

The Brethren in Christ Church and the LGBTQ+ Community: The Traditional View

By Lynn Thrush*

The importance of this conversation

At stake in the conversation about sexuality is the necessary and sufficient starting point that God is loved supremely, and our neighbors are loved with the same honor with which we love ourselves. Much of the conversation about sexuality abroad in the culture is conducted outside any reference to the Creator. When the Creator is referenced, such references are frequently to a diminished selection of the comprehensive revelation of the Creator in Scripture. This paper seeks to remedy an inadequate starting point regarding human sexuality wherein the Creator, the implications of the Creator who makes promises, and the Creator's end goal (telos) are all given their due.

The holy Scriptures reveal the Creator to be compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love and faithfulness (Exod. 34:6). Later in the Scriptures, God is declared to be love (1 John 4:16). From the outset, this good Creator made a promise of a good future for the earth: all the peoples/families of the earth would be blessed through Abraham (Gen. 12:3). Thus, the biblical context for all of living is covenantal. The context of the good Creator making promises to humans has its telos in new creation. When one is in Christ, behold, new creation! (2 Cor. 5:17). All things are to be reconciled to God through Christ (Col. 1:19-20).

Also at stake in this conversation is the necessity to reflect seriously on the elevated capability of created humans to be like the Creator—that is, to love—meaning that humans have the ability to honor others above themselves. This paper seeks to remedy a

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reductionistic comprehension of humanity to love one's neighbor by holding that humans must privilege propositions about themselves over denying themselves for the sake of the other.

The Creator's promise-making to humanity and faithful commitment to those promises tell us that humans possess intelligence and can communicate, weigh matters, discern, make decisions, and yield personal desire to a greater commitment to honor the Creator's instruction. Conversations regarding sexuality are appropriately rooted in the context of covenant-living, and in the understanding that the strange logic of denying oneself for the sake of the Creator and others is actually the doorway to human flourishing and the new creation. From the prophet Zechariah, we anticipate the glorious report from the sent ones, the people of God, "We have gone throughout the earth and found the whole world at rest and in peace" (Zech.1:11).

The Brethren in Christ Church does not believe there is a truer reality than the call to love God supremely, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. The Church does not believe that its perspectives are one among many pluralistic options. The Church holds that God is best honored and humans best flourish when God is loved supremely and one's neighbor is loved as one loves oneself. All alternative starting points, the Church holds, diminish the Creator and humans. As the Scriptures summarize the first five books of Moses, we hear the call, "choose life, so that you and your children may live" (Deut. 30:19). The Church holds out this marvelous call to everyone: "Choose life!" believing that these twin instructions lead to human flourishing.

The position of the Brethren in Christ Church regarding human sexuality

With regard to LGBTQ+ individuals, the Brethren in Christ Church holds simultaneously to the scriptural instruction that sexual activity is properly practiced in marriage between a male husband and a female wife and to the scriptural call to love our LGBTQ+ neighbors as we love ourselves.

Current Brethren in Christ Church conversations about sexuality—perspectives that include both people who are heterosexual and those who are part of the LGBTQ+ community—

are conducted in light of the affirmation that all persons are sexual, that sexuality is good, that the highest aspect of this human gift is intimacy (not to be equated with genital sexual activity), that God and humans are covenantal beings, and that our sexuality is likewise to be practiced in the light of God's intentions and covenants.

The Brethren in Christ Church holds that the credentialing of pastors/leaders and the receiving of persons into church membership are steps that are approved for persons who affirm the biblical pattern that genital sex may only be practiced within the marriage of a male husband and a female wife. Celibate persons affirm this biblical pattern. Celibate persons who perceive that they are attracted to persons of the same sex affirm this biblical pattern. The Church, as do the Scriptures, focuses on behavior, acknowledging that inner thoughts are also to be brought in line with God's truth.

The Scriptures provide marvelous assistance in relating to the present culture where not informed by the Church's context described above. The scriptural teaching of how persons process experience calls for compassion for oneself and one another. In this compassion the Church prioritizes presence, kindness, hopefulness, and perseverance in relationships with LGBTQ+ persons.

Additionally, the church gives space and attention to witness to LGBTQ+ friends/neighbors via experience with the Holy Spirit, rather than believing that witness is fundamentally an exercise in rationality. The Church includes prayer, likely privately spoken within one's own mind and heart, then potentially offered in the hearing of a friend/neighbor—again not to rationally persuade, but to invoke the real presence of the Spirit. The Church prioritizes acts of service and initiating love; the Church speaks words of blessing.

This paper calls for all Brethren in Christ U.S. congregations to establish structured gatherings, where belonging is experienced in the church. The structure for "belonging in order to belong" (see the later section on pastoral implications) offers the context of grace-filled relationships and the deep human need to belong. This structured gathering is for sharing, meeting needs, and Scripture study. It is in this setting of community where love is genuinely demonstrated. Because all persons have various deep convictions, these loved individuals who are experiencing belonging understand

that convictional living and deeply loving behavior are not mutually exclusive.

Biblical and theological evidence for the traditional Brethren in Christ position

The Brethren in Christ Church develops its worldview from the entirety of Scriptures. A friend once commented to me that the Scriptures had about eight specific references to same-sex matters. That view (whatever the number of biblical references one might attribute to the subject of same-sex) is not sufficiently anchored in the breadth of Scripture, nor in Brethren in Christ biblical theology.

In this section, I outline first the theological framework in which the Brethren in Christ Church understands matters of sexuality. Here I will describe God the Creator, the context of covenant in God's character including consequent relational expectations with humans, and God's telos, God's purposeful behavior for creation to move toward new creation. I will then provide a survey of the Scriptures pertaining to sexual matters, beginning with the book of Revelation and concluding with the five books of Moses (Genesis through Deuteronomy).

I will also give special attention to Paul's writing to his Roman audience: first, because his readership in Rome experienced much the same sexual culture as the culture today, and second, because Paul's compassion regarding how to experience/understand sexuality in ourselves and others, and his counsel to engage with the Holy Spirit, are especially insightful and encouraging.

Creator, covenant, and telos

The Brethren in Christ Church's theological understanding of the Creator God is that God is only good. There are no shadow sides to God (James 1:17). In the great summation of God's character, we hear, "God is love" (1 John 4:8). When Moses requested to see God's glory, the Lord promised, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence" (Exod. 33:18-19). This is what Moses heard: "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness" (Exod. 34:6). God's name, his character, is repeated

in Jonah 4:2: “I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.” Beautifully, Christian theology learns, and then affirms, that God is good.

Near the outset of God’s revelation of himself he makes a promise that introduces the context of covenant. The promise is this, spoken first to Abram: “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:3). This promise is repeated throughout Scripture. “I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed” (Gen. 22:17-18). Peter reiterates this in his sermon in Jerusalem: “And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, ‘Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed’” (Acts 3:25).

Covenant behavior accompanies the biblical account of promise. Righteousness, justice, and peace are all watchwords of God’s people. Jesus fulfills this text, “In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth” (Isa. 42:3-4). The people of God, sent throughout the earth as those who make followers of Jesus, report this glorious summation, “We have gone throughout the earth and found the whole world at rest and in peace” (Zech. 1:11).

The Scripture indicates that humanity is fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalms 139:14). That God breathed into Adam/humanity the breath of life, such that Adam becomes a living being, is deeply and wonderfully profound (Gen. 2:7). The image of God is seen as God engages with humans in their ability to think, including their ability and requirement to take responsibility. God communicates limits that accord with life. In the biblical worldview, humans take their cues for comprehending everything about life from the one who created them.

Thus, humanity is to care for creation (Gen. 2:15). Humanity is to follow God’s counsel (Gen. 2:16), and walk faithfully with God (Gen. 6:9). Violence, wickedness, and evil are antithetical to God’s will and plan (Gen. 4:10; 6:5). Humanity is to believe God’s promise

(Gen. 15:5-6). Humanity is to honor God above all other loyalties (Gen. 22:2). God's worldview is to be chosen by humanity (Exod. 20:1-17). God's people are to be holy, because God is holy (Lev. 19:2). Humanity is to love the Lord God with all heart, soul, and strength (Deut. 6:5). Humanity is to choose life, so that we and our children may live. . . for the Lord is our life (Deut. 30:19-20).

In the New Covenant, God, incarnate in Jesus, teaches that humanity is to hear Jesus's words and put them into practice (Matt. 7:24). Further, Jesus teaches that which is counter-intuitive, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it" (Matt. 16:24-25). This kind of living is centrally anchored in what it means to be human, and what it means to love. To be truly other-oriented requires certain choices that subjugate personal desires for the sake of the other.

Encouragingly, we Brethren in Christ understand that we live in the reality of spiritual provision for this kind of living. As Great Lakes Conference Theologian in Residence, Matthew Peterson, writes, "God will supply the means by which our commitments lead to genuine transformation via his Holy Spirit."¹

New creation emerges from God's promise to bless all the families of the earth through Jesus and his people. Large, remarkably glorious anticipations for history build on this promise of God. The people of God are the New Jerusalem—the "coming down out of heaven" people (Rev. 3:12; 21:2). We pray for and work for God's kingdom coming to earth, and his will being done on earth as it is in heaven (Matt. 6:9-13). God is bringing about new creation through his people.

Comprehending the biblical revelation of Creator God is to understand that God is good, he is a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God, and he is committed to history issuing forth in a new creation that works under the lordship of Jesus and the responsibility

¹ Matthew Peterson, "Statement on Sanctification," Great Lakes Conference, Brethren in Christ U. S., January 17, 2024.

of his people. We worship God with this prayer, “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen” (Eph. 3:20-21).

A survey of the Scripture from the final book of the Bible, the Revelation of Jesus, to the opening five books of Moses anchors the understanding of the Church regarding sexual matters.

The Revelation

Faithful marriage imagery is centrally used in the biblical picture of the telos, the end to which God is taking history. An angel transports John, in the Spirit, to a great and high mountain where he observes “the bride, the wife of the Lamb” (Rev. 21:9). What John sees is “the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” (Rev. 21:10). This picture of sparkling integrity is in dramatic contrast to an earlier ugly picture where John is transported in the Spirit by an angel into a wilderness and he sees the great prostitute, a picture of enormous unfaithfulness; there a woman sits on a beast, and her name is “The Mother of Prostitutes” (Rev. 17:1-5). Faithful sexual behavior is used to illustrate the holy beauty of God’s people.

The Revelation also teaches that while noble behaviors: love, faith, service, perseverance, even in increasing measure, are noteworthy (Rev. 2:19), sexual integrity is also required to be taught (Rev. 2:20-25) Jesus addresses a church where loving behavior was practiced, but its teaching regarding sexuality was leading to immorality. While Jesus noted that love was being practiced, that affirmation did not eliminate required teaching and behavior for sexual matters.

The pastoral letters

The pastoral letters illustrate covenantal living as respectful behavior of husbands toward wives. Such living is linked to spiritual fruitfulness, indicating that such respect leads to unhindered prayer (1 Pet. 3:7). The author of Hebrews provides summary exhortations, wherein marriage and sexual union in marriage is honored, immediately bracketing out behavior that God will judge, listing male prostitutes and adulterers as illustrative (Heb. 13:4). Care is to be given that no one is like Esau, who for the sake of physical

hunger, forsook covenant living (Heb. 12:16). Integrity of character and integrity of marriage behavior are all of a piece; some behaviors are appropriate, while others are not.

Paul's letters

The letters from Paul describe God's people in covenantal living, whether married or not married, in the significant time/Kairos that is "drawn together" in the new day of the kingdom (understood throughout the New Testament as begun in Jesus Christ). This reality of the "drawn together" presence of the kingdom is to be the lead priority in our living, in comparison to other involvements we may have: marriage, disappointments, joys, buying things, or using up resources (1 Cor. 7:29-31).

Principled and Christ-like behavior is required: mutual submission of both husband and wife, radical submission on the part of wives, and radical self-giving on the part of husbands who are to be like Christ as he gave himself up for the church (Eph. 5:21-25). Radical love and respect are required (Eph. 5:33). Porneia, often translated "sexual immorality," is transactional sexual involvement, and is outside the covenantal behavior established by God's vision of flourishing humanity (Gal. 5:19).

As Paul writes to the Church in Rome, he quickly addresses what must have been rather broadly practiced sexual engagements that were outside the intent of the Creator's creation, context, and telos. Rather than seeing Romans 1:18-32 as a kind of one-off rant of a disgusted apostle regarding variant sexual behavior, I want to make the case that Paul identifies the sexual landscape of Rome, and this context substantially informs the entire letter: "all in Rome who are loved by God, and called to be his holy people" (Rom. 1:7). Later in this paper I will give more attention to Paul's response in Romans 6-8 in view of the context to which he was writing.

Paul anchors his writing regarding the sexual landscape of Rome with robust reflection on the Creator and the nature of humanity. He holds that creation is a faithful witness to God's power and divine nature (Rom. 1:20). Sans self-will, a honest reflection on creation should result in glorifying and giving thanks to the Creator (Rom. 1:21). Paul straightforwardly addresses limits of rationality. It is

substantially important that if humans take upon themselves the role of Creator, naming their own good, declaring what is covenantal or otherwise, and projecting their own telos, marshalling arguments is no longer fruitful.

If God is not so recognized as Creator, then thinking becomes futile/aimless, and unwise hearts become darkened (Rom. 1:21). This leads to God giving such persons up—a tragic development—in the desires of their hearts—another deeply significant phrase—to impurity to dishonor their bodies between themselves (Rom. 1:24). Profoundly, insightfully, Paul explains what is happening: these persons have exchanged the truth of God for falsehood, and they have revered/worshiped and served/worshiped the creation rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:25). So it is that the Church begins this conversation on sexuality with acknowledgement of the Creator.

Paul continues in Romans 1:26 with another “because of this,” another “therefore” as we saw at the beginning of Romans 1:24. Because of this exchange of created things for the role of the Creator, God gave them up (the same word as used in Romans 1:24) to passions of dishonor. Women exchanged (Paul had just used that word “exchanged” in Romans 1:25) the natural sexual use of their bodies in sexual relations that were contrary to nature (Rom. 1:26). Men also were given up to passions of dishonor. Having left natural sexual relations with the female, they were inflamed in their desire for other males, the shame working out and receiving the fitting recompense of their error (Rom. 1:27).

Because they did not see fit to have God in their knowledge, God gave them up—a third time God did this (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28)—to an unapproved, counterfeit mind to do things not proper. While knowing God’s righteous decree that those practicing such are earning death, they continue in such practice and approve others doing the same thing (Rom. 1:32).

Paul’s careful reflection of appropriately understanding the Creator and creation leads, as the whole of Scripture demonstrates, to life. When the creature fails to acknowledge the Creator, rationality ends. The Church, with grace and clarity, bears witness to the wisdom of the Creator.

Jesus and the gospels

In the gospels, Jesus, upon being queried about the lawfulness of divorce, anchored his response to creation, to being made male and female, to the man being joined to his wife, and to the two becoming one flesh such that they are described as one, rather than two. Jesus acknowledges that it is God who yokes the man and wife together (Matt. 19:3-6). Regarding the breaking of covenant, divorcing one's wife or husband to marry another is adultery (Mark 10:11-12).

In Jesus's teaching on adultery, he makes it an issue of the heart and not just an outward action: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:27-28). Covenantal living involves deep integrity.

The prophets

In the prophets, faithful marriage is the metaphor often used by which to measure God's people. Ezekiel 16 describes Jerusalem as an adulterous wife: The Lord gave his solemn oath and entered into covenant with her, and Jerusalem became the Lord's (v. 8). Jerusalem rose to be a queen because of her perfect beauty, but Jerusalem became a prostitute (vv. 13-15). She degraded her beauty, spreading her legs with increasing promiscuity to anyone who passed by (v. 25). Jerusalem engaged in prostitution with the Egyptians, neighbors with large genitals (v. 26): "You adulterous wife! You prefer strangers to your own husband!" (v. 32). Jerusalem, "you poured out your lust and exposed your naked body in your promiscuity with your lovers" (v. 36).

Hosea is instructed by the Lord, "Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her, for like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the Lord" (Hos. 1:2). The Lord said to Hosea, "Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another man and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes" (Hos. 3:1).

Isaiah spoke the word of the Lord to Judah and Jerusalem. "The ox knows its master, the donkey its owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand . . . See how the faithful city

has become a prostitute! She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her—but now murderers!” (Isa. 1:3, 21).

Wisdom literature

The wisdom literature of Scripture counsels readers in light of faithfulness and covenant relationships. Wisdom literature teaches for the purpose of “gaining wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight, and for receiving instruction in prudent behavior” (Prov. 1:2-3). The book of Proverbs is replete with warnings against adultery. Proverbs also assumes that unrestrained passion leads to destruction: “Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his cloths being burned? Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched?” (Prov. 6:27-28).

Psalm 51 pours out of the mind and heart of David, encountering truth after sexual immorality. This is consistent with the entirety of Scripture; our relationship with God is of ultimate importance, and an illicit sexual encounter is, as a matter of fact, a sin against the Lord (Psalm 51:4).

Job, who was so successful, then suddenly and horribly suffered, made this covenant in the midst of his suffering: “I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a young woman” (Job 31:1).

Historical books

The historical books carry stories highlighting covenant faithfulness. Ruth, the Moabitess, experiences the protection of Boaz, a guardian-redeemer for Naomi’s family. Her journey to becoming Boaz’s wife was according to the faithful mores of the time.

In 2 Samuel 13, we have the story of the selfish passion of Amnon and his lack of true love for Tamar. He raped her, then discarded her, and “then Amnon hated her with intense hatred. In fact, he hated her more than he had loved her” (v. 15).

The five books of Moses

The five books of Moses provide foundational accounts and instruction for many areas of life, and certainly regarding sexual mores. To begin with, adultery is forbidden in the ten commandments (Exod. 20:14). Leviticus 18 instructs Israel to be different than people in Egypt, and different than people in the land of Canaan: “Do not

follow their practices” (Lev. 18:3). Without pause these practices are forbidden: do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molek (Lev. 18:21); do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman (Lev. 18:22); do not have sexual relations with an animal . . . [A] woman must not present herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it; that is a perversion (Lev. 18:23). In the final book, the law is summarized: “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life. . . ” (Deut. 30:19-20).

Consideration of appropriate sexual behavior is constructed from our biblical and theological understandings of the Creator who is good, the context of covenant-living that describes the nature of humanity and the way humanity is to relate to the covenantal Creator, and the telos of participating as humans in God’s purposes that are leading to new creation where everything is reconciled to God (Col. 1:19-20). All of Scripture calls humanity to a particular understanding of appropriate sexual relationships, and all of Scripture uses careful, faithful marriage and sexual living to illustrate carefully and faithfully following God.

Other supporting evidence

The Church comprehends that the Creator is awe-inspiring, seen in the beauty and sophistication of creation. We can anticipate that being made in God’s likeness will likewise include beauty and sophistication. God’s self-revelation can be expected to give insight into how humanity, in all of its freedom, can enter into a wise and growing relationship with Jesus Christ, eventuating in a life winsomely described as possessing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23).

In this section I want to identify one such expansive insight from the Scriptures that will assist us both in self-understanding and in our showing helpful care for all our neighbors, especially regarding sexuality. I will support Scripture’s insight with the work of a professor of psychiatry and trauma studies. Additionally, I want to include

the reflection of a Roman Catholic priest who has done wonderful thinking regarding sexuality and celibacy, and whose affirmation of covenant accords so well with the realities of our sexuality, and the integrity we desire regarding our relationships with one another, and our integrity before God.

Brethren in Christ scholar Dr. Peter Guinther, in his PhD dissertation, addresses the critically important, and often overlooked Greek term *μελη* or *μελεσιν*, members/limbs, found in Romans 6:13 and 7:23. Here are the two verses that contain these crucially important terms: “Neither yield your *μελη*, members/limbs as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but yield yourselves to God, as those brought from death to life, and yield your *μελη*, members/limbs as instruments of righteousness to God (Rom. 6:13). “I see, however, another law in my *μελεσιν*, members/limbs, warring against the law of my mind, and making me a captive to the law of sin in my *μελεσιν*, members/limbs” (Rom. 7:23).

Members/limbs are our receptors to experiences: approval, food flavor, confidence, smiles, affirmation, good pleasure, positive discovery, acceptance, affirmation from good contribution, good laughter, discovery, or the negative side of this list. We experience our sexuality through our members/limbs, rather than via our rationality. Our left brain is our logical, structured brain, whereas, as Peter Guinther writes:

. . . the right brain is connected to the “members” of the body more intricately and directly at the subcortical levels, having a greater awareness of physical sensations, survival reactions, limbic feelings and attachments, and perception of one’s internal bodily state.²

This New Testament word, *μελεσιν* (*melesin*), translated in most of our Bibles as “members,” (KJV, RSV, NRSV, ESV), or “parts,” (NASB), or even more blandly and unhelpfully, “part” (NIV, NLT), is not measured like much of our anatomy: height, blood type, or

² Peter Guinther, *Μελος: A Significant Anthropological Term in Understanding Romans 7:14-8:8*, PhD diss., Regent University School of Divinity, 2019, 187.

skin tone. This term does, however, provide crucial insight into our humanity, identifying that we have experience receptors about which we may be unaware, but nevertheless for which we have responsibility for understanding and stewarding.

Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, MD, is the founder and medical director of the Trauma Center in Brookline, Massachusetts. He is also a professor of psychiatry at Boston University School of Medicine and director of the National Complex Trauma Treatment Network. In his book, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, he describes what he calls “the emotional brain.” Paul’s “member/limb” is a close equivalent to that term. Dr. van der Kolk writes:

The limbic system is shaped in response to experience, in partnership with the infant’s own genetic makeup and inborn temperament. . . . Whatever happens to a baby contributes to the emotional and perceptual map of the world that its developing brain creates. As my colleague Bruce Perry explains it, the brain is formed in a “use-dependent manner.” This is another way of describing neuroplasticity, the relatively recent discovery that neurons that “fire together, wire together.” When a circuit fires repeatedly, it can become a default setting—the response most likely to occur.

