

SEXUALITY OVERTURES – LIFE AND MISSION AGENCY REPORTS

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RE: HUMAN SEXUALITY

Biblical Reflection

The Bible is where we begin. “The scriptures are necessary, sufficient, and reliable, revealing Jesus Christ, the living word” and have “been given to us by the inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life”. They are “...the standard of all doctrine by which we must test any word that comes to us from church, world, or inner experience”. All this we receive under the guidance and teaching of the Holy Spirit and from the tradition of the church and we affirm in Living Faith (5.1).

As people who regard the authority of scripture as a cornerstone of our faith, it is essential to understand that while scripture is our only rule in life, we do not worship the Bible itself. Rather, we believe that the scripture points beyond itself to the living word, Jesus Christ. That living word is dynamic, continually illumined by the Holy Spirit (John 16:12–15). It is a living rule, interpreted by the faithful across many centuries, which stands under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

So often, we want scripture to offer straightforward, definitive and uniform answers, and when those answers do not appear in the way we wish they would, we can become discouraged. However, it is never faithful or appropriate to leave the Bible behind. Instead, we are invited to search more diligently and discover that scripture is in fact a rich, complex wealth of teaching and truth, which does not lend itself to easy or direct answers. And this truth about scripture is a blessing and gift to us. Scripture is a library and not a single volume. It models for us a discernment process of a living faith. The Bible itself shows us how one section or teaching is used to interpret others. The Bible demonstrates multiple voices conversing with one another about the nature and character of God, the ways in which God interacts with human beings, and how human beings ought to live with each other. God’s wisdom revealed in the Bible acknowledges that these dynamics change with time and circumstance.

So there is no question about where to begin. We begin with the Bible. The question is how we engage the Bible as we discern the mind of Christ on the subject of sexuality. The church has asked significant questions and must make important decisions about human relationships and about leadership in the church. Whenever such decisions are before us, as a denomination, we must ask questions such as “How do we understand scripture in this matter as we discern the mind of Christ?” By referring overtures about sexuality and marriage to more than one body for response, the church has determined that this is a question best approached from more than one vantage point within the church. The Life and Mission Agency seeks to read scripture and ask “as a matter of biblical justice, how would Christ have his church think about sexuality and full inclusion of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer (LGBTQ) people in the church today?” And also, “what is the scope of God’s intent for human beings to live in relationship to one another?”

Various sections of scripture have been invoked in consultation and in the feedback we received from the church as appropriate and helpful to this discussion. The topic of homosexuality itself is not a frequent matter of focus in the Bible.

In fact, there are only seven biblical texts that explicitly address same sex matters: Genesis 19:4–8, Judges 19, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Romans 1:26–27, 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 and 1 Timothy

1:9–10. Each of these texts mentions same sex sexual acts and condemns such activity. Congregations and the courts, agencies and colleges of the church have been directed by the General Assembly to study this issue and there has been much academic investigation made into this issue in the last 30 years; study material is readily available. However, we will briefly review each of these scriptures in turn.

Genesis 19 and Judges 19 recount stories of men seeking to attack and gang rape foreign men, who are strangers in the city. Both stories counter the stated demand to rape the men with an offer to sexually abuse young women in exchange for this offence against strangers. Both of these stories, and particularly the story from Judges, are texts of and about violence.

Leviticus 18 and 20 are a part of the strands of scripture in the Levitical Law referred to as The Holiness Code. The law in Leviticus 18:22 states that a man lying with a man is an abomination. Leviticus 20:13 restates that such activity is an abomination and then calls for the men to be put to death via divinely sanctioned homicide; the text allows for the legal killing of men who engage in homosexual activity. These texts pose an interpretive dilemma for those who reject the death penalty in light of the Mosaic commandments against murder and Jesus' teaching against killing. It raises the question of how the church can take at face value or as directly transferrable from that culture to our own the sentiments of one clause in a verse, but ignore the violence in the second clause of the same verse?

