

SEXUALITY OVERTURES – CHURCH DOCTRINE REPORTS

**WHERE FROM HERE? AN EXPLORATION OF POSSIBLE WAYS FORWARD FOR THE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CANADA ON QUESTIONS OF HUMAN SEXUALITY**

(A&P 2017, p. 536–40, 28)

Background

The Committee on Church Doctrine has prepared two substantial theological and scriptural study papers on the question of human sexuality, for presentation to this General Assembly. These two study papers offer alternative theological and scriptural approaches to this question and represent the kind of serious theological work that the committee has always tried to undertake in answering questions referred to it. The Committee on Church Doctrine is also asking the General Assembly to send these two documents for study and report by sessions, presbyteries, synods and other bodies of the church. This request for study and report by the committee is intended to deepen and enrich our discussions with one another, trusting that the Spirit will bless us with wisdom and grace as we continue to discern the mind of Christ.

Moving Forward

The committee also recognizes that the church’s present, prayerful discussion of human sexuality must lead finally to a decision about what we will do – about how we will proceed. It is a question of how the church will finally respond to overtures that have invited the church to “full inclusion” of those who identify as LGBTQ, and overtures that have alternatively asked the church to reaffirm its present teaching. It is not only a question of scriptural or theological reflections, then, but also a question of what action we will take.

In order to move to facilitate conversation on these more practical issues and questions, the Committee on Church Doctrine has produced this brief document, entitled “Where from Here?”. It includes a sketch of three possible options for the church moving forward. We believe that these three options flow from and are consistent with the theological and scriptural arguments articulated in the two major study papers we have prepared.

As we present these three possible options to the General Assembly, and invite study and report on them within the wider church, we wish to offer two important qualifications:

1. *These three options do not represent the only possible ways forward for the church.* We are not suggesting that the church must choose between these three options. Rather, we are suggesting that these represent logical possibilities – and, that presenting these to the church will facilitate our shared reflection on the more concrete and programmatic questions that the church will finally need to answer.
2. *The three options are not laid out in a comprehensive way.* We realize that many details would need to be worked on in relation to each option. However, these options are designed in such a way as to open up space for the church’s reflection and response. While reading them you may find yourself asking “What about *this*?” and “What about *that*?”, and it is just these questions we are inviting you to ask, and to share with us.

In order for the Committee on Church Doctrine to gather feedback from the wider church, a response form will be created by the committee – a form that we will ask individuals, sessions, presbyteries and other church bodies to complete in the process of study and report. Further details on the procedure for reporting back will be made available on the website of the denomination, and will be circularized through the General Assembly Office, should the General Assembly decide to provide this opportunity for deeper reflection and continuing consultation as we move forward.

Repentance and Confession

In laying out the three options, below, the Committee on Church Doctrine wishes to highlight that each of these approaches can and should be imagined in conjunction with a process of confession and repentance. That is, individuals advocating for *any* of these three options can also believe that the church has failed to live up the call to repentance and confession that was included within the 1994 Statement on Human Sexuality, 6.23:

The church is called to be a welcoming, nurturing, loving and supportive community, a true church family, where all are welcomed, nurtured, loved, and supported. Sadly, the Christian church has frequently shunned homosexuals and failed to minister to them and with them. The church as a whole must repent of its homophobia and hypocrisy.

Accordingly, you will observe that each of the three options presented includes a prospective recommendation that the General Assembly acknowledge the church's failure to follow the path of repentance and confession envisaged in 1994. In this vein, we also offer a reminder that the Committee on Church Doctrine, together with the Life and Mission Agency, has brought a recommendation to this General Assembly that is intended to initiate a process of listening and confession.

Three Options

The three options for the way forward are presented, below, in the form of recommendations that might be brought to a future General Assembly. Any decision that the church takes on questions of human sexuality will be taken precisely by way of recommendations to the General Assembly, and so we believe it is helpful to present the three options in just that form. While the recommendations presented under each option are in many ways self-explanatory, we will offer a brief description of each, here, to introduce them.

Option A represents a decision that what the church has previously taught on questions of human sexuality is faithful to the teachings of scripture and to the theological heritage that is ours in the Reformed tradition – further, it entails a re-affirmation by the General Assembly of what the church has historically taught on these questions. Following this path would include a process of listening and confession for homophobic actions and attitudes, and would imply hospitality toward those who identify as LGBTQ – all are loved in Christ and welcomed in the church. But this option would not involve any practice of blessing same sex relationships or of providing for the marriage of same sex couples. Ordination as a ruling or teaching elder would be possible only for those who are single or celibate, or to those who are married (where marriage is an opposite-sex relationship).

Option B represents a decision that what the church has previously taught on questions of human sexuality does not attend to the overall arc of scripture toward the welcome and inclusion of all people within the Christian community – including and especially those whose identity does not fit within a traditional heterosexual framework. Following this path entails a redefinition of marriage, in relation to our subordinate standards (Living Faith and the Westminster Confession), as a relationship between two persons rather than simply between a man and a woman. Here there is also a change with respect to ordination, since ordination becomes possible for those who are single or married (whether that marriage is same sex or opposite-sex in nature). This option also imagines freedom of conscience and action for those who disagree with this change in church teaching – meaning, among other things, that teaching elders would not be compelled to solemnize same sex marriages.

Option C represents a decision that newer biblical and theological reflections on marriage and human sexuality do not present a compelling case, and that the church's teachings should not change. However, this option also recognizes that the church is divided on these questions, and creates space for those who can no longer accept the church's traditional teaching on human sexuality. Following this path entails the creation of a liturgy for the blessing of same sex relationships (which is not a marriage ceremony) and allows sessions to use this liturgy, and teaching elders to preside in this liturgy, should they wish to do so. Within this option, it is also imagined that ordination as a teaching and ruling elder would become possible for those in same sex relationships, provided they had received the blessing provided for within the new liturgy.

The three options (In the form of possible recommendations to a future General Assembly)

Option A:

1. That the General Assembly reaffirm the 1994 Statement on Human Sexuality as a faithful and biblical understanding of how we are to live as sexual and relational beings.
2. That the General Assembly affirm the “Historical Classical Paper” as a faithful, new statement of Christian discipleship and human sexuality.
3. That the General Assembly affirm that faithful sexual intimacy can only be lived within marriage (as defined by this option), and that this understanding of sexual intimacy must be attended to in decisions about who may be ordained as ruling or teaching elder in The Presbyterian Church in Canada.
4. That the General Assembly acknowledge that The Presbyterian Church in Canada has failed to undertake the work of repentance and confession for homophobic actions and attitudes, to which it pledged itself in adopting the 1994 Statement on Human Sexuality.

Option B:

1. That the General Assembly affirm the document “What the Bible teaches on Covenant Monogamous Same-Sex Relationships” as a faithful theological and biblical statement on the nature of human identity and sexuality.
2. That The Presbyterian Church in Canada redefine marriage as a relationship between two persons, and that our confessional tradition (Living Faith and the Westminster Confession) be amended to reflect this change.
3. That the Committee on Church Doctrine, in consultation with the Life and Mission Agency, adapt the present marriage liturgies of the denomination to reflect the definition of marriage as a relationship between two persons.
4. That the General Assembly affirm that faithful sexual intimacy can only be lived within marriage (as defined by this option), and that this understanding of sexual intimacy must be attended to in decisions about who may be ordained as ruling or teaching elder in The Presbyterian Church in Canada.
5. That The Presbyterian Church in Canada grant freedom of conscience and action to ruling and teaching elders whose firmly held convictions will not allow them to affirm or solemnize marriage as a relationship between two persons of the same sex.
6. That the General Assembly acknowledge that The Presbyterian Church in Canada has failed to undertake the work of repentance and confession for homophobic actions and attitudes, to which it pledged itself in adopting the 1994 statement on human sexuality.

Option C:

1. That the General Assembly acknowledge that recent theological and scriptural arguments about human sexuality do not offer a compelling case for a change in the church’s doctrine of marriage or its understanding of human sexuality, and that the General Assembly reaffirm marriage as the union of a man and a woman in Christ.
2. That the General Assembly acknowledge that there are some within The Presbyterian Church in Canada who believe firmly that the church should, in faithfulness to Christ, offer a full welcome to those who identify as LGBTQ, within the church.
3. That the General Assembly, through the Committee on Church Doctrine, prepare a liturgy for a prayerful blessing of committed same sex relationships, and that sessions and ministers be given freedom to use this liturgy in services of public worship.
4. That women and men who are living in committed same sex relationships, and who have received the blessing proposed in recommendation no. 3, above, be eligible for ordination as teaching and ruling elders.
5. That the General Assembly acknowledge that The Presbyterian Church in Canada has failed to undertake the work of repentance and confession for homophobic actions and attitudes, to which it pledged itself in adopting the 1994 Statement on Human Sexuality.

Study and Report

As we have stated above, it is important to note that these three options are not the only three available to the church. And it is important to note that each of them leaves numerous questions unanswered. The purpose of study and report is to seek the wisdom, creativity and critical reflection of the whole church as we consider the way forward as a denomination in relation to sisters and brothers who identify as LGBTQ.

As also indicated above, for the process of study and report, the Committee on Church Doctrine will prepare a form that all individuals and church bodies should use in offering their responses to “Where from Here?”. This will greatly facilitate the work of the committee in reporting back to the next General Assembly on the substance of the church’s reflections concerning possible ways forward.

Recommendation No. 4 (adopted, p. 28)

That the documents “The Historic Argument Concerning Human Sexuality” and “What the Bible teaches on Covenanted Monogamous Same-sex Relationships” be commended to the agencies, colleges, congregations, sessions, presbyteries, synods, committees and groups of The Presbyterian Church in Canada for study and response to the Committee on Church Doctrine through the General Assembly Office by January 31, 2018.

Recommendation No. 5 (adopted, p. 28)

That the document “Where from Here?” be sent to the agencies, colleges, congregations, sessions, presbyteries, synods, committees and groups and other bodies of The Presbyterian Church in Canada for study and report back to the Committee on Church Doctrine by January 31, 2018.

THE HISTORIC ARGUMENT CONCERNING HUMAN SEXUALITY

(A&P 2017, p. 480–504, 28)

Introduction to the Historic Argument

This document aims to provide a fresh and faithful statement of the church’s historic perspective on human sexuality.

When starting a paper like this, certain choices are made about the terminology that is used. With respect to the perspective that God’s design for human sexuality is between one man and one woman in marriage, some have chosen to describe it as the “biblical” or “apostolic” perspective. While we agree that this is the biblical and apostolic perspective, we also acknowledge that not everyone holds this view. Therefore, we have chosen to use the title “historic” in our argument. We feel this is both an accurate description for those who hold this perspective and respectful toward those who do not.

This document responds to questions about human sexuality within the framework of four larger questions. These questions, along with appropriate subsections and biblical passages under consideration, are:

1. What is God’s plan for human life?
2. What does it mean to be disciples of Jesus Christ?
3. What does the Bible teach about God’s design for human sexuality?
 - 3.1. The Bible’s Overarching Marital Theology
 - 3.1.1. Genesis 1 and 2
 - 3.1.2. Mark 10:1–12 and Matthew 19:1–12
 - 3.1.3. Ephesians 5:21–33 and Revelation 21, 22
 - 3.2. The Seven Commonly Cited Texts
 - 3.2.1. Genesis 18:16–19:29 and Judges 19:22–26
 - 3.2.2. Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13
 - 3.2.3. 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 and 1 Timothy 1:8–10
 - 3.2.4. Romans 1:26–27
 - 3.3. Other Texts
 - 3.3.1. Acts 10 and 15
 - 3.3.2. Galatians 3:28–29
 - 3.4. Textual Summary
4. What is a biblical way to think about marriage and singleness?

