

Human Sexuality: A Biblical Perspective

A Tool for Conversation

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INTRODUCTION

In July 1986, the General Conference Mennonite Church met at Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, and passed a resolution on human sexuality that affirmed the goodness of human sexuality, confessed judgmental attitudes and the rejection of those with a different sexual orientation, and established a covenant to continue to discern and to remain open on these matters while declaring that sexual intercourse is reserved for a man and woman in marriage. A year later, the (Old) Mennonite Church made a similar resolution at their assembly at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana.¹

Since the 1980s, the Saskatoon and Purdue statements, along with *Human Sexuality in the Christian Life*, published in 1985 as the official church study guide on this topic,² have served as landmarks in the discussion of human sexuality in the Mennonite churches. Most official statements of Mennonite churches, conferences, and other bodies have reflected their commitment to heterosexual marriage while becoming more explicit about their implied condemnation of loving homosexual unions or marriages.

Meanwhile, convictions and perspectives on human sexuality have continued to change in the church. Some see this change as a clear departure from faithfulness and from the Bible. Others do not see it as a departure of that type, but rather as a call into an unarticulated liminal (in-between) space marked by love for others without a clear sense of how this liminal space lines up with biblical and theological values. Such liminality has characterized the church's shifting perspectives on most issues, whether it is the wearing of prayer veils or the acceptability of divorce and remarriage. In no case has the church first worked out an acceptable theology before changing its practice. Just as theology is a matter of faith seeking understanding, so is ethics often a matter of changing practice seeking biblical and theological grounding. For example, growing discomfort with slavery in the 19th century led the church to read the Bible in new ways, seeing for the first time what was there all along.

During the 30 years since the Saskatoon and Purdue statements, the church (and our entire society) has been faced with new issues and concerns concerning sexuality, especially focusing on concerns involving same sex relationships. The issues of sexual relationships and activity outside of marriage—for single persons of all ages—have confronted both society and congregations. None of these concerns is going to disappear, and the church will not find consistent and helpful responses to these questions by ignoring the concerns or by simply restating the “received, traditional” stances.

This situation calls on us as followers of Jesus to reexamine Scripture in light of the way Jesus responded to and talked about human relationships (at least implicitly including sexuality). After we look at the larger picture concerning what we can observe and learn from Jesus and Scripture, we can turn to address the issue of same-sex unions and same-sex covenants.

This document reexamines sexuality and human relationships in the Bible and articulates a biblical and theological rationale for the uninhibited welcome and full inclusion of persons who identify as LGBTIQ+³ in Christian congregations. We understand this to include blessing same-sex marriages and credentialing (licensing and ordaining) nonheterosexuals on the same basis as heterosexuals, whether single or in a covenanted relationship. First, we outline a theology of scripture in which we articulate a way of being biblical in moral discernment that does not fall prey to “biblicism,” or treating the Bible as if it were a text without a history of interpretation. Second, we take this theology of scripture and use it to work through several biblical texts in order to consider how we might best interpret the Bible when we approach it with concerns about sexuality and gender identity. Finally, we pose a series of theological and moral concerns that we think need to inform discernment about sexuality and gender identity in congregations today. We hope this articulation can and will contribute to the ethical, theological, and biblical discernment incumbent upon churches who want to relate

¹ These statements are available online at <http://ljohns.ams.edu/Resolutions.htm>.

² Available online at <http://ljohns.ams.edu/HACL/hsc10.htm>.

³ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, and others who identify as other than heterosexual.

redemptively and constructively to women and men who find themselves attracted to people of the same sex.

1. THEOLOGY OF SCRIPTURE

Mennonite Christians believe that the Bible is a vital resource for the truthful interpretation of God's creation. In fact, many Mennonites believe that the Bible is the primary way they learn about God's self-revelation, paradigmatically in how its authors portray Jesus of Nazareth, but also in how they characterize the entire created order, the Law, the prophets, and the church. Yet, the Bible is not an "even" or "seamless" text. For instance, it had multiple human authors who wrote and spoke from different perspectives in at least three different ancient languages across a span of 1000+ years. Nor, as a document, is the Bible an unchanging text. Textual scholars who examine the manuscript tradition continually assess and revise our assumptions about what the "best text" of a particular passage is. Additionally, every time a new translation of the Bible is published, what the Bible is, at the basic level of what words are in it, undergoes change.

