

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.

Summary of the study

This study examines what the Bible teaches on covenanted monogamous same sex relationships in response to overtures that came to the General Assembly that pray for a re-examination of the Statement on Human Sexuality on the place and role of LGBT people in the church adopted by the General Assembly of 1994. (A&P 1994, p. 252–74) Although there is much wisdom in the 1994 statement, on the basis of our study, we disagree with the following conclusion.

Scripture sees evidence of sexual distortion to God’s creation pattern in adultery, rape, incest, promiscuity and homosexual relationships. (6.1.9)

To include “homosexual relationships” in a list with adultery, rape, incest and promiscuity is unacceptable. Indeed, we can agree that when either heterosexual behaviour or homosexual behaviour involves adultery, rape, incest and promiscuity, the Bible is very clear in its rejection of such behaviour. But, on the basis of this study, the Bible does not clearly and unequivocally prohibit covenanted faithful same sex relationships. A careful reading of the Bible, and prayerful consideration of the teaching and example of Jesus Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit should lead us towards repentance from harmful condemnation of our LGBTQI sisters and brothers who seek to follow Christ in covenanted relationships.

Our study examines what the Bible teaches about what has come to be called “covenanted monogamous same sex relationships” – that is same sex relationships that have the same depth and faithfulness as devoted heterosexual marriages. The study will not discuss if sexual orientation is in itself sinful. The Presbyterian Church in Canada concluded that it is not at the General Assembly in 2003. The important question within Christian communities today is how we understand the biblical teaching on appropriate sexual morality. Because we are generally agreed that covenanted monogamous relationships constitute a foundational sexual norm for Christian heterosexual people, the just and fair question becomes: if the same standard should apply to Christian people who do not identify as heterosexual?

Since 1998, The Presbyterian Church in Canada has adopted Living Faith as one of its subordinate standards. We have paid careful attention to Chapter 5 “The Bible” that tells us how we should read the Bible today. In our study we resisted proof-texting (pulling verses out of their biblical and cultural context) and reading texts without reference to the wider witness of the Bible to Jesus Christ, and the teaching of his life, words, death, resurrection and ascension (Living Faith 5.4). We recognized that the Bible gives a multifaceted witness to Jesus Christ in the four gospels and that any interpretation must be made in the light of his love and sacrifice. We also recognized that the Bible itself is a multifaceted text containing many genres of writing including poetry (Psalms) and narrative (Genesis 1–2). Each genre has its own character and each demands to be interpreted for what it is. We must make every attempt to discern its meaning in the midst of metaphors and the uncertainty of its literary or historical context and, frequently, its languages and the way they have been translated since every act of translation is an act of interpretation.

In this study, we have two guides:

1. The all-encompassing logic of the “love commandment” from Jesus, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’” (Matthew 22:37–39) For the first commandment, Jesus is citing Deuteronomy 6:8 and in the second part he is citing Leviticus. 19:18 making clear that the love of neighbour cannot be separated from the love of God.
2. A careful consideration of the different cultural contexts from which biblical material arise and how the patriarchal social systems and values of ancient Israel, Palestine in the first century and the Roman Empire where Paul ministered are unlike our cultural contexts.

The bulk of our study is an examination of the scriptures but we begin with determining what, for us, are the appropriate questions to be raised in the study. These questions are:

1. What does the Bible, through its witness to Jesus Christ, teach us about the nature, meaning and purpose of us as human beings in God’s creation? (Section 1)
2. How does our biblical understanding of the nature, meaning and purpose of the human being inform our understanding of appropriate human sexual intimacy within the church? (Section 2)

3. How do we understand such a biblical moral logic for people who experience same sex sexual attraction and intimate same sex relations as Christians and wish to recognize covenanted monogamous relationships? (Section 3)
4. How do texts traditionally associated with a prohibition against same sex intimacy relate to the larger biblical teaching on the human being and appropriate sexual morality within the Christian church? (Section 4)
5. Do our conclusions on covenanted monogamous same sex relationships bring well-being or harm to one another within the church? (Section 5)

Section 4 is the study of the individual texts: Genesis 1–3 (the creation stories); Genesis 18–19 (the Sodom and Gomorrah story); Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 (the “Holy Code” references); Romans 1; 1 Corinthians 6:9; and 1 Timothy 1:10. In our exegeses of these texts, we have read widely in the exegetical, cultural historical and linguistic scholarship of the last two decades. Of the 22 books listed in the bibliography, only seven, less than one third, were published before 1994 and so were not available to the writers of the 1994 statement.

