

## Community-Developed

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# The Bible and Same-Sex Relationships

## Preamble

This resource is written in the spirit of the *Being a Faithful Church* resolution ([www.commonword.ca/go/829](http://www.commonword.ca/go/829)) that was passed at the Mennonite Church Canada Assembly, July 6–10, 2016. That resolution affirms the church’s traditional understanding of marriage, but allows for individuals and congregations whose study of Scripture, prayerful discernment, and sense of the Holy Spirit’s guidance, leads them to a different understanding on committed same-sex relationships. The resolution also recommends that “Mennonite Church Canada and Area Churches develop ways to hear one another around the implementation of this resolution.” This resource is an attempt to help us as a church do just that—hear, understand, and appreciate each other better, in the midst of our diversity and our painful disagreement. This resource focusses specifically on different ways of reading the Bible in light of same-sex relationships, because for many good reasons, the Bible plays a critical role in the debate.

This resource is very much a work in progress. The more I read and think about the topic and the many issues and real people involved, the more I recognize the shortcomings of my own work. There is so much more that could and should be said about all sides of the issue. But dealing with the topic thoroughly would require a lengthy book, and few people have the inclination to wade through a whole book on the topic. There is need for a relatively short, straightforward document that names and explores the central issues at stake, and is also accessible to ordinary church folks, a document that can perhaps be a resource for a series of adult Sunday school sessions, or a congregational discernment process, or simply individual reflection.

## Introduction

### Hearing Each Other When We Disagree

The most helpful thing I ever learned about church conflict is that when the church is engaged in debate about a divisive theological or ethical issue, one of the major reasons for the debate is the existence of good biblical and theological evidence on both sides of the issue.<sup>1</sup> If all the biblical and theological evidence pointed in the same direction, then we would all quickly head in that direction and the conflict would be over. On most theological and ethical issues we as a church are agreed on where the evidence points, and as a result we are not in conflict on those issues. When we do find ourselves disagreeing, it is most likely because there is evidence on multiple sides of the issue.

This may be the most helpful insight I have ever learned about church conflict, but I don't always like it much. When my congregation or denomination is involved in a divisive debate, my instinct is to bulldoze through, proving the truth of my perspective, and promoting the evidence on my side of the issue as the only evidence worth considering. Acknowledging that there is good biblical and theological evidence on the other side of the issue forces me to listen to and respect the views of those with whom I disagree. It forces me to recognize that folks on the other side of the issue probably love Jesus just as much as I do (or perhaps even more), that they are just as passionate about the mission of the church as I am, and that they are just as committed to the authority of Scripture as I am. In other words, they are still my brothers and sisters in Christ with whom I must continue to worship, pray, sing, serve, and fellowship. Perhaps I even need to be open to receiving what God might wish to teach me through their opinions, which in my view must surely be misguided.

One of the reasons why the issue of same-sex relationships is so painful and divisive in the church is precisely because it is possible to marshal good biblical and theological evidence on both sides of the issue. Persons on both sides are committed Christ-followers, passionate about the well-being of the church, and committed to the authority of Scripture, even though they may read and interpret Scripture somewhat differently. As a way to help us hear, understand, accept, and love each other in the church, this resource will explore some of the biblical evidence that can be found on different sides of the issue.

Some readers will be disappointed. Many of us are deeply invested in the issue of same-sex relationships, and when we read materials on the issue we want them to support our personal convictions. The purpose of this resource is not to argue for one position or the other. If you hold to the traditional position, I hope that as a result of reading this resource you will come to understand your own position better. However, I hope that you will also come to understand and perhaps even appreciate the opinions of persons with a different perspective. If you hold to the inclusive position, I

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<sup>1</sup> I owe this insight to Rudy Baergen, long-time Mennonite Church Canada pastor and Bible teacher.

hope that you will come to understand your own position better, but I also hope that you will come to understand and appreciate the convictions of traditionalists.

In this resource I simply assume that for Christians the Bible is authoritative in matters of faith and life. As Christians we are a storied people, who get theologically and ethically lost when the biblical story does not stand front and center in our corporate worship, our theological and ethical reflections, and our lives as a whole. In every moment of our individual and collective lives, God calls us to live as people who remember God's love affair with the world as portrayed in the broad sweep of the biblical story, which reaches its highpoint in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. (It is for these reasons that biblical illiteracy poses such a serious threat to the life, identity, and mission of the church.) Therefore, the Bible and its interpretation should stand front and center in our deliberations about same-sex relationships.

It might be helpful to begin by recognizing that already in the New Testament we see an example of how the existence of good biblical and theological evidence on both sides of an issue can fuel conflict in the church. Acts 15 records how the church was engaged in a painful conflict over whether or not Gentile Christians had to embrace circumcision and keep the Jewish food and purity regulations. On one side of the issue were the numerous biblical texts stipulating that circumcision was the essential mark of membership in God's covenant community, as well as the many passages outlining food and purity laws designed to set the Israelites/Jews apart and retain their identity as God's faithful and holy people. The evidence on the other side of the issue was that through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ God's reign had broken into human history in a decisive new way, and new wine called for new wineskins.

Through Jesus Christ God was now redefining the nature of the covenant community and inviting the nations to join. Non-Jews were committing their lives to Christ, and God was showering them with the gift of the Holy Spirit, even though these non-Jews had no intention of becoming circumcised or practicing the food and purity laws that had until now played such a significant role in the life of God's people. Some early Christians saw these events as fulfilling those Old Testament passages that envisioned Israel being a blessing to the nations, as well as passages foretelling that the nations would come to know the God of Israel and become part of the renewed people of God. There was good biblical and theological evidence on both sides of the issue, and so it is not surprising that the conflict was so deep and so painful that even though it is "officially" resolved at the Jerusalem conference described in Acts 15, the apostle Paul still had to contend with proponents of the Judaizing position in many of the churches that he founded and in his letters, particularly Galatians and Romans.

This example does not necessarily mean that when there is church conflict the innovative position always turns out to be the more faithful. During World War 2 numerous Mennonite young men adopted the "innovative" (for Mennonites) position that Christians could in good conscience go to war, and so they enlisted in the military. During and after the war there was considerable pressure in some Mennonite circles to abandon the traditional position on non-violence in favour of the "innovative" just war stance, which several Mennonite groups have done in the succeeding decades.

Mennonite Church Canada has continued to adhere to the traditional Anabaptist/Mennonite commitment to the non-violent way of Jesus. After lengthy reflection and discernment, church groups will sometimes judge the traditional rather than the innovative option as the more faithful.

Acts 15 reminds us that from the beginning of church history there have been situations of theological and ethical conflict, centred on core issues of Christian identity, with good biblical and theological evidence and people of good faith, on both sides of the issue. Such conflicts, as difficult and painful as they may be, and as long as they may sometimes take to resolve, need not destroy nor permanently divide the church, if they are handled sensitively, graciously, and wisely.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. When you recognize that there is good biblical and theological evidence on both sides of an issue, how does this impact the way in which you personally engage in a church discernment process? What might this recognition suggest about how congregations or larger church bodies can shape a healthy discernment process?
2. Can you think of instances when church conflict or disagreement was fueled by the existence of good biblical and theological evidence on both sides of an issue? How was this diverse evidence listened to and processed?
3. How might the church's experience in Acts 15 relate to the conflict that we as a church find ourselves in today on the issue of same-sex relationships?

## **Part 1**

### **Exploring Biblical Evidence for the Traditional Position**

#### **Creation Texts**

*So God created humankind in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.  
God blessed them, and God said to them,  
"Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth ... (Genesis 1:27–28a<sup>2</sup>)*

*Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife,  
and they become one flesh. (Genesis 2:24)*

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<sup>2</sup> All biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

Creation stories in the Bible are important for many reasons. They remind of us who our Creator is and therefore to whom we are accountable. They sketch out the nature of the world that God creates, and thus they remind us that we are called to live in this world on God's terms because it is God's world. Therefore, it is fitting that creation texts play a significant role in conversations around same-sex relationships.

According to Genesis 1–2, God takes the initiative to create male and female, and then blesses and empowers human sexual activity and procreation. Both Genesis 1 and 2 portray God as creating male and female so that human marriage and family become possible. These creation texts are a foundational piece of evidence for the traditional position, because of the kind of human community that God makes possible and approves of. God creates men and women sexually different and blesses them with companionship, with sexual attraction for each other, with the desire to form families, and with the ability to have children. The traditional line of reasoning is that human sexual activity that deviates from God's creational design is a form of sin that harms both individuals and the communities to which they belong. For individuals and human communities to thrive and flourish they must align their sexual and relational practices with God's creational intentions as revealed by Genesis 1–2.

