

## Affirming and Traditional Views

At Bethany, there is no single way of reading scripture when it comes to sexuality and sexual expression. In our congregation there are a spectrum of views. And among those members who are more traditional, there is no *single* scripture reading. The same is true for those who lean more affirming.

We do not offer these two different statements as definitive for anyone. Rather, they are attempts to get into some of the ways people are navigating through scripture when it comes to Bethany and the LGBTQ+ community. The statement on an affirming view tries to address the broader spectrum of queer and non- binary persons, while the statement on a traditional view focuses on same-sex relationships.

These two statements are not here to win an argument. They are part of a discussion, not a policy. They are offered in a spirit of mutual respect and in the hope of assisting us as we live together in Christ, loving each other across our differences. Again, at Bethany, we live into the motto: *In essentials unity, in non- essentials liberty, in all things charity.*

The two statements are included below. Neither claims to be the definitive statement for an “affirming” or “traditional” view.

### An Affirming Viewpoint

An increasing number of Christians believe that sexual orientation and gender identity are not justification for exclusion from church leadership. This “affirming” view also stresses that marriage between two people, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation, is a significant covenant relationship where partners learn the kind of love described in 1 Corinthians 13. This brief document lays out some of the key arguments and biblical concepts discussed by affirming Christians, but it is not inclusive of all affirming perspectives, nor is it speaking for all affirming persons.

Affirming Christians stress that Scripture never mentions, or addresses *committed* same-sex relationships. Each reference to same-sex behavior in the Bible is in the context of lust or misuse of power. For example, people often reference six passages on homosexuality; however, no passage highlights loving, committed, monogamous, same sex partnerships or marriages between two consenting people. Jesus never addresses homosexuality at all. Scripture also does not address sexual orientation, a concept that was unknown in the ancient world. We now have new information about the biological origins of sexual orientation.

In the ancient world, the patriarchal culture emphasized gender and class hierarchies. This is the culture in which Paul wrote the letter to the Romans. Men of a certain status or class used their power to dominate people of both genders sexually. This was a display of lust, excess, and/or dominance. The same-sex behaviors common to this culture were prostitution, master/slave sex, and pederasty, all of which involved exerting power over a

vulnerable person. The apostle Paul condemns the same-sex behavior of his culture (Romans 1:26-27), which we would also condemn today. An affirming viewpoint would say that Paul is not discussing same-sex marriages of two committed adults, and his rejection of same-sex exploitive relationships is a call to monogamy and Christ-like love in covenant relationships. The discussion of immoral behavior in Romans 1 is followed by condemnation of people who misuse God's teachings to judge people (Romans 2:1), a significant verse in this discussion. We cannot forget that Paul was talking to a particular group of people at a particular time when we read his letters. Pertinent examples of the significance of culture for Paul are his criticism of long hair for men in 1 Corinthians 11:4 and gold jewelry for women in 1 Timothy 2:9. In our time, we know those criticisms were based on the cultural patterns of his time, as was his condemnation of same-sex prostitution and pederasty.

Additionally, the word "homosexual" did not appear in any translation of Scripture before 1946. The RSV translators used this word in 1 Corinthians 6:9 for *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, which had previously been translated as effeminate, pervert, or sexual pervert. Further study of these two Greek words caused the RSV editors to amend this translation to "sexual perverts" in their next publication in 1971. As we constantly seek to honor God's word to us through Scripture, it is vital to remember that we are reading words translated over many generations by non-native speakers of the original languages. Scripture has a long history of being reinterpreted by the church when new information about ancient Greek and Hebrew becomes available.

The Bible describes an arc of inclusion that comes from God's great love for humans and all creation. In Acts 15, Peter instructed the early church to include Gentiles without requiring them to be circumcised or obey Old Testament laws. More recently, 19th century Christians challenged the interpretation that Scripture permitted slavery. Reinterpretation of Scripture does not decrease the relevance or authority of Scripture. As Presbyterians, we believe in the church reformed and always reforming. God continues to work in us to bring us to new places of inclusion of the people God loves so much.

An affirming viewpoint would say rather than just focusing on a handful of passages about sexuality, it's important to remember the overarching message of scripture: God loves all people, including those who identify as LGBTQ+. Nothing separates any of us from God's love (Romans 8:38). God did not make a mistake with any of us, including LGBTQ+ peoples; we are knit together, fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:13-14). Jesus preached the Good News of God's love over and over, even spending time with those excluded by religious leaders of his time (Matthew 9:11). Paul's key point in Romans 1 - 3 has nothing to do with sexuality but the fact that we are all broken, that Jew and Gentile are all sinners, therefore we cannot pass judgement on others (Romans 2:1) We must not call anyone impure or unclean (Acts 10:28). We are all one in Christ - there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave or free, nor is there male and female (Galatians 3:28). We will all be included when we worship in God's presence at the heavenly banquet in the restored heaven and earth (Isaiah 25:6, Revelation 5:13).

Throughout the Bible, good fruit is a sign of obedience to God (Psalm 1:3, Matthew 7:16-20, Colossians 1:10, Galatians 5:22-23). Faith communities might consider examining the fruits of non-affirming teachings. LGBTQ+ youth are overrepresented among homeless youth and youth who die by suicide because their families have rejected them, often because their churches encouraged them to do so. LGBTQ+ youth and adults are underrepresented in churches because they feel shamed and flawed in many church settings. Affirming Christians want to see the good fruit of loving inclusion for the LGBTQ+ community and their families.

