

**What the Bible Really Says About Gay Christians (may surprise you)**

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# **What the Bible *Really* Says About Gay Christians May Surprise You!**

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## Introduction

Every civil rights or social justice struggle in America's recent history has, for Christians, included the words, "But the Bible says..." When we can examine our own approach to the Bible, and can understand how others interpret it, we have taken first steps toward overcoming the polarization that prevents us from engaging in meaningful dialogue with one another about difficult issues in light of Scripture, and practicing what the Bible says about more basic topics, namely, practicing love toward all people.

This seminar helps participants *experience* the Word of God through the voices of Scripture, the community with whom they share this journey, and themselves. It encourages participants to consider how to live faithfully in response to their experience of God's word, rather than pursuing or advocating right beliefs derived from it. As a result of participating in this program, participants can expect to

- broaden their understanding of what it means to hear God's voice,
- expand their ability to understand and appreciate the wide variety of beliefs and opinions other people of faith hold about homosexuality and the Bible,
- grow more confident in the Biblical grounding for their own views about homosexuality, and
- increase the frequency with which they turn to Scripture as an authoritative resource for understanding and responding to other difficult social issues.

## Session 1: Getting In Touch With Ourselves

### Living in a Time of Upheaval

**CONSIDER:** For some Christians, faith is something you possess, and it is expressed by accepting certain ideas about God (including Jesus and the Holy Spirit), ourselves, other people, and the world. (Bass, 2012) The test to determine whether someone is a Christian rests in whether they believe ‘the right things’ about Jesus, for example, whether or not Jesus was born of a virgin, died on a cross or rose from the dead. Christian faith is centered in a system of right beliefs.

For other Christians, faith is something you experience or live. While we may believe certain things about Jesus, what counts is cultivating a trusting relationship with him. (Bass, 2012) To trust Jesus means organizing one’s living around the activities and principals Jesus lived and taught. There is no test to determine whether someone is a Christian. Rather, experiential Christians “affirm that the Path of Jesus is found wherever love of God, neighbor and self are practiced together. Whether or not the path bears the name of Jesus, such paths bear the identity of Christ.” (Elnes, 2006)

Such different understandings of what it means to be a Christian can be rather unsettling. But these are unsettling times! Polarization and extremes characterize our culture’s response to current political, social, economic and religious challenges. Cultures around the world have responded violently to perceived disrespect of their religious beliefs. Many religious Americans often feel a need to explain that their personal faith is not reflected in the media’s portrayal of their religion. (Winner, 2002) (Elnes, 2006) When asked if “a good person who isn’t of your religious faith” could “go to heaven or attain salvation” 79% of respondents said, “Yes.” (Newsweek/Beliefnet Poll Results, 2005) People unaffiliating with specific religions outnumber those affiliating with particular religions by a three-to-one margin. (U.S Religious Landscape Survey, 2007)

Citing the work of Anglican Bishop Mark Dyer, Phyllis Tickle, frames the current unsettledness within the American Church as “a giant rummage sale” in which “the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity, whatever they may be at the time, become an intolerable carapace that must be shattered in order that renewal and new growth may occur.” According to Tickle this restructuring has happened in roughly five hundred year cycles within Judaism, Christianity and Islam. But this restructuring of religious institutions is only one part of a “broader upheaval” within society as a whole. The political debate about the size and role of government, the collapse or bailout of institutions deemed too big to fail, voters who cast their ballots based on candidates’ positions on single social issues, the shift from a production-based to a service-based economy, and a host of other actualities in our society, situate the crises of spirituality and morality within the American Church in a much larger context. As the American Church re-defines “those experiences and values that are internal to the individual or to the individuals who compose” her, and externalizes those values and experiences in a new morality, a new embodiment or corporeality of the American Church will emerge, as yet unimagined by the church of the past. There will be born in turn a renewed corporeality of the older tradition. (Tickle, 2008)

As the Church and those who comprise her journeys through this chaotic moment of “a profound lack of trust and confidence in conventional beliefs, practices, and organizations, Diana Butler Bass suggests three questions that Christians, congregations, denominations and the American Church and a whole must answer in order to arrive at a new spirituality, morality and corporeality. How Can I believe? How should I act? Who Am I?

**ASK YOURSELF:** Which of these description of Christian faith resonates with me? How does the description of the current state of American culture fit with your experience?

## How We Read the Bible

**CONSIDER:** For God’s people, Scripture has long been a source of guidance and comfort during times of upheaval. But today, even views about sacred texts is changing. According to pollsters, no more than 34% of Americans interpret the Bible literally. “A plurality of Americans (49%) say the Bible is the inspired Word of God but that it should not be taken literally.” (Jones, 2011) 56% of Americans ages 18 to 25 “believe the Bible teaches the same spiritual truths as other sacred texts” as compared with 40% of people aged 26 to 63, and 30% of people over age 64. (New Research Explores How Different Generations View and Use the Bible, 2009) 68% of religiously affiliated Americans believe “there is more than one true way to interpret the teachings of my religion.” (U.S Religious Landscape Survey, 2007) Diana Butler Bass concludes from these and other statistics that “Americans now speak of belief in a wide variety of sacred languages, voices and accents.” (Bass, 2012) For some Christians the Bible is the Word of God. For other Christians the Bible is the beginning of God’s word to humanity but God continues to speak through the voices of the community of faith. Only when we are aware of our own approach to God’s Word, and how others approach, can we engage in meaningful dialogue about what the Bible might have to contribute to the challenges of our day.

Appeals to what the Bible says about particular topics no longer carry the authority they once did, in part, because today, all people do not read the Bible in the same way. Everyone chooses how they read the Bible. (Levine, 2012) A person who reads the Bible literally and someone who reads the Bible devotionally may place different authority on the same texts. For example, consider Genesis 2:24, “*Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.*” (The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, 1989) Is this text prescriptive – only a man and a woman can marry – or descriptive – marriage is a leaving and cleaving between the parties involved, the gender of the couple notwithstanding?

For the purposes of this seminar you are invited to share your approach to and interpretations of God’s Word with others, and to listen appreciatively to the approach and interpretations of others. We will not evaluate one another’s interpretations. Instead, when we will try to listen to one another until we can sincerely answer the question in our own minds, “How can she/he believe the Bible says that?” After we consider the various approaches and interpretations to specific passages we will ask ourselves what we hear God saying to us individually and collectively through them.

As a group we will discuss Biblical passages through three lenses: the words, their original context, and their application.

The **words** of Scripture were written in Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic originally. Scholars agree that we have reconstructed more than 99% the original content of the documents that comprise the Bible. We will appeal to language scholars of various traditions to learn the meaning of important words in the passages under consideration for our study.

Words without **context** hold little meaning. Communication is a two way interchange. Not only do we need to understand what the sender is saying, we also need to listen to the original words with the ears of the original hearers. The political, economic, social, ecclesial, moral, and technological contexts of those who first received the documents we collectively call 'The Bible' must be taken into account when we are ferreting out the meaning of a particular text for those who heard it originally and for ourselves. For example, we have our own ideas about what it means to call Jesus, "Lord." But when we learn that in the first century the Caesars of Rome referred to themselves by this same title, we gain new insight into the way the earliest Christians understood Jesus. For first-century Christians, saying Jesus is Lord carried political ramifications as well as religious meaning. Today we read the Bible from the vantage point of our own contexts. In fact every Christian who has ever read the Bible reads it through the lenses of their own experiences. During our time together we will trace how the interpretation of Biblical passages has changed over time in relationship to people's contexts. We will listen to voices from the past, called tradition, and add our own voices to a long line faithful interpretations, as we seek to hear what God is saying to us for our own time. As a result our own understanding of certain Biblical passage may be affirmed or may change. We must be open to God's Spirit working among us for God's Word is not static, but "living and active." (Heb. 4:12)

There are different understandings of what people mean by the calling the Bible "inspired." The idea that God chose the words that are contained in Scripture, and that they are inerrant in their every reference when first recorded in the autographs was first articulated by B. B. Warfield and Charles Hodge in 1895. Before that time, people held different views of Biblical inspiration. One compelling understanding of what Paul meant by saying literally, "the writings are God-breathed or God-spirited" (2 Tim 3:6) arises from the image of God breathing into dry earth and beings bearing the image of God coming to life. (Gen. 1:27). It is not the purpose of this seminar to engage in a lengthy explanation about the inspiration of Scripture. We each bring to the table our own understanding of what it means that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. Our goal is to listen to one another until we can sincerely answer the question in our own minds, "How can she/he believe the Bible says that?" While we may have different approaches to God's Word, no one participating in this seminar would be here unless she/he took God's Word very seriously.

**ASK YOURSELF:** What is my approach to God's Word? What things made me uncomfortable reading about approaches to God's Word that are different from mine? How open am I to listening for God's Word in the voices of people with whom I may disagree?