In the very few places the Bible seems to speak negatively of same sex intimacy, it is always in contexts of strong patriarchal bias, marriage infidelity, harm to others in community, and unbridled sexual excess. These are not same sex relations that reflect the “love commandment” in behaviour that allows partners to flourish, in being faithful to one another, accountable, just, equitable and, above all, loving in their relationship. Such relationships give glory to God particularly through covenanted commitment of monogamous partners.

The Study

Introduction

This study will examine what the Bible teaches on covenanted monogamous same sex relationships in response to overtures that came to the General Assembly that pray for a re-examination of the teaching of The Presbyterian Church in Canada on the place and role of LGBT¹ people in the church. Although the overtures ask for guidance on many wider issues, the key biblical and doctrinal questions revolve around the biblical legitimacy of intimate same sex relationships. The important question within Christian communities is how we understand the biblical teaching on appropriate sexual morality. Because we are generally agreed that covenanted monogamous relationships constitute a foundational sexual norm for Christian heterosexual people, the just and fair question becomes if the same standard should apply to Christian people who do not identify as heterosexual?

This study will not discuss if sexual orientation is in itself sinful. The church has already concluded that it is not. The Presbyterian Church in Canada Social Action Handbook states, “Homosexual orientation is not a sin. The weight of scientific evidence suggests that sexual orientation is innate, established early in life, and not a matter of choice” (p. 39). This is based on decisions of the 2003 General Assembly (A&P 2003, p. 526–47, 26, 34, 37–41, 43–45). The report, which was accepted by the Assembly, clearly stated that sexual orientation is not in and of itself sinful. As a church, we continue to hold that position and none of the overtures to the General Assembly which have been referred to the Committee on Church Doctrine challenge that particular finding of that report. Therefore, being of homosexual sexual orientation, and by implication other forms of sexual orientation, is not in and of itself understood as sinful within The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

This study assumes that,

The Bible has been given to us by the inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life. It is the standard of all doctrine by which we must test any word that comes to us from church, world, or inner experience. We subject to its judgement all we believe and do. Through the scriptures the church is bound only to Jesus Christ its King and Head. He is the living Word of God to whom the written word bears witness. (Living Faith 5.1)

This study will take the whole of section 5 of Living Faith as its guide to reading the scriptures including the use of the whole scriptural witness to Jesus Christ while it seeks to rely on the Holy Spirit to guide us as we discern a response to the questions posed. Because we take the Bible very seriously as our rule of faith and life:

- we will resist proof-texting (pulling verses out of their biblical and cultural context).
- we will resist reading texts without reference to the wider witness of the Bible to Jesus Christ, and the teaching of his life, words, death, resurrection and ascension (5.4).
- we will recognize that the Bible gives a multifaceted witness to Jesus Christ in the four gospels.

We will also recognize that the Bible itself is a multifaceted text containing many genres of writing including poetry (Psalms) and narrative (Genesis 1–2). Each genre has its own character and each demands to be interpreted for what it is. We must make every attempt to discern its meaning in the midst of metaphors and the uncertainty of its literary or historical context and, frequently, its language. If we want to apply texts to situations and people that are beyond the original intention of the text we are discussing, our respect for the Bible also requires that we show strong evidence that such larger and more extensive conclusions can be drawn from the text in the light of the teaching of Jesus and the scriptural witness to him.

With Living Faith we recognize that the Bible is conditioned by the language, thought and setting of its time (5.4). With Living Faith we recognize the importance of attending to the historical context of texts in the Bible as well as the wider biblical context. They were written in several ancient languages that have been translated into other ancient languages (such as Latin) and then translated into modern vernacular languages (at first without returning to the ancient sources). Every act of translation is an act of interpretation and we must be aware that the most recent translations are not necessarily more faithful to the original text than older ones. Our subordinate standards teach us to read the Bible with informed scholarship and reflection. They also teach us to read the Bible in the community of faith and listen to its teaching. For our present topic, this means that we cannot study the Bible on same sex relationships without being accountable, just and fair in relations to LGBTQI Christians within the church. Any discussion of texts from the Old Testament must be read with the Good News from the New Testament in mind. The statement of the 1994 General Assembly on human sexuality (from here on referred to as HS1994) discusses the relationship between law and gospel in section 2.2.6. It points to various approaches in Christian ethics and claims,

The moral law revealed in the Old Testament, and known to Gentiles through conscience (Romans 2:15), remains binding on Christians, not in any legalistic sense but as a revelation of God's will for humanity.