Given these, and a host of other factors, contemporary Christians should not be surprised that the Christian interpretation of Scripture changes over time with changes in language, changes in setting, and changes in audience. When Christians develop a theology of Scripture, they pay special attention to how these factors shape their imaginations about what Scripture is and how it functions in the life of faith. In the following few paragraphs, we are interested in considering some of the elements of a theology of Scripture where human sexuality and gender identity are concerned.

Because the Bible has multiple authors, its texts were written from different perspectives, and some of those perspectives belonged to people who lived on the margins of their societies. It has long been noticed, for instance, that the Evangelist Luke seems to have paid special attention to people who were poor or sick in his portrayal of the Gospel story. More recently, scholars have suggested that some texts, both from the New and Old testaments, contain evidence of having been written from marginalized Jewish perspectives. Indeed, in the Gospel tradition, Jesus is portrayed as a Jew from Galilee, not Judea; hence, he represented a kind of Judaism that was not in conformity with the perspectives of the powerful Jewish authorities associated with the temple in Jerusalem.

So the texts that comprise the Bible are related to people on the margins of society. Recognizing that many persons who identify as sexual and gender minorities today feel marginalized in their own lives, we believe that Christians who follow Jesus should look at how Jesus related to those who were marginalized or nonconforming in the first century. In fact, Jesus himself was sexually and/or gender nonconforming in his singleness, given that Jewish men of his age usually married. His interactions were nonconforming as well. For example, his conversation with the Samaritan woman is instructive as we notice how he related to this woman who was clearly outside the "circle of the righteous," as defined by the Jerusalem norms. Obviously, she was a woman (Strike 1!), then she was a Samaritan (Strike 2!), and she was divorced (Strikes 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7!), and she was bedding down with a man who was not her husband (Strike 8!). She was clearly "Out!" within the world of Jerusalem (and probably also Samaria). But Jesus, knowing all this, still had an intriguing conversation in which condemnation was not mentioned, and more surprising to us, there was no call to repentance. Jesus's relationships with other women also reflected healthy, righteous, and compassionate relationships and sexuality. The intimacy that Jesus "allowed" was shocking to many around him: talking to the Samaritan woman, affirming the woman who touched him, massaging his feet as she anointed him, refusing to condemn and enter judgment on an adulterous woman, delighting in Mary (Martha's sister) who wanted to listen to his teaching, and showing concern for a widow whose son had died, for a girl who was sick and had died, for sisters who were grieving (and perhaps dependent) on a brother who had died.

The regularity of these kinds of interactions in Jesus's social practice helps to paint a picture of human sexuality as, for Jesus, much more than a matter of anatomy and biology. As we read the New Testament in the examples above and elsewhere, we see Jesus relating to others in ways that focused on relationships; he did not simply reduce people to their sexualities. Instead, through his practices of fellowship, he showed that sexuality is an integral part of our whole human experience and of how

we see our place in the world. We might recall, for instance, that adultery as Jesus defines it is more than a genital activity; it is an attitudinal perspective toward other persons (Matt. 5:27-28).

Again, the diversity of perspectives attested to in the Bible leads us to find a wide variety of sexual encounters between people—between parents and children (Lot and his daughters), between brothers and sisters (Tamar and Amnon), between married persons (Rachel and Jacob), between male householders and female servants (Abraham and Hagar), between unmarried people who become married (Ruth and Boaz), between unmarried lovers who remain unmarried (Song of Songs), and the list goes on. We find various forms of marriage and different depictions of what forms of sexually intimate couplings between people are labeled appropriate or inappropriate.

The same is true of how we find various ways of treating enemies throughout the Bible: killing them, taking them as slaves, exiling them, stoning them, praying for their misfortune, forgiving them. The consequence of these observations is that we find that there are rarely fixed forms for our lives and relationships prescribed in the biblical texts. Rather, interpreting Scripture has to do with “reading” the many contexts in which Christians today live their daily lives in the light of Jesus’s life and teachings. Jesus did not prescribe fixed forms to follow for how we are to relate to people. He did, however, prescribe strong principles that should guide our behavior. As we read the Gospel tradition, we see Jesus as someone who was concerned with how people treat each other and with the attitudes they bring to their interpersonal encounters with enemies and lovers alike. We believe that we are to love our enemies. In different situations, this principle will take different forms. We believe that we are to be faithful to the relationships we establish (as we noticed above, committing adultery can be a matter of the heart). In different situations, this principle, too, will take different forms.