Romans 1:26–27 is the most widely cited text that condemns same sex sexual activity and the only text that includes a reference to women. We are left to speculate about the reasons why none of the other texts mention women. Among those reasons must surely be that the texts which address sexual activity between two men are not only about sex or sexual laws, but are also about matters of power, honour/shame, as well as the social structures related to gender roles and codes of conduct embedded in the cultures from which these texts arise.

In this section of Paul's letter to the Romans, he is building toward the first piece of his theological argument that all people are sinners, who are reliant upon God's grace and redemption. This reference to men and women exchanging "natural intercourse" for "unnatural" is the conclusion of a discussion about idol worshippers and suggests idol or cultic practices. Knowing the context in which Paul writes is critical for understanding his reference to sex in this passage. Careful word study and historical critical investigation raises questions about the possibility that Paul is referring in this text to abusive practices of pederasty, cultic prostitution or the excessive sexual appetites driven by power-mongering members of the Roman imperial court. It can be argued that this text is not simply about homosexuality. In fact, we may minimize the significance and theological power of Paul's stinging and courageous ethical reproof about idolatry and various social activities by limiting its interpretation to only sexual attraction or activity between two people of the same sex.

In 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 and in 1 Timothy 1:9–10, there are lists of offenders who will not inherit the kingdom of God. Included in this list are two Greek terms, which are notoriously difficult to translate. They have been rendered in major translations of the Bible (such as the King James Version, the Good News Bible, the New Revised Standard Version and the New International Version) as effeminate, or male prostitutes, or sodomites, or sexual perverts. The Greek terms raise many questions about whether they are referring to abusive sexual relationships or cultural norms (that effeminate characteristics are shameful, for example) or if these words are referring to the modern understanding of a homosexual person who lives out her understanding of her sexuality in a committed, mutual relationship with someone of the same sex.

These seven texts have also been thoroughly examined by Christian scholars who argue against same sex relationships, concluding that they contradict God's intentions for humanity, and also by Christian scholars who argue that same sex relationships can be appropriate expressions of love and intimacy between human beings. There are Presbyterian scholars (represented by Robert Gagnon¹, for example) who, through careful translation and rigorous biblical criticism, advocate that these texts offer a moral standard against same sex intimacy for all times and places. Likewise, there are other Presbyterian scholars (represented by Jack Rogers,² for example) who, through careful translation and rigorous biblical criticism, advocate that these texts represent moral standards and contain cultural references that are particular to and reflective of the culture and social constructs of ancient Israel and first century Palestine. The arguments of both groups of biblical scholars are thorough, faithful and sincere. Their disagreements of interpretation involve how to translate appropriately from ancient languages (Hebrew and Greek) into English and how best to understand the social, historical, and religious context of each situation, which varies from the time before Christ into the first century after Christ.

The Reformed tradition often returns to the motto "faith seeking understanding"³ as one of the guides to piety. We place a high value on both the feeling and movement of the heart and the life of the mind in faithful devotion to God in the restless and unending search for God's will. In other words, we worship and follow God using our hearts and souls, always informed by the insights yielded from careful study and thought as we use the gifts of intellect and reflection. The Reformed tradition holds fast to the call for both a well-educated clergy and an educated laity. Therefore, we look to and value biblical scholarship that faithfully and carefully considers how biblical critical methods help us understand how the Bible informs and shapes Christian living, church law, pastoral practices and devotion in every age. On the matter of sexuality, the faithful work of scholars and teaching elders has led to very different, even opposite, conclusions. This same variance in interpretation was reflected in the feedback Justice Ministries received from across the church. These seven texts have been referred to frequently in that feedback and many different conclusions were reached by those who communicated with Justice Ministries.

What that means for us is that the resolution of the issues of human sexuality before the church today is neither simple nor easy. There is no one single infallible, uncomplicated, unquestionable answer to be found in the examination of these seven texts. Therefore, we must look more deeply into the biblical text in search of greater understanding.

We understand that scripture interprets scripture. We also understand that there are texts that do not specifically mention a particular word or topic, but which must be considered as we discern the mind of Christ on that subject. Many of these other texts have been identified for us by Presbyterians in our discussion across the church. And so, our next step in trying to discern the mind of Christ for the church on the issue of human sexuality is to look to additional texts in the Bible that can help us.