Another reason these creation texts are so important in the conversation is because they express convictions that are assumed from the beginning to the end of the biblical story. There are literally hundreds of biblical texts dealing with marriage relationships of one kind or another that one could look at. However, exploring numerous passages would not be particularly enlightening because most of them express essentially the same basic convictions about sexuality and sexual relations as these creation texts, convictions that are summarized below.

### **Some Biblical Convictions about Sexual Relationships**

If one surveys the multitude of biblical passages, either Old Testament or New Testament, that deal with marriage and sexuality in one way or another, the following basic convictions relevant for our conversation come to the surface.

- 1) God has made us all male or female.
- 2) God has made us with sexual desires aimed at members of the opposite sex (in contemporary terms, God has made us heterosexual, although the notion of sexual orientation only developed in the last two hundred years or so in western culture).
- 3) Therefore, sexual intimacy belongs in the context of a marriage relationship between man and woman.
- 4) Same-sex sexual activity is unnatural, abnormal, and represents human sexual desire run amok. Such activity is abhorrent because it violates the way in which God has made us.

The Bible operates with a simple male-female binary, in contrast to contemporary gender studies which generally argue that human sexual and gender identity are much more complex. For example, we now realize that approximately 1 in 2,500 babies is born intersexed (formerly called “hermaphrodite”), that is with both male and female sexual body parts. In such cases initial physical appearance may not accurately predict whether the child will identify as male or female, and parents may struggle with knowing how to raise the child. Today it is also generally recognized that some people are transgendered. Someone may have a sexually male body but their gender identity is female, or they may have a female body but experience themselves as male. I recently read a story about a twelve-year old girl who at puberty discovered, much to her horror, that her testicles were descending and that she was developing other male body characteristics. Medical investigation revealed that this girl was genetically male, even though her gender identity was female in every respect. In contemporary gender studies it is widely believed that some people (according to some sources, as high as 2–5% of the population) are by nature sexually attracted to members of the same sex, that is, they are homosexual, while others are bisexual, experiencing sexual attraction to both males and females. Virtually all of the assumptions built into the contemporary LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) vocabulary are lacking in the Bible.

While the Bible does not explicitly articulate the “order of creation” argument with respect to sexual relationships (except perhaps in Romans 1:18–27), it does seem to assume the argument. Sexually, God has made humans in a particular way with particular desires. To act in ways that are contrary to this order of creation is sinful and unleashes harmful and destructive forces in both our individual and communal lives. Two texts frequently cited in the contemporary debate, seem to illustrate this conviction.

*You shall not lie with a male as with a woman;  
it is an abomination. (Leviticus 18:22)*

*If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination;  
they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them. (Leviticus 20:13)*

Both the language of abomination and the harsh punishment that is called for, illustrate that same-sex sexual activity is considered more harmful than most other human sins, probably because such activity is believed to violate the sexual order of God’s good creation. Many of the holiness laws in Leviticus represent an attempt to respect the order that God has built into creation, and so certain boundaries must not be crossed and certain inappropriate mixing must not happen. Different types of fabric must not be used to make a single item of clothing, a field must not be planted with two kinds of seeds, and animals must not be allowed to cross-breed (Leviticus 19:19). Similarly, God has created boundaries for sexual relationships that should not be crossed, boundaries that include prohibitions against incest, against sex between animals and humans, and against same-sex intercourse (Leviticus 18:6–30). Although the two Leviticus prohibitions speak only of males, the history of interpretation has generally assumed that these passages also prohibit female same-sex sexual activity.



## What Is the Sin of Sodom?

One of the few biblical stories that depicts actual same-sex activity, or perhaps one should say “attempted same-sex activity,” illustrates the Bible’s revulsion towards same-sex practice. God determines that the wickedness of the people of Sodom merits the destruction of the city, and so God dispatches angels to rescue Lot and his family from the conflagration.

As Lot is hosting the angels for night,

*“ . . . the **men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man**, [emphasis mine] surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, ‘Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.’” (Genesis 19:4–5)*

Throughout the Bible the city of Sodom symbolizes human depravity, and clearly this story uses the attempted same-sex gang rape of Lot’s divine visitors to illustrate that depravity.

On one hand, this story speaks into our contemporary conversation in the sense that it displays the Bible’s profound abhorrence of same-sex sexual activity and its conviction that such activity represents human sexual desires run wild. On the other hand, this story doesn’t really speak much to our current debate in the church.

In our present context the conversation centers on whether it is appropriate for a person who is same-sex attracted to engage in respectful, consensual sexual activity in the context of a covenanted relationship with someone of the same sex. The biblical story is about something very different. It stresses that every single man of Sodom participates in the attempt to gang rape the visitors. These men are obviously heterosexual, not homosexual. The Sodom story is about heterosexual men behaving badly, not misconduct on the part of homosexual men. Moreover, the activity attempted by the men is not respectful, consensual sex, but gang rape, similar to the kind of rape that is sometimes inflicted on new or weak prisoners by powerful inmates wishing to establish their power and dominance. In the ancient world it was considered shameful for a man to be sexually penetrated, especially against his will. Thus, what this story condemns is the attempt by the men of Sodom to humiliate, dominate, and brutalize Lot’s male visitors.

## Gender and Sexual Complementarity

The argument from the order of nature or the order of creation sometimes highlights gender and sexual complementarity. In Genesis 2:18–25 God creates the first woman to be a fitting partner for the male created earlier, and the two are joined in marriage. While the two are both of the same flesh (2:23) they are also different, and the text assumes that the two complement each other in the marriage relationship. Some people argue that this passage (as well as human experience more generally) indicates that there are fundamental physical, psychological, and even spiritual differences between men and women, and therefore male and female are able to complement and complete each other in a marriage relationship in a way that cannot happen in an intimate relationship between two men or two women. In addition, male and female biological complementarity is

essential for human reproduction. Some persons even point to the complementarity of male and female sexual organs as a sign of God's creational design. God has designed the male penis so that it fits inside the female vagina as a sign of God's intention for human sexual relationships. The supposed physical awkwardness of same-sex sexual activity between two women or two men illustrates that such activity lies outside the scope of what God intends.

### **The Bible's Relative Silence about Same-Sex Relationships**

One observation sometimes made about the Bible is, that given how large a book it is and how much material it contains, it is truly remarkable how little attention the Bible pays to same-sex relationships. In the Old Testament we find only the two laws from Leviticus already mentioned, as well as the story of Sodom, and a similar story in Judges 19:22–26 which involves another attempt at male gang-rape by men who are presumably heterosexual. Jesus never mentions the issue of same-sex relationships, and it is addressed only briefly in three of Paul's letters.

Some persons conclude that because the matter of same-sex relationships is a marginal concern at best in the Bible, therefore, it need not be a significant issue for us today, and the church ought to be open to accepting same-sex relationships. This line of reasoning uses a half-truth to distort the actual message of the Bible. It is true that the Bible very rarely speaks about same-sex relationships, but that is because it does not need to. The four convictions about sexuality and sexual relationships summarized above, were so widely accepted by the biblical writers and the audiences for whom they wrote, that there was no need to keep repeating that same-sex relationships violated God's intentions for human relationships. I cannot remember ever hearing a sermon exhorting the congregation not to commit murder. This is not because the congregations that I have been privileged to participate in have ever entertained the possibility that murder might be ethically acceptable. Rather, the sinfulness of murder is so thoroughly accepted among us that there is no need to devote valuable sermon time to the issue.

### **What Do Paul's Strange Terms Mean?**

In the New Testament we find three passages, all in Paul's letters, that refer specifically to same-sex sexual activity. The first two that we will look at are similar and occur in the context of vice lists. Such lists of sinful practices and lifestyles were commonly compiled by Jewish, Christian, and Greco-Roman teachers to instruct their audiences about appropriate lifestyles.

In 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 Paul begins with a general statement that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God, and then he provides examples of the kinds of wrongdoers who will be excluded. He concludes by pointing out that the activities engaged in by such wrongdoers are inconsistent with the cleansing, sanctifying, and justifying work of Christ.



In the middle of the passage we read:

*“Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, arsenokoitai, malakoi, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God” (6:9b–10).*

The argument in 1 Timothy 1:8–11 is that God’s law is good if used properly. The purpose of the law is to steer people away from the kinds of actions engaged in by wrongdoers like:

*“. . . murderers, fornicators, arsenokoitai, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, ....”*

I have left two Greek terms, “*arsenokoitai*” and “*malakoi*,” untranslated in these passages because their meaning is disputed. We know too little about the particular first-century sexual practices that these texts are referring to, for us to be certain about what exactly these terms mean in the context of these two passages. The multiple ways in which the two words have been rendered by different translations of 1 Corinthians 6:9 illustrates the unclarity.