This section of HS1994 was written before 1998 when Living Faith was adopted as a subordinate standard of doctrine in The Presbyterian Church in Canada. This may be the reason the HS1994 statement shows some uncertainty on how to read the “Holiness Code”² when it comments later, “The use of the Holiness Code in Christian ethics needs further exploration.” (HS1994, 6.7) Living Faith clarifies how we are to read biblical texts like the “Holiness Code” as Christians in The Presbyterian Church in Canada particularly in section 5.4.

In this study, we have two guides. The first is the all-encompassing logic of the “love commandment”, where in response to a “trick question” from a Pharisee, “‘Teacher, which commandment in the Law is greatest?’ Jesus replies ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’” (Matthew 22:36–40) For the first commandment, Jesus is citing Deuteronomy 6:8 and in the second part he is citing Leviticus 19:18 making clear that the love of neighbour cannot be separated from the love of God.

Key to this study is the understanding that Jesus, in his life, teaching, care for those on the margins and his death and resurrection, embodies the meaning of love.

The love of God and neighbour is incarnated in Jesus Christ and we know it through the witness of the early church as recorded in the scriptures. Although there are different kinds of law in the Old Testament, Jesus himself demonstrates how the whole law must be understood through his loving behaviour especially in his care for the marginalized, the poor and the suffering people (Living Faith 5.1).

Our second guide in this study is a careful consideration of the different cultural contexts from which biblical material arise. The approach taken here, following Living Faith, is to take the Old Testament Holiness Code very seriously through the lens of Jesus Christ and his “love commandment”. In fact Jesus frames the appropriate use of the Holiness Code in Leviticus by citing Leviticus 19:18 as the key interpretive principle of that code. When we make moral judgements, we make them with profound consideration of the moral framework of the whole Bible and especially its multifaceted witness to Jesus Christ. In our engagement in our communities, including with LGBTQI sisters and brothers, we are constrained by the witness of the teaching, example and supreme acts of self-giving of Jesus Christ on the cross to act with special care, respect, equity and justice.

This report will cite often from the Statement on Human Sexuality of 1994 (HS1994). In many instances, it will follow the wisdom of that report.

The motion adopted by the General Assembly in 1994 reads,

That the 120th General Assembly adopt the foregoing statement on human sexuality, and that it be discussed by sessions, synods and presbyteries and that this input be included in the continuing report of the Church Doctrine Committee and that this be the response of the General Assembly to the prayers of Overture No. 22, 1987 and No. 9, 1989. (A&P 1994, p. 56)

The biblical study in this report is intended to be part of this process envisaged by the General Assembly in 1994. Some of the biblical study will reach different conclusions from that of the HS1994 statement. The reasons for that will be clearly explained and will follow the logic of scriptural interpretation as outlined by Living Faith in section 5.

One of the key considerations of this study is to discern the place of those who engage in intimate same sex relationships within The Presbyterian Church in Canada. Connected to that is the possibility for LGBTQI Christians to enter into covenanted relationships as do those involved in intimate heterosexual relationships. A critical consideration is our emerging understanding of the cultural context that shaped the biblical text and its approach to sexual morality. We have striven to discern and distinguish between a cultural, contextual bias and the gospel message as did our predecessors in 1994. HS1994 makes clear that the patriarchal context of biblical material is a matter for concern and discernment. In 5.1.7 the report comments,

While Paul espouses the idea of mutual submission in marriage in Ephesians 5:21 (“Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ”), he does so within a patriarchal and hierarchical society, whose ideology we rightly reject today.

This biblical study will follow this insight and apply the rightful rejection of patriarchal and hierarchical biases in the biblical text as a well-established principle of Presbyterian interpretation, on gender and sexuality.