The first texts we will review are the stories of creation found in Genesis chapters one and two that people in the denomination have invoked during the discussion of this matter in the church. It is important for us to remember that there is more than one story about creation in the Book of Genesis. We recall that Presbyterians have understood and accepted the work of biblical scholars who point to multiple writers and editors behind and within these stories, each with different, competing and complementary perspectives and purposes. The majority of Presbyterians have come to understand that the many different creation stories are not literal or scientific accounts of creation, but rather foundational stories and poetic expressions that point to, among other things, truths about the relationship between human beings, and about the relationship between God and human beings. Certainly, these are highly condensed texts that do a number of things at once as they lay the groundwork for all that is to follow and while they gesture toward sexuality, these are not texts that are primarily about sexual relationships.

Therefore, when these creation stories are brought into conversation with the matter of human sexuality, the faithful work of biblical scholars has led them to a variety of conclusions. One school of thought discerns in the creation stories a template for sexual ethics exclusively between a male and a female, which includes certain unchangeable decrees that shape human life. These ordinances include the prototype for marriage, which hinges on the complementarity of a man and a woman. Another school of thought discerns in the creation stories an enduring recognition that both males and females are created in the image of God, with a profound need for relationship with God and with each other. In this second view, the creation narratives primarily illustrate the covenantal relationships with God and other human beings that God calls us to and is faithful to, even when we are not. It also leaves room for those covenantal relationships to be lived out between partners of the same sex.

What that means for us is that resolution of the issues of human sexuality before the church today is neither simple nor easy. There is no one single, infallible, uncomplicated, unquestionable answer to be found in the creation stories of the Bible. Therefore, we must look more deeply into the biblical text in search of greater understanding.

We now turn our focus to texts in the New Testament that Presbyterians have cited in the last two years in discussions about same sex marriage where the gospel writers record that Jesus invokes the creation stories in his conversation with Pharisees on the subject of divorce (Matthew 19:3–12; Mark 10:2–12; Luke 16:18). These texts have been summoned to prove that Jesus would not permit marriage to occur outside of the one man and one woman relationship. However, it is important to remember that these conversations are not primarily about marriage, but rather are about divorce. In all the versions of this conversation, Jesus prohibits divorce strictly and soundly, with only one exception – in the Gospel of Matthew – which allows for divorce only in the case of adultery. In addition, in all the texts that forbid divorce in the New Testament, the remarriage of those who have been divorced is also forbidden.

In the background of this conversation about divorce, Jesus is referring to the precarious situation of women and children and social responsibility towards them in the patriarchal society in which they live. In fact, in this situation, Jesus makes the existing law, which allowed a man to divorce his wife rather easily thereby leaving her in a highly vulnerable and often destitute situation in society, even stricter so that the application of the law is more just.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada has wrestled with texts containing Jesus' teaching on divorce in sophisticated and faithful ways before when it came to another complex decision about human relationships and about leadership in the church. At that time, through study and practice, the church discerned that while God always desires wholeness of relationship and fidelity, and while God always keeps covenant and expects human beings to do the same, there is a time and place for divorce in a variety of circumstances – far beyond what Jesus allows for in these specific discourses.

In the case of divorce, the church engaged with the scripture texts that explicitly prohibit divorce and sought to discern the mind of Christ in regard to human relationships and leadership in the church. We are reminded that the church concluded, in study and practice, that there is room in the church for divorced persons to diverge from Jesus' original teachings, remarry and enter into, or continue in, ordained leadership as teaching and ruling elders, be appointed to the General Assembly, and be elected to any office of the church, including Moderator of the General Assembly.⁴ So while

Jesus engages with the creation stories, and while Jesus prohibits divorce in his particular context, we as disciples of Christ in the twenty-first century have discerned that the mind of Christ in our

context is different from this particular conversation about a specific question that Jesus once had with religious leaders in the first century.

