

OPEN AND AFFIRMING  
**COALITION**  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

**THE BIBLE AND ONA**  
ONA COALITION WEBINAR

**ANDY LANG**

# THE BIBLE AND ONA



[openandaffirming.org/bible](https://openandaffirming.org/bible)  
[ed@openandaffirming.org](mailto:ed@openandaffirming.org)

# THE BIBLE AND ONA



Experiment: what verse, saying or story in the Bible means the most to you in times of

▼ loss,

▼ fear,

▼ anxiety,

and when you need

▼ encouragement,

▼ hope,

▼ consolation.

# THE BIBLE AND ONA



Question: what do these texts have in common? Do they

- ▼ unify or divide the congregation?
- ▼ give you peace or make you anxious?
- ▼ strengthen you or leave you hopeless?

Christians often use the Bible for inspiration, reassurance, comfort, guidance and challenge. These are the sacred texts that accompany us through the storms of life.

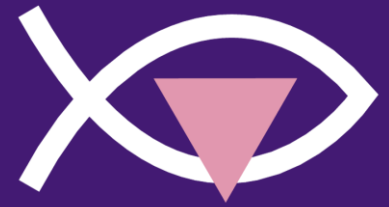
# THE BIBLE AND ONA



There are 31,000 verses in the Bible. At most, eight are the texts that commonly are used to support the proposition that same-sex relationships are “sinful,” and that therefore the church must condemn any expression of sexual love between two men or two women. But those eight verses are

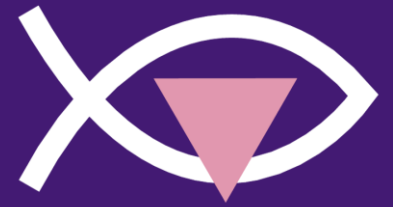
**0.02% of the Bible!**

# THE BIBLE AND ONA



We take those texts seriously. Members of your congregation will have honest questions about them. But 0.02% of the Bible cannot control the conversation, nor have the final word. At some point, your pastor will need to lead your congregation through a conversation about the difficult texts, but your Bible study should focus on basic Biblical values that we have in common, values that unite your congregation and strengthen relationships. You should begin and end with these values. If you do, you'll find that the Bible will help and not hinder you through your Open and Affirming journey.

# THE BIBLE AND ONA



Three words describe basic principles from our Reformed tradition that are relevant to Biblical interpretation:

COVENANT  
CONTEXT  
CHRIST

**THE BIBLE AND ONA**



**COVENANT**



# THE BIBLE AND ONA



The General Synod ONA resolution (1985) urged congregations to adopt “Open and Affirming covenants.”

# THE BIBLE AND ONA



But somehow that word was sidelined, and in the past 30 years ONA churches have adopted ONA

- ▼ statements.
- ▼ declarations.
- ▼ policies.
- ▼ amendments to by-laws.

## THE BIBLE AND ONA



But a congregation's ONA commitment is best understood as a "covenant"—a value deeply rooted in the Bible and in the theology of our Reformed ancestors.