	<i>malakoi</i>	<i>arsenokoitai</i>
American Standard Version (1901)	effeminate	abusers of themselves with men
Amplified Bible (2015)	effeminate	those who participate in homosexuality
New International Version (1978)	male prostitutes	homosexual offenders
Contemporary English Version (1995)	a pervert	behaves like a homosexual
Good News Translation (1992)	homosexual perverts	
New Living Translation (2015)	male prostitutes	practice homosexuality
New Revised Standard Version (1989)	male prostitutes	sodomites
Common English Bible (2011)	both participants in same-sex intercourse (Footnote: Or <i>submissive and dominant male sexual partners</i> )	
New International Version (2011)	men who have sex with men (Footnote: The words “men who have sex with men” translate two Greek words that refer to the passive and active participants in homosexual acts.)	

The term *malakoi* literally means soft ones, hence the translation “effeminate.” In some contexts its meaning was similar to our English word “sissy.” It could be used to describe men who used cosmetics, styled their hair, or weren’t “manly” enough according to accepted images of masculinity. It was also a common slang term in Paul’s day to designate the “passive” or penetrated partner in male same-sex intercourse. Allowing oneself to be penetrated was considered to be the height of unmanliness. One possibility is that in 1 Corinthians Paul is condemning any male who voluntarily allows himself to be penetrated in the course of same-sex intercourse.

However, other interpretations are also possible. Numerous commentators and translators believe that *malakoi* designates men who offered their services for hire, hence the translation “male prostitutes.” Male and especially female prostitutes were well-known in the Greco-Roman world. It is important to remember that many of these male and female prostitutes were slaves forced into the profession by their owners who pocketed the profits. In other cases, the *malakoi* may have been male slaves subject to the whims of their male masters who sought sexual adventure, or who were genuinely same-sex attracted, or who were pedophiles. A well-known practice in Paul’s day was pederasty, which involved an older, more powerful male having sex with a boy, either his own slave, or a prostitute who was most likely being pimped by an older male. Wealthy men were even known to castrate one or more of their slave boys to ensure that they retained their “unmanly” appearance. Some commentators argue that Paul’s primary target in the two passages under discussion is not mutual sexual activity between consenting male adults, but rather abusive and exploitative male on male sexual activity.

The term *arsenokoitai*, used in both passages above, is a compound Greek word meaning literally “man bedders,” someone who takes another man to bed. While the word clearly refers to same-sex male sexual activity, it is not clear under what conditions this activity occurs. Does *arsenokoitai* designate the “dominant” partner in a relationship that is for the most part egalitarian and consensual, or does it designate the dominant partner in one of the abusive types of same-sex relationships that Paul would have been familiar with, or does it designate both? At issue is the question of whether or not Paul condemns all same-sex sexual activity, including loving, mutual, consensual activity, or is he singling out abusive same-sex practices? There is no consensus on these questions. Some commentators even argue that because Paul is familiar with so many abusive forms of same-sex activity, he cannot even imagine the possibility of loving, egalitarian, consensual sex between males who were genuinely same-sex attracted. Other commentators claim that examples of such relationships did exist in Paul’s day, and that Paul deliberately includes them in his condemnation.

The lack of consensus among scholars, and our lack of knowledge about the specific practices that Paul may have in mind, should make us careful about how we use and translate these two passages. A translation like “male prostitutes” suggests far more than we actually know about the *malakoi* and may also be too limiting. Calling them “sexual perverts” is problematic because some of them may not have had perverted sexual desires at all, but may have been forced into sexual acts that they personally found disgusting. Using the term “homosexual” for either *malakoi* or *arsenokoitai* is problematic because it is a modern term unknown to the biblical writers, that we use to designate

someone who is emotionally and sexually drawn to members of their own sex. Some of the persons Paul condemns may have been heterosexual men, perhaps even married, who sought sexual adventure on the side by engaging in either abusive or consensual sex with other males.

While we should be cautious about how we interpret these two passages, there is evidence to suggest that Paul may intend to condemn all same-sex sexual activity. Every Jewish writer of the era who addresses same-sex sexual activity condemns it harshly, on the basis of the Leviticus and creation passages of the Old Testament. It is difficult to imagine that the Jewish-trained Paul would do otherwise. A second piece of evidence is that the term *arsenokoitai* (“man-bedders”) does not appear in Greek literature before Paul. It seems to be a compound Greek word coined by Paul or an earlier Jewish writer, which utilizes two key terms (“lying” and “with-a-male”) from Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. In all likelihood, Paul’s use of *arsenokoitai* intends to recall and reaffirm the condemnation of same-sex sexual activity found in Leviticus. The way both 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 and 1 Timothy 1:8–11 speak about the *arsenokoitai*, assumes that same-sex activity is not a controversial issue in the churches, but that readers will readily agree that *arsenokoitai* are wrongdoers. The third and most significant piece of evidence that argues in favour of a blanket condemnation by Paul, is his more detailed discussion in Romans 1:18–32.

### **Romans 1:18–32: A Key Text**

In this passage Paul asserts that because creation displays God’s amazing power, the Gentiles once understood certain basic facts about God (1:19–20). However, because they refused to honour God the Creator, their thinking became distorted and they exchanged the glory of the Creator God for images of humans, birds, reptiles, or land animals (1:21–23). Idolatry is the root of all sin because it represents a fundamental rejection of the Creator and the Creator’s ways. In response, God delivers the Gentiles over to the consequences of their own blindness and distorted thinking (1:24–25, 28), and as a result they display multiple distorted human desires and practices (1:24–32).

To make idols and thereby worship parts of the creation instead of the Creator, is to turn God’s created order upside down and lose a sense of God’s creational order. As a result, God hands the Gentiles over to degrading passions that represent upside down, anti-creational sexual desires. For Paul, a perverted human focus leads to perverted sexual and other desires.

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. (1:26–27)

In this text Paul both assumes and reinforces the four biblical convictions discussed above: 1) God has made us all male or female. 2) God has made humans with sexual desires aimed at members of the opposite sex (in contemporary terms, God has made humans heterosexual). 3) Therefore, sexual intimacy belongs in the context of a marriage relationship between man and woman. 4) Same-sex sexual activity represents human sexual desire run amok, and is abhorrent because it violates the

way in which God has made humans. Particularly significant in the larger passage is how Paul roots his whole argument in God's creational order, and concludes that same-sex sexual desires run counter to that creational order.

While some commentators maintain that even in Romans Paul has abusive same-sex relationships like pederasty in mind, this argument is difficult to sustain. Paul's disapproval is not linked to abuse. The fact that Paul also includes same-sex female sexual activity in his discussion, indicates that he is thinking in global terms about sexual desires and is not singling out particular abusive male same-sex sexual practices that were all too common in his day.

Romans 1 plays a prominent role in arguments that the church should not embrace same-sex relationships. However, the text is not always used in a way that is entirely consistent with Paul's thinking. I grew up in an era when the church's objection to same-sex relationships took the form of regarding both same-sex orientation and same-sex sexual practices as abhorrent and sinful, which is similar to Paul's perspective. Today, many Christians holding the traditional position have changed their perspective significantly. Because they have been open to hearing Christians who are same-sex attracted tell their stories of what life is like for same-sex attracted persons, and because they have heard the stories of persistent, prayerful, painful, but ultimately frustrating and fruitless struggles to become heterosexual, many traditional Christians now believe that some persons are simply born with a homosexual orientation, and that little can be done to change that reality. Out of genuine Christian compassion, many Christians no longer condemn same-sex attracted persons simply because of their orientation.

