

What about Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation?

John C. Carr, ThM, PhD, DD (HC), RPsych (Alberta #1035)

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Introduction

When I graduated from secondary school in 1956, “Gender Identity” and “Sexual Orientation” were not matters of societal concern as far as I knew. Neither were they matters of concern during my university BA (Philosophy and Ancient Near Eastern Studies) study and my BD (Old Testament concentration) theological education. As far as I was concerned, gender binary (male or female) and heterosexual orientation were “normal” and otherness to those “norms” was unthinkable. If I did think about persons being other than male or female or other than heterosexual, I would have immediately concluded that such persons had something wrong with them because they were not “like me” or like most of the persons I knew (probably all of the persons I knew – at least insofar as I actually “knew” them). As it turns out, at least one of my childhood friends was in fact gay – something I did not know about until after I had graduated from theological college.

“When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child.” (I Corinthians 13:11, NIV).

However, as I have “grown into ministry” with persons – some of whom are “like” me and many others who are not (in Canada, the USA, New Zealand, and India) - my understanding of “normalcy” has expanded. That growing in ministry has not just been a matter of learning from the “living documents” of human experience (Anton Boisen). It has also involved deep exploration of the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures, of theology, and of practical, professional, and philosophical ethics.

“When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.” (I Corinthians 13:11, NIV)

In theological ethics, the writing of James Nelson of United Theological Seminary in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and many articles in a small monthly journal called *Christianity & Crisis*, founded by John C. Bennett and Reinhold Niebuhr of Union Theological Seminary in New York City, were particularly influential – as was a lecture by lawyer and Christian activist William Stringfellow to the Synod of Toronto-Kingston in the late 1960s.

So, also, was a book by Principal J. S. Glen of Knox College, *The Parables of Conflict in Luke*, in which Dr. Glen draws attention to the ways in which Jesus’ ministry, as expressed in the parables of the Gospel according to Luke, was lived out in conflict with many of the religious “givens” and practices of His day and time.

In my experience, religious belief and practice often tend to institutionalize as “required” whatever is experienced as “normal” in particular cultures and eras. Rather than setting us free for loving relationships with God, self, and other (Deuteronomy 6:1-9, Matthew 22:34-40, Mark 12:29-34, and Luke 10:25-37), religion often enslaves us to a particular practice or set of practices precisely because religion, of necessity, attempts to be relevant to context. However, religion almost inevitably gets “stuck” and gets its practitioners “stuck.” On the contrary, a dynamic relationship with Jesus evolves – just like any human relationship.

By the time I had completed 8 years of congregational ministry and returned to graduate school (1970) to study for a Th.M. in Pastoral Theology and a Ph.D. in Pastoral Psychology & Counseling, I had come to believe that the Christian Church was wrong in its elevation of the principle of “normalcy” to an absolute – a practice which had resulted, among other things, in most Christian denominations declaring gender identity “otherness” and sexual orientation “otherness” to be either sickness or sin.¹ I had come to believe that, in excluding (and frequently condemning quite cruelly) persons who live out those “otherness” lives, Christians are at odds with God’s Word for the 20th and now 21st century.

I have also come to believe that words and actions based on labelling gender identity otherness and homosexuality as sin are of the same character as use of Bible and Christian Theology to justify South African apartheid and the enslavement of millions of Africans; the deculturation and harsh treatment and abuse of North America’s, New Zealand’s, and Australia’s indigenous peoples; the subordination of women; demonization of mental illness and of ordinary human experiences such as menstrual flow; etc.

And I acknowledge my own complicity in many of the above sins through my thoughts, my silent acquiescence, and/or my actions.

Interpretive Principles

As we seek understanding of what God might be saying to us through the Scriptures in the 21st century, it is important to clarify what we think about how the Scriptures **are** God’s Word for us.

The ordination vows of the PCC ask for the following commitment from clergy and ruling elders (bolding added).

*The Presbyterian Church in Canada is bound only to Jesus Christ, the Church’s King and Head. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as the written Word of God, **testifying to Christ the living Word**, are the canon of all doctrine, by which Christ rules our faith and life.*

1. *Do you believe in God the Father, **made known in his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom the Holy Spirit witnesses in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments?***

2. *Do you accept the subordinate standards of this Church, promising to uphold its doctrine under the **continual illumination and correction of the Holy Spirit speaking in Scriptures?***

(**Book of Common Worship**, 1991, pp. 325-26 and 393-94)

Chapter 5 of **Living Faith (LF)**, the Presbyterian Church in Canada’s most recent articulation of what Presbyterians believe, includes the following statement (**LF** 5:4).

The Bible is to be understood in the light
of the revelation of God's work in Christ.