## Our Experience of Sexuality and Faithfulness

**CONSIDER:** In the fourth century a debate began over human nature. The Celtic Church, whose views were championed at that time by Pelagius, believed that human beings retained their goodness even though they sinned. Augustine, on the other hand, taught that sin had corrupted human nature leaving human beings totally depraved; sexual intercourse transmitted sin to each succeeding generation. Augustine's self-admitted struggle with lust and sexual addiction significantly impacted his views of human sexuality in general. In the end the political climate of the fourth century Church gave Augustine and his theology the day. Against the backdrop of the extreme asceticism of his world "Augustine's assertion that there may be a legitimate outlet for sexuality, in marriage and the procreation of children, sounds almost radically liberal." (Critical Essays: Augustine's View of Sexuality, n.d.) But by connecting intercourse with the propagation of human sinfulness, Augustine cast a pall of shame over human sexual behavior.

The Church's discomfort and even unwillingness to talk about human sexuality openly bears witness to his pall of shame. But God's Word has much to say about human sexuality. Passages of Scripture that mention husbands, wives, children, marriage, divorce, fornication, and adultery are all passages about human sexuality. Passages that speak about God's people being unfaithful to God or guilty of spiritual adultery, and verses describing the marriage feast of the Lamb or the Church being the bride of Christ, are all grounded in the recipients' understanding of sexuality and covenant-making. Our sexuality is a part of our identity as individuals, and as such, our sexuality is one of the contexts through which we approach the Bible.

**ASK YOURSELF:** How do I view human sexuality? What message has my church taught me about sex? Does own sexual experience/identity support my religious teaching?

### Let's Reflect

You may find it helpful to record your thoughts as you reflect on the following questions.

1. What insights have I gained from this session on interpretation?
2. How might these insights help me apply the message of the Bible for my everyday life?
3. What surprised me?
4. What gave me hope?

**PRAYER:** Gracious God, thank you for your Word. As we begin this journey into your Word more deeply as people who take your word to us seriously, grant us your Spirit's guidance that we may be strengthened in our faith, and faithfully discern your will for us in our day. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

## A Little Exercise

1. I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my own sexual/gender orientation most of the time.
2. I can go out in public with the person I love and express my affection without wondering how the people around me might react.
3. I can choose to legally marry the person that I love.
4. I can be reasonably sure of health insurance eligibility for my 'spouse' through my employee benefits package.
5. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors will be neutral or pleasant to me when they meet my significant other, and observe my friends coming and going from my home.
6. I can go shopping with my significant other most of the time without being watched or whispered about.
7. I can open a newspaper or turn on the television and see people of my sexual/gender orientation liberally and positively portrayed.
8. When I am told about our national heritage or about civilization, I am shown that people of my sexual orientation contributed positively to whom we are as a nation.
9. I can be sure that my children or my nieces and nephews will be given positive materials about my sexual orientation in school. In my church.
10. I can be sure that words referring to my sexual orientation will not be used as pejoratives to describe behaviors or ideas that challenge or stand apart from mainstream thinking.
11. I can go into a store and find birthday, anniversary, Valentine's Day and other greeting cards that mirror all of the significant relationships in my life.
12. I can purchase clothing that I like and enjoy wearing without raising eyebrows or suspicions.
13. I can arrange to protect my children from people who may not like me or may not like them because of me most of the time.
14. I can express myself with hair styles, clothing, gestures, and hobbies or subscribe to magazines that interest me without people wondering about my gender/sexual orientation.
15. I never feel compelled to behave in ways stereotypical of a sexual/gender orientation not my own.
16. I am never asked to speak on behalf of all people of my sexual/gender orientation.
17. If neighborhood parents walk their children to school or wait with them at the bus stop, I can assume it has nothing to do with their perception of me and my significant other.
18. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behaviors without being seen as a cultural outsider.
19. I can attend a church and reasonably assume that if I told them my sexual/gender orientation I would be welcome.
20. I can assume that the person with whom I am romantically involved can visit me in the hospital's intensive care unit.

## Session 2: Created for Relationship

### How Do We Do Our Relationships?

The process of discernment in which we are engaged in this seminar centers on how we live in relationships: with God, with one another, with the rest of creation, and with ourselves. How we live out one relationship impacts all of our relationships. This session explores some basic Bible information about our relationships.

### Not Good to Be Alone

**READ:** Genesis 1 and 2

**CONSIDER:** God created humanity with the potential for and need to be in relationships. After completing his creating work on days one, three four and five of creation, God looked at all that she had made – light, sky, seas, dry ground, vegetation, sun, moon and stars, and all living creatures in the form of birds, fish, and animals – and said that they were “good.” (Gen 1:4,10, 12 18, 21, 25) The word ‘good’ in these verses is ‘tov’(טוֹב) in Hebrew – to be pleasant, agreeable, advantageous, prosperous, (Brown, 2000)<sup>1</sup> And God blessed all of the living creatures by including them as partners in the continuation of the divine creative process through procreation/sexual activity (Genesis 1:22). On the sixth day of creation, God brought humanity into being – an act that seems to have included only one gender. God once again surveyed all that had been made and pronounced the entirety of creation “very good.” (Gen 1:31)

And then for the first time God said something was NOT good. “It is not good for the man to be alone.” (Genesis 2:18) For the man, the absence of being in relationship with creatures worthy of partnership was less than pleasant, advantageous, and prosperous. God included the man in the process of discerning a way to overcome that which was not good (aloneness) with something that was good (partnership). God invited Adam to name and evaluate the creatures that had been made each as to their worthiness for partnership with him. (Gen 2:19-20) When a suitable partner was not found for the man among the other creatures, God continued creating. How interesting to note that God couldn’t complete his creating work without the input from the creature created in the divine image. There was room in all that God had done for further growth and development that included the participation of the human being. God took part of the man (a rib) and fashioned a woman as another creature bearing the divine image who could be a companion for the man. God blessed the man and woman in the same way as the rest of the living creatures God had made: they were included as partners in the continuation of the divine creative process through procreation/sexual activity (Genesis 1:28). And then to humanity (the only creature made in God’s image) God also gave the responsibility of being the steward

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<sup>1</sup> Notice how the Hebrew word does not carry the idea of perfection or morality that we often associate with it in English.



of all that God had made – caring for it and striving to bring it to its full potential. Humanity was trusted with the responsibility of maintaining the goodness of creation. Through these creative and blessing activities, God created meaning, responsibility, and accountability through the experience of partnership, stewardship, and sexual relationships. The writer of Genesis understood these blessings and relationships to apply to all human beings (including their offspring), not just the creatures created directly by God. When God surveyed all that had happened in the six days, God pronounced all that had been made and all of the processes that had been set into motion as good.

Jesus commented on or interpreted Genesis 2:24 highlighting particular meaning in them. “So they are no longer two, but one flesh,” emphasized Jesus. “Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate. Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.’” (Mark 10:8b-12) As Jesus understood them, “the words, ‘one flesh,’ do not merely focus on sexual intimacy but rather they speak more broadly of the unity of man and woman as a fundamental and enduring unit of humankind.” (Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality, 2003) Jesus then applied his understanding of these words to another human phenomenon: divorce. It’s interesting to note that in the Genesis passages, the words ‘marriage’ and ‘husband’ do not appear, but Jesus supplies them and applies the text to the covenant partnership that exists in marriage between spouses.

Some commentators view the Genesis narrative about the man and woman (Adam and Eve) as *prescriptive*. In their view the text prescribes the only kind of relationships in which sexual behavior is appropriate. This prescriptive interpretation is not without difficulty. Viewed prescriptively all human beings must enter this partnership relationship. As a prescription there is no room for single, widowed or intentionally celibate people. Other commentators look at this passage as *descriptive*: teaching how certain human relationships came to be and what values or qualities in those relationships God considers ‘good’. Leaving, cleaving and becoming one flesh with a helper who could be his partner (Gen 2:18) was the way ‘good’ overcomes the ‘not good’ of the man being alone. The writer of Genesis describes male/female leaving, cleaving and becoming one flesh as one answer to overcoming aloneness with helper/partnership. But the text does not say that is the only way in which the ‘not good’ of aloneness can be overcome. Paul describes another way in 1 Corinthians 7:8, 32:33, calling it a gift from God.

These creation passages assume sex will happen between a man and a woman, or at least men and women. (The words in the text can’t be limited to individuals but are used to refer to mankind and womankind.) Because of this straightforward point, some interpreters understand these creation texts to put an end to the conversation about any positive understanding of homosexual practice. Other interpreters, however, claim that the creation accounts in themselves are not the only factor in creation that needs to be considered when thinking through this issue. Some point out that part of God’s intent in the creation was to provide for companionship. These interpreters do not assume that the only compatibility the genders can enjoy is heterosexual in nature. While the partnership portrayed in Genesis 2 is a heterosexual one that involves sexual intimacy, the basic

need for companionship reflected here is one that seems relevant to the lives of all people regardless of sexual orientation. Further, non-sexual companionship occurs between same and differently gendered persons regardless of their sexual orientation.