Numerous Christians and even denominations now make a distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual practice. Hence, same-sex attracted Christians are not condemned for who they are, but they are expected to remain celibate. The basis for this position is that sexual expression is not a "human right" in the Christian faith. The church expects that single persons will remain celibate. Prior to marriage, post-marriage, and even at times during marriage when spouses are apart or one spouse is incapacitated, the church calls for sexual celibacy. Because God intends sexual intimacy to be reserved for heterosexual marriage, same-sex attracted persons must remain celibate for life. Even some same-sex attracted Christians voice this argument. Ed Shaw, for example, writes with deep passion and insight about his experience as a same-sex attracted Christian who went to enormous lengths to change his orientation, but was unsuccessful in doing so. Now, as much as he yearns for a male partner with whom to experience emotional, physical, and sexual intimacy, he is committed to celibacy, because he is convinced that this is the biblical vision for human sexual expression.<sup>3</sup>

While there is a deep pastoral and ethical integrity to this position, and while its compassion towards same-sex attracted persons is a major step forward from where the church of my youth was at, its proponents generally fail to realize that it is not entirely consistent with Paul's arguments in Romans 1. Traditionalists frequently accuse persons in favour of accepting same-sex relationships in

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<sup>3</sup> Ed Shaw, *Same-Sex Attraction and the Church: The Surprising Plausibility of the Celibate Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

the church of setting aside the biblical witness in favour of arguments based on human experience and reason. It is worth noting that the ethical position sketched above also sets aside a significant feature of the biblical witness, and constructs an ethical position based to some extent on human arguments. The distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual practice is a contemporary construct, foreign to Paul's thinking (and perhaps that of the rest of the Bible). The whole force of his argument comes down on the **passions** and **desires** that lead to homosexual activity (1:24,26-27). Paul condemns homosexual desire, not just practice, as being in and of itself sinful. It represents the consequences of divine judgment on humanity that has turned its back on the Creator God. As William Loader puts it, "Something has gone wrong when people are attracted to those of their own sex, and for Paul this happens because something has gone wrong with the relationship with God."<sup>4</sup>

This is an ethical position that many Christians today (including William Loader) are unwilling to embrace, even though it is the "biblical position" of Paul. There may be good theological and ethical reasons to respectfully disagree with Paul and devise an ethical position that does not condemn persons for their same-sex orientation but does ask them to remain celibate. Such an argument is deeply rooted in the biblical teaching that sexual intercourse belongs in the context of heterosexual marriage. However, it also relies on our human experience of hearing the stories of same-sex attracted Christians and concluding that their orientation is just simply a natural part of their being, probably rooted in prenatal biology, and is not necessarily a form of divine judgment on human sinfulness. On the basis of human experience and reasoning, many traditionalists are willing to disagree with Paul, even though this fact generally remains unacknowledged.

### Summing Up

I come back to the insight described at the beginning of this resource, when the church finds itself in conflict over a theological or ethical issue, one factor in the mix is that usually there is good biblical and theological evidence to support more than one side of the issue. In the current debate, it is undeniable that there is a great deal of biblical evidence that speaks in favour of the traditional position. How then do people who favour inclusion respond to this evidence, and what biblical arguments do they bring to the table?

### Questions for Discussion

1. In your opinion, what are the strongest pieces of biblical evidence in favour of the traditional position?
2. Are there other biblical texts or themes not discussed above, that speak in favour of the traditional position and ought to be considered?

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<sup>4</sup> "Homosexuality and the Bible," in *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church*, ed. Preston Sprinkle (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 41.

3. How strongly do you think we today should hold to the four basic convictions of the Bible about sexuality and sexual relationships? Do they reflect God's revelation, or do they reflect primarily the cultural assumptions of the ancient biblical writers?
4. Ever since Acts 15 the church has set aside many of the ethical guidelines presented in the book of Leviticus. Yet Jesus holds up "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18), as one of the two greatest commandments (Mark 12:31). How much weight should the church give to the two commandments in Leviticus 18 about same-sex activity?
5. How have you heard the story of Sodom used in contemporary conversations about same-sex relationships? Was it used in a way that is true to the nature of the story? What implications do you think this story has for contemporary relationships?
6. How valid or helpful do you find the arguments based on gender complementarity or God's creational design?
7. How do you respond to Paul's arguments in Romans 1 about same-sex desires and activity?
8. Do you think that it is important to make a distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual practice? Why or why not?

## Part 2

### Exploring Biblical Evidence for the Inclusive Position

#### What Might We Learn from the Slavery Issue?

The inclusive position, unlike the traditional position, focuses much less on individual biblical texts, and much more on larger biblical themes and on questions of how Christians ought to interpret the Bible.

Inclusivists point out that in the case of many theological and ethical issues, in order to be faithful, the church must apply biblical texts in fairly literal and straightforward ways. "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13). "You shall not steal" (Exodus 20:15). "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:5). One could cite hundreds of other biblical texts that fall into this category. Of course, even such seemingly straightforward passages require interpretation. What does it look like to love God with our entire being? How long a coffee break may I take before I am stealing time from my employer? How low a wage may an employer pay before they are stealing money from an employee?



However, inclusivists believe that it is important to recognize that in order to be faithful Christians, there are also cases in which we must go beyond the plain meaning of biblical texts. Slavery provides one of the best illustrations. From beginning to end the Bible assumes that slavery is a legitimate institution. There are some guidelines that seek to limit the abuses of slavery and make it less harsh, but even the New Testament contains three passages that instruct slaves to be submissive to their masters, in one case, even abusive masters (Ephesians 6:5–8; Colossians 3:22–25; 1 Peter 2:18–21). Slavery, especially in the Greco-Roman world, was such a deeply entrenched institution, that it seems the New Testament writers were not able to imagine that God might call Christians to work for the end of slavery.

Christians in Europe and North America who supported slavery were quick to enlist the Bible's many pro-slavery texts to justify the kidnapping and enslavement of well over ten million Africans, in one of the world's worst crimes against humanity ever. We ought to be grateful that there were also other Christians who enlisted the Bible in building the case against slavery. The Christian abolitionists could not proof-text like the pro-slavery side could, because there is not a single biblical text that outrightly condemns slavery. The abolitionists had to make their case in more indirect ways, by pointing to biblical texts and themes, that if applied more broadly, challenge slavery: the exodus from Egypt which displays God's desire to see the liberation of slaves, God's passion for justice and well-being for the weak and vulnerable, Jesus's ministry to the outcasts and marginalized, Jesus's call to love our neighbour as ourselves, Paul's assertion that in Christ there is neither slave nor free, etc.

With the benefit of hindsight we can easily see that abolitionists were correct, which illustrates that on some issues contemporary Christians must go beyond where the biblical writers end up. Christian faithfulness requires us to recognize that on some theological and ethical issues, the biblical writers, for a variety of reasons, were not yet able to discern the full implications of the good news of Jesus Christ. It is also important to recognize that changing times and situations may call us to live out the gospel message in ways that are somewhat different from how previous generations have lived out the gospel. We should be careful to note that on the slavery issue it was not a matter of one side taking the Bible seriously while the other did not. Both sides took the Bible seriously as a source of authority, but they came to very different conclusions because they emphasized different texts and because they interpreted that Bible in very different ways.

The slavery issue has parallels to the issue of women in leadership roles in the church. I grew up in a patriarchal context where it was inconceivable that a woman would preach a sermon on Sunday morning. We believed that the Bible's deeply-entrenched patriarchy and thoroughly male leadership patterns reflected God's will for the church and world. If there was any doubt about this, we had texts like 1 Timothy 2:11–15 which expressly forbids female leadership in the church, partly on the grounds that women are by nature morally inferior to men. Many denominations, including Mennonite Church Canada, have arrived at the conclusion that in order to be faithful to the good news of Jesus Christ, we must go beyond where most of the biblical writers end up on this issue. We must set aside the deeply entrenched patriarchy of the Bible because it is a reflection of ancient culture, not a reflection of God's eternal will for the church or for human relationships more broadly. Instead of highlighting the multitude of texts that reinforce male dominance and seek to limit the

roles and opportunities for women, we must highlight both the exceptions to the rule and also larger biblical themes that can be enlisted in order to empower women, to set women free to utilize their gifts in service to the reign of God, and to place male-female relationships on an equal footing. Here too, it is not a matter of one side in the debate taking the Bible seriously and the other side setting the Bible aside. Both sides take the Bible as a source of authority, but they read it differently and they choose to highlight different features of the Bible.

At the very core of the conflict over same-sex relationships in the church lies the question, “Do the Bible’s statements about same-sex relationships fall into the category of those texts that we must adhere to literally in order to be faithful, or do they belong to the category of texts that we must go beyond in order to be faithful?” At stake are the four basic assumptions that the Bible makes about human sexuality and relationships:

- 1) God has made us all male or female.
- 2) God has made humans with sexual desires aimed at members of the opposite sex (in contemporary terms, God has made humans heterosexual).
- 3) Therefore, sexual intimacy belongs in the context of a marriage relationship between man and woman.
- 4) Same-sex sexual activity represents human sexual desire run wild, and is abhorrent because it violates the way in which God has made humans. Do these four convictions represent God’s revelation that is still binding on us, or are these convictions a reflection of ancient culture that we are now free to leave behind?