¹ Some Christians incorrectly quote the *Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* of the American Psychiatric Association as warrant for labelling homosexuality as a sickness. The 4th edition of that manual (1994) removed homosexuality from its list of psychiatric disorders.

The writing of the Bible was conditioned
by the language, thought,
and setting of its time.
The Bible must be read in its historical context.
We interpret Scripture
as we compare passages,
seeing the two Testaments in light of each other,
and listening to commentators past and present.
Relying on the Holy Spirit,
we seek the application of God's word for our time.

It is clear, at least to me, that the proof texting approach of the Westminster Assembly documents of the 17th century cannot be used as a way of understanding God's will and Word with regard to gender identity and sexual orientation or any other human issue of faith and life in the 21st century even when there are texts that appear to provide unequivocal answers and directives and even when the Church has "always" seen those answers and directives as unequivocally true.

While the historic interpretations deserve our respect and consideration, they must be understood as just that – as "interpretations" and not as ***in-and-of-themselves*** God's Word. They, and we in our time, point to what was/is believed to be God's Word, but human words are always proximate and penultimate – never ultimate in their character.

Also, as we seek understanding of what God might be saying to us in the Scriptures, we need to take seriously that statements in those Scriptures were made in a pre-scientific cultural context.² The persons to whom the words of the Bible were initially addressed assumed, as universal, phenomena that, in actual fact, simply represented what was normative for the majority of persons at that time and in that culture. Statements (pro or con) about intersexuality, transgenderism, bisexuality, or homosexuality would have had no meaning for persons who did not have the knowledge which we now have concerning gender identity and sexual orientation, or even about the nature and role of sexual intimacy in human life.³

Further, as we seek understanding of God's way and will for us in the 21st century, we do well to remember that Jesus taught primarily in parables – using stories from everyday life about situations with which His listeners would have been familiar, in order to open up their imaginations to that which was God's Word for them beyond the known and the familiar. As Joachim Jeremias tells us, the parables "reflect with peculiar clarity the character of his [Jesus'] good news, the eschatological nature of his preaching, the intensity of his summons to repentance, and his conflicts with Pharisaism."⁴

Finally, in an effort to ensure that the "whole" of Scripture is considered as we struggle to know God's will regarding a particular issue, we need to consider the relationship among the following.

- Texts that seem to be saying what **IS** in accord with God's will

² I am using "scientific" to describe "Western" understandings of the way things are in the world. The problem of interpretation also exists for Canadians who have come to Canada from cultures that are pre-scientific.

³ See previous footnote.

⁴ *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 9.

- Texts that seem to be saying what **IS NOT** in accord with God’s will
- Texts that assist us in understanding the total scope “of the revelation of God’s work in Christ” (**LF** 5:4) with regard to the specific question with which we are struggling
- Context, then and now
- And of course the **emerging** “text” that is human lives lived in faithful relationship with God in the present moment

We need to think holistically in order for God’s Holy Spirit to “get through” to us.

1. Gender Identity

There are about 52 Scripture passages that reference male-ness, female-ness, and sexuality.⁵

Below are listed the most relevant passages. They are quoted in the New American Standard Bible version. All of them speak in binary terms - that is about there being two gender identities, male and female.

Genesis 1:27: *God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.*

Genesis 2:20 ff: *The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man.*

Genesis 5:2: *He created them male and female, and He blessed them and named them Man in the day when they were created.*

Genesis 3:14 ff: *The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you more than all cattle, and more than every beast of the field; on your belly you will go, and dust you will eat all the days of your life; and I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel." To the woman He said, "I will greatly multiply Your pain in childbirth, in pain you will bring forth children; yet your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."*

Matthew 19:4-6 (Mark 10:6-9): *And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made[a] them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let not man separate."*

And then there are the following passages with their understanding of male-female role identification. Some of these principles have already been rejected by many “mainstream” denominations (including the PCC) because they arose out of a very different cultural context than that in which those denominations now find themselves.

⁵ <http://bible.knowing-jesus.com/topics/Male-And-Female>

1 Corinthians 11:11-12: *However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God.*

1 Corinthians 14:33-35: *... for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints. The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says. If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church.*

1 Corinthians 11:3-10: *But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ. Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head. But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head, for she is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved.*

Ephesians 5:22-24: *Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything.*

1 Timothy 2:11-15:

A woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve.

And finally there is this text (which needs to be read in the context of Galatians 3:19-4:7).

Galatians 3:26-28: *For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

It is clear that the Galatians text is not negating a binary understanding of gender identity. It seems to me that it does point to the possibility of something beyond gender binary – a unity of all identities in Jesus Christ.