**ASK YOURSELF:** What does it mean that God involved human beings and their capacity to discern and decide in the ongoing creative process? How many kinds of relationships do you find described in Genesis 1 and 2? What about those relationships is required or prescriptive (we must do or can't avoid) and what is optional or descriptive (we have choices about)? What are the positive values these chapters teach us for our relationships? How can the church today help people live out the values described in these passages?

## We Are Family

**READ:** Read the following Bible passages:

- Genesis 30:1-24
- Ruth 1:1-22; 4:1-17
- Deuteronomy 25:5-10
- Luke 7:11-17
- Acts 16:14-15
- 1 Samuel 25:42-44; 2 Samuel 5:13
- 1 Corinthians 7:2, 8-9

**CONSIDER:** The Bible passages you just read describe a variety of human relationships. From these descriptions we learn that there is no one set of relationships that God pronounced a 'family,' but that all of these relationships constitute families. Several passages here indicate that a man might have more than one wife. This was evidently a practice even in New Testament times, otherwise Paul's advocating monogamy 1 Corinthians 7:2 makes no sense. The practice of taking many wives seems to have deep roots in the economy of biblical cultures rather than having to do with love. The last chapter of the Book of Ruth describes Obed as having two legal fathers and in the eyes of the community, as well as two mothers. Jesus is himself described as having two fathers.

Some interpreters point to the male/female construct in the creation accounts and say that any sexual relationships or family composition beyond that of 'one-man-one-woman' bearing children are outside of that construct are outside God's intention. Some go so far as to say that any sexual relationships beyond the male/female order are "unnatural," against the will of God in creation, the result of the fall into sin, and/or a threat to God's established order for male and female. (Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality, 2003)

Other interpreters honor male-female committed relationship as fundamental to God's purposes in creation, but the ongoing creative process expressed through the partnership between God and human beings makes possible other human relationships beyond those mentioned in the creation accounts. For example, single people are not mentioned in the creation accounts, but we do not consider never-married, widowed or intentionally celibate people "unnatural" human beings. In 1 Corinthians 7; Paul indicates that one who can remain single and celibate possesses a gift from God given to only a few. Likewise we do not regard married couples without children as "unnatural" even though God blessed the first human heterosexual couple to "be fruitful and multiply." "It may be that changing sexual orientations are a part of the ongoing creative process

and we will need to study them carefully to discern whether they have an appropriate place within God's good creation." (Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality, 2003)

**ASK YOURSELF:** What implications do these passages of Scripture have for how we understand and treat single, adoptive, and same gender parents? widows? divorced people? With many early Bible passages seeming to give at least tacit approval to polygamy, how do we understand those later passages advocating monogamy? What do these passages tell us about how the appropriateness of relationships can change over time? If heterosexual orientation is created into human beings, is it possible for homosexual orientation to be created into human beings?

### Body, Field, Building, Bride

**READ:** Glance at the questions listed below and then read the following New Testament passages.

- Romans 12:4-5
- 1 Corinthians 3
- 1 Corinthians 12 (whole chapter)
- Ephesians 4:1-16
- Revelation 19:7-9; 21:2ff
- Luke 5:33

**CONSIDER:** The New Testament writers use a number of models when explaining our relatedness within the church. Each of their images is related to the specific situation that the recipients are living through in their world, their city or their congregation. When reading passages we often hear them speaking to our own context. Commentaries or Googling the particular Bible book from which passages are taken can help us discover the original context for the verses.

**ASK YOURSELF:** Hold the following questions in mind as you read or re-read the passages listed above.

- What is the image the writer uses for the church in each passage?
- What qualities does that image point to for our relationships?
- How does sexual orientation (my own or someone else's) impact my living out these qualities faithfully before God in my relationships?
- What other images or models are meaningful to you when you think about living healthy relationships?

**PRAYER:** Loving One, you created us with the need for relationship so we could love and be loved. Help us honor that need in ourselves and in others. Help us nurture the relatedness we share with all people as beings created in your image, and particularly as people who share the Jesus Way, having been brought into relationship with you by grace through faith in Jesus. Lead us to discover ways to celebrate and affirm all relationships through the ministry of your church, and through our own personal ministry as Jesus' disciples. Amen.

## Session 3: Healthy Relationships Need Healthy Boundaries

### God Sets Limits

**CONSIDER:** Healthy relationships need healthy boundaries. In the Old Testament we find a record of the laws that God established as boundaries for his relationship with the ancient Hebrews. People who choose to live by the terms of this contract or covenant today are called Jews. There are four major Jewish movements today: Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Hasidic. Each movement interprets and follows the laws found in the Tanakh.<sup>2</sup>

Because the earliest Christians were Jewish, the Jewish Scriptures became a part of the Christian movement from its very beginning. Early Christians wrestled with how to interpret their Scriptures in light of the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus. They did not always agree on what their Scriptures meant or how to practice the laws and teachings they found in them. The Book of Acts contains several accounts of how the earliest Christians struggled to interpret their sacred writings. (Acts 10, 15) Jesus himself challenged and offered new interpretations of these same writings in a way that reflected early rabbinic Judaism. The Gospel writers give us clues to many of those moments in Jesus life when they quote Jesus as saying, “You have heard that it was said...but I tell you...”

In this session we will consider a number of Old Testament passages. We will also consider several passages from the New Testament – the writings from the earliest Christians that were given the same authority by the Church as the Hebrew Scriptures. When we buy a Bible or Tanakh we might think the writings in the book were always considered the Word of God. That is not the case. The Jewish canon or list of authoritative books we call the Old Testament was formulated over a 400 year period, from 200 BCE to 200 CE, by Jewish rabbis and scholars. That formation was in process during the life of Jesus and the first two centuries of the church’s life. It took between 250 and 300 years for Christians to arrive at the list of writings we call the New Testament. Even as late as the 16<sup>th</sup> century Martin Luther was challenging the validity of some of the New Testament writings as God’s Word, the Book of James in particular. Jews and Christians alike believe that God was actively involved in the processes used for determining the lists of authoritative books.

Our effort in interpreting the sacred text we summarily call the Bible stands in a long history of God’s people endeavoring to hear God’s voice for their lives for their day. In this session we will read a seven Bible passages that have been thought to speak directly about homosexual behavior. These seven passages are the only references to homosexuality in the Bible. To assess the relative importance of homosexuality as a topic in the Bible it helps to know that in the Gospel of Luke alone the word ‘poor’ occurs 11 times over 8 stories.

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<sup>2</sup> The Tanakh is the book of Jewish Scriptures similar to the Christian Old Testament. The word Tanakh is an acronym that stands for three words corresponding to the three parts of the book: Torah or the Penteteuch, Nevi’im or the prophets, and Ketuvim or the Writings. (Brown M. , 2012)

**ASK YOURSELF:** How does knowing a little about the history of the Bible and its interpretation impact how you read the Bible?

## Genesis 19:1–11 and Judges 19:16–30

**READ:** Read the passages listed above.

**CONSIDER:** These two stories share a common theme: attempted homosexual rape. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 is the better known of the stories because of its frequent mention in the New Testament and the drama of the cities' destruction. In the story two angels disguised as men visit Sodom. (Genesis 19:1, 5, 10) One of Sodom's residents, Lot, offers the angels/men hospitality. But the rest of Sodom, "all the people to the last man," (Gen 19:4) surround the house and demand that Lot make the angels/men available to be raped (Genesis 19:4–5; see also Judges 19:22). Aware of his hospitality responsibility to his guests, Lot instead offers his virgin daughters to the townsmen in place of the angels/men. (A similar offer in Judges 19 is reluctantly accepted and a woman is raped and later killed.) But before the townsmen can act on their intentions they are struck blind, the angel/men and Lot's daughters are spared any harm, and the city is destroyed.

For some interpreters of the Bible, these stories have traditionally counted as a witness to Israel's condemnation of homosexual conduct, especially between males. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah has been taught as specific evidence of God's anger at such behavior. Moreover, the mention of the destruction of these cities in Jude 7 is specifically linked to "sexual immorality" and "unnatural lust." For other interpreters, homosexual rape does not make consensual homosexual conduct wrong any more than heterosexual rape makes heterosexual consensual sex wrong. Since every male in Sodom (19:4) threatened to rape the angels/men, and since Lot offered women to the townsmen in place of the men, we can safely assume that at least a majority of the would-be perpetrators were heterosexual men. Their motive was rooted in ancient practices of domination over one's enemies. As with most cases of rape, it was not about the sex but about the power.