Mennonite Christians tend to interpret Scripture as addressing us and implying a vocation. We believe that we are called by Jesus, “Learn from me.” This calling includes learning to practice interpreting Scripture as he interpreted Scripture. Jesus models a *dynamic reading* of the Law and the Prophets (the Old Testament). His dynamic reading is seen in his extended teaching in Matthew 5, where he addresses a series of *readings* of the Old Testament. Jesus affirms the importance of the Old Testament while also bringing a new perspective to this foundational text. Six times he says, “*You have heard it was said . . . , but I say to you . . .*” If we *learn from Jesus*, we will take other texts from the Old Testament and use the same principles to address them in that same way. This way of reading the Old Testament needs to be part of how we read the texts that deal with same-sex relationships.

We suggest that an appropriate theology of Scripture leads to the practice of *dynamic reading*. Such reading keeps in mind that the author of 2 Timothy states that “all scripture is profitable.” It is the *all-ness* that both perplexes and calls us to continually return to scripture, asking the question, “What else does Scripture have to say (in light of Jesus) that gives us further perspective on how we practice the love of Christ in all our relationships”?

2. EXEGETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

When we interpret Scripture dynamically, keeping in mind elements of both continuity and discontinuity within it, we can discern fuller pictures of human sexuality and gender identity than we can when we approach the Bible as a rulebook that has a clearly circumscribed list of texts pertaining to human sexuality. In the following few paragraphs, we look at a variety of passages from Scripture and think dynamically about how they inform our faith.

Genesis 1 and 2

In the beginning, God made males and females as relational and biological partners. The creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 offer a radical and subversive perspective on the relationship of females and males—a perspective that is often ignored, misread, or forgotten. Much in these accounts challenges the social norms of patriarchy and matriarchy. Indeed, several thought-provoking and striking statements give shape to the world that the narrator constructs as the world God desired, intended, and called, “Very good.”

In Genesis 1, male and female are created in the image of God. They are given the blessing that commissions them to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, and subdue it and have dominion over it.” What is lost in the English translations of this narrative is that the blessing is a plural imperative given to both males and females. Dominion is to be shared. The blessing, understood in this way, would give us the radical thrust of this commission: “*You all*, be fruitful and multiply, and *you all*, have dominion.” From the beginning, both sexes were created together and recent biblical scholarship has helped Christians acknowledge that the mandate to share in responsibility for the created world was nonhierarchical. This text highlights intentional mutuality that is *original* but is broken and disrupted when the humans act out of self-interest, ignoring the community and fellowship with each other that God had mandated. This mandate for mutuality and interdependence stands in stark contrast to the individualism and independence that marks our world and that people of privilege exercise *over* those whom they see as *subservient* to themselves. Both Jesus and Paul pick up on this motif and expect “the kingdom” to take this shape.

The alternative narrative in Genesis 2 is just as informative and subversive. God notes after the creation of the first, single, solitary human that “it is not good that this human should be alone.” The implications of this comment should not be overlooked in our context. A human being that is alone, isolated, and solitary is, therefore, lacking in a basic component of health and life. This should give us pause about our attitudes toward all those who are not married—since in our current context heterosexual marriage has been seen as the only remedy for this “aloneness.” The church of Jesus becomes the place where this “aloneness” is remedied. And who are those who are “alone” in our world? The never married, the widow and widower, the divorced, and those who have no desire for a traditional marriage relationship. Jesus and Paul do not focus on the family as the remedy for aloneness. Instead, they focus on the fellowship of following Jesus together as the place in which companionship is both intimate and life-giving. Without condemning families in general, both Jesus and Paul were, in different ways, highly critical of the exclusivistic loyalties of first-century household structures and advocated the people of God as an alternative family structure (cf. Matt. 12:46-50; 19:12; Mark 3:31-35; Luke 8:19-21; 11:27-28; John 19:25-27; 1 Cor. 7; Gal. 3:28).