Taken together the reptilian brain and limbic system make up what I’ll call the “emotional brain” throughout this book. The emotional brain is at the heart of the central nervous system, and its key task is to look out for your welfare. If it detects danger or a special opportunity—such as a promising partner—it alerts you by releasing a squirt of hormones. The resulting visceral sensations (ranging from mild queasiness to the grip of panic in your chest) will interfere with whatever your mind is currently focused on and get you moving—physically and mentally—in a different direction. Even at their most subtle, these sensations have a huge influence on the small and large decisions we make throughout our lives:

RESPONSE TO TRADITIONAL VIEW

what we choose to eat, where we like to sleep and with whom, what music we prefer, whether we like to garden or sing in a choir, and whom we befriend and whom we detest.³

Dr. van der Kolk sounds much like Paul writing in Romans 7:23 as Paul describes a war going on between his mind and his “members/limbs.” Dr. van der Kolk says of what he calls “the emotional brain”: “No matter how much insight and understanding we develop, the rational brain is basically impotent to talk the emotional brain out of its own reality.”⁴

Drs. Guinther and van der Kolk both help us comprehend that our experience receptors—our limbs/members/emotional brains—must be acknowledged so we can understand ourselves. Paul lamented that his rational brain did not have control over his behavior: “I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out” (Rom. 7:18). Regarding sexual matters, what Paul describes is common.

Paul does not agree that one’s theology should be skewed so that behavior does not matter: “Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means!” (Rom. 6:1-2). To this same audience of those called to be God’s holy people, but who were living like those described in Romans 1:18-32, Paul instructs, “Neither yield/present your members/limbs (μελη) to sin as instruments of unrighteousness, but yield/present yourselves as those brought from death to life and yield/present your members/limbs μελη as instruments of righteousness to God” (Rom. 6:13).

Paul describes how we present our emotional brains as “instruments of righteousness to God,” namely by focusing on life in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:1-17). This very experiential experience of the life of the Spirit (which indeed involves our minds) is the antidote to the disconnect between the rational desire to follow our minds, and the real-life experience of our emotional brains directing us otherwise.

³ Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 56-57.

⁴ van der Kolk, 47.

Dr. Guinther reflects on the ability of the Spirit to make our “limbs/members” healthy:

The Holy Spirit works through community to experientially develop the law of the Spirit in the “limbs” of the body as individuals form attachment bonds with each other, mimic one another’s intentional acts of kindness and forgiveness, and learn to trust each other for mutual edification and protection.⁵

This is a strong call for the Church to engage in intentional relational connections with our LGBTQ+ neighbors. Later in this paper I will propose structures for congregations to develop mentorships that focus on experience with the Holy Spirit as well as structured gatherings that help the limbs/members/emotional brains, not just our rational brains, become instruments of righteousness.

In addition to the Scriptures and professional medical personnel observing the nature of how we process experience, including sexual experience, I want to include the reflection of a Roman Catholic priest, Keith Clark, who died in 2021 at age 82.

I found Father Clark’s reflections about sexuality, particularly in the context of choosing the celibate life, to be wholesome and insightful: “Celibate people are as sexual as anybody else.”⁶ He distinguishes biological motivations that lead to genital sex, bio-psychological motivations that pursue romance, and personal/spiritual connections that lead to intimacy.⁷ He tells the story of men who he knew with the intimacy above, but the relationships did not include romance or genital sex. He also writes about his intimacy with Jan, a wonderful female friend, that did not include romance or genital sex:

Today we talk about our relationship over the years, and she says to those who occasionally ask her why she never married me, “I love him too much to try to take him away from his commitment.” She loves all of me. The intimacy we share is as great as any I have experienced in my life. It is an intimacy

⁵ Guinther, Μελος, 214.

⁶ Keith Clark, *Being Sexual . . . and Celibate* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1986), 129.

⁷ Clark, 21.

arrived at without romantic activity. Her love is one of the greatest gifts of my life.⁸

Father Clark describes covenant-living in the midst of acknowledging the breadth of our humanity:

At least part of the reason celibacy seems so irrelevant to many people is that often there is insufficient recognition of the relationship between the committed celibate life and the whole human experience of intimacy and relationships. As a result, the connection between sexuality and celibacy is almost completely ignored much of the time. People just assume that some people are sexual and others are celibate.⁹

The Scriptures, providing the written revelation of the Creator, simultaneously and insightfully describe the sophisticated way we humans experience life, and the Scriptures lift up the call to righteous behavior in the terms provided by the Creator. Both conviction and compassion are elevated. These twin anchors of covenantal living, informed by the Creator's plan, provide the proper context in which we live our sexual selves faithfully and well.

Answering opposing arguments

God loves everyone equally

Some will hold that because God is love and loves everyone equally, the following perspective holds: The government/church “should not have the right to tell you who you should marry, who you should love, who you can be or what kind of future life that you can have. . . . The government/church should not be in your business. They shouldn't be in our bedrooms. They shouldn't be trying to tell us who we can be, who we can live as, who we can go to school as.”¹⁰

Not only does the Church have responsibility for articulating what ensuing generations of children and sexually maturing youth

⁸ Clark, 38.

⁹ Clark, 104.

¹⁰ Jane Coaston, “Why a Trans Republication Keeps Engaging with Conservatives,” *New York Times*, August 13, 2023, *Sunday Review*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/07/opinion/trans-gender-republicans-lgbt.html>.

will be taught. Persons not agreeing with the Church also have an obligation to identify clearly what they will teach the next generation, clarifying critical matters of their epistemology and identifying the basis for their knowledge.

Often, when persons are critiquing the historic/classic view of the Church regarding sexuality, and they wish to make a biblical/theological claim, it is rooted in some version of this: “God is love, and he loves everyone, no matter their sexual behavior.” The Scriptures directly address this view, “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means!” (Rom. 6:1-2).

Beyond this, the above quoted statements simply do not comprehend the nature of love, embodied most profoundly in the incarnation of Jesus, and similarly embraced in our glad obedience to the God who first loved us. Following the Creator’s directions and living a life of love are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, the Scriptures teach that they necessarily go together.

There are other similar cultural issues

Since divorce and remarriage, women in ministry leadership, and LBGTQ+ considerations are all issues arising from culture, some say that the Church should simply “get on board” with the culture.

It is true that the Church lives in culture, and consequently and necessarily responds to culture. Importantly, the Church gathers around the Scriptures, and does so over time. When I became a pastor in 1978, I was not authorized to perform the wedding of a person who had a former living spouse. In 1972, General Conference granted authorization to study divorce, remarriage, and the ministry of the Church.¹¹ Over the ten years from 1974-1984, the Church studied and conversed together, and in 1988 the Board of Administration concluded that the work of the Church over those years resulted in a new position. The Church opened the way for membership, office-holding, and marriage for persons who had been divorced,

¹¹ *Minutes of the General Conference of the Brethren in Christ Church, 1972, 71-73.*

upon appropriate counsel and their current commitment to marital permanence.

Seventeen years later, the Church held a Consultation on Marriage at Kenbrook Camp, June 13-15, 2005, helping the Church to more fully articulate its biblical understandings which undergirded the earlier more administrative approach to divorce/remarriage wherein the Church identified church membership qualifications and then qualifications for deacons and pastors. I provided exegetical work on the scriptures related to divorce and remarriage via the paper I presented at that Consultation: "Issues Considered re. Marriage."¹² Though the Brethren in Christ Church did not provide an exegetical statement out of that Consultation, it was indeed in light of the scriptural study at the Consultation that the Church reaffirmed commitment to the permanency of marriage, and affirmed the possibility of remarriage, including premarital counseling, for those who had previously been divorced.

Similarly, with regard to women in ministry leadership, in the 1970s there was general discussion in the Evangelical community about the role of women in the church. On October 6, 1979, Board of Administration Secretary Dr. Arthur Climenhaga wrote to Henry Ginder, Eber Dourte, Dorothy Gish, Winnie Swalm, Winnie Thuma, Maureen Rosenberry, and me, appointing us to the "Study Committee for Study of Church's Position Regarding Women and Pastoral Ministry," which eventually led to the 1982 statement affirming women in ministry leadership.¹³

Biblical study marked the Brethren in Christ approach to the matter of women in ministry leadership. Illustrative of this is the message that Dr. Robert Ives preached at the Grantham Church in Mechanicsburg, PA, on March 5, 1978, "The Church Is All Kinds of People."¹⁴ In that sermon he explained that the Greek text in I Timothy 3:11 referred to women who were also deacons. Out of Pastor Ives's biblical teaching, my wife's Aunt Martha Long served

¹² Lynn Thrush, "Issues Considered re. Marriage" (paper presented at Consultation on Marriage, Kenbrook Bible Camp, Lebanon, PA, June 13-15, 2005).

¹³ Arthur Climenhaga, letter to author, October 6, 1979.

¹⁴ Robert B. Ives, "The Church Is All Kinds of People," The Grantham Church, Grantham, PA, March 5, 1978.

as the first woman deacon in the Grantham Church, serving with distinction for thirty-two years. While culture may have led the Brethren in Christ to have a conversation, the Scriptures were the authority that guided our practice.

Certainly, the culture has led regarding matters related to people who identify as LGBTQ+, establishing law in support of same-sex marriage. On June 26, 2015, the US Supreme Court struck down all state bans on same-sex marriage and legalized it in all fifty states. Legality, of course, reflects a much longer cultural openness to LGBTQ+ people. The Church, as it has in the divorce/remarriage and the women in ministry conversations, studies the Scriptures together, and operates in respectful love regarding implementing the practices gathered in light of Scripture. Thus the Church can never simply “get on board with the culture.”

In that the Church’s position is different than US law regarding matters of sexuality, it may be that the Church’s history of nonconformity, especially regarding involvement in the military, can help the Brethren in Christ in the twin commitments of high regard for Scripture and gracious engagement with our neighbors.

The church is tone-deaf regarding LGBTQ+ issues

The Church is often accused of being tone-deaf to LGBTQ+ people, especially to persons in same-sex marriages or to same-sex friends/family members. Too often the charge against the Church is deserved. Too often the Church has made propositional/rational statements the means and the end of relating to our LGBTQ+ neighbors, rather than including equal commitment to ongoing relationship. The Church must grow in willingness to sit with anyone who identifies in any way with the LGBTQ+ community, fully committed to respectful and gracious engagement. This commitment has no end date.

Along with this commitment to ongoing relationships, the Church will give attention to the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures explain that engagement with the Spirit is to be pursued, given the reality of our limbs/members, and because God, who raised Christ from the dead, will also give life to our mortal bodies through the Spirit who lives in us (Rom. 8:11). Engagement with the Spirit is not anti-rational, but it does privilege experience.

The pastoral implications of the traditional position

Paul addresses those “loved by God and called to be his holy people” when writing his letter to the Romans (Rom. 1:7). The Rome that Paul addresses is significantly similar to our current culture. He describes the sexual practices of that culture, and he observes the influence of the culture on those who thought they were God’s people by virtue of their heritage.

Paul teaches that it does matter how we live; he does not allow the view that God’s grace always expands to cover all kinds of behavior (Rom. 6). He also provides a remarkably compassionate identification with his readers, including those dealing with all kinds of sexual matters, when he describes how law/logic-only/rationality-only is impotent to address what has been formed through our “limbs/members,” those receptors of experiences that “fire and then wire”¹⁵ our behaviors (see Rom. 7:7-24).

Along with that compassionate identification, Paul writes about engagement with the Spirit of God, teaching that living according to the Spirit brings life. In this context, he realistically speaks of suffering, and links deep hope and the absolute assurance of being loved as part and parcel of moving toward the telos of new creation (Rom. 8).

This dual teaching, first, of our calling to be God’s holy people, and second, the compassionate call to our culture to access life change via experience with the Holy Spirit rather than believing that life change is fundamentally an exercise in rationality, guides the Church’s pastoral behaviors and decisions.

The Church’s baptismal witness is that we have been united with Jesus in the likeness of Jesus’s death, and likewise united with Jesus in his resurrection (Rom. 6:5). To be united with Jesus in the likeness of his death is fundamental to being a follower of Jesus. No part of life is bracketed out from this death: not our wills, not our intellects, not our sexuality, not our athletic abilities, not our futures. We are crucified with Christ (Gal. 2:20).

¹⁵ van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 56.

The call to be wholly God's is central to the story of the Bible. The Brethren in Christ state this life-choice, this holiness, this sanctification as comprising the following: "As the Spirit works in the life of the believer, he or she is led forward in sanctification to a full surrender and commitment of the motives and will to Christ."¹⁶

The Church acknowledges the Creator and the importance of aligning all of life, including our sexual behavior, with God's authority. Simultaneously the Church affirms that the Holy Spirit provides the capacity to live well within the context of covenant. This living within God's intention accords with the scriptural anticipation of everything being reconciled to God (Col. 1:20). In the light of God's wise authority and his gracious provision to live within that authority, the Brethren in Christ Church credentials pastors/leaders and receives persons into church membership who affirm and follow the understanding that genital sexual relations are carried out in marriage between a male husband and a female wife.

The second call of the Church to our culture is one of enormous compassion. Here we are not addressing what we teach to ensuing generations; here we are addressing those we meet in the moment. Because of the nature of all matters sexual, we are not addressing the Rome-like culture of our day primarily through steps of logic. Rather, in the immediate relating to persons we are alert to the realities of people's limbs/members—their experience receptors, the sources of their "emotional brains." This means we prioritize presence, kindness, hopefulness, and perseverance in our relationships with the LBGTQ+ persons in our lives.

Additionally, we give space and attention to our witness via experience with the Holy Spirit rather than believing that our witness is fundamentally an exercise in rationality. We include prayer, likely privately spoken within our own minds and hearts, then potentially offered in the hearing of our friends, again, not to rationally persuade, but to invoke the real presence of the Spirit. We prioritize acts of service and initiating love. We speak words of blessing.

¹⁶ Brethren in Christ Church U. S., "Articles of Faith and Doctrine, Article IV: Jesus Christ and Salvation," Life in Spirit section, in *Manual of Government and Doctrine* 2022 ed., <https://bicus.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/MDG-2022-For-Web.pdf>.

The dual commitments to conviction and relationships are seen in the two pastoral books, *Messy Grace: How a Pastor With Gay Parents Learned to Love Others Without Sacrificing Conviction* and *Messy Truth: How To Foster Community Without Sacrificing Conviction*, both by Caleb Kaltenbach.¹⁷ The books are endorsed by people such as John Townsend, author of the Boundaries series; Carey Nieuwhof, host of the *Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast*; Preston Sprinkle, president of the Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender; and Mark Yarhouse, professor at Wheaton College and director of the Sexual and Gender Identity Institute.

Regarding *Messy Truth*, Mark Yarhouse, whom I consider one of the outstanding scholars teaching from the perspective of the Church, writes, “I am often asked, ‘Who’s doing it right? Who is a model for relating to the LGBTQ community?’ I point people to Caleb Kaltenbach, whose book *Messy Truth* helps the reader catch his vision for entering into sustained, authentic relationships and provides practical examples from his own life and principles for doing so.”¹⁸

Here are some affirmations by Caleb Kaltenbach from *Messy Truth*:

- It’s acceptable to disagree on theological ideas, but it’s always wrong to dehumanize others—even when they disagree with you. The more that people feel valued by you, the more they feel as though they could get to know others like you. It’s the beginning of fostering the kind of redemptive community that inspires people to follow Jesus no matter the cost.¹⁹
- We need more churches where people can belong so they can belong.²⁰

¹⁷ Caleb Kaltenbach, *Messy Grace: How a Pastor with Gay Parents Learned to Love Others Without Sacrificing Conviction* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2015); Caleb Kaltenbach, *Messy Truth: How to Foster Community Without Sacrificing Conviction* (Colorado Springs: Waterbook Press, 2021).

¹⁸ Mark Yarhouse, “Praise for *Messy Truth*,” Kaltenbach, *Messy Truth*, inside front cover endorsements.

¹⁹ Kaltenbach, *Messy Truth*, 71.

²⁰ Kaltenbach, *Messy Truth*, 78.

- Creating environments and fostering attitudes where belonging precedes belonging hardly implies backpedaling in theology. It requires firm biblical convictions and strong leadership. It's not simple.²¹

Given the above twin commitments to convictions and community, we now turn to actions that the Brethren in Christ Church can take.

Recommended actions

I have three recommendations I would like the Brethren in Christ Church to take in light of this study on sexuality, specifically relating to persons connected to the LGBTQ+ community. The first recommendation focuses on teaching, while the last two focus on pastoral care.

Recommendation #1: A class on new creation

The first recommendation is developing a “new creation” curriculum based on Isaiah 65:17-25, with field service involved in each lesson. New creation involves generations of work; it involves the whole span of one’s life, from preparation involving education/training, to targeting the settings of need across the earth. The focus of this paper understands that the comprehensive new creation is rooted in primary allegiance to God, believing that anthropological perceptions that accord with that allegiance best serve the Creator’s new creation. Thus, this New Creation class anticipates that teaching, and working for, God’s beautiful description of his world in Isaiah 65 also influences the practices of our sexuality.

Following is a sample outline for this curriculum, titled “Aligning Our Lives with God’s Telos (End/Goal),” from Isaiah 65:17-25.

1. “A Better Tomorrow”: the new heavens and earth overtake the former (v. 17)
2. “Living Joyfully”: spreading joy to others (vv. 18-19)
3. “End the Weeping!”: seeking to eliminate stress and suffering (v. 19)

²¹ Kaltenbach, *Messy Truth*, 79.

4. “Excellent Healthcare for Everyone”: long life for all (vv. 20, 22)
5. “Home Ownership—available to all”: (vv. 21-22)
6. “Successful Entrepreneurship”—the privilege for everyone (vv. 21-22)
7. “I Love My Work”: enjoyable, meaningful jobs held over time (vv. 22d, 23a)
8. “A Blessed Clan”: healthy family systems (v. 23)
9. “The Provision Before the Request”: remarkable spiritual intimacy (v. 24)
10. “The Wolf and the Lamb”: surprising reconciliation (v. 25)
11. “The Devil Bites the Dust”: evil is not honored (v. 25c)
12. “No Violence!”: shalom is the rule (v. 25)

Recommendation #2: Creating structures for belonging

The second recommendation is that all Brethren in Christ U.S. congregations establish structured gatherings, where belonging is experienced in the church. The structure for “belonging so that they can belong” (see Kaltenbach) serves the need for grace-filled relationships and places to belong.

These structured gatherings, including the class on creation I described above, are open for LGBTQ+ persons and others looking for a place within the framework of the Church to belong. This structured gathering is for sharing, need-meeting, and Scripture study. It is in this setting of community where love is genuinely demonstrated. Because all of life includes covenantal living, these loved individuals who are experiencing belonging comprehend that convictional living and deeply loving behavior are not mutually exclusive.

These gatherings are especially suited to new creation engagements like with the recommended class because the Church wants to grow in meeting unmet needs in the immediate community and beyond. Further, these gatherings are conducive to identifying with the constant presence and communication of the Holy Spirit to everyone. Experience is powerfully persuasive, seen in the Spirit’s action of healing, provision, assistance through suffering, and more.

Recommendation #3: Training Holy Spirit mentors

The third recommendation is to train mentors in being mindfully alert to the presence, love, healing, and calling of the Holy Spirit. Pastors, deacons, ministry staff leaders, small group leaders, youth and children's leaders could all be led in a practicum-oriented journey, akin to Walk to Emmaus (a spiritual renewal program that uses the name of the account where two disciples doing ordinary life became aware that Jesus had been with them). Here mentees are invited into the truth that Paul teaches in Romans 8:11, "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of (or through) his Spirit who lives in you."

Earlier in this paper, I said that in relating to persons with varying sexual stories, leaning upon logic and seeking to have the other adopt that logic and go in the direction desired do not sufficiently acknowledge how we are created. Paul teaches, however, in Romans 8 that the "emotional brain" is responsive to the Spirit: the Spirit helps us in our hopefulness (Rom. 8:24); the Spirit helps us in our weakness (Rom. 8:26); the Spirit helps us pray (Rom. 8:26); the Spirit groans for us in his intercession (Rom. 8:26); and the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God (Rom. 8:27).

Dr. Peter Guinther reflects on this help from the Spirit, especially in the safe and respectful setting of mentorship and community.

The more an individual presents their eyes (or other senses) to the observation of healthy behaviors, the more healthy desires (satisfying those desires through relationship with God) are wired together with those observations into implicit memory at an emotional level, and the more those desires are manifested in healthy behaviors in the "limbs."²²

The recommendations above emerge from the deep resource wells of Church life. New creation's vision for the shalom of the whole earth fuels whole-life commitment to that vision in young and old alike.

²² Guinther, Μελος, 162.

Belonging that comes from regularly meeting together develops through sharing, meeting needs, and studying the Scriptures. The attention given to the immediate and continual presence of the Holy Spirit alerts all to the richness of the divine-human relationship that seeds continual expectation for increasing personal and worldwide shalom.

Conclusion

The Church affirms John Wesley's prevenient grace, and the Reformed reference to common grace, that God is present before we arrive on the scene. Given God's presence, and that God is love, the Church possesses a deep knowing that it is a good thing to love and respect one another. As 1 John 4:16 affirms, "Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them." PFLAG, founded in 1973, "is the first and largest organization dedicated to supporting, educating, and advocating for LGBTQ+ people and their families."²³ It also hopes for love and respect: "PFLAG is creating a caring, just, and affirming world for LGBTQ+ people and those who love them."²⁴ Perhaps this commonality can provide a growing space for the kind of communication that simultaneously accommodates deep convictions and deep commitment to relationships.

This paper presents the Church's understanding of the Scriptures regarding matters of sexuality as anchored in the Creator, the Creator's character and call regarding covenant-living, and the Creator's goal of new creation. Given this context, the Church, with generational responsibility to the Creator, models and teaches accordingly to present and future generations, understanding that this teaching accords with human flourishing.

This paper also presents the Church's call to relate with compassion to those who identify in some way with LGBTQ+ persons and their families and friends. This call to compassionate and ongoing relationships acknowledges that humans experience life in the complexity of both our logical minds and our emotional brains. In relating with compassion to LGBTQ+ persons, we are further invited to pursue engagement in and with the Spirit. This rich invitation into the life of the Spirit accords with the sophisticated understanding of humans that we are created with capacity to engage with the Divine.

BRETHREN IN CHRIST
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Please Lord, for the sake of every human being whom you love, for the sake of your Church that desires to love you the way you desire, and to love the world the way you demonstrate, do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to your power that is at work within us; to you be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen (Eph. 3:20).

²³ <https://pflag.org>.

²⁴ "About Us," <https://pflag.org/about-us/>.

Response to Lynn Thrush

By John Yeatts

My brother Lynn Thrush has done a comprehensive job of presenting biblical support for the traditional Brethren in Christ position on LGBTQ+. There is likely universal agreement on his starting point: “God is loved supremely, and our neighbors are loved with the same honor wherein we love ourselves.”

Thrush starts his biblical analysis with creation but states at the outset Jesus’s greatest commandment: “Love God and neighbor.” Thrush affirms the Brethren in Christ position that biblical marriage is a lifelong relationship between a man and woman. He then introduces celibacy as the solution for LGBTQ+ persons who do not conform to the limitation of marriage to male and female but does not suggest celibacy as the solution for those whose marriages are not life-long. This insistence on celibacy for LGBTQ+ persons has significant pastoral implications that may not be fully met with love and prayer, as Thrush implies. Thrush addresses such pastoral concerns by affirming the importance of creating a church environment where LGBTQ+ persons can “belong,” but does not specify what that means in practice.