We do well to look to the other passages of Scripture that mention the incidents recorded in Judges 19 and Genesis 19 to help us with our interpretations of the stories. Of the 48 occurrences of the word "Sodom" in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, only Jude 7 names Sodom's sin as being sexual in nature. The original language does not contain the words "unnatural desire" but instead reads "went after strange flesh." Read in context with Jude 6, at issue seems to be intercourse with *angels*, not sex between men. The words "sexual immorality" translate the Greek word from which we derive the word 'pornography.' Ezekiel explains the events in Sodom in these words: This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. <sup>50</sup> They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it." <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Eze 16:49–50). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

We'll discuss the concept of abominations later in this lesson; no mention of sexual, let alone homosexual, activity appears in Ezekiel. When Jesus mentions Sodom he does so when condemning inhospitality (Matthew 10:14–15), not sex between same-gender people.

#### **ASK YOURSELF:**

1. Does homosexual sex actually happen in these passages?
2. What are your thoughts about Lot suggesting the rape of his daughters as an alternative to the rape of his guests?
3. What values (rights and wrongs) do we learn for our relationships from these passages?
4. Are these values limited to either heterosexual or homosexual relationships or can they apply to both kinds of relationships?

### **Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13**

**READ:** Start your study by reading the passages listed here from a Bible translation that's easy for you to understand.

Leviticus 18:1–30

Leviticus 20:1–26

**CONSIDER:** Leviticus 18:1–30 and Leviticus 20:1–26 contain laws regarding sexual activity in general. One verse in each chapter mentions sex between two men. Sex between two women is never mentioned in these verses. In Leviticus 18:1–5 and 20:23 God reveals the purpose for giving ancient Israel these particular laws. The laws in chapter 18 are purposed to make Israel distinct from their Egyptian and Canaanite neighbors. The laws in Leviticus 19 are based on the holiness of God and are designed to help Israel reflect the nature of their God. Leviticus chapter 20 prescribes the punishments for breaking the laws in both of these chapters. God does not offer a statement condemning Israel's neighbors for doing the very things from which they are commanded to abstain; God simply says that for Israel, these things ought not to be done so that they are different from their neighbors.

Several observations about these passages are important to our study. First, these laws govern more than sex; fair labor and business practices, treatment of the poor, and the care of animals are among the behaviors in view. Second, the vast majority of the verses dealing with sexual conduct address heterosexual sex, or sexual practices that one might find questionable regardless of sexual orientation. Third, nothing is said about lesbian sexual activity—sex between two women. Finally, Christians long ago stopped interpreting many of these regulations literally. We no longer put to death those who curse their parents or commit adultery, nor do we excommunicate those who consult horoscopes/mediums. Consistent application of these verses is important; selective enforcement has no legitimacy.

Some interpreters apply the ban on sex between males literally, but few support the literal enforcement of the penalty associated with such conduct - death. These same interpreters point out that Leviticus 18:22 calls such sexual behavior an “abomination,” that is, a detestable practice. These same interpreters point to other Biblical texts that they claim also condemns homosexual

sexual activity. But such appeals border on circular reasoning. Some more recent interpreters point out that all the other laws governing sexual conduct in this passage reference heterosexual activity. Consensual homosexual relationships do not appear to be in view. This law could legitimately be read as a prohibition of heterosexual people engaging in homosexual conduct. However the law was read, the understanding of sexuality being an orientation was not a lens through which the ancients could consider the text. Because the articulated purpose of the Law at the beginning of these chapters was to distinguish ancient Israel from the cultures around them, making them a set-apart people, it may very well be that no moral judgment on the sexual behaviors mentioned is intended. These laws may simply be a way to distinguish God's people from the people around them. For the Christian, the mark of our being set apart from the people around us or being holy is the Holy Spirit in our lives (Ephesians 1:13, 4:30), not the observance of laws.

The word "abomination" covers a wide range of human behaviors beyond homosexual sex as referenced in Lev. 18:22 and 20:13, including:

- eating with a person from a different religion or culture (Gen. 43:32)
- eating the following birds: the eagle, the vulture, the osprey, the buzzard, the kite of any kind; every raven of any kind; the ostrich, the nighthawk, the sea gull, the hawk of any kind; the little owl, the cormorant, the great owl, the water hen, the desert owl, the carrion vulture, the stork, the heron of any kind, the hoopoe, and the bat (Lev. 11:13-19)
- eating part of a sacrifice after the day following its offering (Lev. 19:7)
- eating any creature the Law said was unclean, i.e. shellfish, pork etc. (Lev. 20:25)
- intercourse during a woman's menstrual period (Leviticus 18:19, 30; Ezekiel 22:10),
- idols made from gold or silver and the precious metals from which they are made (Deut. 7:25-26, 27:15)
- a blemished sacrifice (Deut. 17:1)
- child sacrifice, magic, divination (consulting a medium) (Deut. 18:9-14)
- bring the price of a prostitute or the price of a dog as an offering to God (Deut. 23:18)
- remarriage after divorce (Deuteronomy 24:4)
- wearing clothes usually associated with the opposite gender (Deuteronomy 22:5).
- haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that hurry to run to evil, a lying witness who testifies falsely, one who sows discord in a family (Proverbs 6:16-19)
- wickedness, the sacrifice of the wicked, the way of the wicked (Prov. 8:7, 15:8-9)
- a false balance, i.e. deceptive business practices (Deut. 25:16, Prov. 11:1)
- crooked mind (Prov. 11:20)
- lying lips (Prov. 12:22)
- evil plans (Prov. 15:26)
- all those who are arrogant (16:5)
- justifying the wicked and condemning the righteous (Prov. 17:15)

- a lawbreaker's prayers (Prov. 28:9)
- incest (Eze. 22:10), and adultery (Eze. 22:11)
- money (Luke 16:15)

Some interpreters argue for the continuing applicability of Leviticus 18:22 claiming that setting it aside would adversely affect the institution of marriage, a cornerstone of our society, and undermine the heterosexual plan of God's good order of creation.

For other interpreters, setting the law aside would nurture responsible sexuality and faithful committed relationships in the homosexual community, thus contributing to the sexual stability of individuals, families, our churches, our society, and to their health.

#### **ASK YOURSELF:**

1. Is every law in the Bible equally applicable to Christians today? Why or why not?
2. How does one decide which laws need to be followed and which laws can be set aside?
3. What action on the part of my church regarding sexuality would best contribute to the life, health, and sexual stability of our heterosexual as well as homosexual members? To the life, health, and sexual stability of our community?
4. What values do we learn from these passages for our relationships? Be sure to record your response for later discussion.

## **1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10**

**READ:** In these two passages some form of male same-sex conduct is condemned along with other sinful activities. Read these passages in their context: 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and 1 Timothy 1:8-11.

**CONSIDER:** Of the ten items listed in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 three are of particular interest for our topic: *pornoí*, *malakoi*, and *arsenokoítai*. The precise meaning of these Greek words in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 (translated in the NRSV as “male prostitutes” and “sodomites”) has been disputed by Bible scholars. The meaning of each of these words deserves our attention. The Rev. Dr. Arland J. Hultgren, Asher O. and Carrie Nasby Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, and the Rev. Dr. Walter F. Taylor, Ernest W. and Edith S. Ogram Professor of New Testament Studies at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio, offer valuable insight for our study. Their work, quoted here, comes from *Background Essay on Biblical Text for “Journey Together Faithfully, Part Two: The Church and Homosexuality”* published by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

*Pornos* (the singular form of *pornoí*) means “one who practices sexual immorality, fornicator.” While  *pornos* can be used to refer to a male prostitute, it is a general term that can be applied to a wide range of sexual activities. Later in the same chapter, for example, Paul adamantly opposes a Christian man who would join his body to a prostitute (*porne*, 6:15–16); such an action is *porneia* (6:13; i.e., immorality, unlawful sexual intercourse), from which the Christian is to flee (6:18). Already in chapter 5 Paul has used the term to label the actions of a man living with his stepmother (*porneia*, 5:1). Since



*pornos* is listed first, to be followed by idolaters and adulterers, and since therefore it is not immediately connected with terms referring to same-gender sexuality, it does not seem to refer specifically to same-gender sexual expression.

The next two terms (*malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*) are much more central to discussions regarding same-gender sexual activity. Although some interpreters consider the two words to be unrelated to one another, the usual view is that they are indeed linked (and that is the view expressed here), and therefore each term sheds light on the other. The word *malakos* (singular for *malakoi*) is the ordinary Greek word for “soft,” and it has that meaning within the New Testament writings (Matthew 11:8; Luke 7:25). The term was also used, however, in a moral sense already by Aristotle to refer to persons who lack moral self control. Beginning with the KJV (1611), the term has also been translated as “effeminate.” With an eye toward the second of the two words, translators and interpreters in modern times have considered the term to have a sexual connotation. The first edition of the RSV (1946) translated the two terms (*malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*) together, combining them into one term, “homosexuals.” This was revised later so that the 1971 edition read “sexual perverts.” Several other English versions have also combined the two Greek words to designate one thing. The NEB (1961) translated them together to mean persons “guilty of...homosexual perversion.” The TEV (1966) has “homosexual perverts.” The first edition of the NAB (1970) has “sodomites” (for the second edition of this version, 1986, see below). The REB (1989) has “sexual pervert.” Most translations, however, use two terms at this place. Following the various versions in chronological order, the translations are as follows (the first noun referring to *malakoi* and the second to *arsenokoitai*):

- KJV (1611): “nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind.”
- ASV (1901): “nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with men.”
- JB (1966): “catamites, sodomites.”
- NASB (1960): “nor effeminate, nor homosexuals.”
- NIV (1973): “nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders.”
- NKJV (1982): “nor homosexuals, nor sodomites.”
- NJB (1985): “the self-indulgent, sodomites.”
- NAB (1986): “nor boy prostitutes nor practicing homosexuals.”
- NRSV (1989): “male prostitutes, sodomites.”