Having reviewed these questions and themes, we will conclude the document with a section entitled “Other Considerations” which we feel are crucial to the discussion.

Our Approach

At the outset, we feel it is helpful to highlight three assumptions and perspectives in our approach to this work.

A. Scripture is the primary way we learn about and encounter God’s will

First, we agree with the statement in “Understanding and Interpreting the Bible” that “examining scripture is the primary way we learn about and encounter God’s will”. This document was presented to the 2016 General Assembly, and, by resolution of the Assembly on recommendation of the Committee on Church Doctrine was “commended to congregations, presbyteries and other groups in The Presbyterian Church in Canada for their use”. (A&P 2016, p. 278, 39) Although we may learn about God by observing nature or through human experiences, the *primary* way we learn about God and God’s plan for human life is to study the Bible.

The Westminster Confession of Faith is one of the subordinate standards of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. This means it is one of the documents which states what the church believes, confesses and teaches. Chapter 1 provides enduring and concrete wisdom when it comes to interpreting the Bible as we seek God’s will:

The infallible rule of interpretation of scripture, is the scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it may be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly. The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined...and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the scripture. (Chapter 1, sections 9 and 10)

One of the things we learn from this statement is that when we are uncertain about the meaning of a passage in the Bible, we look to other parts of the Bible that provide greater clarity. We also learn that the Supreme Judge in all controversies is the Holy Spirit who speaks to us in and through the Bible.

This is not to say that quoting from the Bible makes one “biblical”. Rather, the process of interpretation involves a humble awareness not only of various biblical passages, but larger biblical themes and the underlying spirit of the text. When asking questions about human sexuality, not only are we to read specific passages, but we are to read them within their immediate context and within the overall framework of the Bible as a whole. Commenting on Jesus’ own use of scripture in Matthew 5, Canadian professor William Webb writes, “Jesus’ approach to scripture goes beyond focusing on its isolated words to meditate deeply on its underlying spirit.”¹ We hope to bring a similar awareness and approach to this document.

B. We have sought to consider the “weight of evidence”

In conversations about human sexuality, it is easy to find scholars or “experts” – Christian or otherwise – who simply support the opinions one already holds. Although we recognize that any opinion or perspective can be valid and helpful, these should be properly considered alongside a wide body of research and long tradition of study over a significant period of history.

It should take considerable prayer, research and consensus to overturn an historic understanding of marriage and human sexuality. It is our view that uncertainty or a lack of clarity is not grounds to advocate wholesale change.

C. We continually strive to purify our motives and keep the command to love God and neighbour at the forefront

The 16th century Swiss theologian Heinrich Bullinger suggested that all true interpretations of scripture presuppose that the heart of the interpreter loves God and seeks to do God’s will. This is rooted in an awareness of the first commandment as articulated by Jesus in Mark 12:28–34 – a passage we will discuss more below. Unfortunately, human history is littered with examples of people using the Bible to prop up their own selfish motives or oppress others. This is a sad misuse of scripture. Although we are broken, sinful people, the contributors to this document have tried to ground their work in prayer, in a love and concern for all people as children of God who are made in God’s image, and in a sincere desire to better understand God’s will.

1. What is God’s plan for human life?

As people of Christian faith this is one of the most significant questions we can ask. If God is our almighty Creator and Saviour, then our lives are best lived in faithful obedience to his plans and purposes. As we are famously reminded in Proverbs 3:5–6: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”

In our Reformed-Presbyterian tradition, one helpful perspective in relationship to this question is found in Question 1 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism: “What is the chief end of man?” The answer provided is this: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” If we were to re-phrase this powerful statement today we might do so like this: “What is the ultimate purpose of humanity? Our ultimate purpose is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever.”

In his book *Being Mortal*, physician Atul Gawande tells a story about Bill Thomas, a doctor in a nursing home who brought in pets to be cared for by the residents. This had a massive and positive impact. The “residents began to wake up and come to life”.

“People who we had believed weren’t able to speak started speaking,” Thomas said. “People who had been completely withdrawn and non-ambulatory started coming to the nurses’ station and saying, ‘I’ll take the dog for a walk.’ All the parakeets were adopted and named by the residents. The lights turned back on in people’s eyes.”

The doctor concluded, “I believe that the difference in [lower] death rates can be traced to the fundamental human need for a reason to live.” Then Gawande himself goes on to explore this idea of humans needing a cause beyond themselves.² As Christians, this great cause beyond ourselves is to glorify God.

The Psalms repeatedly echo this theme: “All the nations you have made shall come and bow down before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name. For you are great and do wondrous things; you alone are God.” (Psalm 86:9–10). Speaking to the crowds in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16). And in Philippians 2, the apostle Paul writes about how the exaltation of Christ to God’s right hand after the resurrection draws others into the praise of God: “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:9–11)

Regarding human joy, the Westminster Catechism points us to Psalm 16:11: “You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” This joy is not fleeting “happiness” which fluctuates with the seasons and experiences of life. Instead, biblical joy is a growing awareness and confidence of the presence, faithfulness, goodness and provision of God. Speaking about his role as the good shepherd, Jesus speaks to this presence, faithfulness, goodness and provision, part of which he offers in the laying down of his own life for his sheep, when he says, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). In the gospel of John, “life” and “eternal life” refer not only to how *long* one lives, but to *how* one lives; it is about quality not just quantity.

When we look at the overarching and repeated themes of scripture, and when we seek to answer the question “What is God’s plan for human life?”, we can faithfully answer *in part* by saying that human beings are made to glorify God. By replacing ourselves with God at the centre of our lives, we increasingly come to know a deep and abiding joy.

However, as we will see in the next question, God’s plan for human life does not end there. Humans are made on purpose and for a purpose – and that purpose is most fully understood and realized when we come to know, follow and share in the mission of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

2. What does it mean to be disciples of Jesus Christ?

The word “disciple” means follower, student, or apprentice. In the ancient world, disciples would sit at the feet of a master, and devote themselves to learning and living out the master’s teachings. In the same way today, disciples of Jesus Christ devote themselves to learning and living out the teachings of their master and Lord. Christianity is not just about information; it’s about transformation. Before anything else Christians are defined by Christ. Dr. Luke Timothy Johnson is a New Testament scholar from the Candler School of Theology in Atlanta. He writes that the most important question about Jesus Christ is whether he is dead or alive.³ Disciples of Jesus Christ are therefore not only those who have a knowledge of who Jesus was, *but who he is today*. This knowledge and faith takes shape in disciples who continue his mission – a mission Jesus himself continues to direct through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus taught about many things including love, truth, faith and forgiveness. But most of his teachings centred on what he called “the kingdom of God” (or “the kingdom of heaven”). This was not limited to life after death. The kingdom of God was where and when God’s will was done. It was where God was known and revealed as king. Although some people today may be uncomfortable using such overt masculine or ruler language, the stories Jesus shared about God’s rule teach us that it is a rule that is full of truth, love and servanthood.

God’s world had become broken and marred through sin. So as God-with-us (“Emmanuel”, Matthew 1:23), Jesus came not only to offer forgiveness of sins, but to personally communicate God’s vision for the world – rescued and renewed as it was intended to be. In a powerful summary of much of his teaching that we call the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus prayed, “Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). The dramatic image is of heaven coming to earth in a new creation, beautifully restored. Not only did he teach about it; he embodied it. As we read in John 1:14, in Jesus we see the glory of God, “full of grace and truth”.

Today, the kingdom of God continues to be where and when God’s will is done. It is where God is known and revealed as Maker, Saviour and Ruler. This doesn’t just happen through what people say with their lips, but in how relationships, communities and organizations are lived in the power of the Holy Spirit. In Jesus, the kingdom broke

into the world in a new way – but it is still on the horizon, yet to be fully realized on earth so long as sin, pride and injustice continue to distort God's creation. In the midst of this situation, disciples of Jesus, therefore, not only give glory to God and enjoy God, but have a distinct role to play in continuing Jesus' mission in a broken world. They learn and live out the teachings of their master in the power of the Holy Spirit. As members of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12), each person has different gifts which build up the body and give glory to God, but they share in this common purpose. It is *God's* kingdom – not our own.

In Mark 12:28–31 we read about an expert in religious law (called a scribe) who asked Jesus this question: “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answers by quoting two scriptures, Deuteronomy 6:4–5 and Leviticus 19:18. It is an answer that helps his followers focus on the right kingdom priorities:

The first is, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second is this, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.

In the New Testament, “love” is not a feeling or sentiment. Its meaning is close to the idea of loyalty and pursuing the good of another. With this in mind, someone who loves God is someone who is loyal to God and to God's ways. Similarly, someone who loves their neighbour is (a) someone who honours their neighbour because they too are created in God's image, (b) someone who acknowledges they are connected to their neighbour as a fellow image-bearer of God, and (c) someone who therefore seeks God's best for them. One of the implications of the first commandment, rooted in scripture and reaffirmed in the mouth of our Lord, is that truth has to do not only with ideas one believes, but with actions one lives.

The word “disciple” is a noun; but in the lives of Christians it comes to life as a verb. If you believe in Jesus Christ you are the hands of Jesus Christ.

3. What does the Bible teach about God's design for human sexuality?

In light of the questions discussed so far, what does the Bible teach about God's design for human sexuality? After all, we are relational beings. So as we seek to glorify God, enjoy God and live as disciples of Jesus Christ, what does the Bible teach about God's design for human sexuality?

3.1. The Bible's Overarching Marital Theology

For 2,000 years, the established majority understanding in the universal church concerning marriage was that it was between one man and one woman. In more recent times, however, the historic reading of the Bible has been called into question. Here we intend to describe a biblical and theological basis for the continued understanding that marriage is between one man and one woman.

As we do so, some people may be surprised to find that the first Bible passages we explore on this difficult subject are not the seven commonly cited texts which are frequently referenced in discussions about same sex sexual activity. The reason we do this is because the positive witness and teaching concerning male-female marriage and celibate singleness is of a higher significance than those seven commonly cited texts. We will examine those texts in this document because they are central to the discussion. However, our first priority is to frame those passages within the larger positive witness and teaching concerning male-female marriage that we find in the Bible.

There is a deeply embedded theological thread which runs from Genesis to Revelation – right through the Bible's grand story of creation, redemption and new creation – which may be called a “marital theology”. This includes a particular understanding of sex, sexual difference, marriage and singleness. In the biblical vision of the church and God's kingdom, the difference between male and female is only one of many examples of a “unity in distinctness” motif.⁴ Men and women are intentionally different; but, as we will see, when brought together, this difference communicates something to us about the unity of the church and God's kingdom.

The biblical teachings endow male-female marriage with a special quality. As we will explain, marriage is presented as a sign or symbol, pointing to a deeper reality in the structures of God's creation and redeeming work. To clarify what we mean, here is an example. The Lord's Supper – sometimes called Communion – involves bread and wine. They are signs or symbols which point us to something else: the body and blood of Christ. So just as we cannot replace the elements of bread and wine with anything we choose and still call it the Lord's Supper, we cannot likewise replace male-female marriage with male-male marriage or female-female marriage and still have them

function in the same way as signs or symbols which point to a deeper reality in the structures of God's creation and redeeming work.