Thrush highlights biblical ideas that are generally important—the abounding love of God, the ministry of peace and justice entrusted to God’s people, the value of a life of holiness, the expectation of the coming kingdom where God’s will is done on earth, and the image of the marriage supper in Revelation. Yet, these ideas could have been more closely tied to LGBTQ+ issues and persons. Indeed, in Thrush’s detailed discussion of an impressive number of biblical texts, he could have made more clear how this biblical evidence is connected to the issue of LGBTQ+ behavior and same-sex marriage.

Thrush’s most convincing evidence for the importance of marriage is that throughout, the Bible bears witness to the faithful relationship between Christ and the church. Nevertheless, he could clarify why this

marriage relationship must be between a man and woman to represent the relationship between Christ and his church.

While Thrush is right to state that the theological framework for discussing LGBTQ+ issues must be broader than the passages I focus on in my paper, pastorally they are the ones that have been used to reject our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters. Throughout my life, I have been saddened by how LGBTQ+ persons have been hurt by language rooted in misinterpretations of these biblical passages. Indeed, I regret my own guilt in such abuse. If we are to pastorally minister to LGBTQ+ persons, misuse of those biblical passages must be addressed. Nevertheless, Thrush is right to place these passages in their broader biblical context.

Thrush deals in some detail with perhaps the most discussed passage related to LGBTQ+ issues in Romans 1-2. Although we clearly differ on exegetical details, I pray that my presentation will lead us not to use language in verses 26-27 to denigrate persons in same-sex relationships. Moreover, I trust that we will also not focus on sins addressed in those two verses over the ones in the verses that follow. More specifically, I plead that we not use the questionably translated words in verse 27 to “gossip” about and “slander” (vv. 29-30) our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters. Indeed, Thrush’s avoidance of these words in dealing with Romans 1 shows pastoral sensitivity.

Thrush is right to highlight Jesus’s anchoring of marriage between a man and woman in the creation story. This marriage relationship is supported by prophets who compare God’s covenant with Israel to marriage and the breaking of that covenant to adultery. Thrush’s conclusion, “Covenantal living involves deep integrity,” might raise the pastoral question: would integrity require us to discipline adultery as strictly as same-sex marriage?

Thrush addresses three counterarguments to the traditional Brethren in Christ position. The first is: the church has no right in my bedroom, or more tactfully, God loves everyone equally regardless of sexual behavior. Thrush agrees that God loves LGBTQ+ people regardless of their behavior, but appeals to Paul’s statement in Romans

RESPONSE TO TRADITIONAL VIEW

6:1: “Shall we go on sinning that grace may increase? By no means.” Our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters might respond: why do we treat them uniquely in requiring them not to continue sinning. When applying for membership, do we ask: Have you given up gossiping? or Have you stopped slandering?

Thrush’s second counterargument is cultural: We need to “get on board” with the culture. He correctly compares same-sex marriage to divorce and remarriage and women in leadership, outlining how the church held consultations on these issues and came to accommodate with the culture.

Some Brethren in Christ ministers, who support the traditional position on LGBTQ+ issues, feel the need for consultations like the ones conducted related to divorce and remarriage and women in ministry to formulate how we relate pastorally to brothers and sisters who disagree with our LGBTQ+ position. Persons who hold a more affirming position might be included to help us address issues important to them.

Thrush’s third counterargument is that the church is tone-deaf to LGBTQ+ persons among us. Thrush wisely agrees that we need “gracious engagement” in the presence of the Spirit with our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters who belong to our congregations.

Moreover, Thrush’s section on pastoral implications is right to emphasize “compassionate identification” and “engagement with the Spirit of God.” I particularly appreciate Thrush’s concluding with the concept of “belonging.” He would help us if he elaborated on the phrase, “belong in order to belong.”

Thrush’s recommendations for relating to LGBTQ+ persons address this issue of “belonging.” Although belonging is crucial to our discussion of same-sex relationships, “Creating structures” seems too formal to allow productive discussion of the pastoral implications of LGBTQ+ persons and same-sex relationships. While it is true that LGBTQ+ persons should be included in these “structured gatherings,” they might best be focused less on LGBTQ+ as an issue and more on loving LGBTQ+ persons.

I am not at all surprised that my brother Lynn suggests “Training of Holy Spirit mentors.” I would love to have Lynn Thrush as a Holy Spirit mentor.

In summary, Thrush and I agree that biblical marriage is between a man and woman for life. My brother Lynn has constructed a thoroughly biblical rationale for our Brethren in Christ position. The crucial issue that I consider in my paper is: How do we address this pastorally with persons who disagree with our position or who are in same-sex relationships? We Brethren in Christ have addressed the issue of LGBTQ+ relationships and same-sex marriage, which Thrush has defended. While he addressed the need for a compassionate Spirit-led pastoral response, he has not adequately addressed specifically how that pastoral response might look in the life of our church. My essay may at least move us forward in that direction.

Response to Lynn Thrush

By J. E. McDermond

One of my basic fears when dialoguing with a person with whom I disagree is the possibility that we have nothing in common, thus making interaction virtually impossible due to a lack of overlapping agreements. That wasn't the case, as I began reading Lynn Thrush's contribution. In fact, I found myself in broad agreement with several of his opening points. As I sit here at my desk replying to his offering, I see the large font copy of Mark 12:29-31 which has adorned my desk since I first read Scot McKnight's *The Jesus Creed*. There are no other commandments greater than loving God and loving our neighbors as we love ourselves. This is fundamental to faith so far as I can tell. Additionally, "Amen!" is scribbled in the margin and green highlights Thrush's sentence, "The context of the good Creator making promises to humans has its telos in new creation," in the second paragraph. I am firmly convinced that God promises to "put right" or re-create all Creation, and so Revelation 21-22 is crucial in my theology.

Yet, as I read closely, I found myself wondering where gaps might appear in our conversation. For example, does Thrush envision more in God's telos than I do? Perhaps. He does write, ". . . [in] the Creator's end goal (telos) are all given their due." Does this element of "due" involve justice or wrath? Thrush notes his belief that God is "compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love and faithfulness" (all of which I agree with), but the question is left open regarding that end goal of what is "due." Is it justice or wrath? There is a difference. Additionally, I agree we need to avoid "a reductionistic comprehension of humanity that reduces the human capacity to love one's neighbor by holding that humans must privilege propositions about oneself over denying oneself for the sake of the other." We all struggle with that element of the human condition, and so I agree with Thrush, if we adhere to this goal and apply it fairly and equitably to all. Of course, reality shows us that isn't always the case. The very real

temptation is to ask others to deny themselves while we free ourselves from this standard.

Points of departure become more evident as Thrush moves into the section regarding the Brethren in Christ Church's position. He acknowledges that "all persons are sexual, that sexuality is good," but the current church tradition on sexuality privileges marriage only for heterosexuals. Marriage is not an option for people from the LGBTQ+ communities. This, for me, raises a recurring question: is love the only biblical attribute that helps us determine Christian practice? I agree with Thrush that love is fundamental; however, can it stand alone? Ever since Rob Bell wrote *Love Wins*, I am increasingly convinced love cannot stand alone. In these complex times, I am convinced justice is also central to most of our discussions about social situations. Thus, I would ask, "Is it just to reserve marriage for ourselves and deny it to another group?"

An even more serious rift appears in this section and at the beginning of the section on biblical evidence if I am reading the material correctly. In the opening of part three, Thrush skips over the traditional biblical passages used to support a traditional view of homosexuality. He ignores specific passages and opts for "the breadth of scripture" which is the recurring theme of covenant. Since I have done something similar in my essay, I am not opposed to his approach. Covenant is a central motif in the Bible. I am surprised, however, when Thrush side steps specific biblical passages about homosexuality. And even more troubling is his assumption that the Holy Spirit primarily functions in the life of Christians as they interact lovingly with people who don't fit into the Church's understanding of acceptable. So far as I can tell, there is no assumption that the Holy Spirit may be at work within the Church causing it to examine its own current convictions and beliefs. Ultimately, both specific passages of Scripture and the leading of the Holy Spirit are replaced by church tradition as authoritative. Is that where the Brethren in Christ Church is today? It is my impression that this has not been the denomination's *modus operandi* in the past, but that may have changed.

RESPONSE TO TRADITIONAL VIEW

Having said that, I want to affirm Thrush for not proof-texting in his essay. All too often people take this approach to “prove” their case when, in fact, the ancient texts used are not relevant to contemporary situations. This occurs on both sides of the discussions in which we engage. The good news is we do this because we hold the Scriptures in high esteem. The bad news is often the Bible is merely a tool to prove our point. Therefore, I applaud Thrush’s approach of broadening his use of the Bible to focus on the theme of covenant. Yet, I believe even here there are attempts to mold and reshape this biblical theme into a shape it wasn’t meant to take on.

The covenant with Abram and Sarai reveals basic truths about God. God is faithful to Creation and humanity. God is redemptive and will redeem both Creation and humanity. God is relational and desires to bless humanity—even arrogant humanity that one chapter earlier (Genesis 11) attempted to build a tower to the heavens, thus challenging God. At a fundamental level, God enacting this covenant powerfully suggests how we ought to be as a reflection of the divine nature. However, there is another powerful truth played out in the unfolding story of covenant: God enters this program with incredibly flawed human beings. Abraham is just the beginning. Israel repeatedly fails. The followers of Jesus fail. The Apostle Paul freely admits he struggles and fails to be Christlike. Neither Israel nor the Church, which are in this covenantal relationship with God to bring about the redemption of Creation (see Revelation 21 and 22), is sinless. And yet God stays in that covenantal relationship throughout the Bible.

Thrush seems to say that because homosexuality is a sin, therefore LGBTQ+ persons can’t be a part of the covenant with God. LGBTQ+ persons can’t possibly be used by God to bring to fulfillment the divine plan. God will stay in a covenantal relationship with Israel and the Church despite their complex and diverse sinfulness, but LGBTQ+ persons are eliminated on the sole basis of their sexuality before even entering a covenantal relationship with God.

Similarly, I am not sure why Thrush’s argument for covenantal relationships in the Bible can only be applied to a man and a woman.

His survey of the Bible on marital relationships provides excellent advice and warnings for people in a marriage relationship. We ought to note that this excellent advice is, in fact, given to couples living in an ancient heteronormative social context. The original readers could never have imagined a world in which there was same-sex marriage. At the same time, the Bible offers advice in social situations that could never have imagined a world without slavery or where women were equal to men. In other words, the Bible offers advice to a world that is drastically different from our own. Is it possible that the Bible's advice on how to maintain a solid marital covenantal relationship would be helpful to all Christians who entering marriage regardless of their sexual orientation?

I strongly support marriage. I strongly support marriage as the context for sexual expression. And this reality came home to me with shocking force a few years ago. As I was driving home from helping our son work on his deck, I was listening to a National Public Radio story. The report was about the gay cruising sex scene. At one level, I was frustrated and angered by NPR yet again highlighting a marginal lifestyle. (I have a love/hate relationship with NPR.) I was horrified at how the young men interviewed in the story were living their lives driven by what seemed to be a focused hedonistic agenda. And then I thought to myself, "Maybe this is a result of the Church not loving them the way the Church says it does. Maybe this is a result of the Church saying a loving covenantal marriage isn't an option for them." Maybe this NPR story threw an exposing light on both communities' misguided beliefs and practices.

I have one final critique of Thrush's essay, and to be honest I hope I have misread his paper because this observation is my most critical observation. Early in the essay, he writes, "The Church holds that the credentialing of pastors/leaders and the receiving of persons into church membership are steps that are approved for persons who affirm the biblical pattern that genital sex may be only practiced within the marriage of a male husband and a female wife." This is repeated later, almost verbatim. In other words, if a person doesn't

RESPONSE TO TRADITIONAL VIEW

agree with the Brethren in Christ Church position on marriage, that person cannot be a minister or a member of the church. Seemingly, church tradition is of greater importance than what Paul wrote, “. . . if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9). Am I correct in understanding that the lordship of Jesus and the foundational truth of his resurrection is secondary to affirming the denomination’s understanding of traditional marriage? If so, that strikes me as wildly problematic.

In the end, I certainly find points of commonality with Thrush’s essay regarding a few basic points. However, at the end of the discussion we are far apart regarding how the church ought to approach LGBTQ+ community members and how Christians are called to follow Jesus as we wrestle with this complex matter.

BRETHREN IN CHRIST
HISTORY & LIFE

The Brethren in Christ Church and the LGBTQ+ Community: The Pastoral Accommodation View

By John R. Yeatts*

The importance of this conversation

The issue of LGBTQ+ is one of the most serious ecclesiastical controversies for all churches in recent years. When faced with such issues, the Brethren in Christ begin with the Bible. In the past, controversial issues usually arose in the local congregation or district councils. If the issue was deemed significant to the life of the brotherhood, it was passed on to the Regional Conference for consideration. In this process, the issue next made its way to the General Conference where a decision was considered and determined by this representative gathering of ministers and members. The resulting decision was binding on the belief and practice of congregations and their members, and church discipline enforced the decision.

This process was implemented on issues as diverse as the use of lightning rods, affirming sanctification as a “second definite work of grace,” operating Sunday schools, and joining labor unions.¹ In each case, the Brethren gathered around the Bible to determine together whether or not the practice was biblical. This is how a Brethren in Christ hermeneutic operated on controversial ideas and practices.

The definitive essay on hermeneutics was written by Martin H. Schrag,² who argues that the major Brethren in Christ hermeneutical principles are: commitment to the authority of the Bible over

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¹ Carlton W. Wittlinger, *Quest for Piety and Obedience: The Story of the Brethren in Christ*, (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Press, 1978), 38, 113, 207-208, 401.

² Martin H. Schrag, “A Historical Survey of Brethren in Christ Hermeneutics,” in E. Morris Sider, ed., *Reflections on a Heritage: Defining the Brethren in Christ* (Grantham, PA: Brethren in Christ Historical Society, 1999), 189-211.

human creeds, the priority of the New Testament over the Old, the interpretation of Scriptures by the gathered church, the priority of obedience to the teachings of the Bible over assent to doctrinal beliefs, and the importance of the written Word and the witness of the Holy Spirit. These hermeneutical principles are relevant to LGBTQ+ attraction and behavior and to same-sex relationships, and they provide a wonderful opportunity for representatives of the brotherhood as a whole to discuss relevant biblical passages to arrive at a position consistent with our hermeneutical principles.

This essay is an attempt to address LGBTQ+ behavior and same-sex marriage guided by a Brethren in Christ hermeneutic: the authority of the Bible over our “Articles of Faith and Doctrine,” the priority of Jesus and the New Testament over the Old Testament, the interpretation of the Bible in its biblical context rather than through theological and historical interpretations, the priority of obedience to the Bible over doctrinal statements, and the necessity of discerning what the Spirit says to the Church.

Moreover, this particular essay addresses the pastoral importance of conversation about LGBTQ+ issues and behaviors. Some pastors are calling for venues where honest questions and concerns can be aired and respectfully discussed by persons with a variety of perspectives to arrive at helpful guidance for congregational leaders in the midst of complex and even confusing pastoral situations. A pastoral accommodation view may facilitate dialogue addressing these questions and concerns.

The pastoral accommodation view

The Brethren in Christ “Articles of Faith and Doctrine” include a defining statement about marriage: “Human sexuality is affirmed within the chaste single life or a lifelong marriage between a man and a woman.”³ Credentialed Brethren in Christ ministers believe this and

³ Brethren in Christ U. S., “Part 2: Articles of Faith and Doctrine,” in *Manual of Doctrine and Government*, 2016 ed. (Mechanicsburg, PA: General Conference of the Brethren in Christ, 2016), 8.

practice its implications: No marriages are permitted between same-sex couples performed by Brethren in Christ ministers or in Brethren in Christ churches. Ministers believe and support this position but there are many who call for the pastoral implications of these proscriptions to be addressed.

One such implication is the apparent inconsistency in the stated policy: A minister whose marriage is not heterosexual must be chaste, but a minister whose marriage has not been life-long need not be chaste. Another inconsistency is that adherence to other statements in the “Articles” is not enforced to the same extent as the sexuality statement. For example, pastors who do not believe in church membership, do not permit women in positions of leadership, do not affirm or practice resistance to military service, or do not practice trine immersion baptism are not barred from ministerial credentialing like those who do not believe or practice our statement on human sexuality.

Perhaps the most pressing unaddressed pastoral issue is: While ministers must affirm the statement on marriage, the status of other persons belonging to the congregation who do not believe or practice this statement is not so clear. Can they attend, be members? teach? preach? serve on boards and committees? be ushers? prepare food for luncheons?

To provide guidance on the extent to which persons who disagree with the church’s position on LGBTQ+ attraction and same-sex marriage, Brethren in Christ practice is for the “gathered church” under the direction of the Holy Spirit to investigate the teachings of Jesus to come to “doctrinal agreement.” Perhaps we have a useful protocol for dealing with persons who disagree with the Brethren in Christ position in our “Articles of Faith and Doctrine” related to nonresistance: “While respecting those who hold other interpretations, we believe that preparation for or participation in war is inconsistent with the teachings of Christ.”⁴ That example related to one of our founding beliefs—nonresistance—could serve as a protocol for

⁴ “Articles of Faith and Doctrine,” 15.

drafting a similar position regarding LGBTQ+ persons and same-sex relationships.

Biblical and theological evidence for the pastoral accommodation view

As Brethren in Christ, we start with the Bible and develop theology from studying it together. We do not begin with theories of the rightness or wrongness of LGBTQ+ behaviors and same-sex relationships, but with a careful analysis of the language in each related biblical passage. Then, following Brethren in Christ practice, we develop theology to apply the passages to ministry in the church. Ecclesiology is central to Brethren in Christ theology.

Biblical discussions of same-sex relationships often begin with Genesis and follow relevant passages canonically to Leviticus and the Pauline epistles. If we prioritize the Pentateuch, we may emphasize obedience to the Law, conformity, and exclusion. When we start with Jesus, we see a completely different emphasis. Although Jesus set a hyperbolically demanding standard for behavior, more important was his greatest commandment: Love God and others—like Roman supporters, tax-collectors, zealots, and others considered “sinners.”

By treating the issue of same-sex relationships canonically, Jesus is de-centered and even overlooked because he does not address the LGBTQ+ issue directly. His silence should not be assumed to affirm or reject same-sex relationships. Arguments from silence are always tenuous. Nevertheless, as Brethren in Christ we start with Jesus and read passages that address same-sex relationships more directly in light of the prior teachings of Jesus, especially his greatest commandment: “Love God and neighbor.”

Following his greatest commandment, Jesus would want us to include LGBTQ+ people in our congregations with both the love and compassion they deserve because they are created in the image of God and the humility growing out of Jesus’s statements like: “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? (Matt. 7:3).” Followers of Jesus love

LGBTQ+ persons and those in same-sex relationships and marriages with humble compassion and help them to belong to our fellowship.

Yet, Jesus' understanding of marriage focuses on "male and female: Haven't you read . . . that at the beginning the Creator "made them male and female" and said, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh?" So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate" (Matt. 19:3-6).

This passage gives biblical support for the Brethren in Christ position: "Human sexuality is affirmed within the chaste single life or a lifelong marriage between a man and a woman."⁵ Because the Bible does not use the word "chaste" (*hagnos*) specifically of sexuality,⁶ perhaps another word could have been used. Still, marriage between a male and female is Jesus's expectation.

Jesus's understanding grows out of the Bible's most consistent treatment of marriage rooted in the two creation accounts combined into a definition of marriage affirmed by both Jesus and Paul. Although these biblical statements assume marriage is between a man and woman, they do not address same-sex marriage. Indeed, neither Jesus nor any biblical writers address committed, consensual, same-sex marriage.

Nevertheless, it is front and center in the church today. The Brethren in Christ have ruled out the option of same-sex marriage based on statements in Genesis (2:24) and affirmed by Jesus (Matt. 19:5-6; Mark 10:7-9) and Paul (Eph. 5:31) that marriage is between a man and woman. Having affirmed that, the Brethren in Christ assume that same-sex relations are "sin," that is, "falling short" (*hamartia*) of the biblical ideal for marriage. In short, we affirm that marriage is between man and woman for life.

⁵ "Articles of Faith and Doctrine," 8.

⁶ The only biblical occurrence of "chaste" (*hagnos*) is in Titus 2:5.

Genesis 1-2

After dealing with the teaching of Jesus, we turn to that important biblical passage from which Jesus builds his understanding of marriage. Some see the creation story as emphasizing the difference between men and women, based on passages like the creation of woman to be a “suitable helper” for man. In Genesis 2:18, the phrase “suitable helper” (kenegdo) is a compound word, including the particle *ken*,⁷ which means “like” or “as,” and *negdo*, which means “in front of” or “opposite.”⁸ Not much can be decided about sexual difference on this ambiguous word.

Moreover, the second creation account emphasizes the unity of male and female. After the creation of the woman, verse 24 says: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.” The language used for marriage throughout the Bible is that the two become “one flesh.” “Flesh” (*basar*) means “of the body” and is applied to “blood relations.” “Flesh” is used for a variety of family relationships (Gen. 29:14; Judges 9:2; 2 Sam. 19:12).⁹ Fidelity to marriage and family is crucial to maintaining the unity of man and woman into “one flesh.”

The word translated “united” (*dabaq*) means to “cling,” “cleave,” or “keep close,” and can refer figuratively to kinship or affection bonds like the “clinging” of Ruth to Naomi (Ruth 1:14), which clearly cannot denote a relationship between a male and female.¹⁰

Preston Sprinkle argues that Jesus cites Genesis 1:27 to highlight sexual differences: God created them male and female.¹¹ But Sam Wilcox questions the assumption that “male and female” implies that “difference” is the primary emphasis.

⁷ Francis Brown with the cooperation of S.R. Driver and Charles A Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon with Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1996), 485-487. Hereafter cited as BDB Hebrew and English Lexicon.

⁸ BDB Hebrew and English Lexicon, 616-617.

⁹ BDB Hebrew and English Lexicon, 142.

¹⁰ BDB Hebrew and English Lexicon, 179-180.

¹¹ Preston Sprinkle, *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality Is Not Just an Issue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 34-36.