In Genesis 2, the culmination of the dilemma of “aloneness” is the creation of a “Helper, a Complement, a Partner.” The animals—God’s first attempt at finding a suitable complement for the solitary human—are not adequate for the needs for a partner. The term *helper* for what is needed is *‘ezer*. In the Old Testament, this term refers most frequently to God rather than to other humans. The *‘ezer* is not a subordinate, a flunky, a go-fer, or a servant. Instead the *‘ezer* is one who can be turned to for help, assistance, and partnership in the addressing of life situations. The entire letter to the Ephesians may be an extended midrash (interpretation or commentary) on these creation accounts. This part of the creation narrative receives its fulfillment in the “new creation” that Paul expects to be realized in the church where each person understands their own needy situation and looks to other members for “help” as companions and partners. Indeed, in many of his early letters, it appears as though Paul thought that the church rather than the family was to be the context in which human beings found their most basic relationships with others. Although, Paul himself seems to have practiced some form of sexual renunciation or asceticism, some of the later Pauline writings offer a moderating voice in response to the strong tones of sexual asceticism in his early writings.

The culmination of the narrative in Genesis 2, however, is not the creation of “a suitable partner” for the solitary human, but in the “new math.” What follows the division of the “one becoming two” (male and female) is the unifying of “the two become one.” We have been taught to read this narrative exclusively as legislating the “the marriage of one man to one woman” as the only fulfillment of this intention of God. Paul, however, did not take this passage in this way in Ephesians. There Paul interpreted “the two becoming one” as the model for what happens as Jesus breaks down the walls that divided Jew and Gentile (and by extension, male and female, and slave and free, and all other persons that were marginalized, excluded, or considered inferior or “outsiders”).

We note, too, that Genesis 1:27 puts “male and female” in a parallel relation to “image of God.” The implication of this parallelism has long been debated. Karl Barth maintained that the image of God is expressed in the very relationality of human beings. In broad terms, the Catholic and Protestant traditions have diverged in that the former has placed a higher value on procreation, thus

condemning the use of birth control. The Protestant traditions have generally placed a higher value on covenant love and intimacy, allowing for the use of birth control in service to the former. Some Protestant traditions have suggested that the church's blessing on unions or marriages between persons of the same sex is in keeping with this valuing of love and intimacy in exclusive relationships, since love, commitment, and intimacy are what constitute marriage rather than biological complementarity or procreation. We encourage Mennonites to enter into dialogue with these traditions, considering especially how central we think procreative capacity is to marriage as an institution. Apart from the hotly contested issues surrounding same-sex marriage, theological exploration on this front has implications for marriages between persons who are infertile or who decide not to have children.

Deuteronomy 23

We see a conversation about infertility and other marginalizing sexual experiences in the Bible. Deuteronomy 23 offers a perspective that treats minority experience as a moral or spiritual deficiency: "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Those born of an illicit union shall not be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD" (Deut 23:1-2; cf. also Lev. 21:17-21). Here, "normality" is treated as an identity marker and a boundary marker for God's people. Men who cannot participate in "normal" sexual activity are excluded from the assembly of the Lord. The same is true of anyone whose birth is due to abnormal sexual activity, the result of an "illicit union." The passage goes on to exclude those who are the result of mixed marriages in ethnic or national terms (e.g., mixed marriages between Israelites and Edomites or Moabites).

On the other hand, the book of Ruth demonstrates that Obed, the grandfather of the beloved King David, was the result of such an illicit union. According to Deuteronomy 23, this fact alone should have disqualified at least seven of the kings of Israel and Judah: David, Solomon, Rehoboam, etc., from being part of the assembly of the Lord. However, Ruth seems designed to show that covenant faithfulness matters more than whether someone is an immigrant. Similarly, the author of Isaiah 56 argues that what really matters is justice and covenant loyalty, not how one is born (cf. also Wisdom of Solomon 3:14). In naming the "immigrant" (v. 3) and the "eunuch" (v. 3), Isaiah is engaging in intentional dialogue with Deuteronomy 23.

Leviticus 18:22, et al.

Several biblical passages condemn sex between persons of the same sex—or at least appear to do so. These passages include Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; and 1 Timothy 1:10. In all five passages, the Bible condemns what looks very much like expressions of sexual activity between two persons of the same sex. But this judgment needs to be tempered—if not reversed—by other Scriptures and other considerations.

