

A Pastoral Conversation Regarding Homosexuality and Same-Sex Marriage in the Church

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INTRODUCTION

Over two subsequent days last fall, two sets of parents made appointments to see me about urgent matters. Both had children who had come out as gay or lesbian in the previous few days. Each situation was different. One set of parents had a daughter who was still a student in middle school, and they were very accepting of her revelation, but were deeply concerned by the journey she had ahead of her. Would our church and student ministry program accept her? Would she be told she is a sinner by our staff or leaders? The other couple shared that their son, a young man in his late twenties, had informed them the previous day that he was gay and in a relationship with another man his age. The parents had always believed that homosexuality was against Christian teaching, and their hearts were broken by this news. Later, I met with the young man himself, who said he had known he was gay for many years, afraid to admit it to himself because he was active at his church and wanted to follow the teachings of the Bible, and of course because he did not want to hurt the parents he loved so much. But a few months previously, he had fallen in love and could not imagine moving forward into the future outside of a relationship with the partner he loved.

Each of these conversations called for differing approaches. To all of them, I listened and tried to empathize, seeking simply to be with them in their pain and struggle. To the first couple with the young student, I shared that I was confident that she would be treated with love and respect by every one of our leaders. I could not promise that no other student or adult would say something that was hurtful in the days ahead, but I committed to do whatever I could to make sure she felt loved and accepted. To the second couple, I helped them to think through what their primary responsibility was with their adult son – to love him no matter what – and we considered how they would approach their son’s new partner without compromising their own beliefs about Scripture. In the conversation with the young man himself, we talked about whether he believed he could continue to be a follower of Jesus while in this relationship with the one he loved. Each one of these persons was on his or her own journey, and my job was to walk with them on it.

It has been more than twenty years since the day I decided I would not talk in public about homosexuality any more. It wasn’t that I was prudish or embarrassed, or that I was afraid of offending people with my own conclusions. I was simply weary of the conversation, the tossing back and forth of biblical prooftexts as weapons in a debate and disillusioned by much of the language used by campaigners for change in the church. Those who support same sex marriage are still people who take the Bible seriously, and those who reject it are not bigots or unloving people, as much of the rhetoric seems to claim. Most importantly, for those who are dealing with issues of sexual identity, whether as individuals themselves or as families and friends, this is a not an “issue to debate” but rather an intensely personal

conversation. Each person is unique, with a different challenge and a different journey than others. As a pastor, broad general brushstrokes have always seemed inappropriate in this case, and I came to believe that speaking about it publicly did more harm than good. I have preferred to talk to people who have questions one at a time, listening as much as possible, seeking to help each of them to find their way on the journey that each person must walk after the conversation is over.

Over the last months, however, the issues surrounding this in our denomination have led me to realize that the lives of these men and women, and their ability to join in a holy church-sanctioned marriage or respond to a call to ordination in the church, are necessarily impacted by decisions of people who do not know them or their journeys. It therefore seems appropriate to share my own understandings of how Scripture speaks into marriage and homosexuality in a broader context, not so much to inform those who are dealing with it in a personal way, but for the rest of us. The way we treat a gay man or woman makes an impact upon how that person understands the Jesus we represent.

I know that there are many who, with great integrity, love, and honest desire to follow Christ, have come to a different understanding than I outline in this document. Our pastors and staff each have differing and well thought out opinions and beliefs about this. I can respect both them and their conclusions. And I recognize that the official position of the United Methodist Church, with whom I am in covenant, is currently different than is mine, and I will always honor my covenant to abide by the practices to which I committed myself. My purpose in this written conversation is not to convince people to believe one way or another. I will leave that to the Holy Spirit. But I would like to outline how I have grown and come to my own understanding about this issue, as well as provide biblical reflection from both viewpoints to help people discern, with the leading of the Spirit, their own beliefs about the scriptural teaching on homosexuality and same-sex marriage.

Perhaps most importantly, I want to make it clear that at our church, we have people with a wide variety of nuanced views regarding homosexuality and marriage (and many other things as well). We live and love and worship together, and we all continue to seek God's direction on how to live faithfully as Christians in this time and place. Ours is an amazing congregation in which we love each other, have prayed for one another, have grieved the loss of loved ones together and have worked side by side to transform our city with the love of Jesus. I believe this is our greatest witness to the world. In a culture which has become increasingly divided into different camps, where the rhetoric is full of name calling, demonization, and righteous and self-righteous indignation, where too often we hang out in echo chambers only with people of our own viewpoints, I believe St. Luke's is a refreshing place to be. We strive to be able to discuss these things with one another and not simply speak at one another. And in this particular discussion, regardless of our views, all of us are committed to embracing with love LGBTQ men and women at St. Luke's as both saints and sinners, useful to the Master in his gospel movement, just like the rest of us.

In this first part of this document, I share the reasons I believe the Bible allows for same-sex marriage in this time and culture. I have asked my good friend and scholar, Dr. Chappell Temple, to share the reasons he believes the Bible does not allow for these marriages. Our intent is to model a conversation through which people can dig a bit deeper into the biblical witness to lead them to a thoughtful and reasoned conclusion.

Let me begin with some basic background on how we interpret Scripture.

The Foundation: The Bible as the Living Word of God

The Bible is the “living word of God,” made relevant by the Holy Spirit for every time, every place, every culture. This means that it is not bound by the culture in which it was written. Nor does it call us back to cultural practices and understandings of prior centuries and other contexts.

Dr. Alyce McKenzie, a professor at Perkins School of Theology at SMU, specializes in teaching the wisdom literature of Scripture. I once heard her say “biblical wisdom is being flexible enough to be led by God.” The opposite of wise folks, of course, are the biblical children of Israel, who are “stiff-necked.” Sometimes, I get so stiff-necked in my own understandings of Scripture that I am not willing to be led by God in interpreting it. I once found a sermon, preached by my own grandfather, that spoke against inter-racial marriage, basing it on a passage from Deuteronomy and another from Acts. I was so disappointed and surprised, because my grandfather was a good and kind man who authentically sought to understand and follow Scripture. It was so hard for me to believe that he would have adopted such an interpretation. But through prayer and study, I realized that this was the position of the vast majority of churches in the south in his day. God helped me to realize the frailty of our human understanding, how bound we are by the contexts and cultures in which we live, and the need for the Holy Spirit to continue to lead us to new and deeper understandings of God’s Word.

So how is it we are led to understand Scripture? Methodists use an image that was coined by theologian Albert Outler in his expression of John Wesley’s teaching. This is called the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral.” At the bottom of the quadrilateral is Scripture. It is first, the foundation. Our interpretation of the Bible is informed by three other agents of God, through which the Holy Spirit works. The other three sides of the quadrilateral are tradition – the teaching of the church, experience – how we have seen God working in people’s lives and the world, and reason – using our minds, logic, and scientific understandings in our interpretation of the Bible.

As Christians, we believe that the books of the Bible are inspired by God. The people who wrote them were writing to specific situations, and the Holy Spirit inspired them to write specific words to those people in those contexts. Further, we believe that those words were inspired not just for their first audience, but for us as well. Throughout the first four centuries of the church, in a process that was not without disagreements and wrangling, the church was led by the Holy Spirit to choose the books of our current Bible to be

authoritative for the Christian church. The current list of New Testament books was first officially affirmed at the Council of Rome in AD 382. But the Holy Spirit's work did not end there. It is only by the Holy Spirit that we are able to take documents written to specific people in a specific culture in specific situations, and apply them to very different people, cultures and situations today. If we did not count on the Holy Spirit to help us apply the writings to our own lives and cultures, we would all still be living by first century cultural standards. (There is a very humorous book by A.J. Jacobs entitled *The Year of Living Biblically* in which the author tries to follow every command of Scripture.) Thankfully, as Christians we have the Holy Spirit to "breathe" into Scripture, so that we might be able to understand and apply it. As the world changes around us, and as our knowledge of science and nature grows, our understanding and application of Scripture must change as well.