The key passages in sketching the marital theology of the Bible are:

Genesis 1:26–31. This is the creation story where male and female are created in the image of God, and are commanded to be fruitful and multiply.

Genesis 2:18–25. This is the passage where the man recognizes his true counterpart in the woman and leaves his father and mother to cleave to her and become “one flesh”.

Mark 10:1–12 and its parallel at Matthew 19:12. These passages highlight Christ's teaching concerning divorce, which references Genesis 1 and 2, and goes on in Matthew's version to contemplate “eunuchs” which helps us better understand the place of singles in a theology of marriage.

Ephesians 5:21–33. In this passage there is the presentation of marriage as an analogy for the relationship between Christ and the church; this passage again references Genesis 2.

Revelation 21 and 22. These chapters provide the vision of the new creation in which the church is represented as a bride adorned for her husband, Christ.

Anglican Bible scholar N.T. Wright describes how the final scene in the book of Revelation brings together this overarching vision of the goodness of male-female marriage as a sign of God's intent in creation: “The last scene in the Bible is the new heaven and the new earth, and the symbol for that is the marriage of Christ and his church. It's not just one or two verses here and there which say this or that. It's an entire narrative which works with this complementarity so that a male-plus-female marriage is a signpost or a signal about the goodness of the original creation and God's intention for the eventual new heavens and new earth.”⁵

Having highlighted some key passages in the Bible's overarching marital theology, we will now explore them more deeply. After that, we will turn to the seven commonly cited texts about same sex sexual activity. At the end, we will provide a summary.

3.1.1. Genesis 1 and 2

Like the other books in the Bible, Genesis had human authors and editors. At the same time, like the rest of the Bible, it is inspired by God. To say the Bible is “inspired”, according to N.T. Wright, can mean that the Holy Spirit “guided the very different writers and editors, so that the books they produced were the books God intended his people to have”.⁶ This line of thinking is reflected in one of the subordinate standards of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, Living Faith:

The Holy Spirit gives us inner testimony
to the unique authority of the Bible
and is the source of its power.
The Bible, written by human hands,
is nonetheless the word of God
as no other word ever written. (5.2)

The early chapters in the book of Genesis are, in many ways, concerned with origins and God's designs for human life. In Genesis 1 and 2, we learn that the heavens, the earth and humanity were not created by humans. They were created by God. As we read in Genesis 1:26–27:

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

From this central passage we learn that humankind was patterned after God's own self. Human beings are created in the “image of God”. There are three ideas identified here with the image of God that we will explore.

First: The idea of a *correspondence* to God.

The revelation that humans are made in the image of God includes both a similarity to God and also a difference from God. We are not ourselves God or gods, but we are made in the *image* of God. And while an image bears

similarity to that which it reflects, it is also different. Any attempt to usurp the place of God or put any other created thing in the place of God is what the Bible refers to as idolatry.

At the same time, we are uniquely designed to be in relationship with God as true worshippers. The older theological approach tends to identify the image of God with certain faculties in the human soul (for example, the power of reason or will). It is something static we possess within ourselves. This would be represented in the thinking of the church father Augustine who lived in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. A more modern theological approach tends to consider the image as something seen less in faculties passively possessed, and more in the active reflecting of God – in the relationship we have with God. This would be represented, for example, in the thinking of Scottish theologian T.F. Torrance.

The 16th century, Reformed thinker John Calvin mediates between these two views by speaking about the image mostly in terms of faculties of the soul, in declaring that these faculties were created in us with the express purpose of helping us relate to God. An image-bearer who does not *use* his or her faculties to relate to God as a true worshipper is, in this sense, not fully or actively bearing God's image.⁷

Second: The idea that biological sex – specifically sexual difference – is somehow integrated into the image of God.

In light of this aspect of the image of God, how we inhabit and express our biological sex becomes a spiritual matter, a concern that touches our image-bearing. Biblical scholar Robert Gagnon describes male and female as “angled expressions of the image of God”.⁸ It is a design that is *complementary*. Therefore, sexual difference must be meaningful. In Genesis 2 God says, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” (Genesis 2:18). This new relationship becomes the basis for the man leaving his father and mother to become “one flesh” (verse 24) with his wife.

Having a biological sex (male or female) entails a call *toward* the sexually other – *toward* mutual help, appreciation and dependence upon the other “in all of life”.⁹ This is a call toward fruitfulness, and toward expressions in which we become more and not less human, more the true worshipper, and less the idolater. This image of “leaning in” toward our counterpart is perhaps better captured in the word “mutualism”, rather than it is in the word “complementarianism”.

Although the Bible doesn't give us a complete description of what “essential maleness” or “essential femaleness” might mean, the presence of sexual difference in God's creation teaches us that it is somehow meaningful with respect to how we are created in the image of God. So the image of God says something to us not only about the faculties we possess that adapt us for relationship with God; it also speaks to the relationship within humankind to the other sex, the other “angled facet” of the image.

Third: The idea that together, male and female, have a vocation related to God's creation to represent God and to exercise dominion over the earth.

Since humans are created in the image of God, they have a vocation to represent God. They can do this because of their correspondence – their likeness – to their creator. Somehow, the idea of fruitfulness is also included in this vocation. And yet, questions remain. Are we male and female *for the purpose of* being fruitful, and fruitful *for the purpose of* subduing the creation; or are we to be fruitful because *that also reflects a likeness* to God's own being as creator? From the biblical text it is not clear; but fruitfulness clearly *is* part of the vocation – the vocation to exercise authority and rule over God's creation. While theologians are interested in other interpretations of the divine insight that humans are created in the image of God, biblical scholars now seem to favour this vocational view.

It is also important to acknowledge that the embodied nature of the human as man and woman, and their sexual union, is also oriented toward the creation of new life. Indeed, before the late modern period in which we live, the idea of discussing human sexuality without talking about the bearing and rearing of children would have been unthinkable. (In the last 150 years, in fact, human sexuality has been re-defined almost exclusively in terms of pleasure and sexual fulfillment, rather than in terms of a covenant bond in which children may be conceived and raised. This thinking has only been reinforced by widespread use of contraceptives.) A part of the human vocation as woman and man together, then, and of the community they form in relation to God, is a vocation toward fruitfulness in a whole variety of ways that is inclusive of the children that result from the sexually intimate dimension of their union.

This is not to say, of course, that marrying and having children is the only human vocation – as we will see, there is a vocation toward a celibate life also within the kingdom. And it is not to say that marriages that do not or cannot bear children are a failure or imperfect. The fruitfulness that is imagined in the covenant relationship between a man

and a woman is spiritual and cultural, and also inclusive of children where God gives that gift through sexual intimacy. A marriage between a man and a woman that does not or cannot produce children may be fruitful in a whole variety of ways. Also, the sexual difference of that couple points to the procreative dimension or possibility of the human, even if they themselves do not express fruitfulness in that way. This is to say, again, that the receiving and bearing of human life in the world is the result of a sexual union between those who are sexually different. And it is to say that the procreative dimension cannot be written out of the relational context between man and woman – as if we can describe “human” intimacy while ignoring the fact of sexually differentiated bodies and the fact of children given through intimate relationships between men and women.

In looking back on this brief but important discussion of key verses in Genesis 1 and 2, we learn that marriage as the union of a man and a woman is traced back to the design of God in creation, prior to the fall. Whatever lapses, changes, or other permutations and combinations of marriage may have come to exist in a fallen world, they are not God’s original design.

As we have also seen, God’s design for humanity is to reflect God’s likeness. Each individual is made in God’s image; but God also chose to establish the divine image in an opposite sex partnership of male and female. Just as the rest of the faculties in humankind (reason, will, emotion, etc.) are particularly adapted to enable our relationship with the God of wisdom, power and love, so the male and female are uniquely adapted to one another – physically and psychologically – to commend them to one another and enable them to give each other “help” in fulfilling this vocation which is given them. Likewise, the human reproductive system is the only biological system not complete within the individual human body – it needs another person of the opposite sex to complete one of its purposes in bearing children, which, as we have seen, is a part of a vocation toward fruitfulness.

3.1.2. Mark 10:1–12 and Matthew 19:1–12

In Mark 10:1–12 (and in the parallel telling of Matthew 19:1–12) Jesus is approached by some religious teachers called Pharisees and is asked this question: “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” Although divorce is not the subject of this document, we include this story for two reasons. First, it is significant that when Jesus is questioned about allowance for divorce, he grounds his reply in God’s created design as described in Genesis:

Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning “made them male and female”, and said, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?” So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate. (Matthew 19:4–6)

In his response, Jesus appeals to the authority of Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:24 as the foundational source of wisdom concerning God’s intended design for male-female marriage. This enduring, continuing wisdom is the basis for his response for how we are to think about marriage in a way that honours God’s intent.

Secondly, this text is important since, in Matthew’s telling, Jesus proceeds from the discussion about divorce to a discussion about “eunuchs” in the kingdom of heaven. He says:

For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can. (Matthew 19:12)

Before we address why this is relevant to our study, it is important to understand that a eunuch is a man who had been castrated. In this text it is unclear whether this meant literal or metaphorical castration. In light of this ambiguity, there has been speculation about who might have been considered a eunuch, and why.

“Eunuchs who have been so from birth” may refer to those who were born without reproductive organs or to those who may not otherwise fit into usual male-female categories. The next statement that “there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others” may refer to those who have experienced castration at the hands of others, or perhaps by disease. In each of these two statements, Jesus appears to be stating what he takes to be matters of fact about his cultural context.

The third category Jesus mentions is eunuchs “who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven”. It is unclear whether Jesus is referring to actual castration or metaphorical castration; either way, it implies that some individuals choose to live celibately (to refrain from sexual intimacy and marriage) because they are

convinced that this way of life conforms better to the ethical code for disciples, or perhaps better enables them to glorify God in their kingdom work and witness.

It should be stated that, in general, eunuchs were not highly honoured in the time of Jesus. Many in that culture would have thought that eunuchs had experienced a loss of male honour because they were not able – by necessity or by choice – to reproduce and engage in the usual dimensions of family life. In addition, there is a religious context of uncleanness in the background here. For example, in Deuteronomy 23:1 we read that that no one who has been castrated may enter the assembly of the Lord. On the other hand, eunuchs are referred to in a very positive light in Isaiah 56:3–5, where we read: “To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.” (Isaiah 56:4–5)

With this background in mind, and in trying to understand the meaning of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 19:12, we are wise to remember that Jesus is talking to disciples who likely find his teaching concerning divorce difficult to accept – particularly the suggestion of Jesus that it may be better to remain unmarried (verse 10). It is at this point that Jesus introduces the discussion of three kinds of eunuchs. Although we can only speculate about the first two categories of eunuchs, Jesus re-frames the thinking of the disciples in a positive way by suggesting that someone who chooses to devote himself solely to God’s work, “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven”, is living in a way that is fruitful for the way of God in the world. In this case, Jesus is almost certainly speaking metaphorically about those who make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom, meaning not physical castration but intentional celibacy. As argued earlier in this document, just as male-female marriage is a sign or symbol, pointing to a deeper reality in the structures of God’s creation and redeeming work, so too is single celibacy. As we will discuss more fully below in the section on singleness, single celibacy is also a sign or symbol, pointing to a deeper reality in the structure of God’s creation and redeeming work.