As can be seen, the translations differ widely. It should be pointed out that even when the term “homosexuals” is used, there is a vast difference between “homosexuals,” “practicing homosexuals,” and “homosexual offenders.”

Interpreters are divided, however, concerning the range of applicability that the terms used here will bear. Some conclude that Paul refers to homosexual activity in a general

sense. If that is so, he uses the two terms to speak, respectively, of the passive and active partners in male homosexual relations. On the other hand, there are interpreters who have concluded that the terms have a more specific meaning in light of the predominant overt same-gender sexual activity in Greco-Roman culture. According to this view, the *malakoi* were the prepubescent boys used in pederasty, and the *arsenokoitai* were those who kept them for their sexual favors. Still others suggest that the former were prostitutes (“call boys”), and the latter their customers. Further, it has been suggested that the former could be male prostitutes, and the latter could be men who engage in same-gender sexual relations in general. Finally, it has been said that the terms are too vague and should not be used for generalizations beyond Paul’s experience and world.

We encounter similar decisions when we turn to 1 Timothy 1:9–10. The interpretive key is, once more, three words—two of them already encountered in 1 Corinthians: *pornoi*, *arsenokoitai*, and the new term, *andrapodistai*. The third term is *andrapodistes* (the singular of *andrapodistai*), which is translated in the standard Greek lexicon as “one who acquires persons for use by others, *slave-dealer, kidnapper.*” The editor indicates that for our passage perhaps the meaning is “procurer.” The term occurs only this one time in the New Testament.

There are two basic approaches to understanding how these three words relate to each other and therefore what, if anything, they have to say regarding same-gender relationships.

The first approach is to take the three words together. In this approach the *arsenokoites* designates the active partner in the homosexual relationship. He hires the  *pornos*, understood as a male prostitute, to satisfy his desires. There is certainly no sense of an equal relationship. How, then, does the third term fit in? Its basic meanings are slave-dealer or kidnapper. In our world those terms designate two different concepts, but in the first century they were similar in meaning. A person was kidnapped, normally, not for ransom or to avoid a court-ordered custody arrangement, but to be sold into slavery. Moreover, one market for an attractive boy or girl was prostitution. Thus, in this first approach, the kidnapper or slave dealer is the one who provides the  *pornos*, who is used by the  *arsenokoites*. This view, developed particularly by Scroggs, is summarized in his translation of 1 Timothy 1:10: “male prostitutes, males who lie [with them], and slave-dealers [who procure them].” Thus this list in 1 Timothy does not condemn same-gender sexual relationships in general, but only that specific form of pederasty that consisted of enslaving boys or youths for sexual purposes, and the use of these boys by adult males.

The second approach considers the three terms as independent of each other. That will mean that *pornoi* has a more generic meaning. As indicated above, while the term can be used to refer to a male prostitute, it is a general term that can be applied to a wide range of sexual activities. Then too the term *andrapodistai* means simply “kidnappers,” without any connotation of involvement in prostitution. This leaves *arsenokoitai* as the only term needing further consideration. Here, once again, the conclusions of interpreters differ.

For some, the term means “homosexuals” (even though the term would not have been understood in antiquity). For others, it does not mean “homosexuals” per se, but refers to persons who are actively engaged in same-gender sexual relationships. And for still others, it refers to persons involved in pederasty. It is common, if not universal, for interpreters to draw attention to connections not only between 1 Timothy 1:10 and 1 Corinthians 6:9 (on which it is most likely dependent for the word *arsenokoitai*), but also between 1 Timothy 1:8–11 and Old Testament law. The author of the Pastorals writes at 1:8–9: “Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient ...” Specifically, as interpreters have pointed out, those denounced in 1:9–10 are persons who break the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1–16). Correlations can be drawn as follows: lawless and disobedient (Exodus 20:1), godless and sinful (20:2), unholy and profane (20:7), parent killers (20:12), murderers (20:13), fornicators and *arsenokoitai* (meaning sodomites, perverts, or pederasts, 20:14), slave traders (20:15), and liars, perjurers (20:16). Whatever the specific meanings of *pornoi* and *arsenokoitai*, they are together considered persons who break the commandment against adultery—whether that means that they break the marriage vow or (by extension) are unchaste.

Clearly, these words refer to some form of male same-sex behavior that is regarded as sinful. What that activity entails is not clear. It is clear that the activity in question is not the committed relationship of a same-gender committed couple. Could it refer to the sort of same-sex relationships between men and boys that was characteristic of the surrounding Greek culture? Possibly, but not necessarily. Do the passages condemn all expressions of same-sex conduct without exception? Some say, yes. Others say that the uncertainties of the word meanings make this sweeping a censure risky. Still others say that, despite the alleged uncertainties of translation, the combination of these passages with others that reject same-sex intercourse guarantees that they are part of a clear and larger picture of biblical disapproval.

#### **ASK YOURSELF:**

1. To what sexual practices do you think these verses refer?
2. How important is it that the passages discussed here do not describe committed relationships between consenting adults?
3. What values (rights and wrongs) do we learn for our relationships from these passages?

### **Romans 1:18–32**

**READ:** In Romans 1:18–32 Paul describes God’s judgment of “ungodliness and wickedness.” Creation bears witness to God’s power and nature so that human beings are without excuse for failing to honor God as God. (Romans 1:19–22) And so God handed them over to their own uncleanness, shameful treatment of themselves, dishonorable passions, the unreliability of their minds and unfitting practices. (1:24, 26, and 28) These unfitting practices included exchanging God’s glory for images of creation, worshipping and serving images of creatures instead of the Creator, and stopping intercourse consistent with their character in order to begin intercourse

inconsistent with their character as both women and men. (1:23, 25, and 28) Experiencing this handing over Paul describes as experiencing the wrath of God. (1:18) Read the passage listed in the heading in a Bible that is easy for your to understand.

**INTERPRET:** This passage may be the most important of all the Biblical passages pertaining to homosexuality. First this is the only reference in Scripture to both gay (male) and lesbian (female) sexual conduct is mentioned (1:26–27). Second, the ‘out of character’ sexual behavior that Paul names is described as one manifestation of sinful behavior expressing idolatry, the worship of the created rather than the Creator.

Some interpreters suggest that Paul’s description of same-sex intercourse as exchanging “natural intercourse for unnatural,” indicates an intention on God’s part that the only normal sexuality in creation is heterosexual. These interpreters make prescriptive as God’s will is for human beings the described order recounted in the creation narratives. Paul’s “natural”/“unnatural” frame expresses his conviction that all people have a basic knowledge of divine will derived from the observed order of creation. In this regard Paul is offering his interpretation of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:23 and prohibiting homosexual behavior.

Other interpreters contend that “natural” refers to what is conventional rather than to the structure of creation. (Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality, 2003) Some interpreters consider “natural” to be creature-specific rather than pertaining to human beings as a class. If Paul was arguing from the belief that creation itself is ordered innately to be heterosexual, the idea that men and women stopped natural sexual activity and started unnatural sexual activity<sup>4</sup> (Louw, 1996) conveys the notion that same-sex conduct is a choice, just like the other sins Paul lists in this passage. Paul could not have understood homosexuality as the expression of an innate sexual orientation beyond an individual’s choosing. Hultgren and Taylor point out that

As far as we can tell, the biblical writers knew nothing about “homosexuality” as a sexual orientation. The concepts of “homosexuality,” “homosexual,” “heterosexuality,” and “heterosexual” are modern, first articulated in the latter part of the nineteenth century. As strange as it may sound, it can be said that the Bible teaches nothing concerning homosexuality.

For homosexual persons, behaving heterosexually is just as unnatural as heterosexual people behaving homosexually.

In its context, Paul’s comments about sexual intercourse are one plank in his larger platform that all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, are sinners and without excuse. We have so little of his views on homosexuality in this passage that we cannot conclusively determine what Paul might have thought about homosexuality. “His real concern was not to focus on the evil of same-sex activity. Rather, Paul is showing the world’s need for grace (law) and leading up to the proclamation of

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<sup>4</sup> **68.50 μεταλλάσσω**<sup>b</sup>: to cease one activity and to start something else in exchange—‘to cease and to start, to exchange.’<sup>4</sup>

justification by grace for Christ's sake through faith in Romans 3:24–26 (gospel).” (Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality, 2003)

### ASK YOURSELF:

1. Make a list of the sins that Paul enumerates in Romans 1:18-32. Are they all of equal seriousness? Why or why not?
2. What values (rights and wrongs) do we learn for our relationships from these passages?