For many, the creation story of Adam and Eve precludes discussions of anything more complex than a gender binary and heterosexuality. However, we know that the creation stories in Genesis simplify things immensely. There is only day and night in Genesis 1, but we know about dusk and dawn. There is only dry land and sea, but we know marshes, bogs, and other “in between” spaces exist. Animals are animals of the land, sea, or air, but we know that there are birds who fly and swim. There are amphibians who live on land and sea. These cases do not invalidate the creation stories but should expand our appreciation for the diversity and creativity of the Creator.¹²

Perhaps “male and female” stress inclusion, rather than difference.

George Payne argues that the Genesis understanding of sexuality and gender—male and female—contains the scientific understanding of that time “to counter some common but damning theological interpretations of that day” like “humans were just a part of nature and pawns of the gods in those stories.” Payne summarizes:

Instead of mere pawns, humanity is the apple of God’s eye distinct and above all the rest of creation by receiving God’s breath and sharing God’s image. In the biblical account, this very God is a personal God who walks in the beautiful garden of creation with the beloved human.¹³

Payne concludes that the message of Genesis 1-2 is not about sexuality and gender but about how the one transcendent God out of love created humans in God’s image for communion and partnership.

Payne is correct that sexuality and gender are not the primary message of Genesis 1-2. Sprinkle thinks that Genesis 1-2 and Mark 10 offer strong evidence for the non-affirming view of same-sex marriage,

¹² Sam Wilcock, “Dealing with Reality: Discovering How God Created Our Neighbors,” in *Invitation to Conversation: Becoming More Inclusive of LGBTQ+ People in the Brethren in Christ Church*, ed. Helena Cicero, Eric A. Seibert, and Julie Weatherford (Grasmere, ID: SacraSage Press, 2024), 254.

¹³ George Payne, “God’s Love Wins: Chapter 2: Understanding Biblical Truth,” part 1 of 2, (blog), February 21, 2017, <https://towelbasin.blogspot.com/2017/02/gods-loves-wins-chapter-2-understanding.html>.

but concludes: “I don’t think the case is closed.”¹⁴ Although Sprinkle is correct that these passages do not seal the deal, they are the strongest biblical affirmation that marriage is between a man and a woman.

Of course, this does not solve the pastoral concern of how to treat persons whose belief and practice do not conform to the biblical ideal for marriage as between a man and a woman. Also important for our pastoral considerations are other passages used to describe same-sex relations with more graphic and denigrating language, using words like “sodomy,” “abomination,” “detestable,” “perversion,” and “unnatural.” Is there biblical basis for speaking about same-sex relations with such demeaning language? Does the Bible give us help in pastoral accommodation of our position on same-sex marriage to avoid demeaning our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters?

Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19)

The city of Sodom has given its name to same-sex relations, which have been called “sodomy.” But is same-sex behavior the sin of Sodom? According to Payne,

Many scriptures relate Sodom type judgment on various evils and situations. They include breaking God’s covenant and worship of false gods (Deut. 29:23-26); doing evil versus doing social justice (Isaiah 1:9-10); words and actions against the Lord (Isa. 3:8-9); false prophets who promote evil (Jer. 23:14); judgment on various nations (Jer. 49:18; 50:40, Zeph. 2:8-9; etc.); and sudden unexpected calamity while living everyday life (Matt. 10:11-16, Luke 17:28).¹⁵

Moreover, the “sin of Sodom” in Ezekiel 16:49 was arrogance, gluttony, and failing to help the poor and needy and in 2 Peter 1-12 it

¹⁴ Sprinkle, People, 40.1, 2017, <https://towelbasin.blogspot.com/2017/02/gods-loves-wins-chapter-2-understanding.html>.

¹⁵ George Payne, “God’s Love Wins: Chapter 3: Understanding Biblical Truth,” part 2 of 2, (blog), February 21, 2017, <https://towelbasin.blogspot.com/2017/02/gods-love-wins-chapter-3-understanding.html>.

is greed, made up stories, slander and blasphemy. Indeed, Jude is the only New Testament passage that ties the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah to “sexuality immorality and perversion.” Sodom’s sins are too many to focus only on sexuality.

In short, the story of Sodom does not clearly address same-sex relationships. Lot’s guests were not requesting consensual, monogamous sexual relations with the visitors. Their goal was “gang rape.” The pastoral implications are that this story has nothing to add to our discussion of committed same-sex relationships.

Leviticus

Two passages in Leviticus speak of same-sex behavior:

Do not lie with (*shakhav*) a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable (*to’ebah*) (Lev. 18:22).

If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads (Lev. 20:13).

The verb “to lie” (*shakhav*) can also mean “to sleep,” or “to lodge.” It is used figuratively of sexual relations and death.¹⁶ The word translated “detestable” is *to’ebah*, which is used of sacrifices to idols, unclean food, idolatrous practices, and ethical wickedness. Payne highlights that *to’ebah* is used “not just of homosexual acts, but incest, adultery, and marriage arrangements that promote strife and jealousy. . . .”¹⁷

Interpreters appeal to cultural practices to explain why Leviticus prohibits sexual relations between two men. Matthew Vines suggests that the behavior violated the patriarchal gender norms of the ancient world.¹⁸ Others argue that the reference in Leviticus is to temple cult

¹⁶ *BDB Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 1011-1012.

¹⁷ George Payne, “God’s Love Wins: Chapter 6: Clean or Unclean?” (blog), February 9, 2020, <https://towelbasin.blogspot.com/2020/02/gods-love-wins-chapter-6-clean-or.html>.

¹⁸ Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships* (New York: Convergent Books, Crown Publishing Group, Penguin Random House, 2014), 93.

prostitution, which would explain why it is “detestable” to God because of its association with idolatry. Yet, recent scholarship has questioned the prevalence or even the existence of temple prostitution in the time of the Levitical Law.

Sprinkle correctly questions cultural arguments based on patriarchal norms and cult prostitution. Yet his claim that the Old Testament prohibitions against same-sex relations are still in effect because “there is no verse in the New Testament that reverses it” is not convincing. Indeed, Sprinkle admits that some commands of Leviticus 18-20 may not be applicable, although he insists those related to sexuality are still in effect.¹⁹

In ministering pastorally to persons in same-sex relationships, we resist using words like “detestable” to refer to same-sex relationships because their connection in Leviticus is with ritual uncleanness and idolatry rather than with morality as we understand it today. Moreover, when considering Levitical prescriptions, we recognize the priority of Jesus’s Greatest Commandment, “Love God and others.”

Romans 1-2

Romans 1:26-27 is perhaps the most debated passage related to LGBTQ+ attraction and same-sex relationships:

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

The most relevant concepts are “natural/unnatural relations” and a variety of words connected to “shameful lusts” (*pathē atimias*). The word group (*timē* and *timaō*) carries the sense of “honor,” “value,” “esteem,” or “reverence.” In the world of commerce it means “value”

¹⁹ Sprinkle, *People*, 48-52.

or “price.” Therefore, the adjective *atimias* means “dishonor” or “worthless” or “shame” or “disgrace.” This word group occurs in relation to sexuality only here in Romans 1:26-27.²⁰

The word translated “shameful” (*pathē*) is the noun meaning “suffering” or “misfortune” without the added sense of “shameful.”²¹ It is used of the sufferings and passions of Jesus on the cross. Without context, neither of the words in the phrase *pathē atimias* require the meaning “shameful lusts.” So, the phrase should be translated “dishonorable feelings.”

According to Paul, “women exchanged ‘natural’ (*para physin*) relations for unnatural ones.” The Greeks applied *physis* (“natural”) to all natural endowments, characteristics, or dispositions given by birth.²² Because males and females were designed by God to replenish and renew creation, Paul says that sex between a man and a woman is “natural” for reproduction and fulfilling God’s purposes in creation.

The phrase translated “unnatural” is *para physin*. The preposition *para* with the accusative *physin* literally means “by,” or “at the edge of” natural. When used in comparison *para* means “more than” or “beyond.”²³ The etymological sense of *para physin* does not mean “unnatural” and certainly not “against the natural.”

As a prefix, *para* usually means “beside.” We think of “parallel” lines as beside, not against each other. A paralegal is not someone who works “against” the legal profession but one who works “beside” the lawyers. In verse 26, the word translated “gave them over” (*paredōken*) is a form of *paradidomi*, meaning to “give” or “grant,”²⁴ and is translated in line with the meaning of *para*—“give over” rather than “ungiving.”

²⁰ Frederick William Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, based on Walter Bauer’s *Griech-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Nauen Testaments and der frühchristlichen Literature*, 6th ed., ed. Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, with Viktor Reichmann (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 148-149.

²¹ Danker, 747-748.

²² Danker, 1069-1070.

²³ Danker, 756-758.

²⁴ Danker, 761-763.

If Paul's intention is to communicate the opposite of "natural," he could have used a prefix like *anti*, as in "antichrist." Paul does use *anti* later in this passage. Yet it should be noted that trusting the meaning of a prefix with a noun may be misleading in determining the meaning of the two together. When asked to define "affluent," a college student replied: "I guess it means 'not very good with words.'" So considering the meaning of a word and its prefix may not perfectly indicate the word's meaning.

Moreover, considerable attention must be given to the fact that *para physin* is used in the sense of "unnatural" in many Greek and Jewish sources. Indeed, it is likely that Paul uses it in the common sense of "unnatural" or "against the natural," but we cannot know that.

Indeed, we Brethren in Christ have started with the literal meaning of the biblical text. The translators have not helped us find that literal meaning by rendering *para physin*, as "unnatural" rather than the literal "beside" or "at the edge of" natural. What the text literally says is "beside the natural," although Paul may well have meant "unnatural."

Nevertheless, the word translated "relations" (*chrēsin*), which means "use" or "useful,"²⁵ may give clarity to how the actions described may be "unnatural." *Chrēsin* refers to "usefulness" of natural relations for the purposes of creation, which is the theme of this entire passage. According to John Toews, "The Genesis creation stories are clearly in the foreground of Paul's thinking. . . ."²⁶ Usefulness in creation, rather than sexual ethics, may be the sense of the phrase translated "unnatural" (*para physin*).

When speaking of men, Paul is more specific saying that men abandoned relations with women to be "enflamed with lust for one another." The word translated "lust" (*orexei*) means "desire" or "longing." Only here in the New Testament is it translated "lust."²⁷ The Greeks saw this striving as neutral, neither good nor evil. Hebrews

²⁵ Danker, 1089.

²⁶ See John E. Toews, *Romans: Believers Church Bible Commentary*, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2004), 383-385.

²⁷ Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 721-722.

11:8-17 speaks of a “desire” for a future better home and for a “blessing,” and 1 Timothy 6:10 calls a “desire” of “money the root of all evil.” The translation of *orexei* as “lust” seems unjustified.

The result of this desire is that men committed “indecent acts” (*aschēmosunēn*) with other men. The phrase “indecent acts” is from the root that means “disgrace” or “shameless,” sometimes associated with “nakedness” or “private parts.”²⁸ The ones practicing these shameful deeds with other men will receive the retribution antimisthian. The word translated “due penalty” is from the prefix *anti*, “in the place of” and the noun *misthos*, “pay” or “wages,” for work done.²⁹ Hence, the converse *antimisthian* has been translated as “exchange” or “what is deserved” or “penalty.” Although *misthos* is common in the New Testament, *antimisthia* occurs infrequently (see 2 Cor. 6:13). Only in Romans 1 is it used in a negative sense.

The translation of *planēs* as “perversion” also seems harsh. The word literally means “roaming” or “wandering.” Figuratively it refers to the lack of a goal or an ethical “failure of judgment” or “error” or “delusion.”³⁰ The New Testament uses it for lack of judgment that comes from following false teachers (1 John 1:8; 4:6). Jesus associates the word with being led astray by false prophets in the last days (Matt. 24:10-12, see also Rev. 12:9). Revelation 12-13 employs the word figuratively for the seduction of being leading astray by Satan and his cohorts. Yet, nowhere in the Bible is *planēs* used of literal sexual immorality.

This passage is clearly the strongest rebuke of same-sex relations. Yet, pastorally one must wonder whether the words in Romans 1:26-27 describe committed, consensual, and egalitarian same-sex relations.³¹ Moreover, we must be careful using the words in this passage today, because they do not mean what they have come to imply when used

²⁸ Danker, 147.

²⁹ Danker, 653.

³⁰ Danker, 822.

³¹ See George Payne, “God’s Love Wins: Chapter 8: The Letters and the Letter: Paul and Homosexuality,” (blog), May 14, 2022, <https://towelbasin.blogspot.com/2022/05/gods-love-wins-chapter-8-letters-and.html>.

to describe LGBTQ+ attractions or same-sex marriage. Pastorally, we can refuse to use words like the English translations of the words in this passage, and other words like them, and we can call out others who use these terms to denigrate our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters. Indeed, in verses 29-32, Paul describes other behaviors that he finds disturbing:

They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

The next chapter mentions other sins of which Paul thinks his readers are especially guilty (Rom, 2:1-2):

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment?

This passage includes condemnation of the judgmental attitude directed toward LGBTQ+ persons.

Moreover, Paul implies we should not emphasize one sin over another. The universality of sinfulness and its remedy in Jesus is affirmed in Romans 3: "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus (Rom. 3:23-24).

It is quite common to say: "Love the sin and hate the sinner." Paul would say: That is not quite right. It is better to say: Love the sinner, but hate our own sins. It is easy to see the log in our brother's eye, but not the plank in our own. If we want to blame someone for sin in our world, Paul might say: "Look in the mirror."

1 Corinthians 6:9-10

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes (*malakoi*) nor homosexual offenders (*arsenokoitai*) nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

The important phrases here are “male prostitutes,” which translates the word *malakoi*, and “homosexual offenders,” which translates the word *arsenokoitai*.

Both words are rare in the New Testament. *Malakoi* occurs elsewhere only in Matthew 11:8 and the parallel Luke 7:25 and *arsenokoitai* only in I Timothy 1:9. Indeed, the latter word may have been coined by Paul. The meaning of these words is highly debated. Sprinkle affirms: “I do not know of any other Greek words in the New Testament that have been subject to such a wide range of translations as *malakoi* and *arsenokoites*.”³²

Malakoi means “soft.” Used of things, it refers to clothes (see Matt. 11:8; Luke 7:25); used of persons it means “soft,” or “effeminate” or the one dominated sexually. Paul does not use *malakoi* elsewhere; others employ it to describe effeminate men.³³

Arsenokoitēs is a compound word composed of *arsēn* meaning “male”³⁴ and *koitē*, meaning “bed.” Interestingly, *arsēn* and *koitē* occur in proximity to both Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. *Koitē* is used euphemistically like our usage today of “to sleep with” for “sexual intercourse.”³⁵

Although literally *arsenokoitēs* means men in bed with men, Sprinkle warns: “we’ve got to be very careful determining the meaning of a compound word based on its individual parts.”³⁶

³² Sprinkle, *People*, 103.

³³ Danker, 613.

³⁴ Danker, 135.

³⁵ Danker, 554.

³⁶ Sprinkle, *People*, 109.

While the meaning of two parts of a compound word may give insight into the meaning of the word, reliance on this can be misleading. To give an example in English: we drive on a parkway, and we park on a driveway. Acting on the literal meanings of the components of these compound words could be dangerous and even lethal.

Although taking *arsenokoitēs* to refer to all males who have sexual relations with other males is consistent with the literal meaning of *arsēn* and *koitē*, because of the unique occurrence of the word and the uncertainty of relying on the meaning of the two components of a compound word, it is tenuous to build the case for same-sex relationships on *arsenokoitēs*.

Moreover from a pastoral perspective, there are many words in this list that we know quite well what they mean. Do we ask prospective church members: “Have you stopped gossiping? Have you stopped slandering? Have you stopped boasting? It seems arbitrary to selectively enforce church discipline on an ambiguous word.

1 Timothy 1:8-10

In 1 Timothy 1:9, Paul uses *arsenokoitais* in a list of unrighteous persons:

We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality [*arsenokoitais*], for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine. . . .

Because the same word is used in both passages, the pastoral implications of *arsenokoitais* here are similar to those mentioned in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. The practical application of both passages may be to allow those considered *arsenokoitēs* to belong to our fellowship to the same extent that we welcome persons guilty of other sins in Paul’s lists.

Elsewhere, Paul makes it clear that the primary way we treat persons who disagree with us is through a “ministry of reconciliation”:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has

come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:17-19).

Paul's message must be understood in relationship to his overall view of the world: Be not conformed to the world (Rom. 12:2). Instead, we follow Jesus's commandment to "Love God and others." Paul spells out in the rest of that chapter how we should respond to person all persons. It is summarized in the last verse of the chapter: "Do not overcome evil with evil but overcome evil with good."

Perhaps a pastoral paraphrase is: If we believe same-sex relationships are sin, we do not return that evil with exclusion from the community but with inclusion in the fellowship. The issue is: to what extent will we allow persons to belong to our fellowship who disagree with us in belief and practice related to same-sex relationships?

Other supporting evidence

To answer that question, we seek evidence from our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters. Most people who become more affirming of LGBTQ+ persons are influenced by a friend or relative who has "come out" or "transitioned." Whether or not we are "affirming," the most important evidence for relating pastorally to LGBTQ+ persons is experience.

That makes sense to Brethren in Christ. Outside of preaching and love feasts, the most memorable experiences of my childhood were experience or testimony meetings. Therefore, the next few pages will be a "testimony meeting" to provide both narrative and historical evidence for pastoral ministry to LGBTQ+ people among us. These quotations all come from the recent book, *Invitation to Conversation: Becoming More Inclusive of LGBTQ+ People in the Brethren in Christ Church*.³⁷

³⁷ See Helena Cicero, Eric A. Seibert, and Julie Weatherford, eds., *Invitation to Conversation: Becoming More Inclusive of LGBTQ+ People in the Brethren in Christ Church* (Grasmere, ID: SacraSage, 2024).

- Some time ago I was in a church home group where we decided to discuss a controversial topic together and see if we could practice the biblical quality of gentleness with one another. The topic was homosexuality—and we pulled it off! We all left as friends. But one thing disappointed me. Most of those who held a traditional view of marriage had no idea how someone could affirm gay marriage and still be biblical. In fact, a number of people in the group were affirming only because of the gay people they knew. They were still conflicted because of what they thought the Bible said about this matter.³⁸
- One of the most difficult features of my journey was the isolation, fear, and loneliness I experienced early on when I was “concerned” our son might be gay. The very place that I had learned should be the safest for me—the church—was, in reality, the very opposite. I quickly learned that the church was not a safe place to share and receive much needed companionship on my journey of being “out” about my son.³⁹
- My daughter does not want to be an example or a token queer person representing all LGBTQ individuals. She does not have a “gay agenda,” although she will rightly call you out on your heteronormativity. I can testify that the good fruit she bears living out of the closet, and in her fullness as a queer woman, is bountiful and beautiful. It is nothing like the bad fruit that results from living in the dark closet of captivity. . . .
- The Lord is faithful as we find community in other settings now. But I miss our brothers and sisters and the joy of the journey together. I miss the glorious harmonies of voices and instruments in song. I miss the accountability of relationships. I miss the hope of reconciliation. I miss the body of Christ as the Brethren in Christ taught me it could be.⁴⁰

³⁸ Fred Miller, “A Biblical Journal Toward Loving, Committed, Same-Sex Unions,” in Cicero, Seibert, and Weatherford, 145.

³⁹ Dinah Knisely, “The BIC Church is Failing the Queer Community (and People Are Leaving),” in Cicero, Seibert, and Weatherford, 203-204.

⁴⁰ Joanna Hadley-Evans, “So Much Groaning,” in Cicero, Seibert, and Weatherford, 83-84.

- In early 2019, after profound introspection, study, and conversation with LGBTQIA+ individuals, I said, “I believe that God can, and does, bless same-sex monogamous marriages.” This statement resulted in the removal of my ministerial credentials. It’s worth noting that I had not officiated any same-sex marriages. It was the statement of belief alone that led to the revocation of my credentials and my removal as the pastor of a thriving church. . . .⁴¹
- It was not until recently, when I received an email from a couple who found our website and resonated deeply with how we follow Jesus and express his mission, that I reached a turning point. They asked, as a same-sex married couple, if they would be welcomed to worship Jesus and share in his mission in our community. Their gentle, hopeful spirit was beautiful and so clearly reflected Jesus. And I realized for the first time that I could no longer draw a line that would inhibit them from fully participating in the work Jesus is doing here. As I got to know them, my convictions were solidified.⁴²
- If, on the last day, God tells us that we let too many people into the church, I can accept that. I can’t accept it if God tells us that we kept people out.⁴³
- [W]e returned to our previous Brethren in Christ, hoping to find a welcoming church home for our family. And although the faces were friendly, the smiles genuine, and the sermons free of condemning content, there was a quiet lack of welcome for the queer children of God. And that subtle silence felt heavier than any of the anti-queer sermons our family had sat through to that date. It pushed an unmistakable distance between the people of God and his queer children who are so desperately in need of

⁴¹ Justin Douglas, “Once Upon a Time There Was a Church Called The Bridge,” in Cicero, Seibert, and Weatherford, 117.

⁴² Keith Miller, “Full Inclusion,” in Cicero, Seibert, and Weatherford, 132.

⁴³ Lin Taylor, “Are You 100% Sure?” in Cicero, Seibert, and Weatherford, 241.

love and acceptance. So we walked away. We walked away from the church family we had worshipped with, cared for, and raised our children with for almost twenty years.⁴⁴

- I hold no bitterness toward the Brethren in Christ denomination, only thankfulness for the years of nurturing and ministry and for the wonderful seekers of Christ I worked alongside and served. I believe our Creator wants us to be authentic—to be our true selves. How many of God’s children will be lost to the church because of fear, or a misinterpretation of scripture, or cultural ignorance? Jesus did not lose me, but the Brethren in Christ Church did.⁴⁵
- After all the church planting and growth that happened in Circle of Hope in Philadelphia, all it took was a hardline policy toward LGBTQ+ people and a doubling down by the denominational leaders to set in motion a series of events that disassembled the church for the next generation. Unfortunately, that is not a new phenomenon for the Church.⁴⁶
- To be frank, by now I’ve heard all the arguments related to evangelicalism and sexuality. I know all the relevant Bible verses. I have read so many books and essays, and I have sat through endless hours of debate. I don’t want to dissuade you from seeking answers, or from conversing with those who care for you. But for me, eventually I grew tired of defending my faith struggles and justifying my sexuality. I’ve grown tired of people limiting me to my sexuality.⁴⁷
- Being a parent of a trans woman has helped me be more accepting of others not like me. . . . If we say we accept all children in our midst, do we continue to love them when they tell us that the gender they were assigned at birth is wrong, or that they are gay,

⁴⁴ Martha Truxton Heller, “Wonderfully Made,” in Cicero, Seibert, and Weatherford, 88.