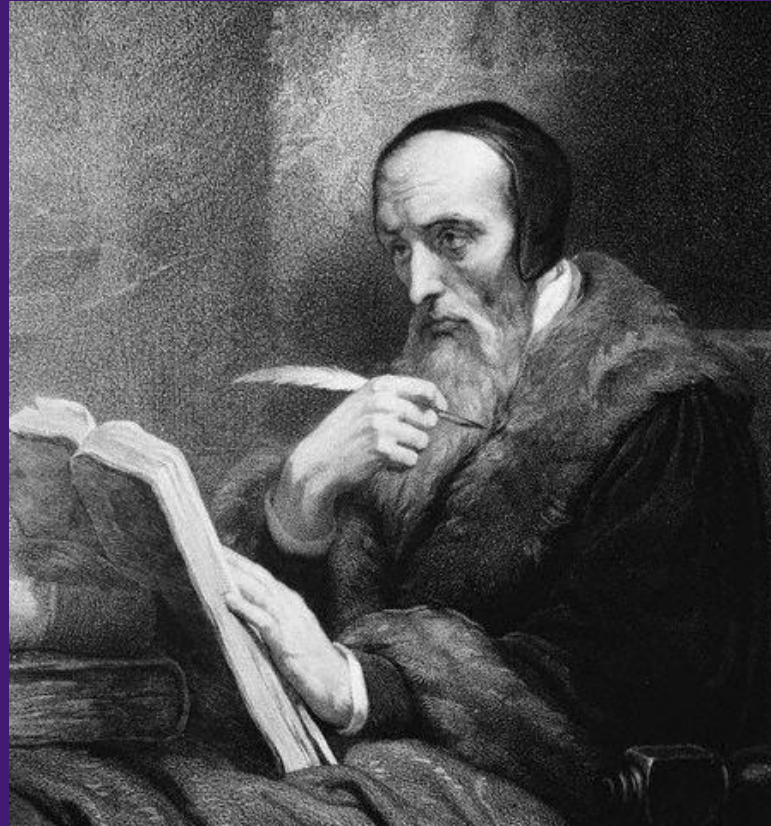
# THE BIBLE AND ONA



“Accept one another, just as  
Christ accepted you,  
in order to bring praise  
to God”

Romans 15:7 NIV

# THE BIBLE AND ONA



What was John Calvin's interpretation of Romans 15:7?

# THE BIBLE AND ONA



“For Christ, having received, not one or two of us, but all together, has thus connected us, so that we ought to cherish one another.”

John Calvin

# THE BIBLE AND ONA



So covenants are about connection:

- ▼ Mayflower Compact (1620): “[We] solemnly and mutually, in the presence of God, and one another, covenant and combine ourselves together....”
- ▼ Dedham, Massachusetts, Church Covenant (1638): “[We covenant] through the help of the Lord to live together in this our holy fellowship according to the rule of love.”
- ▼ Thomas Shephard (1648): “Members [of the church are] bound to cleave only to Christ, their head ... and to one another by mutual love, which they are bound to strengthen and confirm ... by a Solemn Covenant.”

# THE BIBLE AND ONA



What are the values our ancestors in faith associated with covenants?

- ▼ connection
- ▼ mutual love
- ▼ holy fellowship (community)
- ▼ experience of God's presence



# THE BIBLE AND ONA



In other words, an ONA covenant  
all about relationships—our  
relationships with each other, and  
our relationship with God.

# THE BIBLE AND ONA



And because this is a journey the congregation is taking “in the presence of God” (Mayflower Compact) every step begins and ends with prayer.

**THE BIBLE AND ONA**



**CONTEXT**

# THE BIBLE AND ONA



The Bible is the Word of God, but this Word reaches us through holy men and women who lived in a given time and place. Their world was sometimes very different from our world. In the Bible, we hear God's Word not through a single voice but many voices.

So, it can be a mistake to believe I have found in the Bible the answer to my question, when the source of that text—an individual or a community—was asking a different question.

# THE BIBLE AND ONA



When we seek the meaning of a text we have to inquire, first of all, what are the questions behind the text? That's why it's always important to understand context.

Heinrich Bullinger (1504-75): “[I]t is requisite in expounding the scriptures, and searching out the true sense of God’s word, that we mark upon what occasion every thing is spoken, what goes before, what follows after, at what season, in what order, and of what person anything is spoken.”

Understanding the Bible in context is a basic principle of biblical interpretation in the Reformed tradition. We’ll use this method later in this webinar.

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**CHRIST**

# THE BIBLE AND ONA



The Word of God is not only text but also a person: “the Word [who] became flesh and lived among us.” (John 1:14). The Word of God is Jesus Christ! So the question, “what would Jesus do?” is not a bad guideline for reading Scripture.

John Calvin’s method for sorting through difficult texts in the Bible was to submit them to the judgment of Christ—“the Supreme Lawgiver of the Church.” Jesus and the values Jesus taught us will help when we apply the Bible to our lives—especially on a journey towards an ONA covenant.

**THE BIBLE AND ONA**



# THE DIFFICULT TEXTS





# Strangers and Angels

Genesis 18:1-14

Genesis 19:1-25

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Exercise: read both texts as part of the same story.

# THE BIBLE AND ONA



## Questions:

1. Strangers arrive. How do Abraham and Lot respond? What do their actions have in common?
2. How were their actions different than the actions of the men of Sodom?
3. Each story has a “result.” They are very different. What are they?
4. Where in Genesis 19 is the “sin of Sodom” described as a faithful, self-giving relationship between two men or two women?
5. Is the threat of violence against the stranger—in this case, sexual assault—the “sin of Sodom”?

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The context for both stories is the ancient code of hospitality. In the ancient Near East the stranger is a protected person: strangers should be welcomed, sheltered, fed, and kept safe from harm. In Genesis 18 and 19, there are two encounters with strangers entering the community from outside, with two outcomes.

1. Abraham's hospitality to strangers brings life: Sarah is "with child."
2. Sodom's violation of the ancient code of hospitality brings death: the city's destruction.