We include this study of Mark 10:1–12 and Matthew 19:1–12 because it also orients us to the future of God’s coming kingdom, and reminds us that our time on earth – for both married and single – is a pointer to that coming kingdom. Since we will all be single in heaven (see Mark 12:25), Jesus’ teaching about eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven reframes celibate singleness as an honourable way to serve God as a disciple of Jesus Christ. We include a larger discussion about some of these themes in section 4 below.

3.1.3. Ephesians 5 and Revelation 21, 22

Ephesians 5, and Revelation 21 and 22 most clearly point to the special quality of marriage: that it is a sign or symbol, pointing to a deeper reality in the structures of God’s creation and redeeming work.

Marriage involves sexual opposites coming together in a permanent and exclusive union. Marriage is for the purpose of sanctification and for the creation of new life and fruit. As we have discussed already, we see this vocational aspect most clearly rooted in the first chapter of Genesis. The apostle Paul was also thinking vocationally in 1 Corinthians 7.¹⁰

There is also a mystery at the heart of marriage¹¹ – at least for healthy and faithful marriages where male and female come together as fellow image-bearers of God. Marriage speaks to God’s particular vision of shalom/peace in which distinct things are brought into unity, and in which the New Jerusalem (in the book of Revelation) teems with life. In creation we are built for it; and in new creation, we realize it.

In the telling of God’s story there is another trajectory in which God in Christ becomes the servant of the creatures who were formed to serve him – in which God in Christ sacrifices himself and takes pain into himself in order to endow human beings with a grace and unblemished beauty beyond their deserving or ability to achieve. The question which the marriage reference in Ephesians 5 addresses is what the cross and resurrection specifically has added to the understanding of marriage among those who follow Christ. Does the gospel refine our understanding of marriage in any way? And even more, does the gospel give us power to live out our marriages with grace and confidence in the times when it gets hard? The answer to both questions is yes. Let us explain more.

Mutual submission: The secret of marriage

The book of Ephesians was written to Christians in the ancient city of Ephesus, a city on the Aegean coast of Asia Minor. It is a letter which touches on many subjects, including husbands, wives, and how Christian faith shapes the relationship.

Ephesians 5 says that the influence of the gospel on a marriage – what we might call the secret of a healthy and faithful marriage – is *mutual* submission. Today we may at first react negatively to verses 22 to 24 where wives are exhorted to submit to their husbands. Indeed, husbands are referred to as the “heads” of their wives. Ephesians was written in a highly patriarchal society, where male dominance was assumed and where the rights of women were muted and merged into the rights and identity of men. In light of this, we should especially pay attention to verse 21, which says “Be subject to *one another* out of reverence for Christ” (NRSV, emphasis added). This is the topic sentence and summary verse for the paragraph which then goes on to sketch out a symmetry and mutuality of submission in an asymmetrical manner: The wife lets her husband take a leadership vocation in the family, giving up her desire to direct; and then the husband seeks the good of his wife and makes it such a priority that he cherishes her more than he cherishes his own body and life, thereby giving up his desire to live as a self-concerned bachelor even after he marries.

The thrust of the passage is that it provides a model of giving and giving something up in order to raise and glorify the other. That model should look familiar to us because it is a gospel model. We see it when Christ glorifies the Father by submitting to his will for him, and when the Father glorifies Christ by giving him the name which is above every name.

After describing the kind of love the husband is to have for his wife, Ephesians quotes Genesis 2:24: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” The letter then offers this commentary in verse 32: “This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church.” These verses make it clear that marriage, along with helping us become better image-bearers of God as individuals, is also, in and of itself, an image of God. It serves as symbol of the dynamics of the gospel in which Christ unites with the church in a loving, self-giving way and raises the church to the status of being his glorified body. Christian marriage consciously partakes of the same dynamic that we now explore more fully in Revelation 21 and 22.

Revelation 21 and 22

This visionary capstone to the marital theology of the Bible leans heavily on imagery of the church as the Bride of (Christ) the Lamb. The “bride” or “wife” is explicitly mentioned in verses 2 and 9 of chapter 21 and in verse 17 of chapter 22, but she remains present and develops across these two chapters.

She is a singular bride, but she is also a holy city, richly adorned (21:11, 18–21), fruitful with the children of God running around in her (21:3, 7; 22:3), and the kings and people of all nations of the earth coming to her (21:22, 26), perpetually illuminated with the light that comes from her Lord’s presence (21:22–23) and flowed-through by the river of the water of life, which is God’s Spirit (22:1–2, 17). Her gates are never closed day or night (21:25), which is a way of saying she lives in peace and is secure, but nothing wicked is allowed to come in (21:7–8, 27; 22:3, 14–15). The gates are open; all are invited, but even when the Bible arrives here at its last word, the reality is that not everything (or everybody) is included. Sin is excluded because it would mar the holiness which is the quintessence of the bride’s beauty. There is forgiveness for sin offered in Christ, but if we cling to our sin more closely than we cling to Christ, we will be excluded, really and finally, from life in the kingdom.

We are told in the gospels that there is no marriage in heaven. Jesus means that spouses who were married on earth cannot expect life to carry on in the same domestic way in the life of eternity. But in a sense all of heaven is a participation in the marriage of the Lamb and the Bride. Revelation 21–22 here signals to us that marriage does not get eclipsed in God’s designs. It is not something God institutes in Genesis at creation merely for the practical and this-worldly purpose of populating and structuring society. It persists as a core dynamic of the new creation telling us that marriage between opposites is pleasing to God, and even reflects the difference between Christ and the church who are nevertheless united in the new creation.

In this section we have titled “The Bible’s Overarching Marital Theology”, we have argued that male-female marriage is rooted in God’s design in creation. Humans are individually created in God’s image, but the coming together of opposites as “one flesh” is also a part of their vocation as image-bearers of God. In Ephesians we find a presentation of marriage as an analogy for the relationship between Christ and the church. And in the closing chapters of Revelation we find a vision of opposites coming together in the new creation: The church is represented as a bride adorned for her husband, Christ. Through all of these passages, sexual difference is not accidental in God’s ordering of the universe. It has purpose. Further, male-female marriage is a sign or symbol which points to a deeper reality in the structures of God’s creation and redeeming work.

3.2. The Seven Commonly Cited Texts

When we explore the seven commonly cited texts, finding our sexual counterpart in someone of the same sex is one of the prohibited uses of human sexuality. When the Bible speaks explicitly about same sex sexual activity in these seven texts it is unanimously negative.

We also need to note that the Bible is not only a *little* negative toward same sex intercourse; it speaks in terms that are strong. The Bible does not single out same sex practice as the only sin or the worst sin, as some churches may seem to indicate. But in the seven places where the Bible does speak of it explicitly, it uses decisive language. While they are all in agreement that same sex practice is something God's people should avoid, the seven commonly cited texts are of different weight.

Genesis 18:16–19:29 and Judges 19:22–26 are two stories which refer to the sinful conduct of the men of Sodom and of Gibeah. They clamour to have sex with the male guest(s) being hosted inside someone's house. These texts speak to our modern question across a great distance; the circumstances are quite different than the case of committed, mutually consenting same sex couples in the church. It is not that they do not speak to it, but if the Bible's negativity toward same sex sexual relationships rested on these two texts alone, a case could not be made securely. In that sense these texts are the least important.

Leviticus prohibits male same sex activity in two places: Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. While these texts have to travel quite a distance across the testaments and out of the time when the primary relationship between God and God's people was through the law, they are still relevant because they are part of the enduring moral law as compared to the judicial or ceremonial law. (We will discuss this more below, p. 491–93) A concern of the moral law is holiness, which is something Christian disciples cannot neglect. Still, Leviticus is not where the historic perspective should begin or focus on exclusively when citing the reasons for their convictions.

1 Corinthians 6:9–10 and 1 Timothy 1:8–10 speak of male prostitutes and men who have sex with men among a longer list of sinful behaviour. Of these two, 1 Corinthians 6 is the most important text because the surrounding passage gives us more of the apostle Paul's teaching on sex, marriage and singleness among disciples of Christ after the resurrection as they wait for his return.

Romans 1:26–27, and the passage that surrounds it, is the most extended theological treatment and the one which goes furthest toward offering a logic for *why* same sex sexual activity is prohibited. It is also the only text which explicitly prohibits female-female as well as male-male sexual activity. So this is a key text.

With these overarching considerations in mind, we will now explore the passages more fully.

3.2.1. Genesis 18:16–19:29 and Judges 19:22–26

Genesis 18:16–19:29 and Judges 19:22–26 represent two difficult stories. Here the men of two ancient settlements, Sodom and Gibeah, clamour at the door of someone who is hosting a male visitor (Gibeah) or visitors (Sodom; the visitors in this story are angels), insisting that the host give up his guest(s) so that they can have sex with him/them (probably forcibly). These are very difficult and disturbing stories. Is what is being described here the same as what we know in the church as loving, long-term, monogamous partnerships? No, they are definitely not the same. To make them equal to the other passages we are considering would be very unfair. So what do we make of them?

The Genesis 18 story in particular about Sodom and Gomorrah is referenced in other parts of the Bible (Deuteronomy 29:23, Isaiah 1:9–10, Isaiah 13:19, Jeremiah 23:14, Jeremiah 49:18; Lamentations 4:6, Ezekiel 16:44–58, Amos 4:11, Zephaniah 2:9, Matthew 10:14–15, 11:23–24, Luke 10:10–12; 17:26–30, 2 Peter 2:10, Jude 7). Sodom has become emblematic of wickedness. There is not just one “sin of Sodom”. If we look through some of the passages above, what Jesus seems to be most concerned about is the hardness of heart which underlay the mens' actions. If people are unable to receive Jesus because of their pride and rebellion, he warns that it may be worse for them on the day of judgement than for Sodom and Gomorrah. (See Matthew 10:15)

Isaiah's indictments against the people of Israel, whom he figuratively addresses as Sodom and Gomorrah, are for their idolatry and injustice. Ezekiel 16:49–50 says: “This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she 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.” It was incumbent upon the city of Sodom to provide hospitality to sojourners, such was the code of ancient cities. Instead they sought to exploit the guests of Lot, so some commentators speak of a “sin against hospitality”. But the way the men of Sodom sought to violate the male guests of Lot was also in a sexual manner. The text says:

...the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them." Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof." But they replied, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door.

(Genesis 19:4–11)

Scholars like Derrick Bailey and John Boswell who seek to revise the historic position have argued that the men of Sodom's intent with Lot's guests cannot be definitely said to be sexual, since the word "know" is used with a sexual connotation only 15 times in the Old Testament scriptures, a small proportion of its total uses.¹² But in our view the sexual intent is clear, not only because Lot offers his virgin daughters up in the place of his guests, but because in an almost parallel story (the one in Judges 19), the sexual use of the word "know" is unambiguous: the concubine who does fall into the hands of the rape-gang is said to be violated and *known*: "And they knew her and abused her all night until the morning". (Judges 19:25)

Moreover, this is how two Jewish writers living around the time of Jesus (Philo and Josephus) interpret the story of Sodom. Further, there are two references to the stories in the New Testament letters in which the sexual aspect of Sodom's sin explicit. One is Jude 7 where we read: "Likewise, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which, in the same manner as they, indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire." (Jude 1:7)¹³

Let us be clear. The actions of Lot and the virgin's father in Judges 19 are deplorable. These are stories of violence. It is only our purpose here to highlight that to the biblical writers, the sins in Sodom and Gibeah were at least *partially* sexual. Judging from the reference to "sexual immorality" and "unnatural lust" in Jude 7 in the New Testament, and from the way that other second century BC non-biblical sources treat the text¹⁴ the fact that the sexual sin of Sodom was men with men, only adds to its immorality in the Jewish and early Christian religious mind. Having said this, the stories are very far removed from mutually consenting same sex couples in the church. It would be unwise to base any doctrine concerning human sexuality on these two stories alone.