⁴⁵ Martha Lockwood, “Free to Be Reverend Me,” in Cicero, Seibert, and Weatherford, 51.

⁴⁶ Rod White, “I Don’t Want to Have a Gay Policy,” in Cicero, Seibert, and Weatherford, 140.

⁴⁷ Seth Chamberlain, “The Song in Each of Us,” in Cicero, Seibert, and Weatherford, 23.

lesbian, bisexual, questioning, or queer? Are they still welcome in our midst? Does the congregation disown them or continue to love and accept them as they grow to adulthood?⁴⁸

- A couple of years ago, when I started being open about my sexuality, I asked the church for simple dialogue. I didn't insist on them being welcoming or, heaven forbid, affirming. I wanted to gain understanding together. But dialogue seemed to be too big an ask, as calls would take months to be returned. I had a couple of roles in the congregation that I loved, and I was never directly told that I was not wanted. But when I asked a few times if I was still welcome, I was never answered. So eventually, I stepped away.⁴⁹
- Could we allow churches that have more fully inclusive views—and that desire freedom to practice them—to stay within the Brethren in Christ denomination right alongside churches with more conservative views and practices, all the while trusting the Spirit to move in our midst as we continue to discern ways forward together as a family of churches? . . . The Brethren in Christ has always had a big tent . . . [b]ut the Brethren in Christ tent is getting smaller. Lately, I've noticed within the Brethren in Christ a move to tighten up beliefs and to build greater conformity.⁵⁰
- Many heterosexual couples are choosing to live together without getting married. Yet it seems easier to accept them into our fellowship than to accept those of the gay community. Who am I to know what works God will perform, who he will draw to himself through the gay community, if we are faithful?⁵¹

⁴⁸ Susan Felix, "Let's Join LGBTQ+ Christians on a Journey to Holiness," in Cicero, Seibert, and Weatherford, 182-183.

⁴⁹ Tammy Astuto-Goodman, "The Truth Will Set you Free," in Cicero, Seibert, and Weatherford, 16.

⁵⁰ Vernon Hyndman, "The Tent is Getting Smaller—Let's Enlarge It!" in Cicero, Seibert, and Weatherford, 193, 193-194.

⁵¹ Wanda Heise, "I Wish the BIC Church Offered Unconditional Love to Queer People," in Cicero, Seibert, and Weatherford, 188-189.

- I was “out” to several people at church and one was eventually comfortable putting words to their sexuality as well. We were (and are) strong Christians, and we were passionate about this church and its mission. We worked to encourage loving attitudes and to create spaces that would be welcoming and safe for LGBTQ+ people. We weren’t trying to change church theology but were simply hoping that LGBTQ+ people could be treated like everyone else: people with sin who are saved through the blood and forgiveness of Christ. . . . But we faced pushback and disappointment. . . .⁵²

Too many brothers and sisters and their family members have left the Brethren in Christ. How do we make pastoral accommodations to show love and accept those still among us to avoid more losses in the future? We made accommodations in the 1950s after an exodus of perhaps as many as a thousand young people.⁵³ How can that be avoided today?

Answering opposing arguments

The experiences of persons in our Brethren in Christ congregations, like those included in the preceding section, reveal that many have left our fellowship over the LGBTQ+ issue. This raises the importance of pastoral accommodation that would allow these Brethren in Christ children to “belong” in our fellowships at some level. The main question is: Can persons in same-sex relationships and persons who affirm such relationships belong at every level in Brethren in Christ congregations? If not, at what level can they be belong?

Our Brethren in Christ hermeneutic guides us to decide this as a brother/sisterhood. It is not our purpose to resolve the issue here but to identify some issues and questions to be addressed related to the level at which LGBTQ+ persons can “belong” among us. Our Brethren in Christ commitment to Jesus’s greatest commandment—love God and others—suggests that we show compassion and offer inclusion to LGBTQ+ persons and others who do not agree with our belief

⁵² Liz Johnson, “Everyone Needs Love and Compassion,” in Cicero, Seibert, and Weatherford, 44.

⁵³ Wittlinger, *Quest for Piety and Obedience*, 482.

and practice that marriage is only between a man and woman and that any sexual behavior occurring outside of that relationship is sin. This paper advocates a pastoral accommodation model that includes persons who disagree with this position. The level of inclusion is the important issue.

A common argument from the traditional side against the church including persons in same-sex relationships is: Don't we have to let them know what they are doing is wrong? Perhaps that is not so necessary because most LGBTQ+ persons know that the traditional position of the Christian church and the present position of most churches is not "affirming" of LGBTQ+ practices and same-sex marriages. Indeed, 91 percent of non-Christians believe that Christians are anti-homosexual.⁵⁴

Likewise, Brethren in Christ members and others among us know the traditional position of the church. Perhaps we do need to bear witness to our belief, but when we state it repeatedly, we may drive LGBTQ+ persons and same-sex couples away from the church, which seems out of character with Jesus's invitation, "Follow me."

Another argument from the traditional side against including persons in same-sex relationships is that the Brethren in Christ will follow other denominations who have been divided by this issue. The United Methodist Church is now in the middle of such a split. Pope Francis formally approved allowing Roman Catholic priests to bless same-sex couples while maintaining its strict ban on same-sex marriage, continuing to affirm that such relationships are inferior to marriage between a man and woman, and maintaining that homosexual acts are "intrinsically disordered."⁵⁵ His decision has caused considerable consternation among other Catholic priests and members.

⁵⁴ David Kinneman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity . . . and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 26.

⁵⁵ Nicole Winfield and David Crary, "Pope Approves Blessings for Same-Sex Couples that Must Not Resemble Marriage," AP News, December 19, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/vatican-lgbtq-pope-bfa5b71fa79055626e362936e739d1d8>.

In the past, I worried that allowing LGBTQ+ persons and couples in same-sex relationships to belong to our congregations would cause many offended persons to leave. More recently, I have come to realize refusing to allow them a place in our fellowship has already caused many to leave. Coming down on one side or the other of this controversy may not be more likely to prevent division.

Moreover, a pastoral response to LGBTQ+ persons among us may make it less likely that division will occur. Strong exclusionary policies might cause persons to carry feelings that will make it unlikely that they can ever be restored to fellowship. Compassionate pastoral responses from leaders and congregants may keep the doors open for continuing conversations and future restoration. In short, a pastoral response to LGBTQ+ persons may make it less likely that ecclesiastical divisions will occur than strong proclamations that may drive a wedge between persons with different positions and cause splits.

A third counter argument is one I take seriously because I have spent two years teaching in four African countries. The argument is: Our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world will not understand accommodation on same-sex relationships. This argument is condescending to our global church. My experience leads me to believe that our brothers and sisters in Africa (and elsewhere) are just as capable as we are of understanding and evaluating the arguments in this volume. Indeed, they are at least as astute biblically and theologically as we are. We can both benefit from dialogue. Our African brothers and sisters have learned from us the importance of egalitarian involvement of women in church leadership, and we have learned from them in the value of communal, rather than individual, patterns of leadership and problem-solving related to issues like LGBTQ+. Instead of prejudging how our brothers and sisters around the world will react to inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons, we may invite them into the conversation.

A fourth counterargument is related to our brother and sister groups who have representatives in the Brethren in Christ Historical Society, who likely would be more likely to discipline persons who

practice LGBTQ+ behavior. But they have been more consistent than the Brethren in Christ in enforcing discipline with many persons that the Brethren in Christ have included. For example, divorce and remarriage is a deal-breaker for the Old Order River Brethren, but that is consistent with discipline administered for other “sins.” The Brethren in Christ have offered compassionate inclusion for persons involved in a variety of “sins,” but LGBTQ+ behavior is a glaring exception. Our Old Order brothers and sisters apply consistent discipline for all behaviors that “miss the mark” (hamartia) of God’s ideal. Brethren in Christ discipline seems less consistently applied to various “sins.”

A fifth counter argument against pastoral accommodation related to inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons, this one from the affirming side, is that they are more likely to grow and develop in a healthy manner if they leave the Brethren in Christ to find a more welcoming denomination. But if we truly follow Jesus, we are the best place for people the world rejects. Some LGBTQ+ individuals find their way to the Brethren in Christ because “affirming” denominations may not focus their message on Jesus. If we truly follow Jesus, we may be more loving than churches that affirm LGBTQ+ persons but are less concerned to follow Jesus. The Jesus-centered approach of the Brethren in Christ emphasizes Jesus’s greatest commandment: Love God and others, including LGBTQ+ persons.

The pastoral implications of the pastoral accommodation approach

The Brethren in Christ declare that all same-sex behavior is “sin” because it “misses the mark” (hamartia) of the biblical ideal for marriage and that credentialed Brethren in Christ ministers must agree that same-sex behavior is “sin.” At the same time, we attempt to follow Jesus’s greatest commandment: Love God and others. So, the pastoral question is: How do we love persons among us who do not conform to our position?

One option emphasizes the “sinful” nature of all same-sex behavior: We exclude LGBTQ+ persons from our fellowship, based on the Paul’s treatment of the incestuous person in Corinth: “Expel the wicked

person from among you” (I Cor. 5:13). On an issue like committed, loving, consensual same-sex relationships this seems harsh, but has happened all too often. Sprinkle answers the question, “Should we ‘I Corinthians 5’ gay people from the church?”:

[I]f 1 Corinthians 5 does apply to professing believers who are engaging in same-sex relations, then to be consistent, we need to apply it to everyone “guilty of sexual immorality or greed” and to the “idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler (I Cor. 5:11) . . . [and] all the greedy, who hoard their wealth and have no concern for the poor; . . . and who stab others with dehumanizing words, that tear down instead of building up; and the swindlers who cheat on their taxes and illegally download copyrighted content on the internet.”⁵⁶

Sprinkle makes it clear: We are harder on LGBTQ+ behavior than on other actions we consider to be sin.

Again, to quote Sprinkle: “Homosexuality is not an issue to be solved; it’s about people who need to love and be loved.”⁵⁷ To love them, he suggests: “[Y]ou should have more LGBTQ+ friends and not less. We should be frequenting the gay district in town, inviting gays and lesbians over to our house, and asking to stay with gay and lesbian friends in their houses.”⁵⁸ We Brethren in Christ could practice this hospitality in our churches—including LGBTQ+ people in our fellowships.

Sprinkle is pushing the Brethren in Christ to follow Jesus’s greatest commandment: Love God and others. This relates to our formal acceptance of persons into membership in our congregations. At present, we do not allow same-sex couples to be members, although no written documents specify this exclusion. Of course, there are many other behaviors that do not exclude persons from membership. Do we say to prospective members: If you want to be members of our

⁵⁶ Sprinkle, *People*, 154-155.

⁵⁷ Sprinkle, *People*, 20.

⁵⁸ Sprinkle, *People*, 80.

church, you must stop gossip, slander, arrogance, and boastfulness? In addition, we welcome heterosexuals who have violated their vows to life-long marriage.

One person from the Barna Research said: “I cannot imagine Jesus actually treating gays and lesbians like Christians do today.”⁵⁹ We are all sinners. So, the major pastoral question is: Can we also allow persons who do not agree that same-sex relationships are sin and/or are in same-sex marriages to belong in our congregations?

Susan Felix summarizes the most fundamental pastoral issue raised by our Brethren in Christ stance on LGBTQ+ and same-sex marriage:

If a person has accepted Jesus and asked for forgiveness of sins, who decides their level of participation in a local congregation? May they be baptized? May they partake communion? May they serve communion? May they be part of, or lead, a Bible study group? May they join the choir or worship team? May they join the local church? Are there restrictions, or should there be, on who holds leadership positions within the church?⁶⁰

Recommended actions

If we are committed to following Jesus’s greatest commandment—love God and others—how practically can we extend that love to LGBTQ+ persons in our congregations? Sprinkle’s *Afterward* includes several challenges for congregations interested in ministering to LGBTQ persons:⁶¹

1. Create an environment where people who experience same-sex attraction can talk about it. . . . There are many same-sex attracted Christians who remain closeted due to an unhealthy church environment that wouldn’t know what to do with them if they talked about their struggle.

⁵⁹ Kinneman and Lyons, 93.

⁶⁰ Felix, 181.

⁶¹ The numbered and indented paragraphs are from Sprinkle’s *People*, 178-186. Those that follow each challenge are mine. Although Sprinkle uses the word “homosexuality,” he cautions to use the term with care to avoid “erasing the faces of real people with different stories,” *People*, 22-23.

Allow LGBT persons to belong to our fellowship as members? leaders? clergy?

2. “Listen to the stories of LGBT people. . . . I believe that every single Christian needs to think deeply about this issue. And since it is not an issue but people, every Christian needs to listen to the stories of LGBT people.”

Read and promote the book of stories edited by Helena Cicero, Eric Seibert, and Julie Weatherford.⁶² Have events where LGBTQ+ persons tell their stories and Brethren in Christ bishops, leaders, and members offer compassion and forgiveness to persons who have been excluded from their congregations.

3. “Put homophobia to death. . . . Homophobia refers to the dislike of or prejudice against LGBT people. . . . Don’t squirm in your silent agreement. Take a stand for truth. Take a stand for people. Kill homophobia.”

Facilitate reconciliation programs in our congregations including input from LGBTQ+ persons. Offer seminars in Brethren in Christ churches where attenders can understand the nature and prevalence of homophobia. Invite psychologists to address churches about how members can reduce homophobia individually and as a congregation.

4. “Educate others about the complexities of homosexuality. . . . Whether it is in personal conversations, Bible studies, sermons, or any other venue where the subject of homosexuality is discussed, Christians need to resist quick and easy answers that perpetuate a simplistic view of a very complex issue.”

All of Sprinkle’s suggestions could be practiced in Brethren in Christ churches. Facilitate sex education programs in our fellowships that include all issues not just those related to LGBTQ+ persons.

5. “Promote biblical (not cultural) masculinity and femininity [T]he church sometimes makes it tough for people to fit

⁶² See Cicero, Seibert, and Weatherford.

in, only because they don't live up to an artificial standard of masculinity and femininity.”

Develop a biblical/theological understanding of sexuality treating all related issues fairly. Focus on how the Brethren in Christ can affirm a statement on marriage but demonstrate compassion and acceptance for those who disagree or whose practices do not conform.

6. “We are living in Babylon. . . . Many Christians in America view homosexuality through a political lens. . . . It's time for the church to stop treating LGBT people as some issue to debate and some lobby to vote against. It's time for the church to start treating them—who are us—as people to be loved.”

Denounce cultural homophobia without fear of being branded as partisan politically. Refuse to allow political/religious propaganda in the culture to dominate our thinking. Edit our Brethren in Christ statements for politically partisan language.

7. “Remember God is holy. . . . Until we acknowledge and delight in the holy otherness of God, we will always have a distorted view of homosexuality.”

Admit we are not the measure of holiness. We Brethren in Christ have dealt with issues of holiness more than most other denominations. Perhaps we can highlight that our holiness tradition has centered on “perfect love.” Commission someone to write a book on “Perfect Love” to complement Paul Hostetler's book *Perfect Love And War*.⁶³

Conclusion

The Brethren in Christ have a position on same-sex relationships: “Human sexuality is affirmed within the chaste single life or a lifelong marriage between a man and a woman.” The pastoral question is: To what extent can people who do not conform to this statement in

⁶³ Paul Hostetler, ed., *Perfect Love and War* (Nappanee, IN: Evangelical Press, 1974).

belief or practice still belong to our fellowship? Can they attend, be members, serve on boards and committees, be leaders, be ministers, and so forth? Must they not only conform to male/female sexual behavior alone but also believe that LGBTQ+ behavior is sin? What is the level of conformity expected and who is required to conform?

To answer those questions, we might consider a pastoral policy similar to the one we have for biblical pacifism as it relates to participation in war: “While respecting those who hold other interpretations, we believe that preparation for or participation in war is inconsistent with the teachings of Christ.”⁶⁴ The Brethren in Christ have always affirmed a position of “nonresistance,” but persons in our congregations who are open to teaching on our position can belong at all levels.

A half century ago, we opened our churches to persons whose marriage was not life-long; perhaps we should now include persons whose marriage is not between a man and woman. Indeed, this is how we treat most all deviations from our Articles. Why treat same-sex relationships more strictly? Our policy on this fundamental Brethren in Christ position of biblical nonresistance can serve as a model for other issues and behaviors.

We live in a polarized moment. Christians are tempted to succumb to political emotions. Sprinkle says:

And when I listen to talk about gender and trans related questions, I wonder if they even know what they are talking about. . . . Getting furious about our cultural moment doesn’t convince people of the truth. Our truth will not be heard until our grace is felt, because the greatest apologetic for truth is love.⁶⁵

We Brethren in Christ follow Jesus’s greatest commandment: Love God and others.

⁶⁴ See Randall Basinger, “The Brethren in Christ and the Peace Position: Brethren in Christ Statements of Faith and Their Significance,” *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 47, no. 1 (April 2024): 3-52.

⁶⁵ Preston Sprinkle, *Embodied: Transgender Identities, the Church, and What the Bible Has to Say* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2021), 221.

Response to John Yeatts

By J. E. McDermond

There is much to commend in John Yeatts's essay. From his initial sentence he shows his awareness that our topic is "one of the most serious ecclesiastical controversies for all churches in recent years." Additionally, he repeatedly notes the topic's complexity. The complication is revealed in how one interprets ancient languages, how one understands corporate undertakings to determine the group's stance on a controversial topic, or how any of us view sin, whether our own or another's sin.

I especially want to thank him for reminding us we are discussing not mere abstractions like the nuanced meaning of an ancient word, commitments to church tradition, or theological principles. Those subjects certainly come into play, but when we enter a discussion like this, we are fundamentally talking about our fellow human beings who, like us, are made in the image of God. By approaching this interchange from a pastoral perspective, Yeatts reminds us of this crucial reality.

Furthermore, Yeatts reminds us we are not wrestling with this as citizens of a state or political entity. We are the Church; we are the Brethren in Christ Church. We have a time tested and workable method for dealing with "controversial issues." In the past our denomination, at a variety of levels, "gathered around the Bible to determine together whether the practice was biblical. This is how a Brethren in Christ hermeneutic operated on controversial ideas and practices." I want to affirm Yeatts for reminding us of this. At the same time, I think he could have been clearer to note that this time-honored approach no longer seems to be the *modus operandi* of the Brethren in Christ Church at least on the matter of how the denomination understands our convictions regarding our interactions with the LGBTQ+ community. Grass roots, scripturally-informed, face-to-face conversations and prayer have been replaced by a very different

decision-making process.

Yeatts's most significant contribution to our discussion, in my opinion, is his careful work with the often-cited biblical texts. In particular, he pays close attention to the original biblical languages. Yeatts repeatedly notes these ancient texts address complex historical or social contexts which are more complex than one might assume or they present far more ambiguous meanings than our English translations reveal. As a result, he acknowledges we need to be wary of establishing pastoral protocols based upon simple direct relevance or linguistic uncertainty.

An example of the linguistic work is highlighted when Yeatts addresses Romans 1-2 and Paul's use of *para physin*, which is often translated as "unnatural." The original Greek wording is used in a variety of contexts and meanings, thus resulting in the expression's nuanced use in the ancient world. Because of this complex ambiguity, Yeatts rightly concludes, "Indeed, it is likely that Paul uses it [para physin] in the common sense of 'unnatural' or 'against the natural,' but we cannot know that."

Similarly, when wrestling with 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, he points out that the word *Arsenokoitēs* very rarely appears in ancient Greek texts. It is so rare that some scholars speculate that Paul created it by combining *arsēn* (male) and *koitēs* (bed). Rightly, Yeatts concludes, ". . . from a pastoral perspective, there are many words in this list [1 Corinthians 6:9-10] that we know quite well what they mean. Do we ask prospective church members: 'Have you stopped gossiping?' 'Have you stopped slandering?' 'Have you stopped boasting?' It seems arbitrary to selectively enforce church discipline on an ambiguous word [*arsenokoitēs*]."

Additionally, I appreciate that Yeatts reminds us that often we are "comparing apples and oranges" (my expression, not his) as we move between our social context and the social contexts of the Bible relating to homosexuality. The most obvious challenge to a straightforward application of the ancient biblical text to the modern situation is the Sodom and Gomorrah story.

RESPONSES TO PASTORAL ACCOMMODATION VIEW

Often the traditional view takes this incident and the cities' destruction as evidence that we ought, also, condemn homosexuality. However, a simple transfer of principle from Genesis 19 to the twenty-first century world doesn't stand up, as Yeatts notes. Sodom and Gomorrah are condemned for numerous sins in addition to homosexuality. More to the point, however, when discussing homosexual behavior today, it is frequently within the context of monogamous and/or marital relationships. Genesis 19's depiction of Sodom and Gomorrah is homosexual gang rape, as Yeatts points out. I would hope we all condemn sexual violence in any form, but at the very least we need to recognize that what Genesis 19 is addressing is not what we are addressing. Therefore, that biblical story has limited value for our contemporary decision-making.¹

There are two related points with which I disagree, but to be honest my disagreement may only be a matter of semantics. Still, I want to raise these concerns. First, at the conclusion of Yeatts's section focusing on the relevant biblical texts he writes, "The issue is: to what extent will we allow persons to belong to our fellowship who disagree with us in belief and practice related to same-sex relationships?" Is that **the** question? It certainly is a central question, but I am not convinced it is **the** primary question a pastor or any Christian must ask when facing any question life throws up before us.

For many Brethren in Christ pastors and congregants, the guiding principle to answering Yeatts's question is traditional biblical interpretation; thus, their answer is anyone who disagrees with a traditional reading has a limited, if any, way to belong. At the other end of the spectrum, which hasn't been addressed formally in our essays, are Christians who take their cues from liberal Western democracies' guiding principles of tolerance and equality. Thus, one concludes

¹ I would also point out this biblical retelling is, at best, a cautionary tale, and NOT a passage which can easily be slotted into twenty-first century sexual morality. I say this because in that story, Lot offers his two virgin daughters to be gang-raped by the crowd. Surely, none of us would view this as acceptable moral behavior, despite it "being biblical!"

everyone is to belong in the Church.

I suggest there is a third option. That option highlights what is, in my opinion, **the** question for this or any Church discussion: will we follow Jesus and the Holy Spirit? A few decades ago, WWJD bracelets were the rage. At the time, and even today, I was convinced this was primarily a fashion trend. Asking yourself “What would Jesus do?” is one thing. Answering and then doing it is another. Additionally, asking the Holy Spirit to empower us to live like Jesus is one thing. Allowing the Spirit to move in our lives to reflect Jesus’s life is another. Will we follow traditional readings of the Bible or contemporary social norms is not **the** question. These options are easier than following Jesus and the Spirit. The challenging question is “Will we follow Jesus?”