First, we often seriously underestimate the impact of culture in forming our sense of right and wrong. Leviticus itself bears witness to the fact that cultural sensibilities were relevant in chapters 18 and 20. Both passages use the word abomination (or *toebah*) to describe same-gender sex. Other examples of *toebah* include Egyptians eating with Hebrews. That was an abomination to the Egyptians (Gen 43:32). Or the Israelites' habit of raising sheep—also an abomination to the Egyptians (Gen 46:34). Deuteronomy clearly says that cross-dressing is an abomination to God (22:5), and that putting money earned in prostitution into the offering is an abomination to God (23:18). But some texts are not clear about who, exactly, finds some act abominable (e.g., Lev. 18:22; 20:13). Although Leviticus clearly implies that these practices are as abominable to God as they are to the Israelites as a whole, Genesis does not imply that either the Israelites or God hold abominable what the Egyptians consider abominable (Gen 43:32; 46:34).

Therefore, what people hold as "abominable" derives, at least in part, from cultural sensibilities. Although we generally like to imagine that God shares our particular cultural sensibilities, we

know better. God's people must not simply follow culture. Indeed, God's call, "Be holy, as I am holy" is in part a call to be separate, to be devoted. It is a call to be Other, to be pilgrims and aliens in a foreign land. Nevertheless, all Christians today live out our discipleship in culturally specific ways. It is impossible to be "above" culture, since we live all of life within culture. We cannot simply avoid culture in expressing our faithfulness, yet it is difficult to separate our cultural sensibilities from the whispering voice of the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes the church listens to cultural shifts to its own detriment, but sometimes it does so to its own blessing. For instance, 100 years ago, it was often considered "shameful" to be the result of sexual activity outside of marriage. Persons so born were called "illegitimate," or worse. However, cultural sensibilities on this issue have shifted. We now recognize that the circumstances of a person's conception do not add to or detract from that person's value or worth or that person's ability to love or be loved.

The New Testament authors were unanimous in speaking with one voice in condemning "sexual immorality"—*porneia* in the Greek. It does not, however, define what *porneia* is. For instance, does it remain incumbent upon brothers-in-law to impregnate childless sisters-in-law whose husbands have died (cf. Deut. 25:5-10; Ruth 4)? Is it okay for a man to have more than one wife, as long as he is not an overseer or a deacon (1 Tim. 3:2, 12)? Most careful treatments of this issue conclude that the context in 1 Timothy indicates that what is at stake is the reputation of the leader in the community. Thus, what is required is that a leader be a "one-woman man" (1 Tim. 3:2, 12) or a "one-man woman" (1 Tim. 5:9). Rather than a proscription against (1) polygamy, or (2) divorce and remarriage, or (3) remarriage after the death of a spouse, these passages (4) call for faithfulness toward one's spouse. In other words, they call for leaders to avoid *porneia*. But again, what is *porneia*, other than the opposite of faithfulness toward one's spouse?

The Song of Songs is both unique in Scripture and inconclusive when it comes to sexual ethics. It is clear that the Song is a celebration of love and of human sexuality. What is not clear is what the author is or is not suggesting as limitations to that celebration. The lovers in the Song are not married. It is clear that they are celebrating their awakening sexuality in some way. It is also clear that they feel hemmed in and limited by the more conservative expectations of others with regard to their sexual exploration, even if those limitations only add to their human desire.

Several passages of Scripture invite the faithful to consider new thoughts. The first of these is Acts 10.

Acts 10

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 both condemn a man having sex with another man because doing so is an "abomination" (*toebah* in Hebrew). That the very concept of "abomination" is in part a matter of cultural sensibilities was explored briefly above. Also considered "abominable" in the Hebrew Bible is the eating of "unclean" foods. Deuteronomy 14:3 says, for instance, "You shall not eat any abhorrent thing" (NRSV). A more literal translation from the Hebrew would read, "You shall not eat any abomination." The word *abomination* or *abhorrent thing* (*toebah*) is the same word that is used in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13.

In Acts 10, God gives Peter the same vision three times while he is praying in a trance. Each time, a sheet comes down from heaven that is filled with unclean animals—*abominations*. Each time, God commands Peter to get up, kill, and eat. And each time, Peter refuses to do so, saying, "No way, Lord. I have never eaten an abomination!" In response, the voice from heaven says: "What God has made clean, you must not profane."⁴ Then the sheet is taken back up into heaven.