3.2.2. Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

In Leviticus 18:22 we read: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." Then in Leviticus 20:13: "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them."

Like Genesis, Leviticus is a part of the Bible called the *Torah*, commonly referred to as the Law of Moses. The cornerstone of the ancient Israelite understanding of God was that God was holy. In order to interact with the Lord the people needed to maintain holiness. Holiness often had to do with separation and distinction. Israel itself was a holy people because it was set apart among the nations to be in covenant with the Lord, and its separateness was expressed by the way the duties and prohibitions of its law distinguished it from other nations.

The overarching theme of Leviticus is holiness, and the latter part of the book (from chapter 17 on) is sometimes called the "holiness code" because it outlines how God's holy people were to live. The first question that arises about trying to transport holiness commands from a legal book like Leviticus concerns the role of the law in the Christian life today. The law is not the whole basis of our covenant relationship with God because we have that through Jesus who sealed a "new covenant" by his death; but Jesus himself upheld the law and often quoted from the book of Leviticus. For example, his statement in Mark 10:31, Matthew 22:39 and Luke 10:27 to "love your neighbour as yourself" is a quote from Leviticus 19:18.

It is unlikely that a first century Christian would interpret the law as casually as one sometimes hears today. It is true that one must approach a book like Leviticus with interpretive sophistication; but we should start from a posture of reverence and teachability when we approach this book, no less than any other book of the Bible. With

this in mind, let us explore the how three different kinds of laws in the book of Leviticus may be interpreted by Christians today.

Exploring three kinds of laws. Are Levitical commands relevant today?

Judicial Law: Some of the laws and the penalties prescribed in Leviticus were meant to serve as a judicial code for the nation state of ancient Israel. These are not really transferrable beyond that context. For instance Leviticus 20:10 prescribes the death penalty for adultery. In John 8, Jesus felt comfortable not applying that penalty, but still upheld the moral teaching contained there and elsewhere in the Old Testament that adultery is wrong. Therefore he tells the woman caught in adultery to “not sin again.” (John 8:11)

Ceremonial Law: Other laws in Leviticus are concerned with maintaining ritual cleanness. For instance, menstrual blood, along with dead bodies, leprosy, etc. would defile anyone who came in contact with them on the way to the temple. But menstruation was not in the moral sin category; if it were, it would have required a sacrifice to atone for it. From the point of view of Leviticus, it was problematic only in a ritual cleanliness sense. Commands concerning this topic may be considered part of the ceremonial law, relevant only while the temple stood. However, the Jewish temple was physically destroyed in 70 AD, so by then, Christian thought had already translated the concept of the temple so that it became a metaphor. After that time, accompanying notions of holiness and purity remained, but they became notions of *moral* rather than *ceremonial* purity. For instance Paul in 1 Corinthians 6 says “Shun fornication!...do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?” (1 Corinthians 6.18–19)

Moral Law: The moral law is the third category of law in Leviticus. These are laws which Jesus and the New Testament remind us are still in force by reiterating the heart of their moral concern and even strengthening them. As it says in one of the subordinate standards of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, the Westminster Confession of Faith, “The moral law [does] forever bind all... Neither [does] Christ in the gospel any way dissolve, but much strengthen, this obligation.” Paul’s choice of the word *arsenokoitai* in 1 Corinthians 6:10 (see also 1 Timothy 1:10) seems to be a conscious echo of Leviticus’ same sex intercourse prohibition in the Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint. In other places, the New Testament picks up and often reinforces prohibitions from the Old Testament’s moral law. For example, some of the teaching in the New Testament also includes explicit prohibitions against same sex intercourse, adultery, incest and polygamy. So Leviticus cannot be said to be irrelevant to us just on the grounds of its being an Old Testament legal book.

Having quickly surveyed these three kinds of laws, we find that the law cannot be summarily set aside because it was a part of an ancient holiness code for the Israelites. Laws were given to Israel for different reasons in a variety of contexts. The fact that we inhabit a different context today does not immediately invalidate the Law, but it does make us look closely at the underlying principles behind the laws and ask how we might apply them now.

In Leviticus 18:3–4 we read, “You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not follow their statutes. My ordinances you shall observe and my statutes you shall keep, following them: I am the Lord your God.” As God’s people prepared to enter Canaan, we learn that the Israelites are at risk of idolatry. A part of the risk for them as God’s people is to forget God’s ways and merge their beliefs with the surrounding cultures, who worshipped other gods and who, among other things, engaged in sexual wrongdoing that did not honour God’s design in creation. It is with this background that we encounter portions of the moral law in Leviticus 18.

With this in mind concerning Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, this is one of the situations where the statement in the Westminster Confession continues to guide us:

The infallible rule of interpretation of scripture, is the scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it may be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly. (Chapter 1, sections 9 and 10)

Therefore, we look to other passages in the Bible to provide further clarity. What we find is that the male-female sexual ethic continues throughout scripture – and is not limited to the ancient Israelites – as we discover in the New Testament. It is to those passages we now turn.

3.2.3. 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 and 1 Timothy 1:8–10

The first passage, written by the apostle Paul to the troubled church in ancient Corinth reads as follows:

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites [Greek: *oute malakoi oute arsenokoitai*], thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers – none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.
(1 Corinthians 6:9–11)

As we will discuss below, the words in verse 9 are variously translated. The English Standard Version of the Bible translates it like this: “Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality...” The New International Version (NIV, 2011) translates it as follows: “Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men...” The NIV includes a footnote that reads: “The words *men who have sex with men* translate two Greek words that refer to the passive and active participants in homosexual acts.” We will return to this passage shortly.

1 Timothy 1:8–10, also written by Paul to the young Timothy, reads like this:

Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites [Greek: *arsenokoitais*], slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me. (1 Timothy 1:8–10)

Again, there are many different translations of this passage which testify to the difficulty modern translators have in helping today’s readers understand what the original text may have meant. The New International Version translates the word *arsenokoitais* in verse 10 as “those practicing homosexuality”. But before we explore the words more closely, let us look at the wider context.

Both of these texts come from New Testament letters where the Christian community is in view. In 1 Corinthians, Paul, who has previously ministered in Corinth, is writing back with some teaching on many questions – sexual morality among them – because a scandal has arisen, and because Corinth is a highly sexualized city. He is writing not just to individuals but to a community about what it means to be a holy and loving community, a community of the baptized, an outpost of the kingdom which lives by different ethics than those around them.

1 Timothy is called one of the pastoral epistles because it is particularly concerned with issues of church leadership, membership, discipline, and the threats of false doctrine and moral hypocrisy.

It was understood in the first century that there were things one could do to “not inherit the kingdom of God” to land outside the kingdom boundary. Insofar as possible, the discipline of church members was aimed at signaling to people on earth whether their behaviour was or was not on course to inherit the kingdom¹⁵ – and better that they be confronted with that now while there was time for correction. Further, Christian communities were meant to be missional bodies, engaging the world with a distinct message and teaching concerning a way of life. With that in mind, one must ask, “How could they be that kind of lighted ‘city on a hill’ witness if the people inside the church did not look or sound any different from those around them?”

With this in mind, Paul reminds the Corinthians that though some of them had come out of very sexually promiscuous backgrounds and had participated in behaviours that were definitely circumscribed by the ethics of the church and the kingdom, in receiving baptism and the Holy Spirit they have been “washed...sanctified...justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.” (1 Corinthians 6:11) The practice of same sex intercourse is one of the behaviours presented here as a behaviour a Christian should categorically avoid. So the early church, while not isolating same sex intercourse as the only sin, or the worst of sins, speaks seriously and unambiguously about it.

Two significant Greek words: *malakos* and *arsenokoitai*

There is much discussion about the Greek words *malakos* and *arsenokoitai* that are used in these two passages. Do they really refer to what we see today between couples who are in loving, long-term, monogamous, same sex

relationships? Or do they refer to temple prostitution, or pederasty (exploitative sex between a man and a boy where the boy serves as the passive partner), or other kinds of promiscuity we may see in culture in general?

Arsenokoitoi is not a word that occurs in any surviving piece of pre-Christian Greek literature. However, by looking closely at the word one is able to understand its meaning. “*Arsen*” refers to men or males, and “*koite*” is the word for bed – bed in a sexual connotation, hence “male-bedders”. The Greek version of the Old Testament of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 which forbids male-male intercourse uses the terms *arsenos* and *koiten* which may be where Paul got the term.

A significant detail about Paul’s choice of this word is this: Other words were available to him to explicitly communicate temple prostitution, or pederasty, if he wanted to. Instead, he chose a general word that refers to the practice of a man taking another man to bed and lying with him as he would a woman. That would seem to exclude all forms of same sex intercourse, even those which takes place within a stable relationship.

The word *malakos* refers to something “soft”, as in soft clothing – the sense in which it is used in Matthew 11:8 and Luke 7:25. Scholars wishing to revise the historic position of the church argue that it may not have had to do with sex at all, but rather with men who were considered too passive, or simply effeminate. However, the standard Greek dictionaries of the New Testament give two meanings: “being yielding to touch” and “being passive in a same sex relationship”.¹⁶ In the context of this passage where moral sins serious enough to exclude one from the kingdom of God are being listed, we do not think it is likely that Paul would be talking about personal style and aesthetics. It can be said with confidence that these passages do in fact refer to same sex sexual practice, and to male-male same sex intercourse in general.

There is also another aspect of 1 Corinthians 6 which we should explore. In verse 11, after the list of “wrongdoers”, we read, “And this is what some of you used to be”. It is stressed that the people being discussed were no longer engaging in these activities. The reason this verse enters our discussion here is because it can be misconstrued to suggest that one’s conversion to Christianity always and immediately changes how they feel. Reflecting on this, the author of *Washed and Waiting* and a celibate gay man from a conservative Christian background, Wesley Hill, says that it did not square with his experience to hear Christian testimonies which went along the lines of a stark “before” and “after” contrast. Wesley was raised in a loving Christian home, knew the Lord from an early age, and never lived a promiscuous life. He experienced same sex attraction, came out to friends and family, came to the conclusion before the Lord that it would not be right for him to act on those impulses, and continues to experience attraction to men. The only thing that has changed is that he feels healthier about being able to acknowledge to others and to himself that he is attracted to men, rather than keeping that part of himself hidden. Wesley Hill is very dubious about “reparative therapies” for homosexual desire, because they buy in so completely to this “before and after” model.¹⁷

The same is true for Rosaria Butterfield who lived for many years as a lesbian, was an activist in the LGBTQ community, and also a professor of English literature and queer theory. As she puts it, “The answer to homosexuality is not heterosexuality. The answer to homosexuality is a life of holiness.”¹⁸ Butterfield herself is now heterosexually married and says her conversion to Christianity did not do away with her same sex attraction. Even for those who may fervently want to, it just does not seem possible to, as the expression goes, “pray away the gay”. The Presbyterian Church in Canada does not endorse reparative therapies, which apart from being psychologically damaging also put the theological emphasis in the wrong place. As New York author and pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, Tim Keller, says, “You don’t go to hell for being a homosexual... First of all heterosexuality does not get you to heaven, I happen to know this, so how in the world could homosexuality send you to hell?... What sends you to hell is self-righteousness, thinking you can be your own saviour and Lord. What gets you to heaven is getting a connection with Christ because you realize you’re a sinner and you need intervention from outside.”¹⁹

3.2.4. Romans 1:26–27

In the letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul carries his readers through many significant themes including righteousness (living in right relationship with God) and unrighteousness (not living in right relationship with God). He is writing to a Christian community in the decades after the resurrection of Christ as they try to understand and live out their faith.

