all human behavior stand not only under the gracious mercy but also under the judgment of God. Sexuality is part of God's good creation, but it is also marked by human sin in need of restoration and redemption by God's grace and subject to the ordering of God's word.

We might call these two positions "prohibition" and "celebration." Sometimes in our church's debates it sounds as if there are no other options. But these two positions do not exhaust the possibilities; they define the ends of a spectrum. Between these two poles, there are a number of other positions that can be identified. While these other views make use of the doctrine of creation, they also bring other theological considerations to bear on the issue.

One approach might be called "differentiated judgment." According to this view, the critical issue is homosexual activity. It is not who the homosexual is that is a problem; it is the behavior that is wrong. Thus, homosexual persons can be welcomed into the life of the church and even elected and ordained to office as long as they are not sexually active.

This is one way to understand the current position of the Presbyterian Church going all the way back to the first "authoritative interpretation" of the Constitution in 1978. At that time, the judgment of the church was that "avowed, practicing homosexual persons" were not eligible for office. The clear implication is that non-practicing and repentant homosexuals could be eligible. The same idea is conveyed in the phrase "chastity in singleness" found in G-6.0106b.

On the one hand, this approach seeks to recognize that all persons are sinners in need of repentance and amendment of life. On the other hand, it can be argued that this standard assumes that all heterosexual relations between a wife and husband are right and that everything else – including all homosexual practice, whether between committed partners or not – is always wrong. But this focus on sexual behavior begs the question of whether sexuality is not something more than specific activities but also part of one's deep identity as a person. If sexuality is part of a person's identity, then this attempt to differentiate between behaviors becomes discrimination against persons.

Another approach might be called "pastoral acceptance." This view often begins from the experience of getting to know gay or lesbian persons and coming to the judgment that their sexual identity is simply part of who they are; it is "the way they are made." While this way of being may fall short of the ideal for human life, it is part of reality as we know it.

Now, the question becomes: how should the church respond to gay and lesbian persons? The response of the pastoral approach is that we should follow the model of Jesus who came to seek and save the lost, who welcomed sinners and brought hope to the broken-hearted. Church members who affirm a position of pastoral acceptance might believe that homosexual behavior is a sin, while at the same time believing that the church should welcome gay and lesbian persons and could ordain them to church office. After all, does the church ordain anyone but sinners who are less than fully repentant? Those who favor pastoral acceptance believe that the church should be for gay and lesbian persons what it is for everyone else: a community of hospitality given and received in the name of Jesus.

Yet another perspective can be called "sanctification." This view begins with acknowledgment of homosexuality as part of the way human life is and asks how Christians should live in relation to this reality. Unlike the "celebration" position, this view remembers that all Christians, of whatever sexual orientation, are sinners redeemed by the grace of God alone. As forgiven sinners, all are set free to ask: how then are we to live? The simple answer is that we are to love one another (and ourselves) as God has first loved us.

Among other things, this means to take part in the ministries of the church and live in relationships (of community and family) ordered by the kind of “covenant fidelity” that we see demonstrated by God in Jesus Christ. On this view, the church would not only welcome gay and lesbian persons to membership and ministries, but also welcome and bless covenants of life-long partnership just as the church blesses and honors marriage. The church would welcome gay and lesbian Christians to ministries and faithful partnerships not so much as privileges to which they have a “right,” but rather as disciplines through which, by the grace of God, sanctification occurs.

Other positions could be identified. Each of these has been stated in over-simplified terms. And other typologies of positions could and have been made. What matters is not so much the particulars of the positions, but the fact that neither a simple “for” or “against” is an adequate response to the complex set of questions involved in the issue of homosexuality. The church should continue to bring to these questions a broad range of biblical and theological ideas as we seek to discern how God is calling us to live faithfully in our day.

In our discernment, it is critically important that we recall as a church community that the question of how we as Christians understand homosexuality comes not as a “social issue” impressed upon the church from “the world.” This question has come from within the church family and our own families. It is fellow believers, baptized sisters and brothers, who have come seeking to share their gifts and the fullness of their lives with Christ and the church. ✕ Perhaps it is with that reality that we had best begin.



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What do leaders and scholars in the Black Church say about sexuality and ordination?