It is important to understand that the patriarchal and hierarchical bias on gender is also fundamental to the question of same sex relationships. Particularly in the New Testament context and the Roman Empire of that time, there were strong gender biases that considered same sex intimate relationships as a denigration of manliness. The HS1994 statement shows some awareness of that bias when it refers to the Jewish scholars, Philo of Alexandria (25–50) and Josephus (37–100), and their vehement rejection of same sex relationships as “contrary to nature” in section 6.11. However, that report did not have access to the research done since 1994 on the cultural basis for these claims. Philo of Alexandria, who is now known to be the source of fourth century Christian bias against same sex relationships, based his arguments in a particularly abhorrent form of misogyny. For Philo, women and men who acted “womanlike” were considered inferior to males and were led astray by the female “weakness” of carnal passion. Such women and “women-like men” represent what is base about the human condition while men represented what is spiritual, (see Lings 2013, p. 285; also Carden 2004, p. 61 in Lings, and Dynes 1990, p. 983). Philo builds this theory on the Greco-Roman perception of manliness during the time the New Testament is being written. He goes so far as to claim that men who “debase their manliness” by acting in an unmanly way as a “passive” sexual partner to another male should be put to death immediately. His agenda is to prove that Judaism is in harmony with the best of high Roman culture which shared these misogynistic views of gender. In this process, Philo claims that the Mosaic Law parallels the “law of nature” in Roman culture. It is to this “law of nature” – that which is considered natural about men and women by Romans – that Philo appeals when he argues that same sex intimacy is “contrary to nature”. We will see later how important this emergent understanding of the cultural context and gender bias is when we read texts in the New Testament. HS1994 urges the church to “repent of its homophobia and hypocrisy” (6.22). Surely such repentance would require that we apply the same measures of cultural bias – used to address male or female gender imbalance – to our reading of the Bible in relation to LGBTQI sisters and brothers?

We also need to be keenly aware of personal bias as we read the Bible. No one, including the authors of this report or any other is without bias. If, for example, it shocks or troubles us that there might be a biblical argument for the affirmation of covenanted same sex relationships, we might be disposed to discount the supportive biblical arguments. If we are disposed to affirm LGBTQI people, we might be biased against listening to counter arguments. The best we can do with biases is to be aware of them and to examine them in the light of the scriptural witness as we listen to one another within the church and to the Spirit. Most fundamentally, our biases need to be measured against the great “love commandment” as taught and emphasized by Jesus Christ. The authors of this study make our case here acknowledging that we believe that intimate same sex relations are an integral part of human life and that covenanted intimate relationships between people of the same sex can be affirmed in contemporary Christian communities based on our reading of scripture and our prayerful reliance on the Holy Spirit. We believe that this understanding reflects the “love commandment” and must reflect a loving, just and fair treatment of LGBTQI Christians within The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Asking the Appropriate Questions

One of the key aspects of biblical interpretation that respects the contextual nature of the biblical text is to approach the text with questions appropriate to its time. We could ask, for example, what the Bible has to say about the internet but this would be an inappropriate question. The internet did not exist in biblical times. However, the Bible can help us understand how we should use the internet. To ask a question like, “does the Bible approve or disapprove of homosexuality?” is also an inappropriate question. The understanding of sexual orientation, as we know and accept it today, as “homosexuality” was not part of the biblical world – indeed the word “homosexuality” did not enter the English language until the 1890s. It is also a question that starts in the wrong place by making non-biblical assumptions. For example, such a question assumes that the Bible has to supply an either/or answer. What if, as we will show below, the Bible clearly rejects certain forms of sexual behaviour without necessarily prohibiting all forms of same sex intimate relationships? It is, therefore, important to go to the Bible as witness to Jesus Christ and seek to discern the appropriate questions to ask about sexuality in the light of Christ and the gospel message. Because the gospel of Jesus Christ is the story of the salvation of humankind and creation we need to ask a more basic question to help us discern its moral teaching. We have to ask what does Jesus Christ and the Bible teach us about what a human being is, what God’s intention is for humanity, and how do these insights inform our understanding of sexual practice? It is this anthropological question, therefore, that is the first question we will address:

1. What does the Bible, through its witness to Jesus Christ, teach us about the nature, meaning and purpose of us, as human beings, in God’s creation?