The letters and passages of all Scripture are, as 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says, "God-breathed" and "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." That means that Scripture is alive with the Holy Spirit, the breath of God, and that if its specific statement seems not applicable to a particular setting, the underlying message of that Scripture remains applicable and authoritative for us.

Let me share a couple of examples of how we have interpreted the Bible in this way. In 1 Timothy 2:1-15, the Scripture teaches as follows:

¹ First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, ² for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. ³ This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴ who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. ⁵ For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, ⁶ who gave himself a ransom for all —this was attested at the right time. ⁷ For this I was appointed a herald and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth. ⁸ I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; ⁹ also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, ¹⁰ but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. ¹¹ Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. ¹² I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. ¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve; ¹⁴ and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. ¹⁵ Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

Some would simply throw this passage out, saying it was specific to that time and place. (Thomas Jefferson literally just snipped from his Bible the passages he thought were no longer relevant.) These interpreters would say we no longer have kings, and braided hair

meant an altogether different thing in Jesus' day than it does today, so we should just ignore the passage. Further, women and men live in our culture in full equal status with one another. Others would discard this teaching because it seems to be contradicted by Paul later when we see Aquilla AND Priscilla as teachers (Acts 18:26). Others would ignore the comments about braided hair but hold to the teaching that women should not have authority over men.

Instead of either extreme, throwing this passage out or seeking to apply it literally to a culture far different from that of 1st century Ephesus where Timothy was pastor, I believe we look at the underlying foundation of the argument and ask the Holy Spirit to bring it to life for our day. The purpose of the passage is to remind us that our ultimate mission and purpose is to reflect God's desire for "everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." Our behavior, including our clothing and roles of men and women and the way we deal with our political structures should all reinforce rather than detract from that desire. We ask the Holy Spirit to help us apply it to our time and our culture. We ask ourselves "what actions, attitudes, and behaviors do we practice that distract from our purpose or serve as an obstacle to others coming to a relationship with a living Savior?" We cannot simply toss out the passage because our world has changed. We must seek out the underlying truth that the passage seeks to reveal and apply it.

Consider a second example – the Bible's teaching on divorce. The passages in the Bible about divorce and remarriage are, on their face, clear. Luke 16:18 says, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and whoever marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery." Mark has virtually the same language. In Matthew 19:9 the gospel writer shares a caveat from Jesus regarding the adultery clause: "except for unchastity." Paul adds yet another exception to the rule in 1 Cor 7:15, applied specifically to families where one is a believer and the other a non-believer: "But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound. It is to peace that God has called you." Moreover, Paul says his teaching on this matter is not simply his opinion, but it is "from the Lord." All these commands are, on their face, very clear. Interpreted literally, the only acceptable reasons for divorce are sexual infidelity or a non-Christian leaving a Christian, and any remarriage, even following unfaithfulness, constitutes adultery.

So why do we, in the church, recognize divorce for Christians for reasons other than infidelity? And why do we celebrate the remarriage of divorced persons as wonderful God-sanctioned acts? And why do we in the United Methodist Church ordain divorced people? First, we look at the argument that underlies Paul's teaching: marriage between Christians is meant to allow them to continue to focus on their mission as followers of Jesus. In Ephesians, Paul teaches us that the love between spouses is meant to re-present the love of Jesus for the church. As a result, we are "called to peace" in our relationships with husbands and wives. When a marriage cannot reflect the love of God, when after all efforts it can no longer be considered a holy marriage that honors God in mission and love, then divorce is a better option. It is the underlying message of Paul's arguments about marriage

that guide us. We will discuss a second and more essential reason the church can sanction remarriage after divorce in a later section.

Now interpreting Scripture is a dangerous thing. All committed Christians share a concern that conversations about the Holy Spirit's guidance in these matters can lead to a sense of ambiguity, and there is a danger that interpreters will make Holy Scripture say just what they want it to say. To these concerns, which I share myself, I find three responses helpful. The first is simply, yes – it is a danger. But it is a danger less perilous than becoming like Pharisees in our interpretation of Scripture or turning the Bible into a dead book irrelevant to our life and culture. Second, even when we try to be “the Bible said it, that settles it” kind of people, our cultural viewpoints still color our understandings of Scripture. These cultural viewpoints have guided the church, over the centuries, to embrace slavery and racism and misogyny and xenophobia and domestic abuse. Gratefully, the Holy Spirit has led us over time to see the error of these applications of Scripture. We cannot completely remove our cultural bias from our interpretation. We can, however, ask God to help us to be aware of that bias and interpret correctly. Finally, we can guard against reading our own desires into the passages through collective interpretation. This is that “tradition” component of the Wesleyan quadrilateral. We believe that just as the Holy Spirit worked through the church in selecting these writings to be our holy writ, the Holy Spirit works through the church in our interpretation of those writings. The collective process of discernment is a sort of “check and balance” on individualistic interpretation of Scripture. We strive to work together toward appropriate change and growth, rather than each of us deciding to live by Scripture as we see it alone. As a pastor in the United Methodist Church, I seek to live by the teachings of the church which I have committed to serve. At the same time, I will work within the structures of that church to bring change when I feel the Holy Spirit's leading.

A CHANGE IN UNDERSTANDING

From the time I came to Christ, I always assumed that homosexuality was contrary to Christian teaching. But as I became acquainted with more gay men and women and could see God at work in their lives, I began to question my own assumptions, and decided to actually dig deeper into the Scripture itself. As I studied the specific biblical passages, and was challenged to consider it more and more over the years, I found that the assumptions I had made (or been taught) were not consistent with the whole of the teaching of Scripture. In short, it is exactly because I believe in the Bible and take it very seriously as the way I know who Jesus is and how we are to live as his followers, and because I believe it is the *living* Word of God, that I think it is time for the United Methodist church to change her official position on homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and ordination of gay men and women. My primary reasons are fourfold:

1. Because we now understand that homosexuality is not a choice people make.
2. Because the homosexual practices referred to in Scripture are not the same as monogamous committed relationships within the bond of marriage.

3. Because creating a second class of members in the body of Christ based on their sexual identity harms people with our rejection, placing an obstacle in the way of their relationship with Jesus. Our greatest responsibility is to draw all people into a relationship with Jesus.
4. Because the essence of biblical marriage is mutual submission, faithful love, and holiness, rather than complementary genders and roles.

1) Homosexuality is not a choice people make.

Both physical science and social science help us learn new things on a daily basis. Still, almost every scientist will tell you that science also points to the millions of things we do not yet understand and many things we have misunderstood, as well as plenty we most assuredly still misunderstand. While we still do not completely grasp what determines sexual and gender identity, science has led to new general agreements about some parts of it. In 2016, J. Michael Bailey of Northwestern University, along with three other research scientists, did a compilation of multiple research projects on the causes of sexual orientation. Based on their review of the latest science, Bailey and colleagues draw several conclusions:

-- Across cultures, a "small but nontrivial" percentage of people have non-heterosexual feelings. The specific expression of sexual orientation varies widely according to cultural norms and traditions, but research suggests that individuals' sexual feelings are likely to develop in similar ways around the world.

-- Various biological factors - including prenatal hormones and specific genetic profiles - are likely to contribute to sexual orientation, though they are not the sole cause. Scientific evidence suggests that biological and non-social environmental factors jointly influence sexual orientation.

-- Scientific findings do not support the notion that sexual orientation can be taught or learned through social means. And there is little evidence to suggest that non-heterosexual orientations become more common with increased social tolerance.¹

Tuck Gunn and Eric Vilain of the UCLA School of Medicine have compiled research on the biological basis of sexual orientation. Some of the research has found that identical twins are significantly more likely to have the same sexual identity than are fraternal twins. While they have not identified a "gay gene," they have found that male sexual orientation seems linked to several specific areas of the genome. Furthermore, Gunn and Vilain point to significant research on the role of exposure to various hormones during a child's gestation, and the impact it has on sexual

¹ J. M. Bailey, P. L. Vasey, L. M. Diamond, S. M. Breedlove, E. Vilain, M. Epprecht. "Sexual Orientation, Controversy, and Science." *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 2016; 17

orientation. For example, women who were exposed to high levels of testosterone during gestation were much more likely to have non-heterosexual orientations.²

While there is no universally agreed upon cause of homosexuality, the scientific community has come to understand that there is a biological component in some way. As a pastor, it has been clear to me that some people have known from the time they were small children that they have same-sex attraction. Others seem to come to that conclusion later in life. Further, it is evident that sexual orientation is not binary, but rather falls on a continuum in some way. Same-sex attraction is stronger in some than in others. Despite all that we do not know, there does seem to be an almost universal belief among LGBTQ men and women that their sexual orientation was not a choice, but part of who they are.