This raises the question of how Jesus deals with the law in his teachings. There is not a uniform answer to how Jesus interprets the law. The Sermon on the Mount is one of the lengthiest discourses of Jesus regarding the law. In some cases, Jesus calls for absolute adherence to the law, or a stricter implementation of it as is the case with divorce (Matthew 5:31–32). In some cases, he expands the law in order to include not only one's actions but also one's motivation and inner character (Matthew 5:21–30). In other places, including when Jesus interprets laws regarding the Sabbath, he outright rejects interpretations of the law that stand in the way of a person's healing, well-being and restoration to an abundant life.⁵ Jesus' interpretation of the law is neither systematically applied nor consistent. There must surely be many reasons behind Jesus' handling of the law, among them are reasons of justice and how the law impacts the treatment of vulnerable human beings, as well as how human beings can best honour God.

What that means for us is that resolution of the issues of human sexuality before the church today is neither simple nor easy. There is no one single, uncomplicated, unquestionable answer to be found in Jesus' teachings on marriage and divorce in the gospels, nor in the way that Jesus deals with individual laws from the Mosaic tradition.

Throughout the discussions among Presbyterians on this topic over the past two years, questions have been raised about the broader literature of the New Testament, wherein we find a simile that refers to the relationship between Christ and the church in the language of marriage. Jesus refers to himself as the bridegroom in one conversation recorded about the Pharisees and the practice of fasting (Mark 2:19–20, Luke 5:34–35 and Matthew 9:15). John the Baptist refers to Christ as the bridegroom and himself as the friend of the bridegroom (John 3:28–29). The wedding feast is a symbol of a future time of fulfillment, which will be a time of justice and abundance. In Revelation, there are references to the marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:7) and to Jerusalem as "a bride adorned for her husband" (Revelation 21:2, 9). These references are embedded in apocalyptic literature.⁶

In addition, in Paul's letter to the Ephesians 5:22–33, the relationship between Christ and the church is likened to the relationship between a husband and a wife. For Paul, the simile that Christ is to the church as a husband is to his wife, hinges on a concept of marriage where the female is subservient to the male, where the male is the head and ruler of the household, and where salvation comes through the husband to the wife.

Paul challenges some of the social norms of his day, such as calling on husbands to respect their wives and emphasizing mutuality. The Presbyterian Church in Canada has followed Paul's trajectory and taken it further than Paul himself did. The Church brought texts that seem to relegate the equality of women into conversations with other texts, such as the ancient baptismal blessing in Galatians 3:28, where Paul says, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

Through discerning the mind of Christ, The Presbyterian Church in Canada now holds that men and women are equal – in marriage, in positions of leadership and authority in the church. This operative stance of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, which stands in contrast to the understandings of gender and marriage reflected in the household codes of the Pauline letters, has implications for the simile that hinges on them about the church as the bride of Christ and how we understand it. We are constantly looking, as Jesus did in parables, for situations in our own everyday context that can help us understand the relationship between God and us. In different contexts, we will need to employ different similes, which can accomplish that important

work. When importing a simile from a different context, it becomes essential to notice the ways in which the simile still works and ways in which it no longer functions. Unless we are willing to assert that the church and Christ are equals, the simile of the church as the bride of Christ no longer functions in the same way in the twenty-first century as it did in the first century.

What that means for us is that resolution of the issues of human sexuality before the church today is neither simple nor easy. There is no one single, uncomplicated, unquestionable answer to be found in either the household codes nor the similes and illustrative parables of Pauline literature or the apocalyptic literature of the New Testament.