Arguments can be made in favour of both positions. On the side of the traditionalists lies the whole weight of the biblical tradition that limits sexual relationships to a marriage relationship between a man and woman. Persons arguing for inclusion claim that this is not much different than the weight of biblical traditions that favour slavery and reinforce the inferiority of women versus men, traditions that God now calls us to transcend, based on taking seriously broader biblical themes and emphases. In John 16:12–15 Jesus tells his disciples that he still has much to teach them but they are not able to handle such teaching just yet. Therefore, he will send the “Spirit of truth” who will bring further revelation and guidance from Jesus. Some Christians believe that the “Spirit of truth” is now calling the church to be open to same-sex relationships, just like this “Spirit of truth” called us to new ways of thinking about slavery and the role of women in the church.

On the other hand, however, is the position of someone like Christopher Seitz, a leading Old Testament scholar. “If the Bible’s consistently negative word about homosexual conduct is wrong, or outdated, *who will then decide in what other ways the Bible is or is not to be trusted or cannot comprehend our day and its struggles under God?*”<sup>5</sup> Seitz’s comments remind us that the church

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<sup>5</sup> Christopher R. Seitz, *The Character of Christian Scripture: The Significance of a Two-Testament Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), pp. 178–79.

must always guard against domesticating the Bible and allowing it to speak only the message that we are comfortable hearing. On the other hand, Seitz's comments gloss over the reality that in every age the church does in fact make difficult decisions about whether it will fully "trust" certain kinds of biblical texts, texts that reinforce slavery for example, or the oppression of women, or encourage genocide against the enemies of God's people (see Deuteronomy 20:16–17; Joshua 6:21; 8:24–27; 10:28–42).

## Reading the Bible through Interpretive Lenses

In response to one of my public presentations dealing with how the church interprets Scripture, one woman made a comment something like, "All of this stuff about different ways of interpreting the Bible is just too complex. I just read the Bible, take what it says at face value, and then try to do what it says." I appreciate the deep piety and commitment to the authority of Scripture that underlies a comment like this. However, it is dangerously self-delusional to think this way. With respect to many individual texts, we should interpret and apply them in a straightforward way. However, despite what we might claim, none of us just reads the Bible and takes all of what it says at face value. All of us read the Bible and interpret and appropriate what it says through a whole set of interpretive lenses.<sup>6</sup> These interpretive lenses influence which biblical texts we highlight and give weight to, and which we sideline or even ignore. Such interpretive lenses give us ways to deal with the problematic features of the Bible, like its legitimization of slavery, genocide, and the oppression of women.

One of the best ways to illustrate what interpretive lenses are and how they function is to use an example from the New Testament. Acts 15 describes how the early church dealt with a huge conflict that struck at the core identity of the church. Were Gentile Christians obligated to be circumcised, follow the Jewish food laws, and adhere to all the Old Testament purity laws, which were all designed to set the Israelite/Jewish people apart as God's chosen people? The early church's "Bible" was very clear on what was required of God's people in such matters. Yet the church made the remarkable decision that because of the new things that God was doing through Jesus Christ, it would no longer be bound by the multitude of biblical texts that spoke very clearly on the issue.

So what did the church do with its Scripture in light of this decision? The church did not re-edit its Bible and delete all the passages about circumcision, food laws, and purity regulations. Instead, it developed what can be called an interpretive lens to deal with such texts. In essence the church declared, "Such passages and practices once played a useful role in the life of God's people, but now, because of the new era of salvation initiated by Jesus Christ, and because of God's purpose to make the church a universal multi-ethnic community, we must push these biblical passages into the background and not allow them to determine our life and practices." This interpretive lens developed

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<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to Ernst M. Conradie for introducing me to the concept of interpretive lenses, although he calls them "doctrinal constructs." See "What on Earth Is an Ecological Hermeneutics? Some Broad Parameters," in *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives*, edited by David G. Horrell, et al (London: T & T Clark, 2010), pp. 301–311.

by the early church has served us well throughout the centuries. I don't know a single Christian today who does not read and interpret the Bible through this interpretive lens.

Why is it that the question of slavery is not a burning issue for us today, like it once was? Over the last several centuries the church has gradually developed an interpretive lens that shapes how we now read biblical texts that legitimate slavery. We have not re-edited the Bible and deleted the pro-slavery passages, but we have developed an interpretive lens that highlights the biblical texts and themes that can be used to challenge slavery. Our interpretive lens foregrounds these texts and themes so that they shape our practice, and the pro-slavery texts we either ignore or push into the background.

Many denominations have done something similar with those biblical texts that reinforce patriarchy and limit the role of women in church, family, and society. They have developed an interpretive lens which claims that the patriarchy evident in much of the Bible is a reflection of ancient patriarchal culture and is not a reflection of God's will for human life. Rather, God's will is reflected in those biblical texts and themes that promote the empowerment of women and envision mutuality and equality in male-female relationships. The Mennonite church deals with violence in the Bible in a similar way. We recognize that many passages in the Bible encourage God's people to wage war against their enemies, but we explicitly say that these passages will not determine our practice. Rather, we choose to give greater authority to the call of Jesus to love our enemies and embrace his non-violent way of life.

Interpretive lenses can be liberating and life-giving. They can also be blinding and oppressive. That is why from time to time the church must critically evaluate and perhaps reform its interpretive lenses. For centuries the church had an interpretive lens by which it marshaled biblical evidence to justify slavery. This interpretive lens blinded Christians to the liberating themes and passages in the Bible, and was in drastic need of revision. Many Christians today still embrace an interpretive lens that uses the Bible to limit the role of women in church, family, and society. Others argue that this interpretive lens distorts God's will and must be revised. Some interpretive lenses, like the early church's interpretive lens for reading the Bible's circumcision and purity passages, have proved remarkably stable and life-giving over the centuries. Other interpretive lenses, despite their longevity, need to be examined and perhaps revised.

In reality, none of us just reads the Bible and simply believes and does what it says. Of course we should do so with respect to many individual passages, like the Ten Commandments for example. However, when it comes to the Bible as a whole, we always read and appropriate in ways that are profoundly shaped by a large number of interpretive lenses. While interpretive lenses can be dangerous and deceiving, many are gifts of God. For example, interpretive lenses free us today from having to debate (and fight over) issues like circumcision and purity laws, or slavery, or (hopefully) women in leadership roles in the church. We are free to use our time and energy to get on with the pressing matters of Christian ministry in our own time.

The church's conflict over same-sex relationships is to some extent a conflict over which interpretive lens we believe God is calling us to embrace in our reading of the Bible. On one side are Christians

who defend the church's long-standing interpretive lens based on the large amount of biblical evidence opposed to same-sex relationships. On the other side, are Christians who argue that, just like at one time the Holy Spirit guided the church into adopting a new interpretive lens for dealing with the circumcision and purity laws, or the issue of slavery, or the issue of women in church leadership, in our time God is calling the church to develop a new interpretive lens for dealing with the biblical evidence opposed to same-sex relationships.

### **The Role of Human Experience and Reason in Biblical Interpretation**

Supporters of inclusion rely heavily on what they claim human experience and reason teach us about sexual orientation, sexual attraction, and same-sex relationships. Before we can discuss these arguments it is worth reflecting on the role human experience and reason play or should play in biblical interpretation. Some Christians claim that we should just read and interpret the Bible and not place much weight on human experience and reason. After all, the Bible contains God's revelation that we should not challenge on the basis of our human reason and experience. This is especially true since all our reason and experience are tainted by human fallenness that inclines us towards self-interest, self-deception, and distortion of the truth. Such cautions are worth heeding, and the church should always treat Scripture as its pre-eminent authority.

Yet we cannot and should not park our reason and experience at the door when we approach the Bible. The presence of wisdom literature like the book of Proverbs in the Bible, which presents itself not as divine revelation but as human reflections on the nature of life, testifies to the Bible's conviction that human reason and experience can be gifts of God which are extremely valuable for discerning the shape of the faithful life. Christian discipleship requires more than just reading and applying the message of the Bible, but requires us to bring our human experience, knowledge, and reason into dialogue with the Bible. Jesus tells the powerful parable of the Good Samaritan and at the end challenges readers to go and do likewise. For us today to go and do likewise requires more than pouring olive oil on the wounds of someone who has been mugged, like the good Samaritan does. We must utilize our human reason and experience, not to mention our best medical expertise, to discern the concrete ways of being Good Samaritan kind of people today.