This does not mean that gay people have no choice in the behavior they choose. Indeed, they could choose celibacy. Paul points out that he is celibate, and that it is a good thing, allowing him to focus on the work of Christ. But he acknowledges that this isn't possible for everyone and is a special gift he has been given which not everyone can or should undertake. He goes on to say that celibacy is something that should be chosen in response to a call from God, rather than imposed by the church.

Nor is the claim here that everything that has some biological component is acceptable behavior according to Scripture. If someone were to prove to me that pedophilia had some sort of biological cause, or that some people were genetically predisposed to violence, that would not make it ok. There is always a danger that "this is how God made me" is used to justify ways of life that are not consistent with biblical teaching. In fact, I have heard that argument applied to polygamy, saying that men in particular are not created to be monogamous. The "God made me this way" argument alone does not suffice to justify behavior that is contrary to biblical teaching or the overarching ethical message of the New Testament.

Understanding that homosexuality is not a choice, however, does bring an altogether different perspective to the biblical teaching on homosexuality, in that the scriptural arguments against it are based on the assertion that the homosexuality it is condemning is a choice made based on lust and the pursuit of unnatural cravings, and modern science demonstrates that monogamous committed homosexuality does not fit this category. When we apply modern knowledge and understanding to Scripture, we begin to understand its message in a new way. Let us consider the biblical teaching itself now.

2) The practices condemned in Scripture are not the same as monogamous committed homosexual relationships.

When we operate from an understanding that homosexuality is not a choice, it helps us understand the passages in Scripture differently, and we can understand why they would

² T. C. Nguc, E. Vilain. "The biological basis of human sexual orientation: is there a role for epigenetics?" *Advanced Genetics*, 2014;86:

not apply in the example of monogamous gay couples. There are others who can do a more thorough explanation of the appropriate Scripture passages, and certainly, there are esteemed biblical scholars and scholars of the ancient world whose commentaries on these passages differ from one another. We are all a bit at the mercy of these divergent historians and scholars, which is frustrating for those of us seeking to dig deeper into Scripture. Nonetheless, I do think a brief conversation about the specific New Testament passages is important.

Robert Gnuse is a professor of Religious Studies at Loyola University in New Orleans. He summarizes the texts and their primary focus as follows:

There are seven texts often cited by Christians to condemn homosexuality: Noah and Ham (Genesis 9:20–27), Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:1–11), Levitical laws condemning same-sex relationships (Leviticus 18:22, 20:13), two words in two Second Testament vice lists (1 Corinthians 6:9–10; 1 Timothy 1:10), and Paul’s letter to the Romans (Romans 1:26–27)... These do not refer to homosexual relationships between two free, adult, and loving individuals. They describe rape or attempted rape (Genesis 9:20–27, 19:1–11), cultic prostitution (Leviticus 18:22, 20:13), male prostitution and pederasty (1 Corinthians 6:9–10; 1 Timothy 1:10), and the Isis cult in Rome (Romans 1:26–27)³

Let me deal more directly with the New Testament passages: In **Romans 1:18–32**, Paul has two primary arguments against homosexuality: 1) it is unnatural, and 2) it is driven by excessive lust when people have darkened and wicked hearts. I believe that in fact there ARE some practices of homosexuality that would fit this description. Similarly, there are some practices of heterosexuality that would fit this description as well, and Scripture would prohibit both. Dr. Craig Williams, professor at City University of New York, has written the most authoritative text on homosexuality in the Roman world, into which Paul is writing. The practice in the Roman world was relatively common. While there are very few references in ancient literature to monogamous homosexual relationships, the common practice generally took the form of pederasty, in which older men have younger men as concubines, slaves or prostitutes, in addition to having wives or female concubines. There are thousands of references to this behavior in ancient Rome, and Paul was appropriately condemning it. It was socially acceptable for men to have homosexual relationships as long as they took the dominant role.⁴ But those behaviors – excessive hedonistic practices, promiscuity, sexual exploitation – are not the homosexuality we are discussing today. Paul would be condemning this behavior in heterosexual relationships as well. This is reinforced for me by the vehemence with which Paul addresses the issue, comparing those participating in these activities with “slanderers, God-haters, insolent,

³ Robert K. Gnuse “Seven Gay Texts: Biblical Passages Used to Condemn Homosexuality,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin: Journal of Theology and Culture*. Vol 45, May, 2015. p. 68.

⁴ Craig Williams, *Roman Homosexuality* (Oxford University Press, 1999, 2010).

haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.” (Romans 1:30-31) Then he punctuates his point with “They know God’s decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.” (v. 32) I can understand Paul including such language in reference to wild hedonism, but it is hard for me to reconcile that kind of language with the gay men and women I know who are in monogamous relationships, committed to Christ, and deeply seeking to follow God’s will.

1 Corinthians 6:9-10 includes a list of “wrongdoers” who will not inherit the kingdom of God. Along with fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, and robbers are two Greek words, which have been translated a number of different ways. One is *malakoi*, which comes from the word meaning effeminate, and refers to the passive partner in homosexual sex, and the other is *arsenokoitai* which is the dominant partner in these sex acts. In **1 Timothy 1:10**, it is this word, *arsenokoitai*, that is included in a list of those who reject the gospel through their actions, and therefore live under the law: “the lawless and disobedient, the godless and sinful, the unholy and profane, those who kill their father or mother, murderers, fornicators, slave traders, liars, and perjurers.” Both of these words were, at one time, translated “homosexuals,” but scholars now try to use more specific language in their translations. In the NRSV, *malakoi* is translated “male prostitutes” and *arsenokoitai* is translated “sodomites.” Dale Martin, professor of New Testament at Yale Divinity School, has done a full examination of the use of this word in the Greek language and has concluded that it applies to “economic exploitation by some sexual means.”⁵ Indeed, the practice that Paul is condemning was one in which men took on other males as sexual objects to be kept and used, and its oppressive structure and exploitation – driven by both power and lust – deserves to be included in a list of abhorrent behavior! But to place committed, same-sex relationships between people seeking to follow Christ in a holy union with this ancient Roman practice is a misinterpretation of Paul’s teaching in a dramatic way.

I am troubled when I find people using these passages of Scripture to condemn modern day homosexuality. Do those who interpret Scripture this way believe gay men and women today “deserve to die” and that they have “wicked and darkened hearts?” (Romans 1) Do they believe they are “godless and profane” (1 Timothy) and excluded from the kingdom? (1 Corinthians 6) Of course they do not! Nonetheless, some interpret Scripture as grouping together all homosexual behavior and condemning it all. The practice of homosexuality we are speaking about today is not that which was prevalent in the context in which the letters of Paul were written.

There are other places in Holy Scripture where the more general term “sexual immorality” is used, and this term is used by some teachers today to apply to homosexuality. To be sure, the Bible is unequivocal in condemning sexual immorality. I reject the argument,

⁵ Dale Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2006) p. 42.

proposed by some progressive advocates of same-sex marriage, that sexuality is a personal decision about which the church should set no boundaries, so “anything goes.” But the sexual immorality that is condemned in Scripture is the sexual practice, both heterosexual and homosexual, that the biblical writers saw all around them – promiscuity, brothels, pagan religious sexual practices, pederasty, and other exploitative lifestyles that indeed are driven by excessive lust, and which cheapen and profane sex. But homosexuality as lived out in committed relationships is neither unnatural – it is part of someone’s created nature, nor is it an expression of excessive lust. These passages of Scripture simply do not apply.