Finally, I was uncomfortable as I read Yeatts’s closing paragraph to his section, “Other Supporting Evidence.” Twice he used the word “accommodations” when describing historical changes in the 1950s and how we might approach same-sex relationships today. As I mentioned above, perhaps my concern is one of semantics, but I am not convinced “accommodation” is the foundational matter we face. Following Jesus is the bedrock issue. A faithful Church doesn’t look to accommodate. A faithful Church follows Jesus in his radical inclusion of anyone who is willing to accept him as Lord and Savior. A faithful Church is open to the leading and empowerment of the Holy Spirit that enables Jesus’s followers to be like him.

In the final analysis, there is much to affirm in Yeatts’s essay, but it is not without points that need further clarity.

Response to John Yeatts

By Lynn Thrush

In his essay on pastoral accommodation to LGBTQ+ persons and their families and friends, John urges the Brethren in Christ Church U.S. to pastorally, like a good shepherd, extend love in word and deed. I affirm John's call to the church to gracious behavior, avoiding demeaning language for LGBTQ+ persons. I affirm John's deep evangelistic concern that the Church not lose people because love is not extended and thus not experienced. I affirm John's deep commitment to the scriptures. He wants us to study the words Scripture uses, what the words meant at the time of their writing, how they are used throughout Scripture, what they intend, and their application today. John loves the Brethren in Christ Church. John loves LGBTQ+ people, and all others. John is my brother in Christ.

In his essay, John identifies "the major pastoral question" this way: "Can we allow persons who do not agree that same-sex relationships are sin and/or are in same-sex marriages to belong in our congregations?" He restates the question, "The pastoral question is: To what extent can people who do not conform to this statement (Brethren in Christ position on same-sex relationship) in belief or practice still belong to our fellowship?" In another place he asks the question this way: "How do we love persons among us who do not conform to our position?"

John writes affirmatively that "marriage between a male and female is Jesus's expectation." He quotes Matthew 19:3-6, and says of that text, "This passage gives biblical support for the Brethren in Christ position: 'Human sexuality is affirmed within the chaste single life or a lifelong marriage between a man and a woman.'"

While John makes the above affirmation, he is also extending an invitation to the Church. He invites the Brethren in Christ Church to "consider a pastoral policy" whereby LGBTQ+ persons "can belong at all levels" in the Church. John wonders aloud, "perhaps we should now

include persons whose marriage is not between a man and woman.”

In my response I want to demonstrate the grace that marks the Brethren in Christ Church at our best. I gladly extend this grace to John, who is an esteemed and long-time teacher and mentor in the Brethren in Christ Church. My observations are designed to help all of us to engage straightforwardly and with respect.

I note first that John uses the word “pastoral” beyond its connection to showing care. He uses the term to refer to doctrinal and administrative matters. “Accommodation” is used in terms of allowances. John speaks approvingly of a summary of “the *fundamental pastoral issue* (my emphasis) raised by our Brethren in Christ stance on LGBTQ+ and same-sex marriage. . . . May they be baptized? May they partake communion? May they serve communion? May they be part of, or lead, a Bible study group? May they join the choir or worship team? May they join the local church? Are there restrictions, or should there be, on who holds leadership positions within the church?”

In my essay, I also call for the church to provide structures of belonging. I believe that in honest respect for one another, LGBTQ+ persons understand the joint commitments of the Church wherein we follow the historic posture of the church regarding limiting sexual relations to a husband-wife relationship. Even so, we treat with dignity all persons with alternate views. Throughout the scriptures the “is it lawful?” questions tended to miss the mark. Jesus engaged at a deeper and more substantive level of prior matters of the heart.

Underneath this question of who-may-do-what-in-the-Church as related to LGBTQ+ persons is the phrase or its equivalent, referenced four times in John’s paper: “committed, consensual, same-sex marriage.” This phrase is assumed to be an unimpeachable good. This common description fails to comprehend the first Adam as “they”/ male and female (Gen. 5:1-2), and not a bachelor male. In creation the woman was divided out from the “they.” Thus, definitionally, marriage is the covenantal union expressing the original “they.” Male/male or female/female relationships are of a comprehensively different order.

The “who-may-do-what” questions are not of the first order of

pastoral consideration. The Church is identified in the baptismal vows of death and resurrection. This company of the crucified fundamentally have their lives described as cruciform. Holding that matters of gender, sexual expression, and the nature of marriage are all the purview of human perception, and that such perceptions are insulated from our baptismal identification of being buried with Christ in his death (Rom. 6:4), does not accord with the Scripture and the Brethren in Christ comprehension of its entirety. There is a glorious wholeness described in who we are: “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:23).

The Scriptures John reviews are those that have admittedly often been used in a rather proof-texting fashion to condemn same-sex behavior. He provides explanation to say that, as a matter of fact, they do not forbid same-sex behavior. I believe he has done us all a favor by looking carefully at how words/texts are used. While there may be wider usages of these texts, however, those wider usages do not erase the Bible’s pervasive speaking against sexual immorality. It is difficult to move from an acknowledged wider use of words to saying that same-sex behavior is actually righteous behavior. Thus, for example, while rape could be a valid part of what happened with the men of Sodom wanting to have sex with Lot’s male guests, the Hebrew word is “to know” (Gen. 19:5), a common Hebrew word referring to sexual relations, as in Genesis 4:1, “Adam knew his wife.” No wider usage changes Jude 7’s description of that story as sexual immorality.

I note John’s frequent use of Jesus’s identification of the greatest commandment—singular—as “love God and others.” It is more precise to say that the greatest commandment identified by Jesus is to love God, and in a comprehensive way, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment” (Matt. 22:37-38). In John 14:15, loving God means keeping his commands. The second commandment, to love your neighbor as yourself, is also comprehensive like the first,

but of course it does not erase the first commandment. We are to embrace both. The scriptures find no conflict in loving God, keeping his commands, and loving neighbor.

Both John and I call for the Brethren in Christ Church to follow the Scriptures seriously, and to love our neighbors without dissembling (false pretenses). We affirm respectful conversation. We affirm covenantal commitments that outweigh personal desires. We affirm that in familial and church settings, we will live together respectfully, including respecting deeply held convictions. There are two burdens upon all of us when we bear these convictions: 1) those who believe same-sex behavior is righteous should spend time in reflection and conversation about how that comports with the whole of Scripture's affirmation of all of life, excluding no area, being offered to God as a living sacrifice, and 2) those who believe same-sex behavior is not righteous behavior should commit to respectful engagement when talking about or with LGBTQ+ people and their families.

The Brethren in Christ Church and the LGBTQ+ Community: The Full Inclusion View

By J. E. McDermond*

The importance of this conversation

A few years ago, I tried hunting waterfowl. A friend's property backed on to the perfect setting. There was a shallow wide creek with gently sloping banks and trees almost up to the edge of the water. Ducks and geese seemed to be present all the time. So, I bought some camo clothing, a few decoys, and shells. I borrowed a shotgun and started something new.

My friend is an experienced hunter; he gets a buck, a doe, and a wild turkey every year. In my past I hunted for small game like squirrels and rabbits, with some success. We quickly learned that hunting waterfowl was a very different undertaking. Those birds move quickly. Even when flying away in a straight line, they aren't easy to hit. It is much easier to hit a big buck that is standing still than it is to take a small duck that is moving briskly.

Being the Church is a little like duck hunting. We are tasked with sharing Jesus's message and what God has done through him with a rapidly and ever-changing complex world. The way the story was told yesterday or three centuries ago will not work well tomorrow or the next century. Our contemporary context only heightens the challenge. Every day it seems as though we learn something new about the world that we didn't know last week. One simply cannot easily keep up with how quickly science discovers new realities. How do we share the

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Gospel in a world that is so quickly changing? When Galileo “proved” the Earth wasn’t the center of the universe, the Church changed its belief about the universe. The Church had the same message, but the world was very different.

Or how do we effectively share the Good News with different cultures and differing social, moral, or spiritual convictions? The Church has wrestled with this from the very beginning. We see the reality when reading Matthew and Luke. Compare these verses about Jesus’s description of the Kingdom. Matthew writes, “The **kingdom of heaven** is like a mustard seed someone took and sowed in his field. . . .” (NRSV 13:31) and Luke writes, “What is the **kingdom of God** like? . . . it is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden. . . .” (NRSV 13:18-19). Are they talking about two different subjects? No, but they are addressing two different audiences. Matthew wrote to Jews, who would be offended if he used the word “God.” Luke wrote to Gentiles who were not offended by his use of “God.” They both wanted to share the good news that Jesus brought: God was beginning the divine rule in our midst. Matthew and Luke both considered their audiences’ different convictions.

The overriding issue before us isn’t one particular social or moral context. The crucial concern is how the Church should continue to best understand the Good News of what God did in Jesus Christ and then how the Church can best share that Good News in a variety of contexts that are ever changing. The question of same-sex attraction is one specific context in which the Church needs to discern how to be both faithful to the Gospel and relevant to the world. To do that is very much like my duck hunting: it isn’t easy, and it isn’t like what we have done before.

The full inclusion view

All three contributing authors have been asked to share our views on a complex matter. As the shorthand “LGBTQ+” implies, this is quite complex! It is easy to misstep because what I might generally say or think regarding one sub-group might not apply to another sub-group.

LGBTQ+: THE FULL INCLUSION VIEW

Additionally, there is the question of a person holding to Christian convictions. In my mind, it is unfair to expect non-believers to commit to Christian mores and values. Finally, there is the question of what we can expect from the state and what we can expect from the Church. I can easily imagine Christians advocating for state-sanctioned gay marriage while arguing against providing marriage ceremonies to gay couples. There are many options for getting it wrong in a short space. Having laid out that disclaimer, I will share these current personal convictions.

First, all humans are created in the image of God. Therefore, all humans are to be loved and treated justly. There is nothing I can think of that allows believers to renege on this fundamental truth, and that includes sexual orientation. The main reason I cannot identify loopholes is the fact that, so far as I can tell, God doesn't take advantage of any loopholes. Scripture is replete with affirmations of God's loving and just orientation toward humanity. It seems odd to me for us to find loopholes, exceptions, and justifications for our treatment of others that God doesn't employ during interactions with us.

Second, when we determine what is acceptable sexual behavior within a Christian context, those standards and expectations ought to be applied equally to all who desire to follow Jesus. For example, if we decide a hedonistic approach to sexual expression falls outside the boundaries of acceptable Christian behavior, then that applies to all who are Jesus's followers. Since that is a Christian conviction, then I would argue it applies to anyone who claims to be Christian whether they are gay or straight.

Third, because sexuality is such a powerful driving force in most people's lives, I believe Christian marriage is the best context for the expression of our sexual desires; therefore, the Church ought to view marriage as the preferred relationship for both straight and gay couples. Additionally, if an individual senses a call to celibacy, regardless of their orientation, then the Church should affirm that person's calling. It is not, however, the Church's responsibility to impose celibacy on any individual.

Finally, God generously gives a variety of spiritual gifts to individuals for the entire Church's good. I do not believe God withholds these gifts based on the individual's gender, age, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. I assume because God freely gives these gifts to all people, and without exception, any believer who is spiritually gifted can, and should, serve at any level of congregational or denominational life.

Biblical and theological evidence for the full inclusion view

Important "ground clearing" exercises

Before I unpack my position and how I arrived there, let's begin by identifying what we are addressing. We may assume we know this, but we might also be surprised. For me the core issue is not focused on the simple view of the morality or immorality of same-sex attraction, which when teased out is complex and raises many questions. Is same-sex attraction sinful? Is acting upon same-sex attraction evil? Should a committed marriage or covenant relationship between two people of the same-sex alter our view of same-sex attraction? When we make determinations about same-sex attractions and activities, are we addressing the same phenomenon as the ancient writers of the Bible? These and other questions are often laid out as the "real" issues we need to address and wrestle with when discussing this topic.

However, I am not convinced the broad subject of same-sex attraction, in any of its varied forms, is the actual foundational concern. I believe the core matter is, as my title suggests, inclusion. Who can be included among the people of God? Are there any weakness, flaws, or sins that bar people from following Jesus? This essay is simply focusing on one matter that many Christians point to as a reason for excluding a person from participating in the Body of Christ.

Therefore, the basic thrust of my argument will address the matter of inclusion. Of course, I will touch upon related and broader points, but keep in mind, inclusion or exclusion is the foundational issue with which we must grapple.

Please allow me one more digression prior to beginning. Some readers may be wondering "how we got here." Why is this such a pressing concern for the Church? This wasn't an issue forty years

ago; why is it one now? Others may simply ask, “What is happening?” David P. Gushee provides a concise explanation of what has occurred to bring us to where we are. He writes,

So, what exactly is the issue that everyone is fighting about?

One starting point might be to say that historic Christian understandings of sexuality are being re-evaluated due to evidence offered in the lives of those who do not fit the historic heterosexual norm, together with associated research and mental health efforts.

The historic Christian sexual norm was exclusively heterosexual. . . . It declared that all human beings exist in two distinct sexes, male and female, and that they are divinely commanded to have sexual relations only with the opposite sex. Furthermore, the Church taught that sexual behavior should be constrained to lifetime monogamous marriages and, often, emphasized procreation as the central divine purpose for sexual activity. This heterosexual-marital-procreative norm was also generally linked to a patriarchal understanding of gender—that is, difference in men’s and women’s (divinely prescribed) roles and behaviors—that gave men greater power. The Bible was, and still is, cited as authority for some or all of these norms related to gender and sexuality. A wide range of associated cultural and legal practices reflected and reinforced these theological and ethical beliefs once Christianity became the official or dominant religion in many lands, as it did here in the United States.

These powerful sex-and-gender paradigms have been challenged in many ways in recent decades. Many of our most intense religious and “culture war” battles have been fought on this broad front between advocates and resisters of change. (Failure to disentangle and treat specific issues separately has engendered unnecessary confusion and conflict. . . .)¹

¹ David P. Gushee, *Changing Our Mind* (Canton, MI: Read the Spirit Books, 2017), 25-26. The bold font is in the original.

Having established these basic elements, let me proceed to my biblical and theological approach to inclusion and exclusion.

The seven biblical passages

Traditionally, the discussion regarding LGBTQ+ exclusion focuses on seven biblical passages. Four are from the Old Testament: the Noah and Ham encounter (Genesis 9:20-27), Sodom and Gomorrah's destruction (Genesis 19:1-11), and two Levitical laws condemning homosexual practice (Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13). The New Testament contains the other passages: 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, 1 Timothy 1:10 (both are part of Paul's vice lists), and Romans 1:26-27 (these verses contribute to Paul's argument about humanity's sinful nature).

I admit I was tempted to skip over these verses, in large measure because the debate swirling around them isn't very productive, in my opinion. The traditional view, again in my opinion, doesn't do them justice in their complexity and all too often quickly uses them as mere proof texts. One might rightly point to the Leviticus verses and conclude, "See, Leviticus condemns it, and so should we." But refraining from proof texting in a limited way forces us to admit we don't fully agree with the verses in question. Remember, those verses also demand gay people be executed (Leviticus 20:13). I don't know anyone holding the traditional view who advocates for executing LGBTQ+ people. Moreover, in addition to same-sex behavior, the death penalty is the Leviticus order of the day for many violations of holiness, including consulting mediums (20:6), cursing your parents (20:9), and adultery (20:10). Why single out this one issue as particularly heinous by such limited proof texting?

Additionally, employing the Noah and Ham story as a text prohibiting same-sex behavior strikes me as a mystery. Noah is drunk, Ham sees him naked, and informs his older brothers, who in turn cover their faces to avoid seeing their father naked. They then walk backwards to cover Noah. There is no mention of sexual relations between the father and the son. What had Ham done wrong? We find the answer in Leviticus 18 which provides a list of kin who one should

RESPONSES TO FULL INCLUSION VIEW

not “uncover their nakedness.”² Many people assume this euphemism is about sexual relationships. However, assumptions aside, the actual text of the Noah and Ham story leads us to believe Ham merely saw his father drunk and naked, which was a source of shame. In fact, the older brothers endeavored to remove Noah’s shame by covering him AND they avoid looking at his naked body. When thinking about the connection between shame and nakedness we need to think no further than Genesis 3 when God confronts Adam after he devoured the forbidden fruit. Adam admits he hid because he was naked, and we assume shame was associated with his nudity once he violated God’s command not to eat of the tree.

Some believe Genesis 19:1-11 gives better support to the traditional view. You will recall, these verses recount a horrific incident when two angels visit Lot who was living in Sodom. We are told all the local men surround Lot’s home demanding he allow them to “know” his guests. This is a Hebraic euphemism for sexual relations, and in this case, the assailants were planning to rape Lot’s guests. The story’s depravity doesn’t end there. Lot offers his two daughters to be raped by the mob instead; however, they refuse that offer. While this story does include an aspect of homosexuality, it focuses on sexual violence and not committed monogamous same-sex relations.

Many conclude the reason Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed is the residents’ homosexuality. While that might be a reason, it isn’t the only reason, nor the reason most cited by later prophets. The wider biblical tradition expressly points to other factors. In Isaiah’s litany of woe against sinful Judah, the prophet proclaims, “The look on their faces bears witness against them; they proclaim their sin like Sodom,

² Clearly, scripture employs euphemisms to address delicate topics. However, I don’t believe we can say with certainty that “uncovering nakedness” here is the case. There is a specific euphemism for sexual relationships which we see in the law codes: “lies with.” The author does not use it here. Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson provides a concise exploration of what is meant by Exodus 20:23’s use of “nakedness” in his essay, “The Naked and the Nude.” His contribution is relevant to the Noah and Ham story. Artson, Bradley Shavit, “The Naked and the Nude,” February 14, 2004, Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, <https://www.aju.edu/ziegler-school-rabbinic-studies/our-torah/back-issues/naked-nude>.

they do not hide it. Woe to them!” (3:9) Judah’s sins include consulting diviners and soothsayers (2:6), relying on wealth and military power (2:7), idolatry (2.8), arrogance (2:11), and other factors, but there is no mention of homosexuality. Is it possible that Sodom’s sin was more than sexual perversion rape?

Jeremiah would seem to think so. He writes, “But in the prophets of Jerusalem I have a more shocking thing: they commit adultery and walk in lies; they strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from wickedness; all of them have become like Sodom to me, and its inhabitants like Gomorrah.” (Jer. 23:14). Ezekiel makes a similar connection between the Jewish people and Sodom in chapter 16 when identifying the Jews’ unfaithfulness. The prophet identifies Sodom as a sister to the Jews and specifically lists Sodom’s sins as “. . . she [Sodom] and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it” (16:49-50). Neither Jeremiah nor Ezekiel pinpoints any form of same-sex activity as a reason for Sodom and Gomorrah’s destruction, thus leaving us with another very complex and multilayered biblical incident that cannot easily be applied to our contemporary context.

Turning to the New Testament it would seem we move away from the complexity of the ancient Hebrew narratives and on to the more solid ground of lists (1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:10) and theological argument (Romans 1:26-27). However, even here we face gaps between our language and ancient Greek as well as the cultural and religious chasm between the ancient world and contemporary Western societies.

When identifying unacceptable sinful practices Paul mentions *arsenokoitai* in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. This word accompanies other behaviors such as idolatry, theft, greed, and drunkenness (1 Corinthians) and murder, slave trading, and perjury (1 Timothy). But what is *arsenokoitai*? It depends who you ask and which translation you read. The older Revised Standard Version uses the English expression “sexual perverts” in 1 Corinthians and

“sodomite” in 1 Timothy. The New Revised Standard Version translates it as “sodomites” in 1 Corinthians and in 1 Timothy. Finally, the New International Version has “homosexual offenders” in 1 Corinthians and “perverts” in 1 Timothy. It would seem the NIV translators were aware of the original Greek word’s complexity, and, therefore, used different words for translation.

A basic translation principle is to find other documents where a word is used and then using these various contexts determine what an English equivalent would be. The problem is *arsenokoitai* is very rare; in fact, some scholars believe Paul coined the word from two Greek words: *arsen* (male) and *koites* (bed). This leaves us guessing what exactly Paul meant when including it in his lists. It very probably had something to do with male homosexuality, but the word could mean a variety of behaviors.

Paul lists a second word in his 1 Corinthians list: *malakoi*. The RSV translates this as “sexual perverts”; the NRSV and the NIV read “male prostitutes.”³ Corinth was notorious for its hedonistic tendencies, and clearly the apostle wanted to address this social problem faced daily by his Corinthian readers. Moreover, Paul could have had sacred male prostitution in mind; we know that the Corinthian temple to Aphrodite had both male and female prostitutes.⁴ If this is what Paul had in mind, *malakoi* would have been doubly offensive because it involved both an exploitative and hedonistic sexual element within the larger unacceptable context of idol worship. Ultimately, what Paul is addressing in these two lists is not what we are talking about when we endeavor to process the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people into our congregations.

Finally, we must look at Romans 1:26-27 because these two verses seem to be tailor-made support for the traditional view. They purport

³ It is interesting to note the RSV translators used “sexual perverts” to translate both Greek words at the same time. I suspect this is due to the uncertainty of the meaning of *arsenokoitai* and its close grammatical proximity to *malakoi*, which is a known Greek word.

⁴ See Strabo’s Geography, 8.6.20 where he claims the Temple of Aphrodite had a thousand male and female prostitutes.

to sum up the “degrading passions” (v. 26) associated with both lesbian and gay sexual behavior and therefore, they condemn same-sex behavior. The problem is verse 26 begins with these words, “For this reason, . . .” These verses are a continuation of an argument that began previously, and that context shouldn’t be forgotten.

Romans 1:24-25 contains the immediate portion of the previous argument. Here we read that God “gave them [presumably those engaged in same-sex behavior] up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.” It seems clear to me and others that Paul is suggesting that what he condemns in verses 26 and 27 are a result (“For this reason...”) of people turning from God to worship idols or other gods. But what is the “lie” Paul is criticizing? We are pointed in the specific direction by the opening word of verse 24: “Therefore.” In other words, Paul has already identified the root problem that resulted in idolatry (vv. 24-25) and, in turn, sexually inappropriate behavior (vv. 26-27).

Paul’s three-part argument begins in Romans 1:18-23, and it is clear idol worship is foundational. From the beginning of Creation, Paul argues, the physical world points to the Creator. Everyone should have seen this obvious signpost, and so “they are without excuse.” (v. 20). However, some opted to exchange worshiping God with worshiping things in creation. In particular “they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles” (v. 23). In other words, idolatry led to lust which in turn resulted in same-sex, no doubt within the larger context of some cultic worship.