When the vision was over, Peter was puzzled about what it all meant. He was interrupted in his puzzled state by the presence of three men from Cornelius who were standing by Simon's gate. Several important things are happening in this passage. First, God is saying to Peter that he must not "make common" or "make profane" what God has cleansed or made clean. The implication here is

⁴ The Greek verb here and in Acts 11:9 is *koinoō*, which does not normally mean "to call unclean" but rather "to make unclean," or "to profane."

that these unclean foods that Peter has been avoiding are in fact *not* unclean. They are clean, not profane. Peter can and should eat them. Second, the presence of several persons in the flesh at Simon's gate forces Peter to translate his theoretical insight into action.

What is going on here? We see here another intrabiblical dialogue about cleanness and uncleaness. Many Christians see Acts 10 as a "change of policy" on God's part. But the text itself does not support this. It is clear in the context that this vision or dream was meant to show Peter that he should not avoid Gentiles, but should, in fact, accept and bless them. This is no doubt too abstract and theoretical for Peter to handle. But the presence of real-life human beings waiting at the gate did not allow Peter the luxury of leaving the matter in the abstract. These three men needed some kind of response—a response from Peter. The "issue of homosexuality" is not an abstract issue facing the church today; real-life human beings are standing at the gate.

Jesus repeatedly crossed the boundaries of purity to be in relationship with people. The angel's words to Peter in his vision, "What God has made clean, you must not profane" (Acts 10:15; cf. 11:9), must be taken seriously. Well-meaning Christians profane what God has made clean when they oppose commitments of love and marriage that gays and lesbians wish to make. In so doing, they risk standing with "purity" against Jesus and against love. They risk profaning what God has made clean. The church today can thank God for the reality of loving relationships and for the desire to bear public witness to that love in a ceremony of marriage.

Acts 10 suggests that traditional conceptions of what is "abominable" can and should be rethought by anyone who seeks to respond to the real needs of flesh-and-blood human beings today.

Luke 7:36-50

Jesus was criticized for inadequately separating the clean from the unclean in his own ministry. When the woman of Luke 7 wept and bathed Jesus's feet with her tears and dried them with her hair, Simon the Pharisee was secretly critical of Jesus' lack of moral perception. In response, Jesus says, "Simon, do you see this woman?" Jesus draws attention to the presence of a real human being and his words make clear that he values love (v. 47), forgiveness (vv. 47-48), and salvation (v. 50) more than artificial boundaries between people.

Luke 7 suggests that we should maintain a proper biblical perspective on priorities, valuing love, forgiveness, and salvation above artificial boundaries between people.

Matthew 19:10-12

At the conclusion of Jesus' challenging teaching on divorce, Jesus' disciples respond with amazement: "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." ¹¹But he said to them, "Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. ¹²For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can."

As challenging as Jesus' statement about divorce and remarriage is in today's context, Jesus' statement about eunuchs is enigmatic. Its exact relationship with Jesus' teaching about divorce is unclear. It appears that Jesus is making a statement about people with some kind of minority or alternative sex life. Jesus begins and ends with the statement that indicates that not everyone can accept this teaching. Jesus gives three categories of eunuchs here: those who have been eunuchs from birth, those who were made eunuchs by others, and those who made themselves eunuchs. The first category encompasses people for whom heterosexual marriage is not an option. The second category likely refers to men who were castrated and were therefore unable to engage in a normal heterosexual marriage. The third category likely refers to self-imposed celibacy for the sake of the Reign of God.

What unites Jesus' saying about eunuchs with his teaching about divorce and also with the disciples' amazement is the suggestion that sexual obligation toward another is or should be more than

a matter of convenience. It challenges modern consumerism and its “culture of contingency.”⁵ Men and women should not divorce because it is convenient; sex implies and entails obligation and commitment. At the same time, Jesus’s insistence that not everyone can accept this teaching implies that they should not be forced to do so. Some latitude for individual calling and perspective must be factored into this. Some of God’s children will do well to maintain celibacy in devotion to God’s reign, but this celibacy must not be forced on them. Some can accept it; some cannot.

Matthew 19 suggests that sexual fulfillment remains at some level a matter of personal discernment and calling.

Acts 15

Acts 15 records what was probably the most difficult and divisive issue in the early church: must newly converted Gentile men be circumcised? Although Luke shows an interest in downplaying disagreements in the church, he does not downplay this one, since he characterizes the disagreements as intense and the dialogue as sharp. What the contemporary church should learn from Acts 15 is what it says about *how* they discerned this difficult matter.