James V. Brownson is the James and Jean Cook Professor of New Testament at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. I find his conclusion compelling:

Should the moral logic that informs the condemnation of same-sex erotic activity in the “seven passages” apply categorically to all committed same-sex relationships today? The evidence suggests that there are no forms of moral logic underpinning these passages that clearly and unequivocally forbid all contemporary forms of committed same-sex intimate relationships. This is particularly clear when these contemporary relationships are not lustful or dishonoring to one’s partner, are marked positively by moderated and disciplined desire, and when intimacy in these relationships contributes to the establishment of lifelong bonds of kinship, care, and mutual concern. Such same-sex intimate relationships were never considered by the biblical writers...⁶

3) When we create a second class of members in the body of Christ based on their sexual identity, we harm people with our rejection, placing an obstacle in the way of their relationship with Jesus. Our greatest responsibility is to draw all people into a relationship with Jesus.

I have met too many gay men and women who, when they hear the United Methodist church’s position on homosexuality, quickly come to the conclusion that they will join the ranks of the “nones” who turn away from the faith altogether. There are those who find other denominations to receive them warmly, and still others who remain in the United Methodist tradition because they have been formed and shaped by a loving congregation. Still others remain because they know that in the U.S. church, there are many (probably a majority) of United Methodists whose views differ from the United Methodist official position. But so many gay people I have known in my churches have felt rejected and left the faith. My heart is broken, and I believe God’s heart is broken, when men and women turn away from the faith because of the church’s position. Our first responsibility is to draw people into a saving relationship with Jesus. To ask people to live in a way that is

⁶ James V. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (p. 277). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition.

contrary to their created identity in order to be a follower of Jesus is neither biblical nor helpful.

For me personally, the most significant parallel in the Bible to our current discussion is the controversy surrounding Gentiles and Jews in the faith. Two passages are instructive for me. First, in Acts 10, Simon Peter is staying in Joppa, and he has a vision while praying. An angel says to him three times “what God has made clean, you must not call profane.” He is referring Gentiles, which the Hebrew law called “unclean.” Following this vision, Peter is called to the city of Caesarea, to the house of a Roman soldier, a Gentile named Cornelius, to share with him the gospel. Even to go there would mean he must violate the rules keeping clean, but he does so anyway. While there, he says to Cornelius “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.” Instead, he eats with him, and Cornelius receives the gospel and becomes a Christian.

The second passage is In Acts 15, as Paul comes to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles who are in leadership in the church. This is often called the First Jerusalem Council. The presenting issue is whether Gentiles should be required to become Jews and follow Jewish purity laws in order to be Christians. Up to this point, the apostles have maintained that Gentiles could be followers of Jesus, but they must be circumcised and live by those laws. Paul argues that he has seen the Holy Spirit working among these Gentiles, that God is moving in their midst, and that is all that matters. They should not have to change their identity as Gentiles in order to become followers of Jesus. Ultimately, Peter speaks up, echoing what he has learned in his experience with Cornelius: “And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us.” (Acts 15:8-9) The apostle James then speaks as well, making the final decision, “we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood.” (Acts 15:20). This word “fornication” is the word “porneia,” and is translated in some versions as “sexual immorality.” This compromise solution soon fades further, as the prohibitions on food choices are softened, whereas the rejection against sexual immorality is maintained. What is clear is that the apostles’ decision is based on their primary objective: encouraging and supporting God’s work among the Gentiles, and not placing an obstacle in the way of Gentiles choosing Jesus Christ.

John Wesley’s first of three General Rules of the Methodist Church is “do no harm.” When we reject gay men and women who are willing to be monogamous from full inclusion in the life of the church, we put a significant and harmful obstacle in the way of any decision by them to give their lives to following Christ as a part of the Christian community. Because their sexual identity is so much a part of who they are, so significant in their lives, the decision between the opportunity to live out their created identities in committed relationships with someone else on the one hand and being a fully included part of the

Christian community on the other is an impossible choice that is heartbreaking and harmful. As a pastor, I simply cannot believe this is God's purpose for their lives.

The church has used this "do no harm" approach before as it has dealt with Scripture. I previously mentioned that the church has made a concession to allow divorce and sanction remarriage because of an interpretation of the overarching principle in Paul's teaching about marriage. I would suggest that the most important reason the church came to this conclusion is because the church has recognized that ongoing exploitation, abuse, or unresolvable conflict in a family is destructive and harmful, even if there is no adultery. Not that the church believes divorce is a good thing, but rather that it is often a less destructive thing to families and lives than is staying in a marriage that does not honor God or reflect the love Christ has for us. Further, we have recognized that asking people to live in relationships that are neither healthy nor holy, in which men and women live in conflict and/or abuse or isolation from one another, is harmful to their physical, emotional and spiritual lives, as well as to the children who grow up in such environments. Moreover, the church was able to reach this conclusion because so many people have experienced that pain firsthand and were able to testify through experience how harmful remaining in a conflictual marriage can be, and how important it is to not be precluded in the future from a caring committed relationship once someone is divorced. Similarly, the church has seen how harmful it has been for divorced Christians to be rejected and made to feel "less than" by the church over the past decades. A decision to remarry divorced people, as well as consider divorced and remarried people for ordination, has grown out of our commitment to "do no harm," and to understand our first and foremost responsibility to draw all people into a saving relationship with Christ.

Jesus practiced a radical inclusion because he wanted to draw all people into a relationship with him. Our primary mission is to be Jesus' agents to do just that. St. Paul practiced that mission and led the early church to reach out beyond the boundaries of what seemed right and acceptable to the religious folk of his day. We should do the same.

4) The essence of Christian marriage is mutual submission, faithful love, and holiness, rather than complementary genders or gender roles.

Jesus actually does not talk much about marriage or sex or the family, so over the years, the biblical basis for prohibiting homosexuality has rested mostly on the teachings of Paul. As I stated before, that is because the kind of promiscuity and sexual immorality that Paul saw in the Roman world was not prevalent in the Jewish world through which Jesus traveled, so there was no need to condemn it. However, Jesus does talk about marriage at least one time, in his teaching on marriage and divorce. Again, here is the whole text in context: (Note, there is a similar text in Matthew)

² *Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"*

³ *He answered them, "What did Moses command you?"* ⁴ *They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her."* ⁵ *But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you."* ⁶ *But from the beginning of creation,*

'God made them male and female.' ⁷ *'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife,'* ⁸ *and the two shall become one flesh.'* So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹ *Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'* ¹⁰ Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. ¹¹ He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; ¹² and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." (Mark 10:2-12)

Jesus quotes Genesis, noting that man and woman were made male and female, and stating that marriage is the union of these two. For many who reject same sex marriage, it is essential that the two parties to marriage be male and female, believing that in the created order the two parties in marriage are to be *complementary*. These interpreters point to the creation narrative, in which God separates creation – the heavens above and the waters below, night and day, male and female. Many use the same logic to justify separate complementary roles for men and women. However, the full point of the passage is that they are no longer separate, but in marriage they are reunited as one. In the United Methodist Church, we have rejected a concept of marriage that is built around God-ordained, complementary roles for men and women. Instead we have chosen to understand marriage to be mutual rather than necessarily hierarchical, with marriage roles not defined by gender but rather by giftedness. Moreover, the church has embraced the idea that the overarching message of the New Testament is that these categories of gender, as well as those of race or ethnicity or station in life, are no longer significant in the body of Christ, for "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28) A person's gender is not what defines them.

I would argue that the real essence of a biblical marriage is not complimentary genders or gender roles, but three things: Mutual submission, faithful love, and holiness. As I said before, Paul's teaching in Ephesians is that marriage is to re-present the relationship between Christ and his church. Just as we submit to God, we are no longer independent, but one flesh, and subject to one another. Just as God is faithful, we are to be faithful, and show the world God's faithfulness in the way we do marriage together. Just as God is holy, we are to be holy, and show the world God's holiness in our marriages.