Human reason and experience also play a key role in shaping healthy interpretive lenses. The church changed its position on slavery not because pastors and biblical scholars spent more time in their offices studying the Bible. The church's position changed as Christians who were deeply steeped in the biblical story, brought that story into dialogue with the real experience of African American slaves. On the basis of human observations about how harmful and brutal slavery was to real people, and on the basis of important biblical texts and themes, these Christians reasoned that slavery was profoundly sinful. Then they used their reason to create a new interpretive lens for reading what the Bible says about slavery. The real-life experience of Christian slaves enabled them to develop an anti-slavery interpretive lens for reading the Bible almost the moment that they became Christians.

The change in our church's position on women in leadership roles in the church did not begin because we read and studied the Bible more earnestly. It happened because here and there women



began to speak up and testify that they felt the Spirit calling them into leadership roles in the church. Individual congregations began to listen to these women and invited them to lead worship, preach, and test their gifts for other forms of ministry. As congregations were blessed by such experiences, more and more congregations began allowing women to exercise various forms of leadership. Once our practices were in the process of changing, then we brought biblical texts and themes into conversation with the experiences of women and congregations, and we used our human reason to devise a new interpretive lens for reading the Bible so that we no longer use it to restrict the role of women in the church.

Giving a significant voice to human experience and reason is always risky because of the many ways in which our reason is limited and can be distorted. However, there is no way to escape using our reason and experience, and the Bible gives us good precedent for using both. When the early church was discerning whether or not Gentile Christ-followers should be subject to circumcision and the ritual purity laws, they obviously asked what their Scripture said on the matter. However, the clear voice of Scripture did not become the deciding factor, or else the debate would have been over before it even started.

According to Acts, the deciding factor was,

*“And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them [non-Jewish Christ followers] 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)*

While the deciding factor was God’s activity, it was through experience and powers of observation that the early church was able to discern how God was active. These Christians saw Gentiles transformed by the grace of Christ, demonstrating the gifts of the Spirit. Using their reason and prayerful listening to reflect on this experience, these early Christians concluded that what was happening in their midst was of God, and hence, their interpretation of Scripture would need to change. In this story the early church clearly recognizes that the Bible is not the only source of insight and authority that needs to be part of the church’s discernment process. The question, “What does the Bible say?” should be critically important in the church’s discernment process, but it should not end or shortchange that discernment process.

The experience of the scientist Galileo demonstrates the mischief that can result when the church only asks what the Bible says and does not give sufficient weight to human experience and reason. In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century Galileo published a book in which he argued that the sun, not the earth is the center of the solar system, and that the earth revolves around the sun, not the other way around. The Catholic Church condemned Galileo for contradicting the Bible, forced him to retract his views, and had him placed under house arrest for the rest of his life. The church leaders knew that the Bible talks about the earth being unmoved (1 Chronicles 16:30; Psalm 104:5) and of the sun rising and setting and returning again to the place from which it rises (Ecclesiastes 1:5). If the Bible could not be trusted on something as fundamental as the very structure of the cosmos, then the entire Christian faith was in danger of being undermined. Therefore, Galileo had to be muzzled. In time the scientific



evidence became overwhelming and the church was forced to recognize that sometimes human experience (science) and reason must lead to new ways of reading the Bible. The church eventually accepted a new interpretive lens for reading those biblical texts that assume a flat earth with heavenly bodies revolving around it. By now we have so thoroughly absorbed this interpretive lens that most of us never even notice the Bible's assumptions about the cosmos, and when we do we simply shrug them off as reflections of ancient understandings that we can set aside.

Similar dynamics are at work in debates over whether Genesis 1 provides a scientific account of the creation of the world. Some Christians argue that if the Bible cannot be trusted on such a basic matter, then it cannot be trusted at all. Many Christians, however, accept the scientific evidence in favour of evolution, and are not troubled by reading Genesis 1 as an ancient poetic account whose primary purpose is to praise the Creator versus describe the process of creation. Here too, human experience and reason have changed the way many Christians now read Genesis 1.

Earlier I quoted Christopher Seitz to the effect that if we cannot trust the Bible's word on same-sex relationships then the Bible's authority as a whole is called into question. Persons advocating for inclusion point out that in the past church leaders have more than once made exactly this same argument when their interpretations of Scripture were challenged. Then a generation or two later, the church adopted a new interpretive lens for reading the Bible, and the role and authority of the Bible in the life of the church were not irreparably damaged after all. Perhaps the same can be the case with embracing same-sex relationships, even if we take seriously the insight gained from human experience and reason.

### **Do New Insights Call for New Interpretations?**

LGBTQ persons and their supporters have often been critical of the church for discussing issues surrounding sexual orientation and same-sex relationships in an abstract way, without inviting LGBTQ folks and their life experience into the conversation. In many circles debate has centered on what the Bible says, as if that is sufficient. Given the previous discussion about the valuable role of human experience and reason, the church needs to grapple seriously with the experiences of LGBTQ persons. Persons advocating for inclusion seek to welcome the stories and experiences of LGBTQ persons into the conversation in a way that gives significant weight to these experiences. How do LGBTQ persons experience their orientation? When did they first become aware that they were not heterosexual? Have they tried to change their orientation and what was that experience like? What do they yearn for in their relationships, both sexual and non-sexual? What is it like to live in a society and church that is geared towards heterosexuals, and often does not understand their life experience and may not welcome them? How do they hear the church's position on same-sex relationships? What do they long to receive from the church and from their brothers and sisters in Christ?

Several times already I have summarized the Bible's central convictions regarding sexuality and relationships: 1) God has made us all male or female; 2) God has made humans with sexual desires aimed at members of the opposite sex (in contemporary terms, God has made humans heterosexual); 3) Therefore, sexual intimacy belongs in the context of a marriage relationship

between man and woman; 4) Same-sex sexual activity represents human sexual desire run amok, and is abhorrent because it violates the way in which God has made humans. Advocates for inclusion argue that these convictions do not necessarily represent divine revelation as much as they represent the culture and assumptions of the ancient biblical writers, much like the passages limiting the role of women reflect the patriarchal assumptions of the biblical writers. The experience of LGBTQ persons and the findings of contemporary gender studies, reveal that human sexuality and sexual desires are actually significantly more complex than the biblical writers assume. Just like the ethical position of the biblical writers was shaped by the best understandings of their time, our ethical position must be shaped by the best understandings of our own time about sexual orientation and gender identity.

Advocates for inclusion point to several key insights from contemporary human experience and reason, which they claim, represent both human and divine gifts of insight that we ought to take seriously in our deliberations as a church.

- 1) Same-sex attraction and transgenderism are normal human phenomena, experienced by a minority of the population.
- 2) Same-sex attraction and transgenderism are not voluntarily chosen. In most cases people are born with these inclinations, because they are rooted in a person's biological make-up, perhaps genetics, or pre-natal hormones, or a combination of these and other factors.
- 3) People who are same same-sex attracted cannot change their sexual orientation because it is so deeply rooted in their identity. Attempting to change one's orientation is spiritually and psychologically destructive.
- 4) Same-sex attracted Christians love and follow Jesus, and their lives demonstrate the gifts of the Spirit.
- 5) Same-sex attracted persons are capable of forming loving, healthy, covenanted, life-long, relationships, just like heterosexual persons.

The argument generally goes that because same-sex orientation is not voluntarily chosen, because it cannot be changed, and because it is natural just like heterosexual orientation is, the church should not condemn all same-sex sexual activity. Using a line of reasoning similar to what we see in Acts 15, persons advocating inclusion claim that LGBTQ Christians can love Jesus just as much as other Christians do, and their lives can demonstrate the gifts of the Spirit just as much as the lives of other Christians. Same-sex attracted Christians are capable of forming life-long covenanted relationships just like heterosexual persons are, and these relationship can demonstrate just as much love, faithfulness, joy, respect, and fulfillment as heterosexual marriages. From these observations we can conclude that God is at work in the lives and covenanted relationships of LGBTQ persons just like God is work in the lives and covenanted relationships of heterosexual persons. Therefore, the church should be open to marrying and embracing same-sex couples. Just like the new insights of Galileo

and the anti-slavery activists eventually led the church to embrace new interpretive lenses for reading the Bible, our new insights into sexual orientation and gender identity should do likewise.