No doubt this sounds rather far-fetched, especially if you are hearing it for the first time. Could there possibly have been a cult like that in first century Rome? Yes, there was. In his essay,⁵ Robert Gnuse makes a case that the Egyptian cult of Isis had spread through the

⁵ Robert Gnuse, “Romans 1:26-27 condemns the Cult of Isis, not Homosexuality,” *International Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Sciences* 8, no. 3 (2021): 33-41.

Roman Empire to cities like Rome and even Taurus, Paul's hometown. This cult's practices included the worship of animals and unusual sexual practices. Gnuse also argues that because of its reputation for unbridled sexual expression, it was viewed with great reservation by many Romans. This makes it a perfect point to highlight regarding human depravity, as Paul hopes to further his line of argument as to why both Gentile and Jews need the Gospel. He and his readers would have this point in common. Paul strikes at the very heart of what often led both Jews and Gentiles away from God: idolatry. In this case, as is possible and even probable in 1 Corinthians, that idolatry has a same-sex component to it. Because homosexuality is secondary to idolatry, this passage doesn't neatly fit our contemporary discussion about inclusion or exclusion based on sinful behavior.

Arguing biblically for inclusion: Jesus

If we are honest with ourselves, the natural human tendency is to find reasons to exclude people from our group. The process of exclusion is quite simple. It is easier to be with people who look, think, and act like us. Tensions and conflicts arise when differences are aired. If you don't believe this, simply ask yourself why there are denominational and congregational splits. Often people with differences can't get along, and then our tendency toward exclusion takes over. People are either told to leave or they leave voluntarily. Or, in the case of same-sex behavior, people are excluded from the beginning.

I suspect the argument supporting exclusion is equally simple and straightforward for some. Despite what we have seen above, people are convinced that the Bible is clear on the gravity of LGBTQ+ relationships. For them, these ancient biblical passages are simple and applicable to the contemporary Church's convictions. They can easily and neatly be slotted into our current mode of operation. I believe I have shown that isn't the case; for the most part, these ancient texts don't address what we are facing today. Christians are wrestling with how to think about gay people, gay Christians, and gay Christians in loving and committed relationships. Are these people to be included

or excluded? And to what degree, if any, are they included or excluded? I realize that what I have written above seems to leave us without biblical guidance. I have argued we can't proof-text our way out of this challenge. Is there no assistance coming from the Bible? I believe there is.

I believe the New Testament provides us with two crucial resources when attempting to determine our way forward. The first, and most obvious, is Jesus and his interactions with people. While that is obvious to most of us, what he tells us about exclusion won't be welcomed by all. The way I read Jesus's story, he was adamantly against excluding people. His central conviction runs counter to our basic nature to exclude those who differ from us. So, in this portion of the essay, I will explore signs from the New Testament that Jesus was a "radical includer."

Additionally, it is easy to suggest that Jesus's convictions ought to be our convictions. Putting that into practice is another matter. If nothing else, apart from his uniqueness and our weakness, we live in a very different world than he lived in. How are we to be his followers in this ever and rapidly changing world? The good news is that Jesus, himself, promised we would have help discerning the times and the empowerment to be his followers. That assistance and strength comes from the Holy Spirit.⁶ Despite the fact that everything Jesus and the early Church did was in the presence and power of the Spirit,⁷ the Holy Spirit is frequently absent or limited in the contemporary Church's life. In my mind, this is perhaps the Church's gravest weakness today: we don't listen to the Holy Spirit and actively seek to follow Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit.⁸ Therefore, the New Testament's witness to the Spirit's active role in the early Church is my second point of exploration.

⁶ See John 16:4b-17 where Jesus promises to send the Spirit once he has departed.

⁷ See the beginning of Jesus's ministry in Mark 1:9-14 (and parallel passages in Matthew and Luke) and the origin of the Church in Acts 2:1ff. These passages make it clear that what Jesus and the early Church said and did was in the presence and power of the Spirit.

⁸ If you are interested in thinking more deeply about the Spirit's importance, I would recommend Scot McKnight, *Open to the Spirit: God in Us, God with Us, God Transforming Us* (New York: Waterbrook, 2018). I would also recommend Jürgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997). If you are keen on a challenge then read Moltmann's *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

LGBTQ+: THE FULL INCLUSION VIEW

Frequently, groups establish rules that function as boundaries insuring group identity and purity. Contemporary churches do this as we see with the previously noted seven frequently cited scripture passages and their traditional interpretations against including LGBTQ+ people. There is, however, ample evidence that Jesus didn't adhere to such legal boundary keeping. A classic example is found in Mark 2:23-28. Jesus and his followers are traveling on the Sabbath and when they were hungry, they began plucking grain from a field they were passing. The religious leaders, people whose job it was to maintain standards, confront Jesus, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" (v. 24) In reality, the disciples had probably broken at least three Old Testament laws regarding the observation of the sabbath, which all Jews were expected to adhere to: they were walking farther than allowed, they plucked the grain and so they had reaped, and by rubbing the grain heads in their hands to remove the chaff, they were either winnowing or preparing their food. All these actions were forbidden for anyone who considered themselves righteous Jews. Jesus's only response is, "The sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."⁹

The Gospel of John provides two incidents in which Jesus ups the ante and utterly destroys the boundaries that Judaism had come to rely on for identity and purity. In chapters 2 and 3, we read of the Temple clearing and Nicodemus's visit at night. We know the Temple was central to Jewish religious life. People longed to visit Jerusalem at least once to sacrifice and worship in the Temple. The Temple represented God's presence and the vehicle for maintaining both connection to God and Jewish identity. And according to John, Jesus "cleaned house," creating a public incident calling into question the validity of the Temple as it was being run. In fact, he metaphorically encouraged

⁹ Mark reinforces this theme in the very next story (3:1-6) when Jesus heals a man on the sabbath in a synagogue. That story concludes with these words, "The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him," thus reminding us that "gatekeepers" often take offense at having the gate removed. Other passages that depict Jesus's casual approach to traditional interpretation of scripture include Mark 7:1-23 and his repeated use of the phrase "you have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you" in the Sermon on the Mount.

his challengers to destroy it and he could raise it up in three days. John makes the point that Jesus was referencing his resurrection, but this point stands: Jesus came to replace what had stood for centuries, even millennia, as the focus to Jewish life. He had replaced it and its traditions.

The very next incident (John 3:1ff) depicts Nicodemus, a Pharisee, coming to Jesus at night. We think his main drive was to discuss the Bible (Torah) with Jesus, who Nicodemus calls “rabbi.” We know rabbis taught the Scriptures to their students in the evening after a day of bi-vocational work. The studying and memorizing of Scripture were crucial to Judaism, which focused on the sacred text. However, instead of opening the Torah with him, Jesus tells Nicodemus, “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (3:3). In other words, the current tradition of intense Bible study isn’t the way forward. As a good Jew, Nicodemus is confused. Jesus’s reply is especially relevant to us and our discussion: “What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above’” (3:6-7).

What we see occurring in these incidents is Jesus removing three longstanding and valued markers that provided first century Judaism with a tangible sense of belonging and identity. If you observed the sabbath as required, you were in. If you didn’t, you were out. If you revered the Temple and worshiped there, you were in. If you didn’t, you were out. If you studied scripture, you were in. If you didn’t, you were out. But Jesus sets these three crucial commitments aside and places himself and his work in their place. He publicly, and in some cases aggressively, challenged the long-established boundaries that were central to being a Jew. In essence, Jesus was tearing down the religious fences that kept the faithful safe from outsiders, and he was claiming to be the new fence, gate, and gatekeeper.¹⁰ With those boundaries down, there was the danger that anyone could get in. That is exactly what Jesus advocated.

¹⁰ It is no accident that among the famous “I am” statements found in John is this one: “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:7-10).

An incident that reveals Jesus's assumption of who can have saving faith is found in Luke 7:1-10.¹¹ We read that a centurion has a beloved slave who was gravely ill, and through intermediaries he contacts Jesus with his request that the servant will be healed. Jews intercede for the Roman, telling Jesus that "he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us" (v. 4). Jesus begins his journey to the man's home; but before Jesus arrives the centurion goes out to him, and says, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me, and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it" (v. 6-8). Jesus is amazed, saying to the crowd following him, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith" (v. 9).

What is happening in this story is stunning and frankly, for some, offensive. Jesus is publicly announcing that a Gentile not only can but does have greater faith than all of Israel. The shock value of this is heightened by the man's profession. He is a centurion. It is his job to keep the Jewish people in line. He represents the oppressive power of the Empire. Surely, he can't be an insider. He isn't pure as Judaism defines pure. Yet Jesus says he is not only worthy to be an insider, but he is a role model of faith for everyone who thinks they are insiders. With the legal and traditional guard rails removed, one's faith in Jesus become the great test of being counted among the faithful.¹²

Luke 4:14-30 gives us a story from the very beginning of Jesus's ministry that firmly indicates his conviction that anyone can be a

¹¹ Matthew 8:5-13 contains a parallel version of the story. Its inclusion in Matthew is intriguing because it is widely acknowledged that Matthew is writing for a Jewish audience, and still he offers this story to his readers.

¹² This isn't a "one off" incident. Consider the fact that Jesus called Matthew, a tax collector, to be one of his disciples. In his role as a taxman, Matthew had thrown his lot in with the Roman Empire and turned his back on the Jewish people. Yet, Jesus invited him to be a part of his inner circle. Moreover, one of our best-known parables, the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), would have been equally offensive to Jesus's contemporaries who wanted to establish boundaries between themselves and sinners and outsiders. You will recall in that parable, Jesus intentionally uses a sinful and hated Samaritan as the one who loved appropriately while casting "faithful" Jewish leaders as failing to be faithful.

recipient of God's grace and included in his kingdom. After his time of temptation in the wilderness, Jesus announces the beginning of his ministry in his hometown synagogue. When asked to read scripture that Saturday, he reads from Isaiah 42:1, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. . . ." He then claims this scripture was fulfilled in his reading of it and their hearing it. All was going well until he clarified who can receive this good news. He justifies his coming work by telling about the ministry of the prophet Elijah who extended grace and care to a pagan widow from Sidon while ignoring all the Jewish widows facing famine. This was reinforced by the story of the prophet Elisha who ignored Jewish lepers but healed Naaman the Syrian, who had some leprosy-like skin disease. Both the widow from Sidon and Naaman are models of the worst possible kind of outsiders. Sidon was a center of pagan Canaanite Ba'al worship. The widow couldn't be any further outside. Naaman was a Syrian general, whose professional calling was to destroy the Jewish people. The congregation that day fully understands Jesus's intention—anyone could be included—and their opinion of Jesus changes quickly. Luke ends the story with these words, "When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage." Radical inclusion of outsiders often has that impact and reaction, and yet radical inclusion, regardless of the degree of hostile opposition, was Jesus's commitment from the beginning of his ministry.

Prior to turning to three events from the life of the first church, let's examine one last relevant incident from Jesus's ministry. In John 7:53-8:11, we read of a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees regarding adultery. The religious leaders bring a woman to Jesus who was "caught in the very act of committing adultery" (John 8:4). They further remind Jesus that the law required such women to be stoned to death.¹³ This would seem to be an "open and shut" case. The law is the law. By her immoral activity, the woman in question has removed herself from the community of faith, and the law demanded she pay for

¹³ The law they are referring to is in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Leviticus 18:20 and Deuteronomy 5:18 outlaw adultery, and Leviticus 20:10 identifies adultery as a capital offense and calls for the participants to be executed.

that act by forfeiting her life.¹⁴

Interestingly, Jesus doesn't debate this point of the law. But he does know that sin is complex. He knows everyone, including the most faithful "insider," has sin in their lives. He knows the sins they practice do not remove them from God's love and grace. He knows their sins do not prevent them from being Jews. And most crucial of all, he knows this woman's sin doesn't prevent her from belonging either. So, his solution is to force her accusers to face their own sin, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7). By the end of the incident, there is no one to even accuse her. Jesus sends her on her way refusing to condemn her, but also encouraging her to stop sinning.

I read these stories and others from Jesus's life, and I am struck by his radical commitment to inclusion. He doesn't seem at all committed to rigidly adhering to the Law and his contemporaries' traditional interpretation of the Law so as to exclude people. He recognizes that anyone, not just good Jews, can have faith. He affirms previous prophets' decisions to include the worst of the worst as people receiving God's grace and love. And he refuses to scapegoat one sinner so all the other sinners can smugly live with their own sin.

But what of the early Christian church? Did they catch this vision of the kingdom that Jesus preached and embodied? Or did they revert to a Pharisaical rigidity and insider/outsider mentality? Did they drift back to a traditional understanding of identity, sin, and belonging? To be honest, it was touch and go at points, but ultimately Jesus's teaching and the work of the Holy Spirit won out. We see this in three incidents: Acts 8:26-40, Acts 10, and Acts 15.

¹⁴ This is a tangential observation, but I would note that her accusers were not actually presenting Jesus with an ironclad situation. The law calls for both parties to be executed and since the woman was "caught in the act" surely the Pharisees knew who the man was, and yet he was not brought to Jesus for a swift implementation of biblical justice.

Arguing biblically for inclusion: the early church

Turning our attention to the biblical record of the Church's beginning, two general points need to be noted. First, like Jesus's own ministry, the Church's work starts only when the Holy Spirit arrives to lead the fledgling group. We recognize this event as Pentecost, and it is recounted in Acts 2. What ensues is the Church continuing Jesus's ministry under the guidance of and through the Spirit's empowering presence. Additionally, as we read through the Acts of the Apostles, we see the Church generally ministering in ways that are reminiscent of Jesus's own ministry. Specifically, the Church sits loosely on the law and traditions that created guard rails between insiders and outsiders.

I hesitate to argue that persecution should be viewed as a beneficial or positive experience; however, as Luke tells the early Christian story, persecution significantly and positively impacted how the Church fulfilled its calling. Acts 7 recounts the life and death of the first Christian martyr, Stephen, and Luke squarely points to Saul, who will later be known as Paul, as the central figure who led "a severe persecution . . . against the church," resulting in many believers leaving Jerusalem and fleeing into rural Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1).

Chapter 8 focuses on Philip who successfully preached the Gospel in Samaria. He was so successful that Peter and John travelled to Samaria to meet with these new converts to pray with them so that they may receive the Holy Spirit (8:16). With this success, the lines between insiders and outsiders begin to blur. As we know, Samaritans were despised by pious Jews. Among other issues, many Jews viewed the Samaritans as outsiders because centuries earlier they had intermarried with pagans¹⁵ and had built their own temple on Mount Gerizim near Shechem, worshipping there instead of Jerusalem.

In 8:26ff, the demarcation lines between inside and outside are blurred even more. It is here, that Philip, under the Holy Spirit's leading approaches an Ethiopian eunuch, who was reading Isaiah.¹⁶ Once

¹⁵ See 2 Kings 17.

¹⁶ Acts 8:29 reads, "Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over to this chariot and join it.'"

invited to help bring clarity to what was being read, Philip explains that the passage in question is about Jesus and the good news to be found in him. Seemingly, once again Philip's prowess as an evangelist is fully operational, because when the pair come upon a pool of water, the Ethiopian asks, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Philip, concluding there were no prohibitions, baptizes him, and Philip then moves on to his next destination led by "the Spirit of the Lord" (v. 39).

Although Philip didn't see any barriers to this man entering the community of faith, the law certainly placed a hurdle between him and full membership. Deuteronomy 23:1 says, "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall come into the assembly of the Lord." In other words, eunuchs were excluded from Jewish worship. If Philip had followed the letter of the law, when asked if anything prevented the eunuch from being baptized, the answer probably should have been, "Well, there is this one verse." That, however, isn't Philip's response, and the Ethiopian eunuch, just like the Samaritans, became a full-fledged follower of Jesus. All of this is done under the Spirit's leadership according to Acts.

Two chapters later we read a story that figuratively blew the door off Church membership and knocked down the walls as well. A Roman centurion, named Cornelius, who "was a devout man who feared God" (10:2), has a vision telling him to contact Peter.¹⁷ As his representatives are travelling to Joppa, Peter, also, has a vision. He is hungry and sees a sheet, containing a vast array of non-kosher foods lowered from heaven. A voice tells Peter to "kill and eat." (10:13). As a devout Jew, Peter refuses since the law forbids him to eat. The voice replies, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane" (v. 15). Peter is extremely devout because this interaction occurs three times and he refuses all three times.

As the trance ends and Peter is endeavoring to understand what just happened, there is a knock on the door. It is Cornelius's men.

¹⁷ According to Luke, Cornelius was even told where Peter was staying: "Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside" (Acts 10:5-6).

Verse 19 is worth noting: “While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, ‘Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them.’” The next day Peter travels to Cornelius’s home in Caesarea. I suspect Peter was shocked to see many Gentiles gathered there to meet him. Peter, realizing this is both an awkward and pivotal moment, addresses the proverbial elephant in the room, saying, “You yourselves know that it is improper for a Jew to associate with or to visit an outsider, but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection” (10:28-29).

Peter shares the Good News with those assembled, and as he is proclaiming the message, “the Holy Spirit fell down upon all who heard this word” (10:44). The chapter’s closing verses highlight the shocking and liminal nature of this event: “The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, ‘Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’” (10:45-47).

This incident, combined with Paul’s successful evangelizing of Gentiles in other parts of the Roman Empire, created a very real problem for the early Church. While Jesus radically called everyone to follow him and place their faith in him and his vision of the Kingdom of God, what were these first followers to do with the scriptures and traditions to which they had been committed prior to Jesus’s arrival? While the Holy Spirit was clearly leading them to embrace Jesus’s radical inclusion of everyone, how were they to navigate this new reality with their previous convictions regarding insiders and outsiders, especially as defined by the law, traditions surrounding the temple and scripture, and above all circumcision?¹⁸ Some, who held

¹⁸ Circumcision, like the temple, studying scripture and observance of the law, was a marker of Jewish identity. To be a Jewish man was to be circumcised. It was the sign that one belonged to the chosen people. Conversely, to be uncircumcised was a sign you did not belong.

conservatively to the traditions, argued new followers of Jesus must be circumcised. People, like Paul and Barnabas, who knew firsthand what the Spirit was doing in Gentile circles argued against requiring circumcision, even if it was the core identity marker for Judaism.

This is resolved in our final story: the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). The scene depicts the apostles and elders meeting with various concerned parties, including Peter, Paul, and Barnabas as well as Pharisees who were believers. Paul and Barnabas report what amazing work was being done among the Gentiles, but “some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses’” (Acts 15:15). Peter recounts what seems to be the Acts 10 incident with Cornelius, his family and friends. He then lays down this challenge: if God gave them the Holy Spirit, “why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will” (Acts 15:10-11).

After further testimony from Paul and Barnabas, James, the leader of the Church in Jerusalem, announces the council’s decision: Gentiles are not required to be circumcised and are required to keep only four elements of the law and tradition: steer clear of idols and things related to idols, refrain from fornication, and avoid meats that had been slaughtered with unkosher methods and blood. Those deliberating decided to remove virtually all traditional Jewish barriers to the Gentiles. Additionally, James’s letter announcing this momentous decision is intriguing, “. . . *it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us* to impose on you no further burdens than these essentials. . . (Acts 15:28, italics mine).” The early Church, discussing with each other and listening to the Holy Spirit, opted for a radical inclusion of people who desired to follow Jesus.

As we read through the New Testament, we see early believers recalling specific incidents from Jesus’s life and ministry in which he acknowledged the faith of people who were viewed as outsiders,

yet Jesus extended grace to them. Additionally, as we see the earliest Church's wrestling with the significance of Jesus and his work, we note that some early followers missed Jesus's radical openness, but the majority embraced that openness, affirmed it, and incorporated it into the Church's official stance regarding outsiders as members. Apart from a few stipulations, the law and Jewish traditions excluding people were set aside.¹⁹

Answering opposing arguments

While some will agree with what is laid out above, I am aware there are objections to the suggestion that we ought to rethink how we view LGBTQ+ expressions of sexual intimacy even within the context of a marriage relationship. The argument plays out something like this: because the Bible identifies same-sex relationships as sin, if we were to accept those practices then we are opening the Church to accepting all sin. Where does it stop? This, of course, is the "slippery slope" argument. Let's hold the line here on the question of LGBTQ+ inclusion, and thus avoid slipping into a "free for all" approach to sin.

I am not advocating a libertarian ethic. I, like many Brethren in Christ people, am concerned about the presence of evil and sin in our world. When I taught at Messiah College (now University), I required that students read *Evil and the Justice of God* precisely because I expected them to wrestle with the reality that evil and sin are very real and the Gospel confronts both.²⁰ I endeavor to take the Sermon on the

¹⁹ Interestingly Acts 15 identifies four specific items. Avoiding idols is obvious. From the beginning Judaism warned against idolatry. Moreover, in the ancient world some pagan temples doubled as places of worship and butcher shops where animals sacrificed to pagan gods were then sold to the public. The ban on fornication acknowledges the power of human sexuality and identifies a proper context for expressing it. And as noted above, often pagan temples practiced sexual rituals. Refraining from strangled meat ensured food was kosher thus enabling table fellowship possible between Jews and Gentile. Remember that originally the Lord's Supper was a part of a "regular" meal. Therefore, congregations consisting of both Jews and Gentiles had to be able to share kosher meat if they were to share the Lord's Supper. Finally, Leviticus 17:10-12 requires all people to avoid eating blood. Ultimately, these four restrictions are designed to facilitate Jewish and Gentile interaction in a variety of social and religious settings.

²⁰ N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

Mount and Paul's writing about sin seriously.²¹ In recent years, I have become firmly convinced that the single greatest sin facing Christians, especially western Christians, is idolatry. It seems to me that all other sins grow out of this fundamental sin. However, we don't pay much attention to idol worship. Perhaps by avoiding the foundation, we are already on a slippery slope, and isolating and focusing on same-sex relationships as the place to draw the line only facilitates our slide into sin generally.

Moreover, this argument doesn't carry much weight within a Brethren in Christ context because we have already and intentionally opted for the slippery slope. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the denomination wrestled with the divorce and remarriage question. Originally, one could not be a member of a Brethren in Christ congregation if they had been divorced and remarried. The main biblical argument supporting this position was Jesus's teaching where he specifically argued against divorce and remarriage except in the case of "unchastity."²² In Jesus's teaching, to divorce and remarry was to perpetually commit adultery. Ultimately, the denomination opted to ignore Jesus's clear instructions on the matter, and now people who are divorced and remarried can be members of Brethren in Christ congregations.

Another objection can be described as "God's design" for sexuality. This argument relies on Genesis 1:26-28 and 2:18-25.²³ David P. Gushee succinctly describes this approach as suggesting "*the illegitimacy of same-sex relationships based on God's original design for human sexuality in creation, often defined as male/female sexual/gender complementarity.*"²⁴ In other words, because God created humans as male and female, this is the divine intention for sexuality,

²¹ The Sermon on the Mount is located in Matthew 5-7. At various locations, Paul identifies lists of sinful behavior, such as Galatians 5:16-22.