In addition to the passage from Mark and Matthew with Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce, perhaps the most pertinent text is in Ephesians:

²¹ *Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.* ²² *Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord.* ²³ *For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior.* ²⁴ *Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.* ²⁵ *Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,* ²⁶ *in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word,* ²⁷ *so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish.* ²⁸ *In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He*

who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ *For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church,* ³⁰ *because we are members of his body.* ³¹ *“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”* ³² *This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church.* ³³ *Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband. (Ephesians 5:21-33)*

First, Christian marriage is defined by mutual submission: The argument that we are now “one flesh,” means that we no longer function as independent entities, but instead are so joined that what happens to one happens to the other. We can no longer claim that we are completely free from encumbrance, because now we belong to one another. Note that while the passage speaks of husbands loving wives and wives respecting husbands, it does not state that wives should not love husbands or husbands respect their wives. In fact, the passage begins with mutual submission – “be subject to one another...” As he closes this passage in Ephesians, Paul explains the importance of Christian marriage in general: “I am applying it to Christ and the church.” Marriage is to be a teaching tool, a witness to the world about the mystical union between Jesus and his body – the church. And just as heterosexual marriage can present the mystical bond between Christ and the church, same-sex Christian marriage can make the same witness.

Second, Christian marriage is defined by faithful love. In the Old Testament, one essential and overriding characteristic of God is *hesed*, or covenant love. Sometimes *hesed* is translated “loving kindness,” and sometimes “steadfast love.” *Hesed* says that because we are in covenant together, God will not give up on us, and will remain faithful to us, loving us even when we are not faithful in return. The people of Israel were the people of God’s covenant, and God’s faithful *hesed* was with them throughout. In the New Testament, we are told that through Christ, we are adopted into that covenant, and that God’s grace is now available to us all through faith. When Jesus teaches on divorce and says, “what God has joined together let no one separate,” he is reminding us that God is faithful, so God-made covenants are built on faithfulness. Adultery is a demonstration of unfaithfulness, and as such is a breach of that covenant. Marriage is always to be a reflection of God’s faithfulness to us. Same-sex couples can embody God’s faithfulness just as well as can heterosexual couples.

Finally, Christian marriage is defined by holiness. Holiness is being set apart, undefiled, without spot or blemish. This is the image that Paul uses in the passage on marriage in Ephesians. How can a marriage be holy, when all of us are sinful, in need of God’s grace? Holiness in the New Testament is created through our relationship with Jesus Christ. The Jewish teaching of Jesus’ day was that persons were made profane, or unholy, because they had touched something else unholy. Jesus “reverses the process” so that when he touches a person who is considered “unclean,” Jesus doesn’t become unholy. Instead, that person is made clean!⁷ New Testament holiness comes through the touch of Christ. Marriages are

⁷ Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace*. (Harper Collins, 2008)

made holy only because they are sanctified by Christ himself, through his grace. It is a couple's invitation of Christ into the center of their relationship that sanctifies their marriage.

This is why it is so important for the church to allow same-sex marriages rather than simply civil unions. When we refuse to allow gay men and women to be married in the church in a blessed Christian marriage, we preclude them from being a part of relationships that are made sacred by the church's blessing. We discriminate against them based on something that is not their choice, not simply in matters of vocation, but in something even more important – holy union sanctified by God. Instead, we drive them into relationships that are not defined by faithful covenant love, mutual submission, or made sacred by the body of Christ, his church. This is so contrary to our mandate to create marriages which reflect who God is to the world around us.

CONCLUSION

When I study the Bible, I seek to apply reason, experience, and tradition to the text in order to interpret it correctly. Over the past years science (reason) and my own experience of conversations with LGBT men and women have led me to change my own understanding about homosexuality. I now understand that same sex attraction is not a choice people make, but a part of their creation. I now believe that the passages surrounding sexual immorality in the Bible are not applicable to monogamous, committed homosexual relationships, but instead are aimed at the cultural practices of the first century, and are applicable in their condemnation of some of cultural sexual practices we struggle with today, both heterosexual and homosexual. I see now how the church's teaching on homosexuality stands as an obstacle to gay and lesbian people becoming committed followers of Jesus, and as such is so harmful to their emotional, social, and most importantly to their spiritual lives. And I now understand that marriage in the Bible is built not around complementary roles, but around mutual submission, faithful covenant love, and holiness, given as a gift to a marriage through the grace of Jesus Christ. I believe same-sex marriages can embody these characteristics. To be sure, the tradition of the church has prohibited such marriages in the past, but the tradition of the church is one in which new understandings bring corrected interpretations.

It is not in spite of the Bible's teaching that I have come to believe we should welcome and affirm same sex marriage and ordination, but because of it. I hear the angel's words to Simon Peter as words to me: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." (Acts 10:15) And I hear the letter from the Jerusalem Council to the Gentile church: "for it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit to impose no further burden than these essentials." (Acts 15:28) When I struggle with decisions about how to apply the Bible, I know I will make some mistakes along the way. But if I err, I want to err on the side of grace. As an evangelical Christian in the truest sense of the word, I believe that reaching all people with the good news of Jesus' lavish love the most important thing of all.

I still believe the journeys of people wrestling with issues of sexual identity are personal and nuanced, and that publicly pontificating about them is neither appropriate or helpful. But I do hope that each of us at St. Luke's church will seek to have personal conversations with others, listening openly and respectfully to those with other perspectives, and work to hear especially those who have walked this road themselves. Maybe we can model how to discuss this and so many other difficult challenges men and women face along life's road, as we discern God's will for our life together in a spirit of deep Christian love.

The Other End of that Pastoral Conversation Regarding Homosexuality and Same-Sex Marriage in the Church

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INTRODUCTION

After more than forty years of discussion and debate, it's clear that United Methodists are more divided than ever over how the church should respond to questions relating to homosexuality and same-sex marriage. Far too often, however, the arguments advanced by many on both sides have been unduly caustic and even shrill in their expression, "full of sound and fury signifying nothing," as Shakespeare once expressed it.

It is for that reason that I am deeply appreciative of the thoughtful paper that my friend and colleague, Dr. Tom Pace, has authored on this subject, as well as his gracious invitation to enter into a somewhat public pastoral conversation on the topic. For like Tom, serving as a pastor for many years has helped me to frame the question in personal and not simply theoretical or even theological terms. I've also counseled with numerous individuals and families on the issue, including several young men with whom I was privileged to walk through the AIDS crisis in its early years. My current congregation like his--actually it *was* his at one time-- is composed of individuals from across the spectrum and with clearly distinct and different perspectives and orientations. And so I have likewise tried never to speak on the issue without keeping in the front of my mind the gay and lesbian friends I have made both inside and outside of the church over the decades.

I also would agree that this question is not one that can be simplistically reduced to someone's view of the authority of scripture, as though one side has the Bible and the other does not. For as United Methodists we are all, hopefully at least, "people of the Book," as John Wesley similarly called himself a *homo unius libri*, or a "man of one book." The distinction for most comes thus not over acknowledging the inspiration of the scriptures, and thus their authority in our lives, but rather in exactly how we are to interpret those words, specifically as they speak to the question of human sexuality.

Albert Outler's famed "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," for instance, would lead us to remember that we never read scripture in a vacuum, but our understanding is always informed by such other factors as the tradition of the church over the centuries--the witness of God's people in all times and in all places--over how we individually have experienced the meaning of God's Word, and over how we reconcile those experiences with what we know of the world from other sources. In that respect, it's instructive indeed that when Jesus quoted the famed *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6, a passage known and recited by Jews for centuries, that He actually amended the text a little, adding the admonition to love the Lord our God with not just our hearts and souls and strength, but also with our *minds*. (Matthew 22:37)

But Professor Outler himself was clear that when it comes to arriving at a theological position that it is never a matter of following whatever majority vote of those four elements

of scripture, tradition, experience and reason we may muster. I once heard the good professor say, in fact, that he was sorry indeed that he ever even came up with the Quadrilateral concept simply because of the way in which so many have misused it to justify their own opinions. As such, when we come to an issue such as how the church should respond to homosexuality, the place we must start is indeed with what the Bible actually has to say about this, whether we may happen to agree with it or not. After all, as Bill Bouknight once quipped, the liturgical response that we make on Sunday mornings is "This is the Word of the Lord... Thanks be to God," and not "This is the Word of the Lord...*are you okay with that?*" So how are we indeed to make sense of the scriptural witness?