In the first chapter, Paul begins to paint a picture of unrighteous behaviour which stretches to chapter 3, verse 20. In the opening section, he highlights the fact that even the unrighteous should know God, but do not act like it. They willingly ignore God, practice idolatry and are given up to “degrading passions” (verse 26). From there we read, “Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural

intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error” (Romans 1:26–27). Volumes have been written about this passage, but here we will note a few critical points.

In this section, Paul names female same sex intercourse along with male. Both men and women exchanged that which was “natural” with what was “unnatural” – i.e. intercourse with someone of the same sex. This is the point on which much of the discussion and debate has focused.

First, some have argued that Paul is only condemning temple prostitution in the religious (and idolatrous) practices of the Roman Empire, or pederasty (man or boy relationships). However, the phrase in verse 27 that men were consumed with passion for “one another” (Greek: *allelous*) resists this interpretation. As Australian professor and pastor, William Loader, observes, “Paul’s formulations, especially ‘for one another’ (1.27), suggest mutuality rather than exploitation and so apparently envisage also adult-adult sexual relations of mutual consent.”²⁰ Contrary to popular opinion, adult same sex consensual intercourse was in fact widely known in the ancient world, including the first century.²¹

Second, the passage raises the question about what Paul may have meant by the word “natural”, especially in what some call a “pre-scientific age”. As the question is sometimes phrased, “Isn’t it *natural* for some people to engage in same sex intercourse given what we know today about biology and orientation?” This is a line of questioning put forward by John Boswell in his influential book *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*.²²

Paul does not engage in a sustained argument about how he understood the word “natural”. However, both the context of the wider passage, and also his choice of words, give us insight into his larger rationale and argument.

Paul writes that those who have suppressed the truth (verse 18) and “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images” (verse 23) have been given up to “degrading passions” (verse 26). In this sense, Paul is certainly talking about strong passions which have overwhelmed the individuals he describes. Paul is also surely influenced by the prevailing views that a man was engaging in shameful behaviour by acting as a female as the passive partner in same sex acts. However, Paul’s use of the words “natural” and “unnatural” appear to be rooted in a proper knowledge of God as “Creator” (verse 25). The words he uses for “male” (*arsenes*) and female (*thelus*) are the same ones used in the Greek translation of Genesis 1:27, perhaps an allusion to God’s original design for creation in male and female. To act in a way that is “natural”, therefore, is to honour one’s God-given design in creation. This involves not only a knowledge and worship of the true Creator God, but living in a way that bears witness to this same creation.

We are also wise to note that Paul is talking about *behaviours*. He does not appear to be engaging in a sustained teaching about what we might today call “orientation”. His concern is with behaviour that does – or does not – reflect a true knowledge of God as Creator. This is critical to the current discussions about human sexuality because it would be naïve to say a behaviour is “right” simply based on a person’s biological predisposition toward that behaviour. As human beings, created in the image of God, but marred by the sin and brokenness which envelops us all, we often seek to direct and guide however we may “feel”. Although biological factors may cause us to pause, take seriously the complexity of our human condition, and seek an authentic way to love all people as image-bearers of God, biology alone is insufficient grounds to determine “right” behaviour. Reflecting on this same issue, William Webb writes, “the influence of nonvolitional forces upon any human action is no help in determining the ethical status of that action.”²³

As Romans 1:18–3:20 unfolds, Paul employs a rhetorical argument where even those who think they are righteous (the listeners or readers of his letter?) also reject God and are without excuse! Having started by criticizing those “who by their wickedness suppress the truth” (verse 18), he then includes in his criticism those who think they are righteous. As he famously writes in 3:23, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”. Surely this was surprising to some of his original readers!

To summarize, in the opening chapters of Romans we learn that same sex intercourse for men and women – along with a host of other behaviours, including envy, gossip and being disobedient to one’s parents – is not a behaviour that honours God because it betrays a proper knowledge of God as Creator. At the same time, we also find a warning to not judge others too quickly or severely, especially when *all* people have fallen short of the glory of God, and that it is only by “faith in Christ Jesus” (3:22) that one is righteous (in right relationship) before God.

3.3. Other Texts

To this point we have explored several passages related to the Bible's overarching "marital theology". We have also explored the seven commonly cited texts. From here we include three more passages which are sometimes cited when advocating for a change in the historic Christian teaching concerning marriage.

3.3.1. Acts 10 and 15

The Acts of the Apostles tells the story of the development of the early church in the first century. In the book of Acts we learn about the ascension of Christ into heaven (Acts 1:9), the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2), the many powerful deeds ("acts") of the apostles, and other significant stories about the spread of the gospel outside of Jerusalem and Judea. We also learn that the disciples were first called "Christians" in Antioch (Acts 11:26). One of the most significant themes that surfaces in Acts is the inclusion of non-Jews (Gentiles) in the covenant promises of God through faith in the resurrected Christ.

We here include a short analysis of Acts 10 and 15 because they are sometimes cited when advocating for a change in the church's historic teaching concerning marriage.

Acts 10 begins in Caesarea, about 50 kilometres north of Joppa on the Mediterranean Sea. The story concerns Cornelius who was a Roman centurion (military commander). He has a vision and obeys a call to send for the apostle Peter. Peter also has a vision pronouncing animals previously held as unclean to be clean, and is puzzled. Peter meets Cornelius, and comes to understand that "in every nation anyone who fears [God] and does what is right is acceptable to [God]" (Acts 10:35). Peter preaches the gospel and recognizes that Gentile (non-Jewish) believers are to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

This is one of the passages which lays the foundation for what follows in Acts 15 at the famous Council of Jerusalem. At that council the early church accepts the principle that a Gentile need not become a Jew in order to be a Christian. The church had been disturbed by teachers who insisted that Gentiles must become Jews in order to be Christians. Therefore, the Council at Jerusalem considered the matter. During the proceedings, James, the Lord's brother, says,

I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.

(Acts 15:19-21)

Four restrictions were provided for Gentiles. They should abstain from (a) things polluted by idols; (b) fornication; (c) whatever has been strangled; and (d) blood. The council then conveyed this wisdom by letter and in person, and the message was received with much joy.

Based on the story in Acts 10 when Peter comes to understand that "in every nation anyone who fears [God] and does what is right is acceptable to [God]" (Acts 10:35), and also the conclusion of the Council of Jerusalem where the church should not force unnecessary restrictions on those turning to God (except the four listed above), should we too make a similar shift in our thinking and bless same sex unions?

In the story of Peter and Cornelius, God gave Peter a clear vision which enabled him to aid the church to embrace the principle that followers of "the Way" – as Christians are called in Acts 9:2 and elsewhere – were not bound by ethnic or national categories. Peter's vision, in which he was told to "kill and eat" animals his tradition had told him were unclean and not to be eaten,²⁴ revealed that God was making a clear path for non-Jews to be followers of Christ.

In Acts 15 when the Council of Jerusalem decided that a Gentile did not need to become a Jew to become a Christian, it is significant that fornication is one of the four things believers are counselled to avoid. This is significant because sexual ethics continue to matter in the early church. The word in the original Greek in chapter 15, verse 20 is "*porneia*". This is often translated "sexual immorality" as it is in the New International and English Standard Versions of the Bible. It is also the same word translated as "unchastity" and used by Jesus in Matthew 19:9 to state one legitimate ground for divorce. This has historically been understood to refer to any sexual activity outside of the bond of marriage.

Acts 10 and Acts 15 highlight the work of the Holy Spirit in the early church and the new covenant in Christ which is open to all, on equal terms. These stories are directed, however, at including people in the covenant promises of God. In no way do they change or abolish what the Bible elsewhere teaches concerning marriage or sexual ethics.

3.3.2. Galatians 3:28–29

Galatians was written by the apostle Paul to “the churches in Galatia” (Galatians 1:2). This may refer to some churches in north-central Asia Minor, or churches in the south end of the Roman province of Galatia. In the letter, Paul argues that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament law, and of God’s promise to Abraham, which preceded the law. Those who believe in Christ are the heirs of God’s promise to Abraham, and are all one in Christ Jesus. As Paul famously writes, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)

Paul weaves a powerful argument that we are justified (put in right relationship with God) not because of how morally good we are, or how successful – or unsuccessful – we are at observing God’s law, but through faith in Jesus Christ.

It should be noted, however, that upon conversion to Christ, Jews were still Jews and did not become Gentiles; Gentiles were still Gentiles and did not become Jews; slaves were still slaves and did not become instantly or automatically free. Those who were free were still free and were not bonded as slaves; and males were still males and females were still females. Even though all are equals in their spiritual standing in relation to Christ (“one in Christ Jesus”, verse 28), differences in ethnicity, situation and sex were not removed. Paul was born a Jew and though he became a Christian that did not wipe out his identity as a Jew. In Philippians 3 we read how he ceased to boast in the advantages of his Jewish heritage,²⁵ yet as a Jew he could observe the law and did so when it was to his advantage in drawing others to Christ. With respect to slaves, there were provisions and requirements in the Old Testament for slaves to be freed, for example in Deuteronomy 15. The prophet Jeremiah in Jeremiah 34 is called by God to address the sin of non-observance of such provisions. And in the 1 Corinthians 7:21, Paul counsels believers to be content in whatever situation, whether slave or free, but encourages slaves to gain their freedom if they can.

The reason we include this passage from Galatians 3 is because it is often referenced to highlight an internal “movement” in scripture with respect to how we understand the freedom of persons and the role of women. Since, it is argued, there is an evolution in these two areas, there should also be an evolution in our understanding toward same sex unions. Mindful of the principle that scripture should be used to interpret scripture, when we look at other passages through the Bible, while it is true that there is an evolution in the understanding of the freedom of persons and the role of women, no such evolution happens with respect to same sex sexual activity. In fact, where there is movement in the first two areas, the opposite occurs when it comes to sexual relationships: There is a tightening (rather than a loosening) when it comes to sexual ethics, and a focus on purity and the expectation that sex is properly expressed in the context of male-female marriage.

Galatians is a powerful letter. In it we are encouraged by the fact that we are “one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:38) by virtue of our faith. This oneness, however, did not – and we would argue, *does* not – eliminate difference, including sexual difference.

3.4. Textual Summary

Throughout this report we have tried to employ the principles set out in the “Understanding and Interpreting the Bible” document commended to the church by the 2016 General Assembly. We have taken seriously the authority and inspiration of the Bible, brought with us an awareness of our own contexts and biases, and have sought to better understand the context of biblical passages in a way that sheds deeper illumination on the meaning of the texts.

As we have explored the Bible, the marital thread in scripture passes through the story of creation, redemption and new creation. This not only provides a positive witness to male-female marriage and its place in God’s design, but it issues a warning that we cannot reconfigure marriage in a way that eliminates sexual difference.