An Open Letter To Martin ✕

January 20, 2005

In 1963 Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote his famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." His words were meant for a nation that he believed could rise above its self-destructive tendencies and study racism and inequality no more. Today, much of African America – and the nation at large – is confronted with equally destructive and dehumanizing circumstances. What follows is a "Letter to Martin" that was signed by dozens of Atlanta black clergy and published in area newspapers. The letter has served as an inspiration and impetus to action for many.

Dear Martin,

Every third Monday in January history compels us to remember and reactivate your legacy. How shall we honor you? And how shall we honor our deepest and truest selves? Nearly four decades have passed since you left your legacy to us, and what a momentous legacy it was. Yours was the vision of a transformed nation, a society that dared to practice the very brotherhood - and sisterhood - that it preached. In a time of tremendous social upheaval you joined the freedom-loving and justice-seeking tradition of your people, black people, and you did so at great personal cost. Using nonviolent direct action, you challenged the existing status quo. In the presence of your enemies - citizen's councils, police dogs, fire hoses, bigoted mobs, half-hearted allies, Christian racists, the FBI - you practiced an insurgent religious faith. You modeled for others the commitment to racial justice and reconciling peace. With your very body and life you led us into the magnificent, multi-colored and multi-ethnic quest of justice, peace and human community. Sore distressed, we the people, have yet to catch up to your radically inclusive vision.

For African Americans, the cumulative effect of the last forty years has been as disturbing as it is dramatic. In the new millennium, our elusive and torturous quest for freedom and equality continues. The full repercussions of radical democracy in the United States are not yet known. The vast majority of whites see themselves as non-racist and live comfortably with little or no real contact with other racial-ethnic people. Oblivious to the obvious (and sometimes the not so obvious), the connection between white privilege and black rage is discounted, resisted, denied. In our houses of worship, in the ivory tower, in the corporate boardroom, in the halls of government, in popular culture and mass media, in states red, purple and blue, in old and new formations, racism lives on. In the U.S., racial exclusion is still second nature. Racism is who we are. It is our way of life.

Sadly, many black people now have difficulty seeing their connections to other black people. We have embraced societal distinctions that separate us by age, education, gender, sexuality and class. We have forgotten the example set by so many courageous souls a generation ago. Mose Wright, Daisy Bates, Jo Ann Robinson, E.D. Dixon, Ella Baker, Bob Moses, Diane Nash, Fannie Lou Hamer, Septima Clark, John Lewis and Bayard Rustin were part of that magnificent movement of blackness that emerged, broke beyond itself, widened the circle of humanity, and called forth women, children and men of all colors and conditions.

The painful truth is that we now often violate and oppress our own in the name of religion. Always, at the center of the heart of the historic black-led struggle for freedom was the black religious experience. Black self-love was upheld as a divine imperative. Local black churches became ecumenical networks of nurture and resistance. At those beleaguered places of our most urgent human need common ground often could be sought and found in the church. But not always. Movement women like Ella Baker, organizer of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, found themselves at odds with the sexism and sexual misconduct of male ministers. An out gay man like Bayard Rustin, architect of the 1963 March on Washington, was feared as a potential threat to the advancement of the race. Today, in the imperfectly desegregated post-civil rights era, religiously inspired leadership continues to perpetuate a cruel sexual ethic, and in stark violation of their own best sacred inheritance. That black women continue to be relegated to secondary status and lesbians and gays are made to feel unwelcome, unworthy, and uncomfortable in what should be the most

caring, compassionate and empowering of communions is a searing indictment against all the black faithful.

Martin, like you, we are sometimes uncertain in our leadership. The dominant views on sex, sexuality and gender in the Black Church are undermining community, diminishing the faith and leading many to abandon churches out of sheer moral frustration and exhaustion. Our churches have been slow to embrace gender equality. They have largely spoken only opposition and condemnation to same gender loving people and have been unable to proclaim a sexually liberating and redemptive word. Some black churches have concluded it is in their best institutional interest to participate in "special rights" polemics against this so-called "immoral humanity." As black clergy we offer here a more hope-filled perspective.