A LOOK AT THE BOOK

We must begin by acknowledging that the question of same-sex behavior is not a prominent biblical concern, at least insofar as specific textual references are involved. The question is not addressed in the Ten Commandments, for instance, nor are there a large number of passages in the Bible that bear directly and certainly on same-sex behavior. Jesus never mentions such conduct and a simple "WWJD, or What Would Jesus Do Approach" might misleadingly encourage us to do the same, in a sort of "Fortunately God didn't say it, so I don't have to think about it, and that settles it approach." But then there are a number of other issues that the scriptures do not specifically address but which can be dealt with from the broader understanding of what is present within the Bible. Jesus never spoke about child abuse or nuclear war, for instance, but most Christians have inferred that He would have opposed them. More significantly, the Lord never addressed the primary social dysfunction of His own time, which was slavery. We have rightly assumed that had He done so, however, He would have told us that it was wrong and a violation of the divine image God has placed inside each of us.

In that regard, it has often been suggested that the biblical perspective on homosexuality can indeed be likened to how the scriptures were misused in earlier times to justify slavery. But even given the fact that slavery in the ancient world was far different indeed from the chattel model in the American experience, still, the admonitions for slaves to obey their masters were always matched by a word mitigating how masters ought to treat those under them, whether they were a slave or simply a servant (*doulos*). In fact, despite how some in the past attempted to justify the practice, it would be a far stretch indeed to say that the scriptures were truly pro-slavery. In Paul's letter to a slave owner named Philemon about his runaway slave Onesimus, for example, the apostle instructs Philemon to receive Onesimus "no longer as a slave... but as a dear brother," even encouraging Philemon to "receive him as you would receive me."

Or in other words, to quote Gavin Ortlund, Paul "dissolves the slave/master relationship, and erects in its place a brother/brother relationship, in which the former slave is treated with all the dignity with which the apostle himself would be treated. Thus, even before the actual institution of slavery is abolished, the work of the gospel abolishes the assumptions and prejudices that make slavery possible."

Similarly, to take another supposed parallel, the particular passages that some used as prooftexts for the subjugation of women, including the prohibition against ordination in the church, never actually told the whole story, either. For as early as the period of the judges in Israel, there were examples of women such as Deborah in leadership, a pattern which continued into the New Testament in both the role of women in the early church but more significantly in the way in which Jesus Himself elevated women in His interactions with them

However polemically helpful, we may suggest that the attempt to draw a parallel to slavery and women's rights with that of condemning homosexual behavior is thus misleading. For in contrast to those instances, it is worth observing that out of all the references to intimacy within the scriptures, reflecting millennia of moral development, there is *not a single positive reference* within the Bible to same-sex behavior. What's more, even if the texts regarding same-sex behavior are limited, they are sufficient enough to establish a consistent biblical outlook on the matter, especially when they are viewed within the broader context of the scripture's teaching on human sexuality in general. For a biblical view of this issue is not to be drawn only from a list of prohibited activities, but also on the pervasiveness and reasonableness of an affirmed activity, that is, marriage between a husband and wife. In turn, several key passages do directly teach that homosexual behavior is contrary to God's will, a will which is intended to be protective of each of our lives and not simply punitive.

When it comes to the most alarming account within the Bible that deals with same-sex behavior, for example, the story of Sodom in Genesis 19, it is clear that whatever offense the residents of that community intended--whether sexual abuse of the strangers or simply a lack of hospitality (certainly implied in the first option)--God was not pleased with the idea. But more specifically, later on in the Pentateuch the prohibitions against such behavior in Leviticus are spelled out even further in two other rather well known and oft-cited passages, Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13. The principle line of argument used to negate the significance of these words for Christians today, however, has been to note that these verses are part of a system of cultic taboos within early Jewish culture known as the Holiness Code, a code which some will say was of purely human origin, or at best, principles intended for one specific context, but not expressive of the mind of God or His timeless design for us.

Those who would wish to apply these words to modern circumstances must therefore recognize that within the surrounding chapters there are also prohibitions against eating shellfish, for example, and even against cross breeding cattle, cross-planting crops, and cross-sewing two different kinds of fabric onto the same garment. If we're not going to follow all of those regulations thus, or wish to understand them as simply a temporary code of conduct during the Wilderness years, then, so the argument proceeds, we ought not to pick out a few verses, such as these two, for selective enforcement either. More significantly, it has been suggested that the Leviticus texts are in actuality a condemnation not of same-sex behavior itself, and certainly not of the kind of long-term loving relationships which may exist between two men or two women, but specifically of male

prostitution which marked the pagan and foreign cults of many of Israel's neighbors at the time.

The problem with this argument, however, is that the New Testament reaffirms the validity of the Old Testament warnings about homosexual behavior, suggesting that the prohibitions were not simply part of the ceremonial laws which were only for a certain time and situation, but they were a part of God's everlasting moral laws with a continuing ethical significance. To dismiss all of this portion of God's Word out of hand, thus, is to plainly do injury to the idea of inspiration as well as sound interpretative principles. Indeed, even a casual glance makes clear that the Ten Commandments themselves are recorded in Leviticus 19, or directly between these two texts in question. It should also be noted that the seriousness of the act can be understood by viewing the prescribed penalty for its violation. No one is condemned to die in the Bible, for instance, for eating shrimp or sewing a little cotton onto an otherwise lovely wool dress, but such cannot be said for indulging in sexual activity outside of the covenant of one man and one woman.

In this respect we may note that a distinction is sometimes drawn between *perversion* and *inversion*, the first being behavior that is marked by a licentious and offensive spirit, but the second signifying only a constitutional preference for the same sex. And that distinction would seem to be a critical one, for when carefully examined, what is plain is that the Bible does not forbid homosexuality per se--that is, the state or orientation of an individual--but it speaks to homosexual behavior. A person who is a homosexual might not ever express that orientation in actions, choosing to embrace celibacy, for instance, while in contrast, another person may engage in homosexual actions even if they self-identify as heterosexual.

And it is in this manner that the primary text regarding same-sex behavior, Romans 1.26-27, must also be taken at its relative face value. To quote that passage from St. Paul,

"For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions (pathe atimias). Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error." (RSV)

It is clear that at least on the surface of it, this text thus condemns both male and female same-gender sexual activity as sinful by its very nature. Sherwin Bailey's argument that what Paul was attacking was, in fact, degenerate, thrill-seeking experimentation among straight individuals which was unnatural for *them* (that is, it's wrong for straight people to act gay) represents a creative attempt to interpret this passage but not a very satisfactory one. In contrast, in his massive book *Homosexuality and Civilization*, the late Louis Crompton, a pioneer in queer studies and himself a gay man, finds such attempts to mitigate Paul's harshness as well-intentioned but still strained and unhistorical. To quote Crompton, "nowhere does Paul or any other Jewish writer of this period imply the least acceptance of same-sex relations under any circumstances." Similarly, it is simply historically untenable to buy into the idea that in the Graeco-Roman world of the first

century, the only form of same-gender behavior which existed was that of pederasty, or contact between older men and younger boys, so that must be the context for Paul's words here.

Indeed, it may be argued that homosexual orientation and behavior were as widespread in the first century as they are today in the United States and that otherwise fine scholars such as Victor Paul Furnish are incorrect in arguing that no ancient account of sexual attraction comes close to our modern understanding. The insights of Craig Williams, as cited by my friend Tom, are indeed helpful ones and I would agree that the sexual practices of many in the Roman world were marked more by the ideas of dominance and submission, free versus slave, and active versus passive roles than by gender identity and orientation. But Williams' insistence that there was no diachronic change in Roman sexual values from 200 BCE to 200 CE is greatly disputed by other historians, for although attitudes towards the norms may have shifted, the norms themselves did not.