### Summary

In his book, *A Time To Embrace*, William Stacy Johnson, summarizes the current thought on the passages we have considered in this session by noting that there are seven distinct ways of looking at them. Each school of thought takes a position on the following questions:

- Creation – How does same-gender orientation fit into God's creation?
- Reconciliation – How do same-gender oriented people come into a right relationship with God and God's people?
- Redemption – How do same-gender oriented people live as whole people in relationship with God and God's people?

Consider each of the seven schools of thought below.

School of Thought	Creation	Reconciliation	Redemption
<b>Prohibition</b>	Same-gender desire and behavior = perversion	Repent of same-gender identity; the church prohibits same-gender desire and behavior	Live a true heterosexual nature
<b>Toleration</b>	Same-gender orientation = a tragic burden	Repent of same-gender choices; love the sinner, hate the sin	Stoic acceptance of one's fate through abstinence, church expects celibacy
<b>Accommodation</b>	Same-gender orientation = a tragic burden but open to grace	Focus on relationships: While disobedient in form, same-gender monogamous relationships can be obedient in substance	Exclusive, same-gender partnerships are better than promiscuity; the lesser of two evils
<b>Legitimation</b>	<b>Same-gender desire = like all other sinful conditions</b>	<b>Repent of singling out same-gender sins and ignoring other sins</b>	<b>Create a just world in which differences no longer make a difference</b>
<b>Celebration</b>	<b>Same-gender orientation is a fact of</b>	<b>Same-gender loving people need to be</b>	<b>Living into one's sexual orientation</b>

	<b>natural <u>created</u> life</b>	<b>reconciled to the goodness of their sexual orientation</b>	<b>as a gift from God</b>
<b>Liberation</b>	Same-gender orientation is a fact of <u>nurtured</u> life	Binary gender categories are challenged; people can be something other than male or female	Affirm the complexity of gender choices
<b>Consecration</b>	Sexual orientation is not to be condemned, but needs to be rightly ordered	Sin is not about sexual orientation or behavior per se, but in whether one's life (relationships) are rightly ordered; relationships are a means of grace	Sexuality is ordered and consecrated through an exclusive committed covenant blessed by the church. People, not sexuality, are to be celebrated.

### **ASK YOURSELF:**

1. Considering the column marked "Creation," what school best described your thoughts and feelings about how same-gender oriented people fit into God's creation?
2. Considering the column marked "Reconciliation," what school best described your thoughts and feelings about how LGBT people can enjoy a right relationship with God and God's people?
3. Considering the column marked "Redemption," what school best described your thoughts and feelings about how same-gender oriented people can live complete lives as whole people? How have your views changed during this study so far?

The Bible says nothing *about* gay Christians; today's understanding of what it means to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender was outside of the worldview of the contributors to the body of literature we know as the Bible. Christians today try to apply what the Bible says about same gender relationships often failing to understand the people who produced the Biblical corpus in their context.

The Bible says the same things *to* gay Christians that the Bible says to all Christians, for being a Christian is possible by grace through faith, sexual orientation and gender identity notwithstanding. The Bible does have much to say about our sexuality. Passages that mention husbands, wives, children, marriage, divorce, fornication, and adultery are passage about human sexuality. Passages that speak to Israel's unfaithfulness to God or spiritual adultery are rooted in the recipients' understanding of sexual fidelity and covenant-making.

Believing that God is still speaking, we do well to listen to the Spirit's voice through the pages of the Bible and through the voices of the Church-in-community in order to understand and enjoy our sexuality as the good gift God intends it to be. To that end let us seek the blessing of God's presence among us and through us as we journey together....

**PRAYER:** Creator God, we praise you for the blessings of intimacy and companionship that are a part of our life together. Show us the way and give us the grace to order our sexual lives in accordance with your will, and to live within your boundaries for healthy relationships, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

## Session 4: The Value and Values of Marriage

### Why Marriage?

**READ:** Using a Bible you find easily understandable, carefully read the following passages: Genesis 1:26 – 2:25 and 1 Corinthians 7:1-17 and Matthew 19:3-12

**CONSIDER:** There is no word for marriage in biblical Hebrew. Yet from the very beginning of Scripture, we find intimate committed relationships between women and men described.

In the beginning God let the divine playful imagination run wild. God called out of chaos light, space, sky and land and seas, with vegetation and creatures of every description to fill them, hold together this miraculous universe we are even now just beginning to discover with all of the laws of science. God looked at all that he had made and called each one 'good.'

Then God combined the dust of earth with the breath of Her Spirit and a living being much like God stood in the palm of God's hand. After gifting the being with all creation, and watching the being interact with each thing therein, for the very first time God said something was not good. "It is not good that a person should be alone."

That first being had a need that could not be met by anything in creation. That need could not be met even through relationship with God. That need touched - touches - every part of a person's being: body, mind, spirit.

So God set out to heal what was not good. God fashioned another being. And to be sure they would be good for each other, God used a part of the first being in making the second. God took "one of the ribs (a feminine word in Hebrew) of him" from "the man" "and he closed the place of her (the rib) with flesh." Then the first being said, "Now this - bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh - he (*not she in Hebrew*) shall be called woman, for from 'the man' she (the rib) was taken. For this (woman) a man will leave his father and mother and he will unite to his woman and they will be as one flesh." This second being, the woman, was a helper, a compliment. Together the two beings were partners with dignity and purpose. And each one met the needs of the other in body, mind, and spirit. Through their relationship they gave God reason to say that now, everything that had been born of God's creative imagination was 'very good.'

It's important to note that in these verses (Genesis 2:18-25) "the man" is described by both masculine and feminine Hebrew pronouns. "The woman" is also described by both masculine and feminine Hebrew pronouns. The text clearly indicates something feminine was taken out of "the man" and formed into "the woman." "He (the woman) was then named "woman" by "the man." In this context the name woman is more closely associated with the side of the man, than with her own gender.

More important to note is that this passage is *descriptive*, not *prescriptive*. The verses describe what the author observed in the world. If the passage was prescriptive we would all have to be gardeners/farmers, and we would all be required to take a helper/spouse. But that is not the



intent of this passage. Even Paul, an expert in Hebrew Scripture, viewed this passage as describing and not requiring a committed relationship between men and women, for he wrote that “it is well for a man not to touch a woman” (1 Corinthians 7:1) and “I wish that all were as I myself am” meaning single (1 Corinthians 7:7).

If intimate covenanted relationships are not required of us, why would we enter them? One reason has to do with our human makeup. People, for the most part, are built for emotional, spiritual, and physical intimacy, or as the Bible put it, to be naked and feel no shame. Committed relationships satisfy those needs best. Some people do not have a need to be intimately involved with other people, or do not need an intimate relationship with someone in order to live their sexuality out appropriately. Paul taught that those individuals have a particular spiritual gift - the gift to be single/celibate. Paul considered that gift to be more conducive to leading a totally committed life for Christ, but that such a judgment was only his opinion (1 Corinthians 7:7-9). He also conceded that people with the gift of singleness were in the minority.

Another reason to be married has to do with having children. In Genesis as soon as God charged humanity with having children, the origin of the marriage relationship is related to us. We might infer that the optimum context for raising children is an intimate committed relationship.

A third reason for entering an intimate committed relationship is that it's the best context for expressing and satisfying our sexuality. Although sex has been presented in a negative light in much of church teaching, the Biblical understanding of sex is that God gave people sex as a gift to be enjoyed in its proper context. That context is an intimate committed relationship. We'll say more about this later in the lesson.

Once entered, the commitment of marriage is intended by God to be permanent. Divorce, Jesus taught, was a concession permitted under the Law because people are flawed creatures. We don't always live the way God intends. Marriage is intended to meet our deepest needs and bring wholeness that is not possible in a solitary life. If one spouse is not faithful to the covenant, the other spouse is not obligated to remain in it. Unfaithfulness has been defined in a number of ways over the centuries by Christian theologians and clergy. It would seem that anything contrary to the values by which two people are to live out their commitment to each other constitutes unfaithfulness or adultery; adultery is not just having sex outside the marriage relationship.

**ASK YOURSELF:** What leads an individual to want to enter an intimate committed relationship with someone else? If you are married, why did you marry your spouse? How do you think the desires and reasons you just described are the same or different for couples who are the same gender?

## Values to Live By

**READ:** Let's determine the values by which successful marriages or covenanted relationships are lived. You will recall from our earlier lessons that marriages were not restricted to one-man-one-woman in Scripture. Read the following passages carefully. Ephesians 5:21-33 and 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and once again 1 Corinthians 7:1-5. As you read look for the responsibilities a husband

has toward his wife. The responsibilities a wife has toward her husband. What values do these passages of Scripture promote for covenanted relationships?