One would think that if this issue were confronting the church today, we would call conferences to study Genesis 17, the key Scripture demanding circumcision. In that passage God makes clear that Abraham and all of his male descendants must be circumcised if they wish to participate in God’s covenant. It was not optional. It is therefore tempting to ask, “What did the early church not understand about Genesis 17? Was Genesis 17 not clear to them? Didn’t they *know* about this text?”

The church definitely knew about this text and it seems probable that someone at the Jerusalem council appealed to it, even though Luke does not report this in Acts 15. It is clear that *other* Scriptures factored into the argument. For instance, in Acts 15:16-18, James quotes from Amos 9:11-12 in the Septuagint (which differs from the Hebrew at this point) and he alludes to Isaiah 45:21. These passages support the idea that the inclusion of the Gentiles is not some shocking new departure from tradition, but was part of God’s plan all along. The Jews in the Jerusalem Council just needed to look at things in a new way.

Scripture was not the only resource upon which these people drew at the so-called Jerusalem Council. They also told stories about how the Holy Spirit was changing the lives of some of these Gentiles. Both those who wanted to require circumcision and those who did not appealed to tradition. And they argued about it, using their reason and understanding to explore the issue and to persuade others. In the end, the four elements of reason, experience, Scripture, and tradition all played a role in the church’s rethinking of this issue.

Acts 15 suggests that in discerning whether God blesses same-sex marriage, the church would do well to employ the same means of understanding that the early church employed in discerning the matter of circumcision: reason, experience, Scripture, and tradition. At least that would be the *Scriptural* way to approach it.

1 Corinthians 7

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul presents heterosexual marriage as a compromise in kingdom values—not an unfaithful compromise that should be avoided at all costs, but an acceptable compromise. What is best is to remain single, celibate, in service to God’s reign.

At the same time, “it is better to marry than to burn” (v. 9). As Gerald Schlabach says it,

“To burn” may stand for all the ways that we human beings, left to ourselves, live only for ourselves, our own pleasures, and our own survival. By contrast, “to marry” may signal the way that all of us (even those who do so in a vocation of lifelong celibacy) learn to bend our desires away from ourselves, become vulnerable to the desires of others, and bend toward the service of others. That is a good thing for all.⁶

⁵ See “What Is Marriage Now? A Pauline Case for Same-Sex Marriage,” *Christian Century* (29 Oct 2014): 22–27.

⁶ Schlabach, “What is Marriage Now?” p. 23.

We might also note that the metaphor of fire for sexual desire was common in Hellenistic literature. Paul, like many (though certainly not all) of his Hellenistic Jewish counterparts, seems to have thought of sexual desire not according to categories of right and wrong (as if there were legitimate and illegitimate kinds of sexual desire), but rather on a scale of, we might say, quantity. For some people, Paul thought, sexual desire builds over time, leading to a kind of “burning.” For such people it was better to rid oneself of the desire through sexual intercourse in marriage than it was to continue in the state of building and (ultimately) uncontrollable desire. Thus, for Paul—and this is quite different from most views of heterosexual married sex in contemporary Christianity—sex in marriage was not so much the expression of appropriate sexual desire as it was the one sanctioned way to extinguish desire. This view of desire is also relevant to the interpretation of Romans 1.

There are some remarkable points of connection in the teachings of Jesus and Paul in Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7. Both Jesus and Paul seem to suggest that celibacy is the best course. However, both also suggest that this high calling may not be appropriate for all people. For those people, sex must not be divorced from love and commitment—the hard and holy work of marriage. Marriage is “the communally sealed bond of lifelong intimate mutual care between two people that creates humanity’s most basic unit of kinship, thus allowing human beings to build sustained networks of society.”⁷

Paul insists in this passage that the expression of sexual desire finds its proper home in an exclusive relationship of love and commitment rather than in the marketplace of human autonomy. If so, then Christians should *insist* on gay marriage, rather than just allow it.

Just as importantly, Paul couches his counsel on marriage and singleness in 1 Corinthians 7 in an unusual display of humility with regard to his authority. In v. 10 he issues a command that he says is not a matter of personal opinion, but comes from the Lord. But most of what he says in 1 Corinthians 7 he presents as his own opinion, not a command from the Lord, even if Paul commends his opinion as worthwhile and worth taking seriously (see esp. vv. 10, 25b, 40).