And to suggest as Williams does that loving and monogamous same-sex relations were relatively rare in the first century (and thus the biblical admonitions addressing such are not applicable to today's situation) is to ignore that there were clearly such consensual relationships between adults in the classical world. Four centuries before Paul, for instance, Plato, Aristophanes, Phaedrus, and Pausanias all give a positive view of same-gender eroticism, with Aristophanes writing of male partners "who continue to be with one another throughout life...desiring to join together and be fused into a single entity," becoming "one person from two."

As N.T. Wright observes:

As a classicist, I have to say that when I read Plato's Symposium, or when I read the accounts from the early Roman empire of the practice of homosexuality, then it seems to me they knew just as much about it as we do. In particular, a point which is often missed, they knew a great deal about what people today would regard as longer-term, reasonably stable relations between two people of the same gender. This is not a modern invention, it's already there in Plato. The idea that in Paul's today it was always a matter of exploitation of younger men by older men or whatever ... of course there was plenty of that then, as there is today, but it was by no means the only thing.

Indeed, the ancients even offered theories to explain same-sex attraction, and as Robert Gagnon has commented, some of their views sound "remarkably like the current scientific consensus on homosexual orientation." It is worth noting as well that according to the Roman historian Suetonius, the emperor Nero had at least two public wedding ceremonies to other men, in one of which Nero wore a veil and played the role of the bride. Rather than being merely reflective of the culture in which he wrote, Paul's commands were thus actually quite counter-cultural. And his views reflected not just Greek and Roman thought, of course, but centuries of Jewish tradition as well, suggesting his assent indeed with the very Old Testament texts which we have considered.

So what is the apostle saying here in the opening words of Romans? The larger argument within chapters 1-3 is clear, namely that the Gentiles as a whole have repressed from their minds an awareness of the true God whose existence and character are obvious in His creation and as a result of this, God has abandoned many among them to similarly twisted sexual desires and practices. Gay sexual interaction is listed first after adultery in the catalog of Romans 1 not because it is the most serious sin, but because it is simply a warning sign that a violation of reason and nature has occurred, whether it involves sexual intimacy between men, or significantly so, between two women either. In short, to be sure, actions such as these actually speak to the effects of turning away from God than the causes of doing such. Still, for St. Paul they are vices nonetheless, failings that provide evidence of human sinfulness and thus, the human need for God's grace.

In turn, St. Paul's words to the church at Corinth indicate that the apostle sees this kind of behavior as not simply unnatural, but as prohibitive for any who would enter the kingdom of heaven. As 1 Corinthians 6.9, 10 asks the question,

"Do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor males who submit their bodies to unnatural lewdness (malakoi), not homosexual practitioners (arsenokoitai) nor thieves, nor the covetous, not drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God."

What's the thrust here? It is that those who continue in behaviors such as these, and who do not repent, or exhibit sorrow or even strive to refocus their lives and actions, may indeed love Jesus but they have not yet yielded to the absolute Lordship of Christ.

Of course some have suggested that the two Greek terms used here refer not just to those who engage in same-gender sexual practices, but more specifically, in the case of the first term, *malakoi*, to male prostitutes or to catamites, denoting overly effeminate men who allow themselves to be misused sexually by other self-indulgent males. But etymologically, classical Greek knows of no such restrictive meaning for the term. Likewise, *arsenokoitai* quite literally refers to males (*arsen*) who lie down on a couch or bed (*koite*, from which our word coitus derives) with other males in order to have genital contact with them.

More importantly, the attempt to dismiss this Pauline understanding by redefining the Greek words used in this passage, as well as in 1 Timothy 1.8-10, is ultimately not only an example of creative interpretation, it is also a denial of the very real principle of the power of God to transform lives, no matter what dimensions their particular sins or failings may assume. For the word of grace that follows this pivotal passage is a striking one indeed, and perhaps one of the greatest illustrations in the Bible of the ability of God to change tenses in our lives. Take notice of the move from the ways things were to how God would have them be:

"And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God."
(1 Corinthians 6.11)

That is good news indeed to any and to all sinners, or to state the obvious, to each of us, no matter what particular behavior or activity that may have otherwise entrapped us. For the promise of God is to make us new creations in Christ, no matter what our old and carnal selves may have been. One could even say thus that if we fail to offer that possibility and promise to others out of a loving concern not to offend others or challenge their choices or actions in life, we likewise deny the very gospel itself and thus, in the end, fail to "do good" as John Wesley enjoined us, and to love our neighbors by sharing both truth and hope with them as well.

In short, a honest examination of the scriptural witness regarding homosexuality suggests that, taken at face value, the Bible does not condone but rather it condemns same sex intimacy as a violation against God's ultimate will for His children, in whatever circumstances or century they may find themselves. Likewise, the argument that homosexual behavior was of a different nature and character in biblical times than it is understood now is not supported by any careful reading of historical non-biblical texts or our knowledge of the ancient practices of those times.

Indeed, as Kevin DeYoung has said, "the only way to think the Bible is talking about every other kind of homosexuality except the kind our culture wants to affirm is to be less than honest with the texts or less than honest with ourselves." And the theological and linguistic loop-de-loops which some would employ to twist the meaning of the terms may be creative, but they fail to meet academic muster when divorced from their preconceived agendas, elevating personal experiences and preferences over those that are prescribed in the biblical witness itself. All of which leads me to disagree with one of my friend's chief arguments, namely, the idea that the practices condemned in scripture are not the same as modern monogamous homosexual relationships, and thus the prohibitions against those practices are not applicable in the current situation of many. For though as a pastor I might wish that were not the case, I find that I have neither the luxury nor the liberty to proceed as if it were. Or to put it most simply, it's far above my paygrade as a pastor to argue against God's Word if its meaning is indeed as clear as it appears to be.

A PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

Assuming I am reading the Book correctly, thus, what is an appropriate response for a compassionate pastor who loves his or her people to make when it comes to the intensely personal question of the church's response to homosexuality and same-sex marriage? I would begin by agreeing with one of my colleague's other assumptions that homosexuality, or more specifically, homosexual orientation or same-sex attraction, is not generally a choice that people make. My own research over the years into the etiology of homosexuality has led me to conclude that there is indeed a genetic component or biological basis that is involved in human sexual orientation. In the most recent and rather massive study of nearly half a million people, funded by the National Institutes of Health and other agencies, it was found that though there is no one "gay gene," all genetic effects likely account for about 32 percent of whether someone will eventually have same-sex sex. As published in the journal *Science*, and reported by the *New York Times*, researchers

specifically identified five genetic variants present in people's full genomes that appear to be involved. But those five comprise less than 1 percent of the genetic influences.

And thus, other developmental, emotional, and relational factors have also been linked to same-sex attraction. According to Dr. Robert Friedman from Cornell, for instance, childhood gender disturbance appears to be a far more powerful predictor of predominate or exclusive homosexuality than family constellation. Human beings are enormously complex in our makeup thus. Indeed, "anyone who is LGBTQ knows that their identity is complicated," suggests Zeke Stokes, the chief programs officer at GLAAD. Centuries ago, the psalmist was thus correct when he noted that we are all "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139.14)

In the end, however, while the question of causality is important, it is not the most significant one. For we have only to look around to see that the world is full of conditions and behaviors that do not reflect God's ultimate desires or design for us. Some are born with medical challenges or physical or mental disabilities and while it is clear that God "made them that way," no parent embraces those conditions as being good and worthy of celebration in and of themselves-- we celebrate the children, not their limitations. Researchers also believe that individuals may be born with a genetic predisposition to alcoholism. But if such is the case, we don't encourage such individuals to go ahead and drink as much as they like until they become an alcoholic and lose control over their addiction, even though God may have created them with that liability as well. Rather, we acknowledge that living in a fallen world, "east of Eden," involves learning how to deal with the less than ideal in our lives. Or to put it as Martin Luther King once so eloquently did, "the *is-ness* of something does not imply the *ought-ness* of it." So even if same-sex attraction is entirely genetic and thus out of our control, it doesn't imply that we should not subsequently try to control how we act upon those desires.