**CONSIDER:** A key value in marriage according to Paul, writing in Ephesians 5:2, is mutual submission. Interestingly, this value is not just important in marriage. The Apostle encourages all Christians to live in submission to one another. In the letter to the Philippians Paul said it this way:

*Philippians 2:1* Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...

In traditional marriages wives are called upon to submit to their husbands. A woman's willing submission to her husband does not mean she loses her individual identity, or that she is anything less than his equal partner. After all, her place according to passages we have already studied is at her husband's side. Paul's words here are a source of security. In these words God gives wives permission to look to and rely on their husbands for provision, for protection, for partnership, and for leadership in their home. As a wife does this, she satisfies her husband's deepest emotional need, the need to be respected as a man, as her husband, and as Christ's disciple.

Most of what Paul has to say about marriage is said to husbands, even though men often stop reading after Ephesians 5:24. Paul encourages husbands to love their wives just like Jesus loves his church: sacrificially, benevolently, unconditionally. A husband's love for his wife seeks to spare her every unnecessary pain in this life, and to empower her to radiate her full glory as a godly woman. He focuses on her potential rather than her limitations. He reminds her of her successes rather than her flaws. Just as he nourishes his own body, a husband is to tenderly care for his wife in every aspect of their lives together.

The context in which married people live out these principles is not one of expectation, but one of mutual submission. God does not give either husbands or wives the right to hold the other accountable for fulfilling these obligations; rather God reminds each both spouses to continually live their obligations to each other reverently before Christ. To that end they place themselves under the Lordship of Jesus Christ in this covenant of marriage.

Admittedly the relationship modeled in this passage of Scripture is a fragile one. Paul calls it a mystery. It's success depends on both people living every day together with as much determination and reliance on God to be faithful to their commitment to each other as they felt on their wedding day. In that way your covenant becomes unconditional, unbreakable, holy to God. Their relationship become a living model of Christ's relationship with his Bride, the Church, for all who see it.

**ASK YOURSELF:** Do you think these responsibilities and values apply only to differently-gendered couples, or is it possible for two people of the same gender to live according to these values and fulfill these responsibilities in an intimate committed relationship?

**PRAYER:** God, we thank you for covenanted relationships, especially the one we call marriage. Help us to live in ways that affirm the choice of others to live in covenant together, that encourage the values you advocate for our relationships, and that prescribe and prohibit only what you have prescribed and prohibited, erring on the side of love as we touch the lives of others through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

## Session 5: Living In a Time of Change

### Marriage Through the Years

**READ:** History tells us that the norms for marriage have changed dramatically over time. Take a few moments to consider the most significant of those changes.

**Hebrew Scripture** tells us that when God created humanity, sex was a gift from God intended to be used for procreation, a couple's unification and pleasure. Monogamy was not a moral value stressed in the Old Testament. Many of the major figures of the Old Testament (Abraham, Esau, Jacob, David and others) married multiple wives and kept concubines (See Gen. 25:6, Gen. 28:9; Genesis 29:15-35; Genesis 37:2; 1 Sam. 27:3). Intermarriage with people of other nations was forbidden by God (Deut. 7:3, Josh. 23:12, Ezra 9:14). No wedding ceremony is prescribed or described for a marriage to begin.

Marriage was expected at all levels of ancient **Roman society**, albeit for different reasons. The nobility used marriage as an economic and political tool to secure alliances and protect the property line of the family. Farmers and peasants needed children in order to survive the demands of working the land. Roman laws prohibited marrying outside your social class if you were a Roman citizen; government permission was required for citizens to marry non-citizens. Citizens were expected to marry in order to counter a high birth rate among non-citizens. Romans were quite casual in their attitude about what constituted a legal marriage; no licenses, contracts or ceremonies were prescribed. It was generally agreed, however, that if a father objected to a marriage, it was not legal. Caesar Augustus made divorces harder to get in an attempt to strengthen the family. In secular society as well as church society multiple sex partners was common even among those who were married (especially men). Paul began to advocate for monogamy especially among church leaders. Celibacy was considered a form of resistance by those living in the shadow of Rome in the wake of conquest.

Jewish Scripture and tradition as well as Roman law and culture impacted the understanding and practice of marriage in **the early church**. The apocalyptic orientation of the movement, however, led some early Christians to renounce all things worldly including sex and marriage. Some were even abandoning their marriages in favor of the work and consummation of the kingdom of God. So serious was this issue that Paul commented on it in a letter to Christians in Corinth calling on the Christians there to honor their commitments to their spouses (1 Cor. 7:10-16) Celibacy was considered a higher calling than marriage (1 Cor. 7:6-8) and was encouraged among Pauline Christians. Tension developed in the second and third century churches between the position held by theologians like Irenaeus and Tertullian who argued in favor of marriage for reasons of procreation, and the schools of Vallentinus and Marcion who called all believers to renounce all worldly pleasure and activity. The argument in favor of marriage won a position in orthodoxy. Marriage became the norm even for the clergy. But the debate was far from over.

In the fifth century Augustine argued that sexual intercourse conveyed the guilt of Adam's sin (original sin) to all human beings. Even in the context of marriage sexual intercourse was sinful, but not as sinful as sexual intercourse outside of marriage. That position provides the foundation for modern Roman Catholic teaching on sex and in other traditions subscribing to the doctrine of original sin.

Views on marriage shifted dramatically in the **eleventh century**. In the Western church (those loyal to the bishop of Rome) laws forbid clergy to marry in 1139 A.D., citing the higher calling of celibacy and service to the church. The Eastern churches (those loyal to Constantinople or other patriarchates) continued to allow the clergy to wed. The question of what constituted a valid marriage was not settled until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; it was also at that time the Western church developed a standard ritual for weddings. But celibacy was still considered a higher spiritual calling. The Church clearly taught the morality of monogamy, the indissoluble nature of marriage, and its prohibition between immediate family members. (Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality, 2003)

**The Reformation** theologians championed the idea that the family was the building block of all society. For Martin Luther, marriage was a relationship everyone should enter because it was natural and good and ordained by God. He held that for a marriage to be valid it had to have parental consent, blessing by the church, as well as the Roman Catholic requirement of mutual consent. Luther also argued that loveless matches forced upon children were wrong, challenging the common practice of arranged marriages. Breaking with medieval thought, the reformers placed a high value on the sexual relationship spouses enjoyed. Protestant theologians argued that divorce was permissible when couples separated bringing contact and economic ties to an end. Their marriage courts became quite popular, and even though they rarely granted a divorce, the divorce rates in Europe began to rise.

**Individualism, romanticism, and the industrial age** during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries all impacted to how the church and society thought about marriage. Love and personal choice became hallmarks of why people married. Success was measured not in terms of children produced or property secured, but in how the relationship met the emotional needs of the people involved; happiness was now a measure of marital success. The extended family was the norm, but a movement toward the private nuclear family began. Still, economic factors made it very difficult for an unmarried woman to maintain a home or raise children. Economic pressures continued to drive high marriage rates. Maryland passed the first anti-miscegenation law in what would become the United States in 1664.

In the **twentieth century** marriage in America changed dramatically. In the war-time culture of the 1940s and in the consumer-driven economy of the 1950s and 1960s married women began entering the workforce; stay-at-home moms began to disappear. The women's rights movement also played a major role in changing how people, especially women, understood marriage. In the 1960s laws allowing employers to require women to stay single were repealed. In the 1970s America and Western Europe repealed the last of the "head and master" laws redefining

marriage as an association of equals. More progressive religious groups supported women's right for the most part, while more conservative churches have been slow to allow women access to leadership roles despite the changing view of women in culture.

The sexual revolution of the 1960s, including reproductive rights and rights to privacy impacted how we understood and practice marriage. The marriage rates dropped from 95% of Americans adults in the 1950s to 70% by the 2000 census. Divorce rates also rose to an unprecedented level, 12% in 1900, 33% in 1946, to a peak of 50% in 1980. While the divorce rate seems to have declined slightly in the last thirty years, the rate of cohabitation has increased dramatically. Today young people are advocates of "practice marriage" to prepare for the day when they will "marry for real." The average age of those who are getting married is also climbing.

American culture has been struggling with marriage equality since the just after World War II. After a twenty year struggle begun by the Catholic Interracial Council of Los Angeles, laws banning interracial marriage were struck down by the 1967 Supreme Court decision *Loving v. Virginia*. In 2005 the United Church of Christ became the first Christian denomination in America to support marriage equality.

Good and faithful church people have been found on all sides of these developments. At issue was how Christians read the Bible. Since the summer of 2015 all religious groups must decide how they will respond to marriage equality. On June 26, 2015, The Supreme Court of the United States granted marriage rights to all couples regardless of gender. Writing for the majority Justice Kennedy wrote:

No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family. In forming a marital union, two people become something greater than once they were. As some of the petitioners in these cases demonstrate, marriage embodies a love that may endure even past death. It would misunderstand these men and women to say they disrespect the idea of marriage. Their plea is that they do respect it, respect it so deeply that they seek to find its fulfillment for themselves. Their hope is not to be condemned to live in loneliness, excluded from one of civilization's oldest institutions. They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right. (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015)

Consideration of the way the church of the past has navigated the changing current of social issues – slavery, women's rights, and divorce/remarriage – may help us understand our own responsibilities as we faithfully live our calling in this moment of history.