The Genesis stories, which are repeatedly quoted in the Bible, base marriage in a male-female relationship. The pattern of male and female in marriage reflects the mystical union between Christ and the church, and looks forward to the creation of the new heavens and the new earth as envisioned in the closing chapters of Revelation. Reference to same sex intercourse is always negative – and occurred in a time and place when, contrary to what some suggest, same sex intercourse was widely known. This was not just between men and boys, restricted to temple prostitution, or in violent contexts, but between consenting adults.

When studying the progression of certain issues like slavery or the role of women, one can identify an evolution in biblical thought toward the freedom of persons and a greater role for women in leadership. However, when a similar study occurs for same sex sexual activity, no movement occurs. In fact, in the Christian community, one can see, based on the biblical passages, that there is a *tightening* (rather than a loosening) when it comes to sexual ethics. Further, when it comes to how God created human beings, differences in sex are not accidental. They are intentional, and they are intentional to the design of marriage. In the same way, sexual difference is not incidental to the design of marriage, and marriage is not incidental to the story of creation, redemption and new creation; it is appointed to provide an image of that story.

As stated earlier in this paper, it should take considerable prayer, research and consensus to overturn an historic understanding of marriage and human sexuality. It is our view that uncertainty or a lack of clarity is not ground to advocate wholesale change. Based on our prayerful reading and study of the Bible, the church has no warrant to alter the historic understanding of marriage. We believe that the Bible teaches that God's design for marriage is between one man and one woman, and that the church, in faithfulness to Christ, cannot alter this biblical vision. What we can and must do is to strive to fulfill the great commission to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that Jesus has commanded us. We do so, with the assurance that Jesus has promised to be with us always, even to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:19–20)

4. What is a biblical way to think about marriage and singleness?

Marriage

In Living Faith, one of the subordinate standards of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, there is a very helpful and accurate statement in section 8.2.3 that summarizes our view of a biblical way to think about marriage:

Christian marriage is a union in Christ
whereby a man and a woman become one in the sight of God.
It is the commitment of two people
to love and to support one another faithfully for life.
God's law forbids adultery.
Loyalty is necessary for the growth of love.
Disloyalty destroys the union of marriage.
Sexual union in marriage is intended to provide
mutual joy and comfort as well as
the means of creating new life.

Marriage between a man and a woman is grounded in God's design in creation. Although tarnished by human sin, marriage in the pattern of mutual submission is a signpost of discipleship in Christ, and a pointer to the final marriage of heaven and earth described in Revelation 21 and 22.

Singleness

Although most of this report has been about marriage and the prospect of same sex unions, we have also spoken about singleness.

Alongside this positive witness to marriage in the Bible is also a positive witness to singleness. Marriage and singleness are presented as two parallel tracks, each offering distinct opportunities for God's purposes to be accomplished with us. They also offer a distinct opportunity for an image to be borne through us – *in* our marriage or *in* our singleness – of the story of God and for his glory as disciples of Jesus Christ. Section 8.2.2 in Living Faith assures us that "God's purpose for us can be realized in both single and married life. Marriage is not God's will for everyone. Fullness of life is offered to all, both single and married." We fully affirm the wisdom of this statement.

In some ways, singleness in the Old Testament is not viewed very positively. In Genesis, singleness or aloneness is the first thing in the good creation that is said not to be good: "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Genesis 2.18). And so, this is overcome by the creation of a sexual counterpart, which resulted in the one-flesh union, which we take as the basis of marriage.

In other parts of the Old Testament, singleness, barrenness and eunuchdom are often viewed negatively. There was no deeply developed understanding of the afterlife, so one's experience of God's blessing and promise of a future was often expressed in terms of one's offspring upon the earth. Many Old Testament stories (Abraham, Tamar,

Ruth, etc.) turn on God's gracious rescue of someone from the fate of having their line, and therefore their place in the hope of Israel, cut off. Following from this, there is a spirituality of faith and hope involved in marriage and family life which persists today.

In Rabbinic Judaism today, many feel it is a religious duty incumbent upon men to marry and have children. One can hardly think that the Judaism of Jesus' and Paul's day was any less favourable toward marriage and discouraging toward singleness. Yet Jesus and Paul were both single Jewish men. With their example, singleness takes on a new dignity.

Other texts in the New Testament reveal that in our heavenly future there will be no marriage (we shall all be single – “like the angels” – Matthew 22:30). As discussed above in the section on Matthew 19, having just spoken about marriage and divorce in the context of Genesis 1 and 2, Jesus speaks of “eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:12), thus establishing this idea of two equally honourable and God-honouring paths. The New Testament regards this present age as a time when the old created order still continues, but in which “signposts” of the new creation/kingdom of God are breaking in. Single people are like “advance heralds” of the new creation. Further, as we see in passages like 1 Corinthians 7:25–35, singleness is practically useful in the church, as it gives people greater freedom of movement for mission and ministry, and more single-minded focus on the work of the kingdom.

As Jesus discloses in Luke 20:27–40 and Matthew 22:23–33, marriage pertains to this present life. In our future life in heaven we will all be single – though participating collectively in a mystical marriage as the church, the bride of Christ. So there is a *trajectory* in the Bible from all married (see the creation story and the rest of the Old Testament) to all single (our heavenly future). In this present era, we live in a time between. Marriage is good and singleness is good. They each are “signposts” to different things which are part of God's reality.

The Roman Catholic church speaks of the “gift of celibacy”. Some have sought to apply this concept of “giftedness” (which appears as a concept in 1 Corinthians 7:7)²⁶ as a way of arguing in favour of same sex unions because the church should not impose celibacy on someone who has not been gifted for it.²⁷ This is to use the concept of “giftedness” in the sense of “having an aptitude for” or “having received special grace for”.

But in the context of 1 Corinthians 7, Paul may simply mean that there is a gift *received* through living the single life, just as there is a gift *received* through living the married life. Even if there is such a thing as a special aptitude for celibacy, there is no indication that single people who are attracted to members of the opposite sex who may not feel particularly gifted for celibacy should doubt that they have sufficient grace from the Holy Spirit to avoid the sin of fornication. Similarly, those married to an opposite sex partner who may not feel they have a particular aptitude for monogamy, should not doubt that they have sufficient grace from the Holy Spirit to avoid the sin of adultery.

In our view, the Holy Spirit does not need to give us “special grace” or a particular giftedness in order for us to avoid the sexual sins named in the New Testament. There is grace sufficient for avoiding sin always available to us when we seek that help from God. There is also abundant forgiveness in the cross to cover the times when we yield to sexual temptation if we seek it with true repentance.

There is much more that can be said about singleness. But in this paper we bring this section to a close with this comment. Whether celibacy and the single life is a gift in the sense of a particular aptitude or a special grace it is certainly true that it is a gift and a vocation received, just as the married life is a gift and a vocation received. Marriage is good and singleness is good. They are each “signposts” to different things which are part of God's reality. They each have an honourable place in the renewing and restoration of all things in Christ.

Other Considerations

To this point we have explored the idea of the Bible's overarching marital theology, the seven commonly cited texts, other texts which often arise in the discussions, and singleness. But as we studied these texts, we felt it appropriate to include a few other considerations which were raised through the course of biblical study. We feel they are important to the current discussions concerning marriage and human sexuality.

A. Hypocrisy

As Christians who hold the historic view of human sexuality, we acknowledge that The Presbyterian Church in Canada has failed in answering the call of the 1994 Statement on Human Sexuality to provide richer relational communities, free of homophobia, accompanied by the kind of clear theological teaching that this document gives. Some churches have welcomed LGBTQ-identified people more or less on a “do not ask, do not tell” basis. Other congregations have functioned as affirming congregations in defiance of the church's position.

The church also needs to acknowledge its hypocrisy when it comes to how it teaches and lives out a heterosexual ethic. “The Christian community”, writes William Webb, “while *talking* about upholding high ethical standards regarding homosexual activity, is *failing* to live out its ethical standards with regard to heterosexual activity. Until the church starts truly living out its heterosexual ethic, we undermine anything we have to say to the homosexual community about its sexual ethic”.²⁸

B. Hate and Homophobia

At its most extreme, homophobia issues in hate crimes such as the one which took the life of Matthew Shepard from Laramie, Wyoming in 1998. Matthew was tortured by two men, severely beaten, tied to a fence and abandoned. He died a week later. Or it can look like the shooting in the Orlando nightclub this past June 2016, where 49 gay youth were killed and another 53 injured, the deadliest mass shooting in United States history. In 2013 in Canada, the organist of one of the Presbyterian churches in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, Scott Jones, an openly gay 27 year-old, was stabbed outside a downtown bar and paralyzed from the waist down. As a ray of gospel beauty amid the ugliness, the congregation, though not one which has made the overturning of the 1994 Statement on Human Sexuality a ministry focus, raised money for Scott, made structural adjustments to the chancel so that he could still reach the organ, and generally loved and supported him well throughout the medical trauma and the trial of his assailant. We are also reminded of the pain in many homes by Mary Hulst, Chaplain at Calvin College, who quotes a statistic that LGBTQ youth who are from “highly rejecting families” are more than eight times more likely to attempt suicide than LGBTQ youth from families that do not reject them.²⁹

There is no place for hate or homophobia in the church of Christ. Homophobia implies a fear of those who are attracted to people of the same sex. We are called to love one another – and you cannot love if you hate or fear. As stated earlier in this report, “love” in the New Testament is close to the idea of loyalty. It means acknowledging that we are connected to other people as fellow image-bearers of God and that we seek God’s best for them, even when we may disagree with them. This is true regardless of one’s views concerning human sexuality.

It should also be noted that we live in a time of high anxiety in the church. People with different opinions are labelled as haters or unbiblical. However, *we can disagree and still love one another*. This point cannot be stressed enough. Rick Warren, the pastor of Saddleback Church in California, has said that “Our culture has accepted two huge lies: The first is that if you disagree with someone’s lifestyle, you must fear them or hate them. The second is that to love someone means you agree with everything they believe or do. Both are nonsense. You don’t have to compromise convictions to be compassionate.”³⁰ This is a helpful perspective in our highly anxious climate.

C. Identity

In *Habits of the Heart*, American sociologist Robert Bellah discusses how we, as a modern western society, have begun to evolve in our understanding of identity. Something sociologists call “expressive individualism” is taking root – and it is a new view that moves us away from the idea that our identity is given to us, and that it is rooted in our families or communities. Instead, each person is now seen as having “a unique core feeling and intuition that should unfold or be expressed if individuality [or identity] is to be realized”.³¹ Within this framework, a person’s identity is also something that they create or build as an autonomous person. Christians in Canada today are influenced by this kind of thinking about identity. But we should remain aware that our primary identity is always more securely connected to who we are as children of God and disciples of Jesus Christ. In other words, expressing the core feeling of one’s sexuality does not need to be the primary way a disciple of Christ understands or lives out his or her identity.

In 1995 a working group of theologians within the Church of England produced a document called the St. Andrew’s Day Statement, which gives a clear theological statement of a deeper, and more faithful, understanding of human identity in relation to questions of sexual identity and in relation to questions of “expressive individualism”. That statement affirms:

“In Christ” – and in him alone – “we know both God and human nature as they truly are”; and so in him alone we know ourselves as we truly are. There can be no description of human reality, in general or in particular, outside the reality in Christ. We must be on guard, therefore, against constructing any other ground for our identities than the redeemed humanity given us in him. Those who understand themselves as homosexuals, no more and no less than those who do not, are liable to false understandings based on personal or family histories, emotional dispositions, social settings, and solidarities formed by common experiences or ambitions. Our sexual affections can no more define who we are than can our class, race or nationality. At the deepest

ontological level, therefore, there is no such thing as “a” homosexual or “a” heterosexual; there are human beings, male and female, called to redeemed humanity in Christ, endowed with a complex variety of emotional potentialities and threatened by a complex variety of forms of alienation.