NOTES

- a. There are no statements about bisexuality (also known as “sexual fluidity”).
- c. There are no statements about transgenderism, which is now understood to be a location on the “normal” range of humanness (not to be confused with gender identity disorder, which is a very different phenomenon and which is generally characterized as developmentally pathological).
- c. Persons of ambiguous gender identity (hermaphrodites / intersex persons) were “known” during the New Testament period – but there is only one statement in the Scriptures about intersex “gender identity” (Matthew 9:12).⁶

⁶ ... there are eunuchs, that were so born from their mother's womb ... (Matthew 9:12 ASV)

- d. Jesus does speak about people choosing to be eunuchs or being made eunuchs (Matthew 9:12)⁷ – and eunuchs are also referred to in Acts 8. However, we know from cultural studies that being a eunuch was not seen as a function of gender identity. Rather, it was a function of the need of the ruling classes to have male servants/slaves who were unable to impregnate the wives of their masters.

2. Sexual Orientation and Behaviour

There are several passages in the Scriptures which assume male-female sexual intimacy, in the context of marriage, as the norm. Some of those are listed below and others can be found in the preceding section.

1 Corinthians 7:1-7: Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman. But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband. The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband.

Ephesians 5:22-33: Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything.

Colossians 3:18-19: Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them.

There are several passages in the Scriptures that condemn same-gender sexual activity between males. They are listed below. Only the Romans 1 passage also condemns same-gender sexual activity between females. The rest all have to do with male sexual activity. There are **no** references to same-gender sexual **orientation** (a construct that would have been unfamiliar during the period of time in which the Bible came into existence) **only to same-gender sexual activity**. There are references to “sexual immorality” in other texts that are sometimes attributed as references to homosexuality, but that I do not believe that attribution can be substantiated when examined carefully.

Genesis 19:1 ff: The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them and bowed himself with his face to the earth and said, “My lords, please turn aside to your servant’s house and spend the night and wash your feet. Then you may rise up early and go on your way.” They said, “No; we will spend the night in the town square.” But he pressed them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house. And he made them a feast and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house. And they called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them.” ...

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

Leviticus 20:13: If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have

⁷ For there are eunuchs, that were so born from their mother's womb: and there are eunuchs, that were made eunuchs by men: and there are eunuchs, that made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it. (Matthew 9:12 ASV)

committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them.

1 Kings 14:24: *And there were also male cult prostitutes in the land. They did according to all the abominations of the nations that the Lord drove out before the people of Israel.*

1 Timothy 1:8-11: *Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.*

Jude 1:7: *Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.*

Romans 1:26-27: *For this reason, God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.*

1 Corinthians 6: 9-10: *Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.*

Most, but not all, of the texts listed above are regarded by many scholars as having nothing to do with gender identity or sexual orientation. Rather, they are about rape and temple prostitution – or otherwise are quite ambiguous (e.g. the references to Sodom where the issue is really about the failure of hospitality and about exclusion - which ends up being a threat to commit rape).

The exceptions are: Leviticus 18; Leviticus 20; Romans 1; I Corinthians 6; and I Timothy 1.

The Leviticus texts are part of the Holiness Code which contains many other laws that very few Christians would consider to have any current applicability for their lives. If the passages about sexuality are believed to be relevant for the 21st century, then it stands to reason that all of the laws of the Holiness Code must be observed in the 21st century.

The I Timothy passage appears to be contextualized by the “Sodom” experience – i.e. is about “sodomization” as rape.

This leaves the Romans 1:26-27 and I Corinthians 6:9-10 passages as (apparently) condemnatory of same gender (male-male and female-female) sexual attraction and sexual behaviour.

The context for the Romans and Corinthians passages is a society without any boundaries – a society ruled by “degrading passions” (Romans 1:26), not by care and respect for others and a desire to be of service, and certainly not by love for God. It seems

to me that that is what Romans 1 and I Corinthians 6 are about. That is, they are not about a universal sexual ethic. Rather, they are about how, in the realm of God, persons are to treat themselves and treat others with respect – sexually and in every other way. Since one of the manifestations of “degrading passions” in that culture was same-gender sexual activity (regarded as “abnormal” in that culture), same-gender sexual activity was condemned.

But is that the same as finding, in a person of the same gender, one’s “soul mate?” Is it the same as living faithfully in a committed relationship of sexual intimacy with another human being who happens to be the same gender? I think not.