In its wisdom, the 2016 General Assembly asked that the Life and Mission Agency (Justice Ministries) and the Committee on Church Doctrine “include in their study and examination of Overture Nos. 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 21, 23, 24, 26, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33 and 35, 2015, a consideration of Romans 14:1–13 as permission to recommend a dual or two-prong approach, in the interest of avoiding rupture of the denomination, as an option to these overtures.” (A&P 2016, p. 39) While Romans 14:1–13 does not speak specifically about sexuality, it is germane to the conversation both in subject matter and in context. Christian communities, who are seeking to work out faithful biblical practice and discern the mind of Christ as to how they ought to conduct their lives, have been around since the church was first formed. Their struggles to live in the spirit of Jesus Christ, and according to the will of God, serve as a model for all Christian communities.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul lays out a long, rich and complex set of theological arguments that requires thought, analysis and careful attention. However, in essence, Paul’s theological argument unfolds in this way: up to and including chapter 3, Paul establishes that we all fall short of the glory of God and are all sinners. In chapter 5, Paul establishes that, as sinners, we are only justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and can therefore have peace with God, others and ourselves. In chapters 6, 7 and 8, Paul makes it clear that as redeemed sinners there will be inner conflict as we discern the will and way of Christ, but also that neither that conflict, nor anything else on earth or beyond it, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. And out of love for his Jewish brothers and sisters, and respect for their long relationship with the God of the covenant, he argues in chapters 9, 10 and 11 that salvation is for Israel, and now by the extension of grace, includes the gentiles.

Then, in chapter 12, the tone and the purpose of the book takes a turn. This is signified, in part, by Paul’s switch to a new way of communicating. There is a new and obvious urgency in his tone; his sentences are shorter and the ideas more crisp in expression. The remaining chapters of the letter (12–16) focus on Christian practice. Here is the practical, which is born out of the theoretical. Paul is now talking about what it means to be a Christian in daily living and practice.

Right in the middle of this section about what it means to live as a faithful Christian, in chapter 14, Paul takes up the question about the role of food and spiritual practice (festival days). The consumption of meat in the first century is closely tied to the discussion of idolatry and the practice of eating meat sacrificed to idols.⁷ It is not as inconsequential a topic as it may seem to us in the twenty-first century. Paul uses the disagreement between people who do eat such meat and people who do not to illustrate that people of faith will come to differing conclusions about what a faithful life that honours God looks like in daily practice. He leaves room for different conclusions and practices and calls upon all Christians to be fully convinced in their own minds about what they think is the most prayerful, faithful action considered within a community of faith (14:5). And then, Paul asks them all to refrain from judgement regarding a fellow Christian who comes to a different conclusion. The larger, binding conviction is that whatever we do, we do to the honour of the Lord (14:6).

The questions about marriage and ordination in light of the discussion about sexuality that are being posed in The Presbyterian Church in Canada are questions about what it means to be a Christian in daily living and practice. Marriage is not a sacrament in The Presbyterian Church in Canada. And Christians who are called into marriage do so not only to express covenantal love to another human being, but also to honour God. It is before the church to decide if this is true regardless of whether Christians make that covenant with a partner of the opposite sex or the same sex.

What that means for us is that while resolution of the issues of human sexuality before the church today is neither simple nor easy, the scriptures do offer a means by which we can discern the mind of Christ when faithful Christians come to differing conclusions about what they think is the most prayerful, faithful action considered within a community of faith and remain unified as a community of faith. Scripture is in fact a rich, complex wealth of teaching and truth, which does not lend itself to easy or direct answers, but it models for us how to discern the mind of Christ, even when we disagree in matters about how to live out the Christian faith in our bodies, in our relationships, and in our leadership. And this truth about scripture is a blessing and gift to us.

No doubt it is important that we carefully examine and seek to understand specific texts when it comes to the matter of human sexuality, and particularly same sex marriage and the giftedness of LGBTQ persons in same sex civil marriages for ordained leadership in the church. Here, we have looked at the seven texts that explicitly mention same sex relations, along with several other texts that are appropriate to this decision, as we seek to discern the mind of Christ on this matter.

No doubt there are many other scripture texts that can and should be examined for what they say or imply about how God thinks about intimate relations between humans, and about the nature of human love and sexuality. This response is not, and cannot be, exhaustive.

But, no doubt, there is something else which must be considered when examining the scriptures in order to discern the mind of Christ on a significant matter of human relationship and leadership in the church. There is more to our Bible than just chapter and verse. The word of God is dynamic and living, not static and dead. It has movement and direction, within itself, and also beyond itself, as the story of God's people in the world continues to unfold. This can be understood as the trajectory or arc of the gospel. That also demands our attention.