To explain this in more everyday language, we can turn to a statement by Sam Allberry from February 2017. He is a pastor in the Church of England who describes himself as same sex attracted. Addressing the General Synod in London he said, “I choose to describe myself this way (same sex attracted) because sexuality is not a matter of identity for me. And that has become good news. My primary sense of worth and fulfillment as a human being is not contingent on being romantically or sexually fulfilled, and this is liberating. The most fully human and complete person who ever lived was Jesus Christ. He never married. He was never in a romantic relationship, and never had sex. If we say these things are intrinsic to human fulfillment, we are calling our Savior subhuman.”³²

We include this section on identity not because it is comprehensive – it is not – but because, having reflected on the biblical teachings above, it is a part of an important conversation related to human identity, human sexuality and the relationship between the two. “Expressive individualism” is also a part of our modern western context which can influence how we understand ourselves, make meaning, glorify God and seek to live as disciples of Jesus Christ.

D. Pastoral Care

For the sake of pastoral care, may the church never be guilty of putting politics ahead of people. In our current, highly politicized cultural climate, there is pressure on the church to reinforce culture’s conclusions about same sex relationships, or at least to be reduced to silence on the topic. Christians are called to believe, however, that in the Bible we have, from a God who loves us, access to eternal wisdom. This is special insight from God about how to live as the people of the Way, as the people of Jesus Christ.

At the same time that we stand against the ugliness of hate and homophobia, we should also take seriously the ugliness that occurs when individuals are not guided by their community of faith about the historic teachings concerning human sexuality. We are called to trust those teachings, rather than what we so often do, which is doubt the Bible, judge it and scorn it as unsophisticated. We are also called to share the wisdom which has been graciously revealed to us, “in the spirit of humility, as beggars telling others where food is to be found” (Living Faith 9.21) – especially with our questioning youth. May none of them ever have the occasion to say to us, “You were my church family, my pastor, my friends, but you did not share with me different sides of the story. You did not guide me to understand the life-giving hope and truth that shines from God’s word.”

We also need to acknowledge that we live in a culture which is highly sexualized in many ways. Sex, sexuality and promiscuity are used in a myriad of ways, for example, in entertainment and in the selling of products and ideas in the marketplace. This has a powerful impact on how we perceive human sexuality. We acknowledge the pervasiveness of our culture’s sexual brokenness and argue that one of the church’s responsibilities is to counter these attitudes with sound, humble and un intimidated wisdom about God’s design for marriage and human sexuality.

With this in mind, we share these closing thoughts about all people being made in the image of God, and creating caring communities of discipleship and worship. This brings us back to the initial trajectory in this paper that humans are made on purpose and for a purpose – and that purpose is most fully understood and realized when we come to know, follow and share in the mission of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Image of God

One of the most significant revelations of scripture is that all people are created in the image of God. As we have argued, the opening chapters of Genesis are, in many ways, about origins. They teach us about God’s ultimate designs and purposes for humanity. In Genesis 1:27 we read, “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” This is not a given in other religious traditions. In fact, because of this insight, all people should be afforded dignity and respect as image-bearers of our Maker and Saviour. This is no less true for those who are attracted to those of the same sex. Everyone is valuable and worthy of respect.

Caring Community, Discipleship and Worship

We were made to glorify God, to enjoy God, and to know, follow and share in the mission of Jesus Christ. This happens not only by ourselves, but in authentic community where names are learned, prayers are offered, and support and encouragement is given. In our Reformed-Presbyterian tradition, there is an emphasis that the journey of faith is not only travelled as individuals, but alongside others.

We fail in our communities, however, when we underappreciate and undervalue what we share in common with others, even when we conduct our lives differently, and even when we disagree about important topics. We also undermine our attempts to build authentic and loving community when we refuse to acknowledge someone else's differences. These two tendencies, argues Yale Professor Miroslav Volf, are both expressions of *exclusion*. So how do we avoid this? We focus on the love of a crucified Messiah, "...no one can be in the presence of the God of the crucified Messiah for long...without transposing the enemy from the sphere of monstrous inhumanity into the sphere of shared humanity and herself from the sphere of proud innocence into the sphere of common sinfulness".³³ Gathered around the cross, we are all aware of our own brokenness and need of a saviour. Gathered around the cross we acknowledge what we have in common, what makes us different, and offer prayer and mutual support for our journey of discipleship.

We take seriously this discipleship as we gather around our Master and Lord to learn and live out his teachings. As stated earlier in this report, Christianity is not just about information; it is about transformation. This involves not only mutual encouragement, but mutual accountability. In Acts 24:14, the apostle Paul says he is a "follower of the Way". This "Way" is not a choice *between* holiness and love, or *between* truth and compassion; there is a growing unity – a stumbling harmony on the path of obedience.

Earlier in this paper, we also highlighted the first commandment, the commandment to fully love God and neighbour, as expressed by Jesus in Mark 12:28–34. This love is not a feeling or sentiment. Its meaning is close to the idea of loyalty and pursuing the good of another. With this in mind, someone who loves God is someone who is loyal to God and to God's ways. Similarly, someone who loves their neighbour is (a) someone who honours their neighbour because they too are created in God's image, (b) someone who acknowledges they are connected to their neighbour as a fellow image-bearer of God, and (c) someone who therefore seeks God's best for them. One of the implications of the first commandment, rooted in scripture and reaffirmed in the mouth of our Lord, is that truth has to do not only with ideas one believes, but with actions one lives. May this be wise guidance for all of us.

As a final word, and as it relates to confessing our own hypocrisy, standing against hate and homophobia, affirming our identity in Christ, sharing God's wisdom, acknowledging that we are all loved and made in God's image, and as we seek to cultivate prayerful and supportive communities – even when, and especially when we profoundly disagree about significant issues – let us continually turn our eyes to Jesus Christ, our Lord and Redeemer. In John 1:14, we read that Jesus came amongst us full of "grace and truth". May that not only be a comfort, but our example in how we live out our faith... full of both grace and truth.

Ultimately, we do this as a people of worship. After all, our ultimate purpose is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever.

Endnotes

¹ William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downer's Grove: IVP, 2001), p. 62.

² Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End* (Doubleday Canada, 2014), p. 122, 123.

³ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Living Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), p. 4.

⁴ For example, see Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 12.

⁵ As quoted in an interview with Matthew Schmitz in *First Things* on June 11, 2014. The interview can be accessed at firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2014/06/n-t-wrights-argument-against-same-sex-marriage.

⁶ N.T. Wright, *The Last Word* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2005), p. 37ff.

⁷ See *Calvin's Doctrine of Man* by T.F. Torrance.

⁸ "In the sexual dimension of life humans are 'angled' or 'faceted' expressions of the image and likeness of God, 'male and female'. They have integrity or wholeness as God's image, independent of sexual activity. Yet, when they engage in sexual activity, they engage another in their particularity, as only one incomplete part of a two-faceted sexual whole. Ignoring this particularity effaces that part of the divine image stamped on human sexuality." See Robert Gagnon's article "Does the Bible Regard Same-Sex Intercourse as Intrinsically Sinful?" at robgagnon.net/articles/ChristianSexualityArticle2003.pdf.

⁹ See the following sections of one of our subordinate standards, Living Faith: The mystery of human existence is that we belong to God and have been made in the divine image. (2.2.1) We have been made male and female for our mutual help, comfort and joy. Our creation as sexual beings is God's loving purpose for us. We are dependent on each other and as men and women, need one another in all of life. (2.2.2) We are called to work out the meaning of our own lives and to find our true vocation in the love and service of God. (2.3.1) Living Faith here draws together the three concepts of creation in the image, mutuality and vocation.

¹⁰ These three emphases in marriage are highlighted by pastor and author Tim Keller in his talk to Google executives in 2011. [youtube.com/watch?v=06y5Ub9oamE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06y5Ub9oamE).

¹¹ “*mysterion*” is the Greek word used at Ephesians 5:32, the one St. Jerome translated into Latin as “sacramentum”.

¹² Derrick Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (Shoe String Press, 1986); John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (University of Chicago Press, 1980).

¹³ The other is 2 Peter 2:8–10 “...if [God] rescued Lot, a righteous man greatly distressed by the licentiousness of the lawless...then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgement – especially those who indulge their flesh in depraved lust, and who despise authority.”

¹⁴ The Testament of Naphtali, The Testament of Benjamin and Jubilees.

¹⁵ We do not get into the kingdom on the basis of good behaviour or performing perfectly the works of the law. Paul’s writings in Romans, Ephesians and Galatians are clear concerning that point. We get into the kingdom on the basis of God’s grace alone in Christ alone, received by faith alone. Yet if a person is not living well, it calls into question the degree to which they have really been reborn in Christ, and renovated by the Holy Spirit. For the New Testament, one cannot claim to belong to Christ and do the works of darkness.

¹⁶ *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian literature*, third ed. rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker, based on Walter Bauer’s lexicon. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000)

¹⁷ Wesley Hill talks about before and after, and reparative therapy. The link to the clip is [youtube.com/watch?v=W_xBMyWR8B8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_xBMyWR8B8). He starts telling his story at the 9.07 minute mark and he gets to the consideration of the “before and after” narrative and offers comments on reparative therapy from approximately 20.38–23.45.

¹⁸ Rosaria Butterfield’s comments concerning reparative therapy and the kind of change God brings about in people are from a clip of her speaking to the University of South Florida, [youtube.com/watch?v=BBwv7TxQ4v0&t=958s_](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BBwv7TxQ4v0&t=958s_)

¹⁹ Tim Keller talking to David Eisenbach in the Veritas Forum. “Is it a sin? Are they going to hell?” [youtube.com/watch?v=IZFCB9sduxQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZFCB9sduxQ).

²⁰ William Loader, *Sexuality in the New Testament: Understanding the Key Texts* (Westminster John Knox, Louisville, 2010), p. 23.

²¹ A helpful survey is by William Loader in his book *Making Sense of Sex: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Early Jewish and Christian Literature*. (Eerdmans, 2013) See especially the chapter “Passions and Persons”.

²² Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 1980.

²³ Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals*, p. 233.

²⁴ See Leviticus 11.

²⁵ “Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ...” (Philippians 3:7–8)

²⁶ “I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.” (1 Corinthians 7:7–9)

²⁷ This is one of the arguments of Matthew Vines in *God and the Gay Christian*. (Doubleday, 2014)

²⁸ Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals*, p. 252.

²⁹ See the article at ivestream.com/calvin-college/events/4678265/videos/120915882.

³⁰ This is from a *Christianity Today* interview with Ed Stetzer in March, 2012. christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2012/march/rick-warren-interview-on-muslims-evangelism-missions.html.

³¹ Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p. 333–334.

³² Sam Allberry’s comments can be watched at [youtube.com/watch?v=mCLms7J84JY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mCLms7J84JY).

³³ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Abingdon, Nashville: 1996), p. 124.

WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES ON COVENANTED MONOGAMOUS SAME SEX RELATIONSHIPS

(A&P 2017, 505–36, 28)

This study will offer a short summary of its argument followed by a comprehensive study addressing what the Bible teaches about covenanted monogamous same sex relationships.