An affirming viewpoint would say to affirm gay marriage and church leadership by LGBTQ+ people does not require abandoning the Bible. It requires careful re-interpretation of a handful of passages as well as wholehearted attention to major biblical themes: God's welcome of all people, God's desire that we enter into covenant commitments that will help us learn how to love in the model of Jesus, and God's desire that our teaching and patterns of inclusion bear good fruit.

### **A Traditional Viewpoint**

This brief document lays out some of the key arguments and biblical concepts discussed by Christians with a traditional view on sexuality, but it is not inclusive of all traditional perspectives, nor is it speaking for all Christians with traditional view.

Christians with a traditional view believe that men and women were created for one another, "Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Genesis. 2:24). Thus, the complementarity of male and female is given a theological grounding in God's creative activity. This is partly why the New Testament texts in Romans and I Corinthians advocate against same gender sex: it does not fit with the new creation in Christ.

Biblical interpretation on other social issues has changed over time - slavery and ordination of women come to mind. However, both these new interpretations grew from the theological principle of scripture interpreting scripture. Christians could point to conflicting passages of scripture on the issues at hand. That is, Paul may advocate that "women remain silent" in some letters, but Peter reaches back to Joel on Pentecost to declare that "your sons and your *daughters* shall prophecy" that is, "preach" (Acts 2: 17). Paul does not condemn the awful practice of human slavery. However, in Philemon he urges a slave owner to treat his slave, Onesimus, as a free man in Christ. Furthermore, the arch of the Biblical narrative is based on freedom from oppression.

When it comes to scripture passages that address same sex relationships, there is no such disagreement among the passages. These passages do not have the variation that we see with passages around issues of slavery and women in leadership and therefore the interpretation principle of scripture interpreting scripture does not support change to an affirming position.

Christians with a traditional view do not see homosexual acts as part of God's original intention or design. The Bible portrays homosexual acts negatively and as sinful, and lifts up heterosexual marriage as God's plan. There are six passages in the Bible that mention same-gender sex and they are all negative. See below. Interestingly enough, although affirming scholars would counter that not all these passages are applicable to today's discussion, most would agree that these scripture passages speak with one voice, and it is negative.

Still, many with a traditional view would not classify same-sex relationships as worse than other sins. In Romans 1, the most extensive passage on homosexual acts in the Bible, homosexual activity is one in a list of sins including envy, murder, strife, deceit, gossip, slander, boasting and more.

Christians with a traditional view acknowledge that Jesus had nothing to say about same-gender relationships. However, while others might take this to signal Jesus did not care, Jesus' thinking was most probably simply in line with the view of his day. That is, an argument from silence is hard to make. If Jesus had affirmed homosexual acts it would have challenged first century Jewish culture and we would find traces of this in the New Testament and other historic documents and traditions.

Christians with a traditional view believe that being homosexual does not at all keep one from being a Christian, but that the faithful expression of sexuality for the homosexual person is celibacy. Any physical same gender sexual expression is outside those boundaries and is considered sin. The New Testament does not hold up sexual relationships as an essential part of life in Christ. Both Jesus (Matthew 19) and Paul (I Cor. 7) state that marriage is not for everyone. The church should promote singleness as a viable Godly option for all and support and celebrate our single straight and gay brothers and sisters as they follow Christ.

We do acknowledge that at times the church has erred in making the LGBTQ community a special focus of condemnation and shaming. God's love for all His children is undeniable regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity and, to the extent the church has taught or acted otherwise, it has incorrectly and unjustifiably caused much hurt and damage to the LGBTQ community. Without changing its theological position that same-sex sexual relationships are sinful regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity and that we can all choose to honor God in our sexual activities, a thoughtful traditional viewpoint would acknowledge that the church and many who speak with traditional voices could and should grow in our love and care for our LGBTQ brothers and sisters.

We worship a God who is both loving and holy and we gain understanding of God's character and direction through Scripture. Those with traditional viewpoints are sometimes concerned that those with affirming views can be influenced by the voices of our secular society. However, we believe there is a way to remain faithful to a traditional reading of scripture and advocating for certain church standards without becoming legalistic, mean-spirited, or judgmental and still truly loving our LGBTQ brothers and sisters.

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There are six Bible passages that speak to same sex acts:

**Genesis 19:1-29** While this passage speaks negatively to same sex acts, they are acts of violence and not particularly relevant to this discussion.

**Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13** part of the “holiness code” for Israel, lists homosexual behavior as one of the prohibited acts. Affirming Christians point out that we no longer hold to these codes on diet, circumcision, menstruation, etc. Christians of a traditional view, however, point out that none of the other prohibitions in these two passages (sex with aunts, daughters, daughters in law, etc.) have been normalized by the church or even secular society today, as many as 3400 years later.

**I Corinthians 6:9-11** and **I Timothy 1:10**. In these New Testament holiness code passages same gender sexual acts are prohibited demonstrating consistent prohibition over many centuries between the writing of Leviticus and Paul’s letters.

**Romans 1:18-32**. This is probably the most important Bible text for our discussion.

**Places of agreement** regarding this passage on both sides of the discussion:

- Context: This passage is not primarily focused on homosexual acts. Rather, in chapters 1 – 3, Paul is trying to show that all of humanity has fallen.
- Both sides today clearly see that the great sin Paul points to is *idolatry*, not homosexual acts. *Same-sex sexual relations is only one in a list of sins that follow from idolatry*. Chasing after other gods of our own making is the sin that leads to all the brokenness.
- The text is clearly negative on same gender sexual acts.