In the spirit of Jesus of Nazareth, we the undersigned clergy extend the divine invitation of human wholeness, healing and affirmation to "whosoever" (John 3:16). In the best of the Black Church tradition we say, "Whosoever will, let her or him come." Who is included in this "whosoever?" The "whosoever" of today are the diseased and the diseased, the discomfited and the distressed, those who live on the margins of the marginalized, who are the oppressed of the oppressed, the sexually battered and the abused, the homeless and the bereft, the HIV/AIDS infected, who are the young and old, female and male, lesbian and bisexual, transgender and straight. These are they, the children of God. They are our sisters and brothers and partners and friends. They belong to all of us. And they are very much we ourselves.

As Black Christian religious leaders what more shall we do? We must help to forge a progressive agenda for the black community in which race, gender, class, age and sexuality are kept in active dialogue with one another. We must engage one another, prophetically demand more of one another, and prepare to suffer, cry, and toil with each other when it comes to matters of racial and sexual justice, economic and political empowerment, to waging peace. We must be courageous in confronting the social conditions that divide; elitism, poverty, militarism and more await our deepest response. We must continue to look to the ancestors and to Jesus, "the author and finisher of our faith." We must dedicate ourselves to a world where borders can be crossed and a new consensus can be found, where we call our own community beloved and celebrate black people, one unique person at a time. Martin, on your day we vow to take a stand to love all black people.

We vow to accept and to honor all regardless of their gender, class, age, or sexuality for we all are the children of God. The power is in our hands. This is where we must go from here.

Respectfully,

Signers (organizations for identification purposes only)

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What do biblical scholars say about homosexuality and scripture?

The Whole Bible for the Whole Human Family

✠ Members of the Biblical Faculty of the Presbyterian Seminaries Speak to the Issue of Ordination

June, 2001

Dear [General Assembly] Commissioner:

We, the undersigned, earnestly request that you will read the attached statement and consider it carefully. We are all professors of either Old Testament or New Testament. We represent over half of the faculty in Bible in our Presbyterian seminaries at the present.

We hope that the attached statement "The Whole Bible for the Whole Human Family" will assist you as you wrestle with some of the issues of this Assembly. We are greatly concerned that the Bible be heard, interpreted appropriately, and continue to guide us all in our quest for understanding, reconciliation, and justice.

As members of the church universal and as professors of Scripture in our Presbyterian seminaries, we affirm that the Bible is an indispensable means of God's communication, especially in a time when the church is urgently seeking to clarify its message and mission in the world. The question of whether gay or lesbian Christians should be ordained to the offices of deacon, elder, and minister of the Word and Sacrament arises at such a time.

We observe that this debate often revolves around six passages that refer to same-sex relationships. We would first of all caution the church against wresting these passages out of context and pressing them into service in our debate. On careful reading, these passages seem to be advocating values such as hospitality to strangers, ritual

purity, or the sinfulness of all human beings before God. Before we can hear their meaning for our time, we must first understand their meaning in their own time.

Secondly, we would caution the church against any hasty conclusion that these passages present instructions for us on what we know as homosexuality today. In important sections of the Bible – the Ten Commandments, the prophets, the teaching of Jesus – this issue does not arise. Indeed the concept of homosexuality as now understood may not appear at all in the Bible. It is likely that the biblical authors never contemplated the phenomenon that we have been able to name and describe for only a little over a hundred years, a sexual orientation which is integral to the identity of a small minority of the human family.

Thirdly, we caution the church against an interpretation of the Bible that leads the church into pronouncing judgment upon a specific behavior of a whole category of persons in the human community. As the 1985 General Assembly observed in its Guidelines for the Interpretation of Scripture in Times of Controversy, “Let all interpretations be in accord with the rule of love, the twofold commandment to love God and to love our neighbor.”

We would encourage the church at this time to interpret particular passages of the Bible in the light of the whole Bible, and in the recognition that Jesus Christ, the Redeemer, is the living Word of God. It is the gospel of Jesus that invites gay and lesbian brothers and sisters to full communion in the church; it is the Spirit of Jesus that calls and equips Christians for ministry; and it is the justice of Jesus that calls us to insure that those who are invited, called, and equipped are free to fulfill their ministries among us with the full recognition and support of the church.

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