Traditionalists push back and assert that the situation is not quite this simple. We may not yet know enough about the five “insights” summarized above to accept them as unassailable facts that should alter the church’s position. Some of them may turn out to be little more than human assumptions conditioned by our current culture, whereas the Bible’s convictions may yet turn out to be truths revealed by God in order to steer us away from unhealthy and destructive ways of living. Moreover, it is poor ethical reasoning to assume that the biological rootedness of human desires and inclinations somehow makes it appropriate to act upon them. It may well be that some persons are biologically predisposed towards alcoholism, or outbursts of uncontrollable temper, or even violence. In such cases we expect persons to resist acting out of their biological inclinations. The inclusivist side responds by asserting that this comparison is unfair and misleading. Violence and alcoholism are always harmful because they hurt people, whereas, same-sex sexual relationships can be a powerful blessing for people.

One of the key issues at stake is how much weight to give human reason and experience in our discernment process. Complicating the situation is the question of how accurate are either the contemporary convictions of the inclusivists, or the biblical convictions on which the traditionalists base their case. What is not generally recognized, however, is the significant overlap in how inclusivists and some traditionalists use human experience and reason. Earlier, when discussing Romans 1 I pointed out that even many traditionalists now use contemporary human experience and reason to disagree with Paul and the biblical conviction that God has made all humans with sexual desires aimed at members of the opposite sex. Paul declares both same-sex sexual attraction and activity as a sinful distortion of God’s creational order, making no distinction between them. Now that many traditionalists take seriously the stories and experience of LGBTQ persons, they freely admit that sexual orientation may be biologically rooted, that persons are generally not able to change orientation despite strenuous prayer and effort, and that same-sex sexual desires are not a form of divine judgment as Paul argues. Therefore, many traditionalists now differentiate between homosexual orientation and practice, claiming that the orientation itself is not sinful, only the practice.

### **The Redemptive Arc of Scripture**

Comparisons to how the church has dealt with the slavery and women in leadership issues play a significant role in the arguments of the inclusivists as they build a case for developing a new interpretive lens for reading the Bible. In response, numerous traditionalists claim that these other two issues are not parallel to the same-sex relationship issue. In the case of both slavery and women, some traditionalist writers speak of the Bible’s clear progression from acceptance of slavery and the inequality of women, towards indications that both are wrong. Other writers speak of the liberating arc of Scripture, running through both Old and New Testaments, that cumulatively points towards the abolition of slavery and the empowerment of women. While the Bible contains many passages

that support slavery and the inequality of women, there is nonetheless “a Spirit-guided redemptive movement that can guide the church’s discernment.”<sup>7</sup> It is this “Spirit-guided redemptive movement” that gives the contemporary church permission to move beyond where the biblical writers end up on the issues of slavery and empowerment of women. But, it is argued, the issues of slavery and women are fundamentally different than the same-sex relationship issue, because with respect to sexual relationships there is no diversity of perspectives in the Bible, and no biblical trajectory. From beginning to end, the Bible insists that sexual intercourse belongs in a marriage relationship between male and female. While biblical marriage can take different forms (polygamy, monogamy, concubinage [a slave woman forced into marriage]), there is no sanction for same-sex unions. “The redemptive movement throughout the biblical canon is always away from same-sex practices.”<sup>8</sup>

Inclusivists counter in at least two different ways. The existence of a “Spirit-guided redemptive movement” is by no means a self-evident feature of the Bible. It was not evident to white Christian slave owners. The liberating trajectory for women is still not evident to many individual Christians or to many entire congregations and denominations. For this latter group of Christians what is far more obvious is the many ways in which the Bible promotes the inequality and subjection of women, which they feel God is calling them to perpetuate in the present. The existence of a redemptive movement only becomes evident to Christians willing to embrace the kind of interpretive lens that highlights the liberating passages and themes.

A second response by inclusivists is that it is in fact possible to discern a liberating trajectory in the Bible that might allow for same-sex relationships. One of the key features of the Bible with respect to marriage relationships is the changing perspectives as to what faithful marriage looks like. In the early part of the Old Testament a man can have as many wives as he can afford to support or acquire. He is permitted to have concubines, slave women who become second-class wives. By our standards such relationships constitute rape, because slave women don’t own and control their own bodies and are, therefore, unable to give meaningful consent. When an Israelite soldier is at war and finds a captured maiden attractive, he may kidnap her and bring her home, as long as he treats her as a wife (Deuteronomy 21:10-14). By ancient standards this practice may be somewhat humane, because the soldier is not allowed to rape the woman and then discard her, as so often happens in times of war. However, when we today hear how members of Boko Haram or ISIS kidnap and force young women into marriage, we are quite rightly outraged.

The Old Testament forbids adultery but defines it in a way that serves male privilege. If a married man takes additional wives, has sex with his female slaves, or visits a prostitute, none of these actions constitute adultery. He only commits adultery if he has sex with the wife of another man, and then the offense is against the aggrieved husband, not his own wife. The underlying assumption is that a wife’s sexuality belongs to her husband, and only when a husband’s “property” is violated, does adultery occur. By definition, a woman is never the victim of adultery, no matter how many sexual partners her husband has, because his sexuality does not belong to his wife.

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<sup>7</sup> Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, “What Is ‘Good’ and ‘Acceptable?’” *Canadian Mennonite* (20.4, February 15, 2016), p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

These are some of the places where ancient Israel starts in terms of its understanding of what constitutes faithful marriage. The Bible tells the long story of Israel's life with God, and by God's grace, along the way there is new revelation about what God's will for marriage really looks like. By the end of the Old Testament period the Jewish people have come to understand marriage as a covenant relationship between one man and one woman. Then Jesus redefines adultery and calls men, just like women, to be faithful to their spouses. He even goes so far as to define lustful looking as adultery (Matthew 5:28). Whereas the Old Testament permits men to divorce their wives, Jesus calls for lifelong marital fidelity. Paul admonishes husbands to love their wives as they love themselves (Ephesians 5:25–33; Colossians 3:19), a remarkable thing to say given the way husbands were expected to dominate their wives in Greco-Roman society.

But even the New Testament does not envision marriages reflecting the kind of mutuality and equality that most of us strive for. In Greco-Roman society most men did not marry until roughly the age of thirty, and they generally married women in their teens. Add a heavy dose of patriarchy to the mix, and the result was marriages reflecting great inequality between the partners. It is precisely this inequality that allows New Testament writers to speak of the church as the bride of Christ. The image points to the intimacy of the marriage bond, but it also points to the fact that Christ is Lord of the church, in the same way that a husband was lord over his wife.

This brief survey of biblical marriage practices indicates that there is no fixed image of what faithful marriage looks like in the Bible. Rather, faithful marriage is somewhat of a moving target, with significant movement towards marriage arrangements that are more mutual, respectful, and sensitive to the weaker party in the relationship. But even the New Testament does not arrive at an image of marriage that most of us aspire to and want to promote. So what then does the Bible authorize for us? Does it authorize one particular form of marriage relationship? Or does it authorize a process whereby we as a community of faith engage in ongoing discernment about what God's will looks like in terms of relationships that are truly loving, respectful, mutual, and life-enhancing?

The inclusive position claims that same-sex relationships can be in keeping with God's will for life-long marriages that are mutually respectful, joyful, life-giving, and fulfilling, and that model Christ's love for the church. In other words, same-sex marriages can look very much like what we hope and pray heterosexual marriages will look like. The issue we ought to be concerned about is not the sex of the partners, but the nature and quality of the relationship. Traditionalists respond by acknowledging the changing nature of faithful marriage in the Bible, but point out that all such change happens within the boundaries of marriage as a relationship between male and female. This boundary, traditionalists claim, is not merely a human convention but is established by God.

### **The Biblical Call to Justice and Compassion**

Inclusivists frequently point to the biblical theme of God's commitment to justice and to compassion for the weak and marginalized. Inclusivists believe that today Jesus calls us to extend to same-sex attracted persons the same kind of love, sensitivity, and compassion that Jesus extends to the outsiders and untouchables of his day. For inclusivists, this means listening to the stories of LGBTQ



persons, understanding their life experience, and being sympathetic to their yearnings for acceptance, for covenanted relationships, and for the possibility of sexual expression in the context of those relationships. If heterosexual persons are welcome to enter into romantic relationships and then marriage, a commitment to God's justice calls us to extend the same privilege to persons who are same-sex attracted. It seems somewhat arrogant, hard-hearted, and like an attempt to enforce a double standard, for heterosexual persons in the church to decide that same-sex attracted persons should not be allowed to form the kind of loving, joyful, fulfilling relationships that most heterosexual persons seek for themselves. Jesus challenged many of the social and religious norms of his day by extending God's love, grace, and acceptance to persons considered unworthy of divine grace and acceptance. Today, God calls us to do likewise as we deal with the issue of same-sex relationships.