First Corinthians 7 connects with Matthew 19 in suggesting that although love and marriage are profoundly personal issues that should not be forced on others, people are wise to recognize that sexual fulfillment isn’t everything. In fact, men and women are blessed if they feel prepared to commit to God’s reign in a state of celibacy without giving expression to their sexual desires. However, the expression of sexual desire within a committed relationship does have a place for Christians and those who elect to express those desires physically are not wrong in doing so, *as long as they are expressed in the context of love and commitment between two persons—that is, in marriage.*

3. MORAL QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

The theology of Scripture outlined above and our approach (in light of it) to a variety of biblical texts demonstrates a way of being biblical in moral discernment that paves the way, as we put it earlier, for the uninhibited welcome and full inclusion of persons who identify as LGBTIQ+ in Christian congregations, including the blessing of same-sex marriages. We understand this to include credentialing (licensing and ordaining) nonheterosexuals on the same basis as heterosexuals, whether single or in a covenanted relationship. There remain, however, many dynamics for congregations, conferences, and, indeed, entire denominations to discuss. We wish to end with some questions that we hope can guide ongoing discernment about human sexuality and gender identity in the Central District Conference of MC USA.

First, because Mennonites in the U.S. live in a heterosexist culture that privileges certain (white, Protestant, male) versions of heterosexuality as the normative form of human sexuality, we often become oblivious to at least two things. First, we fail to notice the diversity of sexual relationship testified to in the biblical tradition, but secondly, we also ignore how both the Gospels and Pauline literature relativize the forms that intimate relationships take by focusing attention on the *character* of those relationships. In the context of contemporary debates about sexual relationships in the Christian tradition, we might say that, as we read the Bible, we find that the form of a relationship

⁷ Schlabach, “What is Marriage Now?” p. 24.

matters differently than its character. Whether two men, two women, a man and a woman, before or after a marriage license, these questions are questions of forms—they tell us little about the content, attitudes, and moral behavior between the persons involved. If we commit to following Jesus and Paul, then how should we characterize the character of intimate relationships in ways that don't merely perpetuate the sin of heterosexism?

Second, the project of other-ing—marginalizing people because of the identities they bear—is the first step toward violence. Violence begins with dehumanizing; rejecting that which is human, made in the image of God. Violence also involves differences in and misuses of power. Othering and marginalization depends upon a hierarchy of identities that places whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality at the top, while subordinating other corresponding identities. Straight, white males are the “norm.” Of course, human identity is more complex than the boxes checked off for race, gender, and so on; we are more than a sum of individual social identities. Although a particular dimension of identity may stand out more for some individuals than others, it is critical to realize the way multiple oppressions based on identity support and uphold one another. Marginalization and oppression do not act independently of one another but rather interrelate, and are visited upon particular bodies in particular ways, thereby creating a structure that is not simply “double” or “triple” jeopardy. How have our congregations failed to acknowledge the multiplicative dimensions of marginalizing oppression, not just by playing different marginalized groups off one another, but in other ways as well?

Third, Jesus's own love for those on the margins—the tax collectors, the prostitutes, and others from the “wrong side of the tracks”—was scandalous in his day. Most Christians simply find “reasonable” and “acceptable” those sexual expressions that somehow make sense in their cultural context. But what about sexual ethics in “foreign” cultural contexts? Does the North American church have anything to say to Kenyan Christians about polygamy? How could congregations go about demonstrating that they possess the intercultural competence and historical consciousness necessary to address sexual ethics fairly?

Finally, one man has partnered with one woman throughout history and that is unlikely to change. The question is, How should people of faith think about those of us who are not represented in that majority? Is majority sexual expression automatically good and minority sexual expression automatically suspect, or is all sexual expression potentially good when contextualized within relationships marked by practices of love and justice?

Task Group Members

Loren L. Johns, Task Group Chair ☪ Eighth Street Mennonite Church
Ron Guengerich, CDC Board Chair ☪ Silverwood Mennonite Church
Michael Miller ☪ Assembly Mennonite Church
Kiva Nice-Webb ☪ Chicago Community Mennonite Church
J. Alexander Sider ☪ First Mennonite Church (Bluffton, OH)
Regina Shands Stoltzfus ☪ Assembly Mennonite Church