To say such is not at all to minimize the very real and agonizing struggle that finding oneself with such desires and fighting against them involves. Those confronted by such realities thus stand in need of the church's love and support which ought never to be constrained by either awkwardness or misplaced political correctness. We should be clear indeed that, once again, the Bible does not condemn anyone for having a homosexual orientation, or for loving those who may be of the same gender, only for choosing to engage in same-gender genital behavior. For homosexuality may not be a choice, but how we live out our lives with others is.

Those with same-sex attraction who have chosen to embrace celibacy, practicing "costly obedience" as researchers Mark Yarhouse and Olya Zaporozhets have termed it, should be affirmed therefore as sisters and brothers who have put their faith over their feelings. Far from second-class citizens within the church, such are actually amazing examples of the power of Christ to work in the lives of all those willing to submit to His Word and to follow His ways, even when it is not easy to do so. To quote Yarhouse and Zaporozhets, "what we are suggesting is that the costly obedience of celibate gay Christians should impact the full church by being a model of what we are all called to live into: a life of sacrifice in which the

hardships we face are given meaning and significance in relation to the passion of Christ. And the church needs to consider what it means to share in that cost."

To reiterate the point, therefore, this is not an argument that those with same-sex attractions can merely come to Jesus and "pray the gay away" in their lives. For while Christ may indeed bring about a complete change in individuals, for many the challenges in our lives may not be resolved at any prayer meeting, no matter how powerful it may be. But for those within the church--both gay and straight-- it is important to recognize that though the culture has wholeheartedly elevated sexuality to the highest of all enterprises and activities, those who follow Jesus have not. For we take our identity not from our sexuality but from our spirituality-- we are children of God more than we are male or female, white or black, gay or straight. Our pride is not in ourselves, or our sexual orientation; let the one who boasts "boast only about the Lord." (1 Corinthians 1.31) And as children of God, we thus affirm that there is a Christian understanding of right and wrong that often stands at odds with that proclaimed by the culture. Morality is not simply in our minds, however, it is based in God and His Word. Right and wrong are not matters of choice or taste, but matters of fact. Just because a desire may feel right does not make it right. For as Proverbs 14.12 reminds us, "there is a way that *seems* right to a man, but its end is the way of death."

In this respect, as important as marriage is, what we find in scripture is that God honors both singleness and marriage. Jesus Himself, for instance, was a single man in a time and culture in which marriage was for all intents and purposes compulsory. And yet in Matthew 19, He affirmed the goodness of both godly singleness and godly marriage. Likewise, St. Paul, whom we believe to have been married and then was not, was clear that each have their own gift from God, and for some that will be expressed through marriage and for others through remaining single. And within the church today, we should say the same. For as Rachel Gilson has expressed it, "in the end sex is a gift, but it's not the point."

How should the church respond therefore to such realities as homosexuality and same-sex marriages? First and foremost, with compassion for all. But again, compassion is not the same as simple acceptance; we can care for others without caring for how they may have acted, or the ways in which they have denied God's grace and truth either deliberately or unintentionally. As Rick Warren has suggested "our culture has accepted two huge lies. The first is that if you disagree with someone's lifestyle, you must fear them or hate them. The second is that to love someone means you agree with everything they believe or do. Both are nonsense. You don't have to compromise convictions to be compassionate." To love others as Christ did, therefore, is to speak the truth in love, for as Bonhoeffer is said to have observed, "nothing can be more cruel than that leniency which abandons others to their sin." But that is precisely where the current impasse in the church has come.

Some have suggested that it is unfair for the church to have singled out homosexual behavior as sinful in God's eyes. But the reality is that it has generally not been those within the church who have focused in on that behavior, but those who advocate for it and have insisted that same sex behavior is not sin and should not be considered as such. And as a minister of the gospel that is a problematic demand for me to honor. For should you

ask me whether any of the other behaviors mentioned by St. Paul in Corinthians 6, for instance, can be exempted from that list, I would have to say no, for again it is not my place to do so. And thus to overlook this one behavior is not possible either. The Catholic distinction between mortal and venial sins notwithstanding, I don't find any hierarchical ranking when it comes to our iniquities within the witness of scripture: sin is sin, period, and none is any worse or better than any other in God's eyes. Likewise, every church in the world is absolutely chock-full of sinners which is exactly why we offer prayers of confession and issue invitations to lead a new life, following the commandments of Christ, at every gathering, to everyone who is present.

But if we are to be faithful to God's Word, we are not at liberty to rescind or give a pass to the portions of it that may be troubling or offensive to our more politically enlightened times. We can support civil unions--which I do-- but we can't call them marriage, for God has already defined that for us in the only passage that is repeated both in the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the Epistles: "for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife." We can and should endorse equal rights in our societies, for individuals should have the ability to determine with whom they will share both their livelihoods and their lives. We can celebrate love wherever it is found, for there is clearly a shortage of it in this world today.

But as we structure our corporate life together, we are also charged with reflecting to the best of our abilities the values and vision for His Church that Jesus Christ has given to us. That is why though participation and membership, baptism and service, and the means of grace are open to all within the church, from my perspective at least, ordination is a different matter. For no one is entitled to be a pastor, nor is it a civil right, but a gift proffered by the church to those who are willing to embrace its teachings and principles and have been judged to be competent to lead others towards that end.

All of which brings us to that proverbial fork in the road which the United Methodist Church among others now faces. For if, after careful study and prayer, one truly believes that the scriptures forbid the practice of gay or lesbian physical relationships, to acquiesce in not just allowing, but actually endorsing such within the Church's understanding, is simply not an option for anyone trying to earnestly so follow Christ. On the other hand, if one reads the scriptures in such a way as to allow for an interpretation that does not preclude homosexual activity, then the clear commandment of Jesus to love others will and should take precedence over what can then be dismissed as merely cultural laws which were bound in their time and application.

What would seem to me at least not to be an option would be to simply make it a local choice, allowing each congregation or pastor to determine their own policy like they would any other such decision, including what color the carpet should be in the sanctuary. For that not only dismisses the seriousness of the question, it suggests that those with studied views on both sides who are trying their best to faithfully reflect God's will for this world ought to be willing to simply "go along to get along." And at least as we may learn from the example of the Laodiceans, those who are neither hot nor cold will be spit out of the mouth of God. It is for that reason that I reluctantly have come to conclude that the future of The

United Methodist Church may have to involve at least two new expressions of the Methodist experience, each setting the other free to faithfully follow their understanding.

Like my friend Tom, I would be content if I never again had to discuss this question or deal with the anguish it has caused so many, both within the church and without. But as I do my best to "contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people," (Jude 3) I find myself constrained by my understanding of that faith as revealed in the scriptures. Unfortunately, that position will place me swimming upstream against a culture whose current would take us in a different direction. But in the end, I am reminded that the scriptures tell us that "this is the day that the Lord has made" and not "this is the Lord that the day has made." My hope is that each of us can find a way to be both faithful and fruitful in our faith with a passion for truth and a compassion for all.

FOR FURTHER READING

In addition to the books in the references in the paper, you might want to consult the following:

Scripture, Ethics, and the Possibility of Same Sex Marriage, by Karen Keen (Affirming)

Changing our Mind, by David Gushee (Affirming),

The Bible's Yes to Same Sex Marriage, by Mark Achtemeier (Affirming)

Unclobber, by Colby Martin (Affirming)

God and the Gay Christian, by Matthew Vines (Affirming)

Can You Be Gay and Christian, by Michael Brown (Non-affirming)

People to be Loved, by Preston Sprinkle (Non-affirming)

Space at the Table, by Brad & Drew Harper (Non-affirming)

The Moral Vision of the New Testament, by Richard Hays (Non-Affirming)

The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics, by Robert Gagnon (Non-Affirming)

Costly Obedience: What We Can Learn from the Celibate Gay Community, by Mark Yarhouse (Non-Affirming)