**ASK YOURSELF:** Does anything in this timeline surprise you? How does our culture help or hinder understanding our sexuality as a gift from God? How does this evolving understanding of marriage impact your understanding of morality?

## Social Change and the Church

### Slavery

**CONSIDER:** The Bible supports the institution of slavery. Consider the following passages:

*<sup>44</sup>As for the male and female slaves whom you may have, it is from the nations around you that you may acquire male and female slaves. <sup>45</sup>You may also acquire them from among the aliens residing with you, and from their families that are with you, who have been born in your land; and they may be your property. <sup>46</sup>You may keep them as a possession for your children after you, for them to inherit as property. These you may treat as slaves, but as for your fellow Israelites, no one shall rule over the other with harshness. Leviticus 25:44-46*

*<sup>5</sup>Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; <sup>6</sup>not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. <sup>7</sup>Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, <sup>8</sup>knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free. <sup>9</sup>And, masters, do the same to them. Stop threatening them, for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality. Ephesians 6:5-9*

Jesus mentions slaves several times in the Gospel accounts, but at no time calls for them to be freed or for an end to the institution of slavery.

During the Civil War and again during the Civil Rights Movement some Christians, congregations and even whole denominations supported slavery. They argued that:

- The Bible recognized slavery in both Testaments.
- Biblical characters owned slaves
- Paul returned a runaway slave, Onesimus, to his master (Paul's Letter to Philemon).
- The institution of slavery brought Christianity to the heathen.
- Blacks were inferior to whites and thus appropriate candidates for subjugation based on the Curse of Ham.

Other Christians, congregations and whole denominations argued that God had more to say about slavery based on broader teachings from Scripture:

- that humanity is created in the image of God
- that we are called to love our neighbors as ourselves
- and that justice demands freedom for all.

At the time, these Christians and their organizations were embroiled in heated and deeply held disagreements. Today persons born after the Civil Rights Movement may wonder how any Christian could believe that slavery or a second system of rights for those with a different skin color could have ever been considered moral based on the Bible's teaching of love. In fact, today it is common to encounter people who struggle to accept the Bible at all because it supports slavery in the texts cited above.

The United Church of Christ claims several proud moments in history through the work of our Congregationalist forbearers. Congregationalists were among the first Americans to take a stand against slavery. The Rev. Samuel Sewall wrote the first anti-slavery pamphlet in America, "The Selling of Joseph." Sewall laid the foundation for the abolitionist movement that came more than a century later. Enslaved Africans broke their chains and seize control of the schooner Amistad in 1839. Their freedom was short-lived, and they are held in a Connecticut jail while the ship's owners sued to have them returned as property. The case became a defining moment for the movement to abolish slavery. Congregationalists and other Christians organized a campaign to free the captives. The Supreme Court ruled the captives are not property, and the Africans regained their freedom.

**ASK YOURSELF:** What processes do you imagine were at work in congregations and denominations that led Christians to abolish slavery even though the Bible supports it? How does one understand and explain the Biblical passages cited above if slavery is considered to be immoral today? What costs do you imagine came with such understanding?

### **Role of Women**

**CONSIDER:** While the roles women have occupied in society through the centuries is a study beyond the scope of our discussion, we do well to note the changing understanding of women, first in Jesus' teachings compared to the traditional values of his day, and then in the church over the last century. Equality for women continues to be a struggle, and continued to be an issue in the 2012 presidential election.

Much of what the Bible says about sexuality is rooted in the perspective that women are property rather than persons. Put simply, Jesus related to women as persons overturning much of the traditional value system regarding sexuality in his day. (Loader, 2005)

Those who oppose women in leadership roles in their churches often cite Paul's letter to Timothy: *Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.* (1 Timothy 2:11-12) Even today the Southern Baptist Church and the Roman Catholic Church are among those denominations that refuse to grant women credentials as clergy in part based upon their interpretation of these Bible verses.

But there have been Christians who believed that God was not finished speaking about the role of women in church just because Paul finished his letter to Timothy. Modern Biblical scholars like N. T. Wright understand Paul's words to Timothy as an encouragement for women to be permitted to learn the Scriptures, but acknowledge that they have been used to ban women from service in church offices. In 1853 Antoinette Brown was the first woman since New Testament times ordained as a Christian minister, and was perhaps the first woman in history elected to serve a Christian congregation as pastor. At her ordination a friend, Methodist minister Luther Lee, defended "a woman's right to preach the Gospel." He quoted the New Testament: "There is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28) Churches who permit women to hold office as clergy and other church leaders cite the wider teaching of Scripture as the basis for their position: both genders are created in God's image, Scripture



teaches that women as well as men receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit and no biblical passage indicates that these gifts are bestowed based on gender, and there are numerous New Testament passages that describe women in church leadership roles in the first century church.

**ASK YOURSELF:** What processes do you imagine were at work in congregations and denominations that led Christians to include women in leadership roles even though there are some Bible verses that seem to teach just the opposite? How does one understand and explain the passage in 1 Timothy 2 if women are permitted to hold church offices? What costs do you imagine came with such understanding? How is this issue the same as or different from same-gender marriage?

### **Divorce and Remarriage**

**CONSIDER:** How they read the Bible seems to underlie what American churches believe and practice regarding divorce and remarriage. In some congregations and denominations clergy who divorce are forced to resign their standing. Divorced church members experience a wide range of changes in their relationships with their church, from acceptance to excommunication. All too often those in the congregation to which the couple belonged before the break up take the side of one spouse over the other, using their own determination of “fault” or “guilt” as justification for their judgment. How literally one interprets the words of Jesus and Paul seems to determine the likelihood of a congregation’s response to divorced and remarried people.

Jesus seems to say that there is no room for divorce in the lives of his disciples in Mark 10:2-12. In Matthew, however, Jesus is quoted twice as offering grounds for remarriage (Matthew 5:31 and 19:9) if a divorce happened because of ‘*porneia*’ (translated unchastity, unfaithfulness, adultery in various Bibles). Only men/husbands are given this exception in a literal reading of these texts. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 7:15, Paul adds another condition under which remarriage would be an option for divorced people. Christian spouses whose non-Christian spouses walk out of a marriage, are not obligated to remain single and do not commit adultery if they remarry. Some churches have sought to determine guilt or unfaithfulness in rendering judgments about clergy or member divorces. More recently many churches recognize that there are no innocent parties when a marriage fails, and offer to divorced people grace and a new beginning upon the pledge of repentance.

**ASK YOURSELF:** What do you make of what appears to be an evolution in thought about divorce and remarriage even within the Bible? What processes do you imagine were at work in congregations and denominations that led Christians to change their stance on divorce and/or remarriage? How does one understand and explain the passages in Scripture cited above in light of your beliefs about divorce and/or remarriage? How is this issue the same as or different from same-gender marriage?

### **When God Continues to Speak**

In John 14 Jesus is quoted as saying to his *followers*, “*But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.*”

A part of figuring out what God is still trying to say to us comes through discernment – the testing through dialogue, questioning, Scripture study and prayer of the various opinions Christian people hold individually within the context of the faith community. These differences are necessary to determining the will of God (1 Cor. 11:19), but care must be taken so that they do not degenerate into division of the Body of Christ.

Paul, when navigating another social issue with moral, spiritual and religious overtones, said that “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.” (Romans 14:23) There must be room in times of change for people to remain faithful to their own understanding of God’s Word, while also making non-judgmental allowances for sisters and brothers in Christ to do the same even though those sisters and brothers see the issue differently. Just how the Church today can live together faithfully while in dialogue about topics on which they disagree may be discerned from careful consideration of how the New Testament portrays the earliest Christians accomplishing that same goal. Paul’s words regarding stronger and weaker Christians and not causing our sisters or brothers to stumble are very helpful in achieving that end (Romans 14:13-23; 1 Corinthians 8)

**ASK YOURSELF:** Do you believe that God has finished speaking and that the Bible contains all that we can know about what God has said? If God does continue to speak to us about our lives, what are the issues you hope God will say more about? What are the ways Christian people can discover God’s continuing revelation to humanity? Is it possible that we are living in a moment of history wherein God is trying to say more to us about homosexuality and marriage? What do you think God is trying to say to you about homosexuality and/or same-gender marriage?

**PRAYER:** God, we thank you for the place into which we are called in the history of humanity. Help us live faithfully by granting us ears to hear you, eyes with which to see others as you see me, minds to discern your truth, mouths to speak what we believe, and hearts that are humbly seeking you more and more. Amen.

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