3. Synthesis

a. Gender Identity

On the basis of the texts, one is led to the conclusion that the writers of the Bible knew only maleness and femaleness as God-created identities. But there is no negation of any other kind of gender identity. There is only affirmation of maleness and femaleness as a norm. In my opinion, the fact that other types of gender identity are not affirmed does not mean that those types of gender identity are illegitimate. They were just not known when the Bible came into existence in its present form.

b. Sexual Orientation and Activity

The Christian Church of the 21st century is being asked, by many of its members, to legitimate the bond that is created when two persons of the same gender fall in love with each other and commit to living out that love faithfully. It seems to me that we have to ask whether that is what the Romans and Corinthians or any other texts are saying is sinful behaviour. My answer, above, is that that is **NOT** what the Romans, Corinthians and other passages are about.

Somewhere in the first edition of his *Daily Bible Readings* William Barclay comments on what the Apostle Paul has to say about the role of women. Barclay says (I think he was referring specifically to Galatians 3) that Christian teaching stood out, in the culture of those times, “like a lighthouse on a lonely shore” – that, through Jesus, the disciples, and Paul, God was transforming culture and religion with an ethic of love. In the last few decades, Christian understanding of those texts has moved beyond even what Paul said about that issue. It seems to me that Christians, in this 21st century, might have a responsibility to be that “lighthouse on a lonely shore” in solidarity with our sisters and brothers who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, two-spirit, etc.

c. What about marriage?

The presence of Jesus at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee (John 2:1-11) is often cited as Christological warrant for the institution of marriage between one man and one woman. However, while heterosexual marriage would certainly have been the norm during Jesus’ earthly ministry, that is not, in and of itself, a statement (direct or indirect) about male-female marriage being the **only** legitimate form of marriage for all time.

The PCC’s 1991 *Book of Common Worship*, after citing the Cana story, continues: “*Paul, the apostle, tells us that marriage is a symbol of the mystical union between Christ and the church. John, in his Revelation, describes the fulfilment of human history as a*

marriage between our Lord and the new creation, to be celebrated with a joyous wedding feast.”

While the metaphor of marriage used in passages like these clearly **assumes** male-female “marriage,” that does not provide a **warrant** for affirming that male-female marriage is the **only** legitimate form of marriage for all time. The metaphors used in the cited passages simply reflect the knowledge and experience available in the context in which they are offered. (I note, also, that some modern Christians would reject the male-female hierarchy implied in these metaphors – i.e. that God/Jesus is always the groom and the Church is always spoken of as the “bride of Christ.”)

What the Scriptures do affirm about relationships, including the intimate partnership of marriage, is faithfulness and fidelity, care and respect. Moreover, as previously noted, the Scriptures affirm that we are to “love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength; and our neighbour as our self.”

Postscript

There are many ways, besides sexuality, in which we humans are different – colour, ethnicity, handedness, etc. Are all of these just a “feature of life, but not ... a part of the person’s essential being or identity?” Or is it just sexuality that is not essential to a person’s identity?

My father was a person of mixed handedness. His natural propensity would have been to write with his left hand – but the educational system of his day refused to accept that as an aspect of his identity and forced him to write with his right hand. That severely impacted him until, as an adult, he chose to write with his left hand and to affirm the many capabilities he had as mixed-handedness person. By the time my sister, a person with dominant left-handedness entered school, the system had recognized that handedness was an essential aspect of the learner’s emerging identity and her use of her left hand to write was accepted and affirmed.

Can a case really be made theologically, as some have done, for seeing any aspect of our personhood as “just a feature of life, but not ... a part of the person’s essential being or identity?”

Whether Eden is understood to be history or metaphor, the reality is that we no longer “live in Eden.” Humanity has evolved and developed with great diversity. God has set us on a journey – a pilgrimage. We are no longer who we were in the beginning – whoever/whatever that was. That diversity, it seems to me, is affirmed in what Paul says about the nature of the church in the Corinthian correspondence and in what Jesus says, among other things, in the parable of the talents.

Is it Scriptural to classify as sinful one aspect of that diversity? I don’t believe that the Scripture texts which negate same-gender sexual activity are really about relationships of commitment and truth between persons who are “other” than distinctly opposite genders. When they were written, there is no way that those who wrote them could have understood such activity as an expression of truth and commitment.

I don’t believe that every word written in Scripture is “literally” God’s word for us in the here and now. It seems to me that textual literalism does not leave room for the Holy Spirit. Understanding all of Scripture as the Word of God and as informing, through the

Holy Spirit, particular texts in particular times and contexts is what speaks to me – is how I listen for the Word of God in particular situations.

Final Comment

So – who is our neighbour?

And how do we love our neighbour?

What does it mean to love others as God loves them?

And **what** is God saying to us about that?

And **how** is God saying it, in the 21st century?

It seems to me that these are the critical questions that must guide our discussion concerning gender identity and sexual orientation.

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