# Idols and Consequences

Psalm 115

Romans 1:18-27

# THE BIBLE AND ONA



Exercise: read both texts as part of the same story.

# THE BIBLE AND ONA



The unifying theme of Romans 1 is the sin of idolatry—which misdirects human worship from the true God to “images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.”

Here Paul is contrasting the monotheism of the Jewish tradition which is foundational for the Gospel with the pagan religions that surrounded—and tempted—the early Church. Paul wanted to separate the church from the world, and that meant a separation from the gods of the world—a separation that was implicit in Paul’s upbringing as a Jew.

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Idolatry, both in Psalm 115 and in the Letter to the Romans, dehumanizes us because when we displace God from the center of our lives, that empty space will be filled up by objects that have no real worth. The psalm argues that when we worship material objects we lose our humanity. We become like the objects we mistake for gods. We become like wood, stone, or metal.

The consequence, for Paul, is moral and social chaos: “They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice.” And then there’s a long list: “envy, murder, strife, deceit....”



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What are the same-sex relationships Paul is describing in verses 26-27? Remember this is the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, not the 21<sup>st</sup>. There were no cultural spaces or institutions that could support lifelong partnerships between two men or two women based on fidelity and equality. Even the word “homosexual” did not exist. So Paul is not answering the question: “What do you, Paul, think about two women or two men who commit themselves to each other for a lifetime of self-giving love, who promise to stand by each other in good times and bad, who will make a home together and take responsibility for children together?”

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This is the moral question we're asking in the church today, but it's not the question Paul is asking.

In fact, Paul could not even imagine the question. As far as we know, same-sex relationships in the Roman Empire Paul inhabited could exist only in four cultural spaces:

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1. Sacred prostitution in the context of pagan worship: this was true in many of the religious cults popular in the Roman Empire, as it was in the religious world of the Old Testament.
2. The sex trade based on the enslavement of conquered peoples: young boys were captured in war and sold to older men as sex partners.
3. The Hellenistic tradition of pederasty: a social convention in which young boys provided sexual favors to older men in return for education and patronage.

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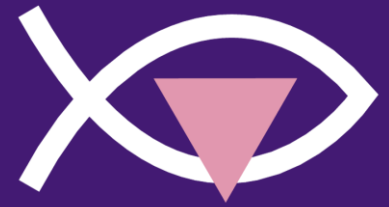
4. The excesses of the Imperial Court in Rome. Paul, like any other Roman citizen, would have known about the degraded sexual practices of emperors like Tiberius, Caligula, and Nero. Paul's cryptic reference in Rom. 1:27 about shameless pagans receiving "in their own persons the due penalty for their error," is, some scholars believe, a reference to Caligula, who had publicly shamed and sexually humiliated the military officer who later killed the emperor and mutilated his body.

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All of these sexual practices centered on idol worship, slavery, exploitation or violence. When Paul condemns same-sex relationships this is the only context in which he can list these behaviors together with the sins he associates with idolatry: “envy, murder, strife, gossip, slander, disobedience to parents....” The moral question Paul is asking is not whether faithful same-sex relationships are a sin: it’s a question he could not have asked in a world where there was no “LGBT” community and no institutions, structures, or cultural spaces in which a lifelong relationship between same-sex partners was even imaginable.

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And if we can agree that any sexual practice based on the threat of violence or the exploitation of the weak by the strong is not God's intention for human relationships, then we can also agree with Paul that this misuse of the gift of sexuality is a form of idolatry, because it displaces God at the center of our lives and fills that empty space with our own power. In this sense, Romans 1 has enduring value not only for a conversation about human ethics, but as an admonition that only God belongs at the center of our lives.

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So I think we can actually ask this question: “Does the Bible really say anything about faithful same-sex relationships?” The answer, I think, is no. The story of Sodom hinges on the threat of physical violence against strangers—a violation of the code of hospitality in the ancient Near East. Paul in Romans is not describing a self-giving relationship between two equal partners who commit themselves to each other for a lifetime of mutual care and support, but condemning the moral chaos that results from false worship.

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We can find value in these texts—but they provide little guidance for congregations struggling with the question whether they can really welcome their LGBTQ neighbors not only as individuals but also as married couples and as families.

We need to look beyond the seven texts—to the basic values of relationships that center on our covenant with God and with each other.

In this way, the Bible can be foundational for a congregation on its ONA journey.



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[openandaffirming.org/bible](https://openandaffirming.org/bible)  
[ed@openandaffirming.org](mailto:ed@openandaffirming.org)