²² See Matthew 19:8-9 and Jesus's larger conversational context with the Pharisees in 19:1-12. Cf. Matthew 5:31-32. Mark 10:1-12's version is even more stringent in that Jesus does not mention the "unchastity" exception.

²³ In its most detailed form this argument also draws in Matthew 19:1-12 and Romans 1:26-27. However, I will only address the Genesis passages.

²⁴ Gushee, 80. The use of italics is Gushee's.

thus establishing that male/male or female/female relationships are beyond God's intention.

In Genesis, there are two different incidents depicting the creation of human beings, and these events seem to have two different motives. Neither motivation seems to have sexuality as the driving force. In the second, God is concerned that the male doesn't have a suitable companion, and so a variety of animals are created. Still, there is a sense of inadequate companionship, and that is when God creates the woman as the male's companion. While the sentence, "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24), may hint at sexual relations, the specific purpose for creating the woman doesn't necessarily involve sexual behavior. The Genesis 2 narrative specifically addresses companionship and may imply sexual behavior.

On the other hand, Genesis 1's motivation has a sexual behavior element; the male and female are commanded to "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Gen. 1:28). The task before human beings is to reproduce, and the only way for that to happen, prior to recent advances in technology, is through intimate heterosexual activity. Thus, some conclude that God's design for all time is heterosexual orientation and behavior. Moreover, it is assumed that opposite sex attraction must be the norm as well.

There are at least two problems with this argument. First, the reality is that not all people are born biologically as either male or female. A very small percentage of people are born with both ovarian and testicular tissue. Biologically, they don't fit into the male/female binary model. This isn't a recent development; the earliest medical attempt to record the phenomenon dates to the sixteenth century. The current medical term describing the condition is ovotesticular disorder.²⁵ This real medical/biological syndrome calls into question

²⁵ See National Organization for Rare Disorders, "Ovotesticular Disorder of Sex Development," September 27, 2016, <http://rarediseases.org/rare-diseases/ovotesticular-disorder-of-sex-development/>, for a useful introduction to the phenomenon.

that humans are only either male or female as Genesis affirms. In reality, what is known as the intersex condition covers more than this one extremely rare condition. There are four medical categories found under the broad umbrella term “intersex.” They are 46, XX intersex, 46, XY intersex, true gonadal intersex, and complex or undetermined intersex.²⁶ Given this complexity, gender is more akin to falling on a spectrum between male and female rather than simply a binary of male or female. Additionally, the general condition isn’t unusually rare; 1.7 percent of the population is by various intersex conditions.²⁷ For comparison, roughly 2 percent of the world’s population has red hair.²⁸

Second, the “God’s design” argument doesn’t take into consideration the vast and growing scientific evidence that some people are born with same-sex attraction. Neuroscientist Simon LeVay published a landmark text discussing innate same-sex attraction in 1991.²⁹ Since then publications arguing for innate same-sex attraction have burgeoned. Some of this literature is reviewed in an article by Anthony F. Bogaert and Malvina N. Skorska.³⁰ Additionally, the field of genetics has been exploring the possibility of a genetic link to innate same-sex attraction.³¹

²⁶ For a brief introduction to intersex conditions see MedlinePlus, “Differences of Sex Development,” National Library of Medicine, last updated March 12, 2024, <https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/001669.htm>.

²⁷ See United Nations Human Rights, “Intersex People: OHCHR and the Human Rights of LGBTI People,” <http://www.ohchr.org/en/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity/intersex-people>.

²⁸ See “Red Hair,” *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_hair. I am in debt to Dr. Jennifer Szczytkowski Thomson, my former colleague at Messiah University, for pointing out this percentage comparison.

²⁹ The book has been rereleased in a second edition. See Simon LeVay, *Gay, Straight, and the Reason Why*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

³⁰ Anthony F. Bogaert and Malvina N. Skorska, “A Short Review of Biological Research on the Development of Sexual Orientation,” *Hormones and Behavior* 119 (2020), <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2020-18924-001>. Again, I am indebted to Dr. Jennifer Szczytkowski Thomson for pointing out the LeVay text, the Bogaert and Skorska article and other publications.

³¹ See, for example, Tuck C. Ngun and Eric Vilain, “Chapter Eight, The Biological Basis of Human Sexual Orientation: Is There a Role for Epigenetics?” *Advances in Genetics* 86 (2014), 167-184, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/B9780128002223000085?via%3Dihub>, or Andrea Ganna, et. al. “Large-scale GWAS reveals insights into the genetic architecture of same-sex behavior,” *Science* 365, issue 6456 (August 30, 2019), <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.aat7693>. Joanna Hadley-Evans drew my attention to these articles.

In the final analysis, I find the slippery slope and God's original design arguments wanting. In the first case, the denomination has, in reality, already jumped on the slippery slope when we decided to accommodate divorce and remarriage despite Jesus's very clear teaching on the subject. That decision from the 1970s and 1980s drove home the reality that making ethical and moral decisions in the contemporary world is not as easy as simply citing a passage of scripture. Additionally, the argument from Genesis regarding "God's design" doesn't easily square with the growing scientific body of evidence. There are people who are neither strictly male nor female. Therefore, we are aware that there may be "another" divine design: some people are born with same-sex attraction. Thus, we may have to wrestle with two very different manifestations of "God's design."

The pastoral implications of the full inclusion view

Given the above information, how should we proceed regarding the inclusion or exclusion of members of the LGBTQ+ community in our church communities? First and foremost, Jesus and the early Church's practice of radical inclusion needs to be continued by the contemporary Church. If Jesus believed a Syrian general, whose role was to destroy Israel, could receive God's grace, then I think we can extend grace to the LGBTQ+ community. If the early Church could abandon circumcision for membership, then I think we can relax our exclusionary convictions as well. This is not to say we throw out all our principles, but our principles need to line up with Jesus and need to be applied equally to all people regardless of their sexual orientation. This is particularly true if the individuals in question are believers. I see no biblical justification for excluding any fellow believer from Christian fellowship and worship.

Application of this basic principle becomes challenging when we face the reality of behavior, which is a consideration as well. I have argued the purported "anti-gay" passages are not addressing the same situations that we face. Those ancient texts are a complex mix of anti-social behavior, idolatry, and perhaps hedonistic activity. On the other

hand, we frequently rub shoulders with individuals or couples who are well adjusted non-idol-worshipping people who desire or experience long-term marital and monogamous relationships. Applying those ancient texts to our contemporary contexts is an exercise of comparing apples and oranges or forcing square pegs into round holes.

At the same time, I am aware there is a common theme of hedonistic sexual expression in both the ancient world and our own. This hedonism can be found in both gay and straight communities. Furthermore, I believe it is safe to say the Christian tradition has consistently discouraged any form of hedonism. In its best moments, the Church ought to apply this principle with equal conviction to both heterosexuals and LGBTQ+ people. Sadly, I suspect it is enforced more frequently for gays than straights. For example, while gays are expected to be celibate, many parts of the western Church condone heterosexual “linear polygamy” and frequently turn a blind eye to heterosexual fornication and adultery.³² When facing the cultural expression of hedonistic sexual practice, the Church needs to apply the same principles for all people. Thus, Christian marriage should be an option for both gay and straight believers, and celibacy should be accepted as an option for people of all orientations, as well. In no case is hedonistic sexuality acceptable for people who seek to be followers of Jesus.

One final core matter of application remains: can LGBTQ+ Christians undertake ministry roles in churches? I have addressed the broader topic of ministry in the New Testament in a previous essay, and I will merely summarize my relevant idea here.³³ I believe the Holy Spirit is given to every believer, and the Spirit in turn gives each believer gifts that are intended to benefit the entire Church and the building of God’s kingdom. I do not believe anyone is denied the Spirit

³² Linear polygamy would be the practice of repeated divorce and remarriage by an individual.

³³ See Jay McDermond, “The Understanding of Ministry in the New Testament” in E. Morris Sider, ed., *We Have this Ministry: Pastoral Theology and Practice in the Brethren in Christ Church*, 2nd ed. (Nap-panee, IN: Evangel Press, 1991), 22-42.

due to their gender, race, age, or sexual orientation. Thus, it seems reasonable to me that through the Spirit's presence in their lives, LGBTQ+ Christians ought to be encouraged to share their spiritual gifts with the congregations and denominations of which they are members. Therefore, no role should be withheld from them.

Recommended actions

Finally, I would make a few specific appeals for action. First, the denomination needs to give pastors and their congregations the freedom to begin exploring how they understand their calling regarding this topic and how they are called by the Holy Spirit to reach out to the LGBTQ+ community in their area. One can only come to clarity if one can prayerfully listen to the promptings of the Spirit without constraint and censure.

Second, it is my sense that the entire denomination has not been given the opportunity to process this matter. So far as I know, nothing akin to the Acts 15 council meeting has been organized. I have heard that current leadership has decided this matter is resolved, but I do not believe a handful of leaders deciding and then dictating their decision is an adequate or acceptable approach to such a crucial topic. Decisions made in an echo chamber are probably poor decisions. While open and honest discussion takes time and will, no doubt, be difficult and challenging, this is the crucial activity the denomination needs to organize.

Third, and most important of all, we all need to educate ourselves about the lives and experiences that members of the LGBTQ+ community have had within Brethren in Christ circles. We are not merely discussing abstract concepts. This isn't simply a plea for thinking correctly. While coming to a Spirit-led and Jesus-like position may well involve such abstractions, we are dealing with fellow human beings. Our decisions impact the well-being of people who God loves, so we would be wise to learn about them.³⁴

³⁴ Fortunately, a book has recently been published that facilitates this process. See Helena Cicero, Eric A. Seibert, and Julie Weatherford, eds., *Invitation to Conversation: Becoming More Inclusive of LGBTQ+ People in the Brethren in Christ Church* (Grasmere ID: SacraSage Press, 2024).

Conclusion

As I arrive at this conclusion, it seems to me that I have only scratched the surface of a very complex challenge facing the Church. The complexity of the topic of sexual orientation and behavior and how the Church ought respond is akin to duck hunting: fast moving and often challenging to focus on the target. And yet, there can be no doubt, at least in my mind, that Jesus's model of radical inclusion ought to be the contemporary Christian's driving principle when thinking about the Church's life and mission. This seems simple and straightforward to me despite any of the entanglements—biblical, social, or scientific—we might face.

Additionally, it seems obvious to me that the leadership and presence of the Holy Spirit is available to us as we seek to find our way. Both Jesus and the Spirit, as depicted in the New Testament, provide us with a model for our decision-making and a yardstick by which we understand and interpret all of Scripture, especially those passages that seem easily applied to our contemporary contexts, but are, in reality, ancient texts depicting ancient convictions that are both incredibly complicated and only marginally fitting to what we are wrestling with today. Despite the challenges, the Church can make good decisions. But in order for that to happen, we need to talk with and listen to each other. And above all, we need to listen the Holy Spirit as we seek to be more Christ-like.

Response to Jay McDermond

By John Yeatts

Let me begin by affirming my Brother Jay McDermond’s courage to present the full-inclusion position that disqualifies him from ministerial credentialing in the Brethren in Christ. His introduction sets out an important aspect of the discussion—the changing context of ministry—using biblical examples of the New Testament church’s adjusting to geographical cultures. He ends that introduction with a succinct statement of a task before us: “how to be both faithful to the Gospel and relevant to the world.” The Brethren in Christ have confronted this issue for two and half centuries as our doctrine of separation from the world lives in tension with the great commission to go into the world to share the Good News.

McDermond’s contention that all humans are to be loved and treated justly is insightful. We talk much about loving LGBTQ+ people but less about declaring that they be treated justly. I would like to hear him expand on this with biblical examples, which would be easy to find.

Attention to justice might lead us to consider to what extent our church should be involved in advocacy for the civil rights of LGBTQ+ persons and against the oppression that finds advocates even in the Christian community. One might envision a Brethren in Christ movement for the just and equal treatment of LGBTQ+ persons. That might counter the impression of those who see Christians as anti-LGBTQ+.

McDermond is right to affirm that hedonistic behavior—gay or straight—must be denounced with equal fervor. A point of issue is whether McDermond is correct to reject imposition of the calling to celibacy for persons who are LGBTQ+.

McDermond dismisses “seven biblical passages” because the “debate swirling around them isn’t very productive” in addressing

RESPONSES TO FULL INCLUSION VIEW

the LGBTQ+ issue. Nevertheless, pastorally we are not primarily addressing an issue but people. These are the very passages that have been used for centuries to exclude and slander our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters who, like us, bear God's image.

That is the reason that I have addressed those passages extensively in my essay. Nearly all of the LGBTQ+ persons who grew up in the Brethren in Christ church with me are no longer present. That is a tragic witness to the exclusive spirit that McDermond decries. We must stop using these passages to treat people in ways that Jesus would never have condoned.

I wish McDermond had addressed more directly the reality that marriage is repeatedly described throughout Scriptures as between a man and woman for life—and which is affirmed in Genesis, Jesus, and Paul. While he denies that this necessarily establishes God's intention for all of humanity and that male and female is more a spectrum than a binary, it remains true that the biblical model for marriage is always male and female. While it is correct that the Bible does not denounce same-sex marriage—indeed it does not mention it—marriage between male and female is the only form of marriage recognized or condoned. Despite McDermond's convincing arguments that the focus in Genesis 1 is not on sexuality and that biblical writers did not envision the sexual complexity that modern medicine recognizes today, I cannot escape the evidence that biblical marriage is between a man and woman for life. Although McDermond does not explicitly deny this affirmation, it is likely the place where our disagreement is most evident.

McDermond's arguments for inclusion from Jesus and the early church are impressive. His training and scholarship in biblical studies and pastoral theology—both of which he taught for years—is evident. From analysis of a variety of passages, he convincingly argues that Jesus favored inclusion rather than exclusion, and that Jesus rejected boundaries set up by the gate-keeping religious leaders of this day. Unfortunately, these passages do not address LGBTQ+ relationships directly.

Moreover, some of Jesus's statements are quite exclusionary. The

Sermon on the Mount, where he implicitly affirms marital faithfulness between a man and woman and explicitly denounces divorce and remarriage (Matt. 5:27-32), ends with a rather exclusive statement: “small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it (Matt. 5:13).

Of course, McDermond is not arguing for a “free-for-all” approach to sin. Yet, his copious examples from Jesus and the early church are convincing evidence for inclusiveness. Indeed, I am inclined to follow McDermond by erring on the side of inclusion rather than exclusion.

McDermond’s suggested actions are both compassionate and helpful. He affirms that the Brethren in Christ Church should extend grace to all persons that our society deems “outcasts,” including LGBTQ+ persons who are in same-sex relationships and persons who believe that such relationships are ordained by God. The level of inclusion—membership, clergy, leaders—is perhaps the most pressing pastoral issue that our beloved church must address.

McDermond and I agree that we must prayerfully seek divine guidance to see in what new direction the Spirit is leading. With my brother Jay I believe that this issue has not been given a proper hearing. It has been decided by leadership rather than by General Conference, which has traditionally been the governing body in our polity. Finally, we agree that we must hear the stories of the lives and experiences of LGBTQ+ persons in our community. Some of those stories are featured in my essay and more are in the book edited by Cicero, Seibert, and Weatherford.¹

In summary, I believe that the Brethren in Christ should continue to affirm the biblical ideal, outlined by Lynn Thrush in his essay, that marriage is between a man and woman for life. Although alternative marital configurations and divorce and remarriage fall short of that biblical pattern, exclusion is not the best remedy. Indeed, our church

¹ See Helena Cicero, Eric A. Seibert, and Julie Weatherford, eds., *Invitation to Conversation: Becoming More Inclusive of LGBTQ+ People in the Brethren in Christ Church* (Grasmere, ID: SacraSage Press, 2024).

RESPONSES TO FULL INCLUSION VIEW

must overcome our inclination to exclude persons like my Brother Jay McDermond.

McDermond's statement of his position begins with a hypothetical: "I can easily imagine Christians advocating for state sanctioned gay marriage while arguing against providing marriage ceremonies to gay couples." Let me imagine something similar: I can easily imagine the Brethren in Christ affirming our position that biblical marriage is between a man and a woman for life and at the same time including persons who commit to follow Jesus regardless of their sexual beliefs and behaviors.

That is certainly paradoxical and even contradictory, but part of being a Christian is to affirm paradoxes like God is three in one, Jesus is divine and human, humans are in God's image and fallen, the evil world is the venue of the kingdom of God, there is absolute truth but our apprehension of it is severely limited, the end is already but not yet—and that marriage is between a man and woman for life but people in same-sex relationships and divorced and remarried are included in the community of Jesus's followers.

We Brethren in Christ have spent several years addressing the **issue** of LGBTQ+ persons and same-sex relationships; perhaps it is time to spend more years addressing how we pastorally include **persons** who disagree with our conclusion on the issue or who are in LGBTQ+ relationships. May God bless us in that important pastoral task.

Response to Jay McDermond

By Lynn Thrush

In our work in these essays, I am hopeful that the sober thinking here might contribute to good thinking and good work in the Brethren in Christ Church US and beyond. Indeed, I am hopeful that we are doing more than recycling the lines of reasoning of others. A significant portion of good thinking and work can result from interacting with Jay McDermond's substantive paper. I have known Jay across the years to be a careful and compassionate thinker and follower of Jesus. It is a privilege to engage with his careful writing. I affirm Jay's preamble—our subject is “a complex matter As the shorthand ‘LGBTQ+’ implies, this is quite complex! It is easy to misstep because what I might generally say or think regarding one sub-group might not apply to another sub-group.”

I begin by noting the masterful work Jay does showing God shattering exclusionary expectations and traditions established by his people who early on had heard God say he promised to bless all the families of the earth through them. Jay takes thirteen pages to survey the Scriptures, and his writing is a clarion call to bring God's good news to the ends of the earth, to every people group and every kind of person. While Jay is marshalling these biblical texts to say that they are leading to inclusion, they certainly do that, but as he points out, this grace is not cheap: Jesus both refuses to condemn the woman caught in adultery, but also calls her to stop sinning.

Jay frames his writing by saying, “I believe the core matter is . . . inclusion. . . . Keep in mind, inclusion or exclusion is the foundational issue with which we must grapple.” I believe, however, that exclusion/inclusion as the propositional binary for understanding God's work in the world is inadequate because propositions are insufficient to cover the God/human story. The story of God certainly includes inclusion: God loves the world (John 3:16). Jesus also excludes those who do not

RESPONSES TO FULL INCLUSION VIEW

do the will of God: “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers” (Matt. 7:21-23).

Jay certainly acknowledges evil and sin in the world, and as he testifies of his work with students at Messiah College, he expected his students “to wrestle with the reality that evil and sin are very real, and the Gospel confronts both. I endeavor to take the Sermon on the mount and Paul’s writing about sin seriously.” In this response, I want to engage with Jay’s next statement, “In recent years, I have become firmly convinced that the single greatest sin facing Christians, especially western Christians, is idolatry. It seems to me that all other sins grow out of this fundamental sin.”

I think Jay’s identification of idolatry, which is indeed Paul’s concern in Romans 1, is very helpful in comprehending matters related to LGBTQ+. Idolatry is the description of humans taking on the role of creator and acting on the perceived inadequacy or the unacceptability of the Creator and the Creator’s creation. We could all be helped by understanding that the discussion of LGBTQ+ is not fundamentally about sex, but rather idolatry.

When idolatry is the essential issue, then inclusion/exclusion is not primary. Arguments for certain kinds of sexual behaviors, or against certain kinds of behaviors, are not helpful in themselves, because the prior issue of worshipping the Creator versus worshipping created beings must be settled. Our posture toward the Creator is to be thankful (Rom. 1:21), rather than holding the Creator to have missed the mark in some fashion.

Jay continues with the theme of idolatry with his helpful work on the “seven biblical passages” traditionally used in arguing against homosexual behavior. While saying that it “is possible and even probable in 1 Corinthians that idolatry has a homosexual component to it,” he points to many other sins associated with the seven texts and concludes with this statement: “Paul strikes at the very heart of what often led both Jews and Gentiles away from God: idolatry.”

While idolatry is the description of giving highest honor to other than the Creator, new creation is the vision of humanity loving God

supremely and our neighbor as ourselves. In my essay, I say this: “New creation involves generations of work; it involves the whole span of one’s life, from preparation including education/training to targeting settings of need across the earth. The faithful stewardship of our sexuality is both subservient to, and necessary for, the generational vision of new creation.” I do not think the Church has thought sufficiently enough and deeply enough about the value of assuming that the Creator has not been casual in his creation of humans, but as a matter of fact he has invested purposefully, comprehensively, and profoundly in them. When the Creator said in Genesis 1:31, “It was very good,” there are no limitations to that summary!

I also want to address the phrase, “holding the line,” related to LGBTQ+ matters. Here Jay references the concern for the “slippery slope,” the view that casualness here will open the floodgates (I am mixing metaphors) to all manner of moral failure. I would like to reframe this conversation in light of new creation. Life is not all that complex. Righteousness and unrighteousness are straightforward.

There is a truth about our humanity that our bodies and our sexuality are uniquely related; in addition, our bodies are uniquely temples indwelt by the Spirit (1 Cor. 6:18-20). Missing the mark regarding our sexuality misses the mark regarding our very own bodies. Our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit; they are the very vehicles of our participation in the new creation, and the Holy Spirit is crucially important to that participation. (Jay makes a most wonderful call to listening to the Holy Spirit and actively seeking to follow Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit.)

Maybe Paul would not have needed to say, “you are not your own” (1 Cor. 6:19). Perhaps it should be self-evident given that the Creator is in our body, we would understand that we are not our own, and that we are to honor God with our body (1 Cor. 6:19-20). The profundity of these statements requires sober consideration. The Church is not arbitrarily “drawing a line;” sexual matters are related to the Creator’s astonishing plan to live within us. The Church dare not treat missing the mark in this area like missing the mark in other areas. It has to do

RESPONSES TO FULL INCLUSION VIEW

with the Creator's choice to make the world this way. Idolatry is the description of creating an alternate ultimate.

Regarding telling and hearing stories of LGBTQ+ persons, I caution care, especially among our young, that those stories do not lead to experimentation. I am more interested that all of us tell the stories of new creation, of the recognition of the Holy Spirit in our bodies, and of the way in which we are honoring God in the here and now, with our bodies. "For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen" (Rom. 11:36).

I am grateful for this opportunity to engage with Jay, my esteemed brother in Christ, and with the readers. May we see in these pages the hearts and minds of writers who deeply desire to love God and all people faithfully.