Inclusivists point to one of the most famous commandments from Leviticus, which Jesus highlights as one of the two greatest commands, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18; Mark 12:31). Inclusivists believe that loving the LGBTQ neighbour as oneself implies taking seriously what that neighbour yearns for in terms of their human flourishing, and making space for the fulfillment of such yearnings in the church. Loving the LGBTQ neighbour as oneself means seeking to understand what life is like for LGBTQ persons, and asking oneself the question, "How would I wish to be treated by the church if I were an LGBTQ person?"

Traditionalists respond by claiming that they are no less committed to God's justice and compassion and to Christian neighbour love than inclusivists are. However, when persons choose ways of living that run counter to God's will and guidance for human flourishing, it is not an act of love to condone or even encourage such activity. The loving and compassionate course of action is to call attention to the guidelines that God has revealed in order to channel human life in healthy, life-giving directions. On our own we humans often have distorted understandings of what actions lead to human flourishing, which is why we need God's revelation as found in Scripture to guide us. When a woman caught in adultery is brought to Jesus, he extends compassion and divine grace to her, but he also tells her to go and sin no more (John 8:11). Jesus seeks to free her from actions that are harmful and self-destructive. Some traditionalists suggest that this story can provide a model for responding to persons engaged in same-sex sexual activity.

### **One Final Biblical Text: Mark 10:2–12**

Mark 10:2–12 is a passage sometime brought into the discussion by inclusivists. The opponents of Jesus seek to test him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" (10:2). The question is framed in terms of male privilege—is a man allowed to ditch the wife he has grown tired of. Among Jewish teachers there was a considerable range of opinion. Some held that only the most serious offense justified divorce, while others believed that a man should be free to divorce his wife if he disliked her cooking or homemaking skills. Jesus responds by asking another question, essentially, "What does the Bible say?" The Pharisees respond by citing Deuteronomy 24:1–4, which permits a man to divorce his wife if he does the proper paperwork, no small matter in a society where writing materials were hard to come by and very few people could read and write. Then Jesus makes the



amazing statement that this law was God's concession to male hard-heartedness (ie. sinfulness) (10:5). In other words, this law does not reflect God's will. God's will is to be found in the creation story which speaks of the one-flesh union between husband and wife. Then Jesus concludes, "Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate" (10:9).

Jesus asserts that the male desire to keep open the option of divorce is sin. He doesn't provide any reasons but we can guess. A divorcing couple did not share joint custody of children, because they belonged to the husband, even though the mother had probably spent much more time raising them and had developed a deeper bond with them. Family assets were not divided equally, but the husband got everything. Employment opportunities for women were minimal and so divorce could mean poverty and financial insecurity for the wife. On the issue of divorce, Jesus interprets Scripture in a way that seeks to protect the persons who are most vulnerable and have the most to lose.

Jesus sees the provisions for divorce found in Deuteronomy 24:1–4 as the best that God could get across to the Israelites during the time of Moses. Jesus sets the passage aside because it does not reflect God's will for all time. God's will is more fully revealed by Genesis 2:24 which speaks of marriage as a one-flesh union, from which Jesus concludes that God intends marriage to be permanent. What is significant for our purposes is that Jesus in essence declares that we should not automatically take every biblical marriage text as reflecting the full will of God. Some merely reflect the best that God could get across to the people of the time.

Inclusivists suggest that perhaps those biblical texts that assume God only blesses male-female relationships, also reflect the best that God could get across at the time, but don't necessarily reflect the full will of God for all time when it comes to relationships. Perhaps God is inviting the church to expand its understanding of marriage. Perhaps the issue God is concerned about is not the sex of the marriage partners, but the depth of their love for each other, the strength of their commitment, and their desire to live together as a couple in ways that serve and bring honour and glory to God. Just like the early church had to set aside the circumcision and purity law passages because they stood in the way of how God was seeking to enlarge the boundaries of the faith community through Jesus Christ, perhaps at this point in time God is calling the church to set aside certain biblical restrictions so that boundaries can again be enlarged.

Traditionalists can easily respond by saying that such musings represent misguided speculation that distracts us from the overwhelming biblical evidence that leaves no room for same-sex relationships.

### **Conclusion: The Importance of Gentleness and Grace**

Sexuality is core to our identity as human beings, and as a result issues of sexuality and sexual identity affect us at the core of our being. This is one of the reasons why passions and convictions run so deep on the issue of same-sex relationships, and why conversations around the issue can be so harsh, explosive, and fraught with hard feelings. This is also why Christians who engage in such potentially painful conversations, whatever their personal opinions may be, ought to speak and act in a spirit of gentleness and grace.

Another reason why gentleness and grace are so desperately needed in our current conversations is because of the pain and vulnerability experienced on both ends of the opinion spectrum. Some time ago I attended a church conference at which the issue of same-sex relationships was a major topic of discussion. A man got up to the microphone and defended the traditional position at great length and with much passion, citing the standard biblical texts from Leviticus and Paul. Later that evening I was an observer at a meeting of LGBTQ folks and their supporters. Person after person, with tears in their eyes, shared about how deeply hurt and offended they had been by the man's comments, and about how they had gotten up and left the session because they experienced themselves being personally violated. What I experienced as comments about the Bible and biblical interpretation that I did not fully agree with, others experienced as spiritual abuse, because they have throughout their lifetime felt undermined and diminished by such harsh comments and such use of biblical texts. This experience opened my eyes in new ways to the deep pain and vulnerability experienced by many LGBTQ persons because of the numerous forms of rejection they experience from society and the church, rejection that I am often oblivious to.

I have also had conversations with Christians who hold to the traditional position and also feel deep vulnerability. They are painfully aware of the growing momentum in most western societies to accept same-sex relationships. They realize that their opinions on the issue relegate them to a minority in society that is sometimes ridiculed in the media as being reactionary, out of touch with the times, opposed to basic human rights, and even downright oppressive. When there is momentum in their church community to accept same-sex relationships, as there currently is in many denominations, such persons may feel that the spiritual, theological, and biblical rug is being pulled out from under their feet. They may even fear that if current trends continue they will no longer feel at home or even be welcome in their beloved church community. They lament the loss of what they hold to be fundamental biblical and theological truths, and they fear that the life and witness of the church will be irreparably damaged.

I am not suggesting that all fears and vulnerabilities have equally valid foundations in reality, or leave people equally exposed to real pain and rejection. The fears and vulnerability of LGBTQ persons are probably more deeply rooted in painful human experience than the fears of traditionalists. However, there is plenty of fear, pain, and vulnerability on all sides of the issue. For this and other reasons, the current situation calls for a profound spirit of gentleness and grace, no matter where we personally stand on the issue. Few of us wish to be the target of someone's diatribe, but rather we prefer to be spoken to gently and respectfully. It is difficult for us to hear, understand, and value the opinions of someone who expresses their views in harsh and judgmental language. When we extend Christian grace to each other, such grace affirms us as valuable human beings made in the very image of God, and as cherished brothers and sisters in Christ, all redeemed by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Such grace affirms that there is a place for each of us in the church, right alongside those with whom we might disagree on the issue of same-sex relationships.

## Questions for Discussion

1. In your opinion, what are the strongest pieces of biblical evidence in favour of the inclusivist position? What are the weakest arguments?
2. Are there other biblical texts or themes not discussed above, that speak in favour of the inclusivist position and ought to be considered?
3. Inclusivists often point to what they consider as five key insights from contemporary human experience and gender studies. How valid do you think these five convictions are? How much weight do you think they should carry in the current debate?
4. Inclusivists assert that the Bible's four central convictions about sexuality are more a reflection of ancient culture than they are revelation of God's will. What are your thoughts on this issue?
5. Do you find the discussion of interpretive lenses helpful for understanding how the church actually uses and interprets the Bible? Do you agree that conflicting interpretive lenses lie at the heart of our current conflict?
6. What are your responses to the value that inclusivists place on contemporary human reason and experience? What role do you think the stories and experiences of LGBTQ people should play in the church's discernment?
7. Is it helpful to draw parallels between the issue of same-sex relationships and the issues of slavery and women, or is the same-sex relationship issue significantly different, as traditionalists often claim?
8. Is it appropriate to use the Bible's changing images of faithful marriage as a rationale for expanding our contemporary understanding of marriage to include same-sex relationships, or should all Christian understandings of marriage be constrained by the Bible's male-female boundary?
9. What relevance do you think God's passion for justice and Jesus's embrace of marginalized persons have for the current debate?
10. In concrete terms, what does it mean for you to love your LGBTQ neighbour as yourself? What should it look like for our congregations and denomination to extend neighbour-love to LGBTQ persons?