There is a gospel arc throughout the scriptures that continually points toward God's irresistible and efficacious grace, the dignity, inclusion, worth and spiritual giftedness of all human beings, and abundant life found in those who follow Jesus Christ. The arc of the gospel is toward continued epiphany; we think of the non-Jewish magi drawn to the Christ child, and gentiles included in the covenant in spite of their rejection of the law. The arc of the gospel is towards liberation and new life as Jesus conquers sin and death and gathers to himself and his church those who had once inhabited the margins of society, a group populated by those who fell outside the holiness codes, such as lepers, eunuchs, Samaritans, and the unclean. The arc of the gospel is toward justice.⁸

The following are a few examples from the Bible where we can see the origins of this arc:

- God resolves never to destroy the whole earth in a flood ever again (Genesis 9:8–17), choosing to deal with humanity not by punitive measures but by covenant.
- While Jesus deals with individual laws in radically different ways, he deals with the whole of the law in one, comprehensive way when he is asked which is the greatest

commandment. Jesus responds with two commandments. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Matthew 22:35–39). And in so choosing, Jesus says that “on these two commandments hang all the law and prophets” (Matthew 22:40). In all his interpretations of the law, Jesus promotes loving relationships. This is how all his various teachings about the law converge and what governs all his actions and further commandments. The arc of the gospel that bends towards justice is illustrated by how Jesus interprets individual laws through the supreme law of love, often bringing people from the outside into the centre of the conversation in acts of healing and restoration.⁹

- In Jesus’ encounter with the Syrophenician woman, he denies her request to exorcize the demon that possesses her daughter because she is a gentile. But in a remarkable exchange, Jesus reverses his original response and extends grace to her and her daughter is made well (Matthew 15:21–28, Mark 7:24–30).
- Peter is commissioned with continuing and expanding Christ’s ministry of grace, as God persuades him that the Gentiles are to be included in the covenant as well (Acts 10:9–16).
- Paul extends this trajectory of the gospel in his own ministry as well, as he addresses communities in different contexts. In his first letter to the Corinthians, he speaks about the body of Christ and he says, “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 12:13) In his letter to the Galatians, Paul invokes the same inclusiveness, but this time he expands it, adding gender/sexuality to the categories of ethnicity and class. “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28) As questions arise in the community, Paul logically extends inclusion along the trajectory of grace.

This same gospel arc has led The Presbyterian Church in Canada to follow courses of practice led by the Spirit that diverge from what is allowed and forbidden in some specific pieces of scripture. In 1845, the Presbyterian Church of Canada Synod met in Cobourg and condemned slavery, and communicated its opposition to the practice to the Presbyterian Church (Old School) in the United States of America. This decision was a departure from the practices provided for in some scripture passages in the Old and New Testaments.¹⁰

Likewise, while some pericopes of scripture explicitly direct otherwise, The Presbyterian Church in Canada elected in 1966 to ordain and celebrate women in leadership and ministry as elders and members of kirk sessions. In the same year, the General Assembly also discerned that the Holy Spirit was calling the church to ordain women to the ministry of Word and Sacraments in contradiction to certain passages in the Bible restricting the role and leadership of women in society and the faith community. Over the years, the denomination has also struggled with the issue of divorce and the role of divorced people in the church. The church now allows, for pastoral reasons, an exception to the strict adherence to the teaching of Jesus about divorce and accommodates a practice that welcomes divorced persons to the Lord’s table, allows for subsequent re-marriages, and provides for the election and confirmation of divorced people in positions of significant leadership in the service to Christ and ministry in his church.

If the arc of the gospel incarnated in Christ and heard in his preaching and seen in his life and ministry is grace; if it bends towards justice; if it is loving, then we believe that the same arc of the gospel can permit the church to make additional pastoral accommodations to allow ministers to bless same sex marriages already performed by civil authorities. And we believe that there is

room in the church for gifted leaders in same sex civil marriages to receive and answer the call of Christ to serve as ordained ministers of Word and Sacraments.

The God, who is revealed through the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, whose word becomes flesh in Jesus Christ, and who continually speaks through the Holy Spirit, invites us to consider ways the church might faithfully and more fully include people in the LGBTQ community.