When we have answered that question we can proceed to a next step in our biblical study. Our second question will then be,

2. How does our biblical understanding of the nature, meaning, and purpose of the human being inform our understanding of appropriate human sexual intimacy within the church?

When we have found solid biblical ground for such a biblical moral logic we can then continue to ask,

3. How do we understand such a biblical moral logic for people who experience same sex sexual attraction and intimate same sex relations as Christians and wish to recognize covenanted monogamous relationships?

Discussion on same sex intimacy in Christian circles often begins with an examination of a series of specific texts that are considered to contain “the biblical teaching on homosexual relationships”. Such an approach is not appropriate within The Presbyterian Church in Canada. Our understanding and the teaching of our subordinate standard, Living Faith, is that the whole of scripture, informed by its witness to Jesus Christ and the gospel, is to be our guide. Only when we have examined the larger questions above will we be ready to respectfully interact with the texts that people identify as representing complete biblical prohibition against same sex relationships. Moreover, we are required to read the whole Bible through the lens of its multifaceted witness to Jesus Christ. In relation to sisters and brothers in our congregations who are in covenanted intimate same sex relationships, the appropriate question to ask is if the Bible clearly and unequivocally prohibits such relationships? Thus, this study will ask,

4. How do texts traditionally associated with a prohibition against same sex intimacy relate to the larger biblical teaching on the human being and appropriate sexual morality within the Christian church, and do they clearly and unequivocally prohibit covenanted Christian same sex relationships?

When we have done all of the above, biblical teaching also requires us to be accountable to one another particularly when we wish to make judgements on one another’s behaviour. We will show how our mutual accountability, deeply rooted in the Bible, requires us to ask if what we believe and teach does harm to one another, or, if what we believe or teach could cause others to harm one another in the Christian community? We will ask to what extent conclusions on the biblical teaching can lead to harm or well-being, and we must test our conclusions against the biblical witness of Jesus Christ. The next question will therefore be,

5. Do our conclusions on covenanted monogamous same sex relationships bring well-being or harm to one another within the church?

In addressing this question the biblical study will address, briefly, the long Christian tradition that developed from the fourth century onwards that rejected all forms of same sex intimacy under the banner of the “sin of sodomy”. The report will pay some attention to how that trajectory of teaching diverged from biblical witness and eventually brought brutal and violent harm to people.

The Biblical Study

1. What does the Bible, through its witness to Jesus Christ, teach us about the nature, meaning and purpose of us as human beings in God's creation?

The New Testament does not order itself in terms of great themes as suggested in the question above but rather responds to pastoral needs in particular contexts. One key place where we can discern who we are is found among the earliest documents of the early church produced by the apostle Paul.³ There is much we can learn about ourselves from the four gospels, but, it is, first of all, in the pastoral writing of Paul to early Christian communities that we learn how our identity is fundamentally wrapped up in the meaning of Jesus Christ himself. Without fail, when Paul addresses our human identity, he does so in response to pastoral challenges in early Christian churches. This contextual reality of these early biblical teachings is very important because it reminds us that no theological or ethical conclusions can be divorced from their pastoral, human and cultural setting. Here is what we can learn from Paul about our nature meaning and purpose.

1.1 Jesus Christ teaches us and demonstrates to us that we are creatures who are all in need of redemption and destined in Christ to receive grace and be set free.

This is the great theme of the opening section of Paul's letter to the Romans. Here Paul emphasized that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). However, this awareness serves as the prelude to the great gospel message of redemption. Romans 5 and 6 show how Jesus Christ brings life and wholeness to us as a gift of grace through faith. By faith we belong to him. The Heidelberg Catechism answers the question of our only comfort in life by the succinct statement,

That I am not my own,
but belong –
body and soul,
in life and in death –
to my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ.

This statement is directly situated in relation to Romans 14:7–9:

We do not live for ourselves only, and we do not die for ourselves only. If we live, it is for the Lord that we live, and if we die, it is for the Lord that we die. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.

In the context of the letter to the Romans, this insight is used to address a pastoral concern about differences of opinion on Christian practices. For Paul, it is unthinkable to address such differences without understanding how we, as Christians, see our identity. For him, who we are, the meaning of our lives, and how we deal with each other is inextricably rooted in living in Christ.

We can only know who we are when we can grasp the meaning of Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection, and cling to him in the faith that he will redeem us through his loving and gracious forgiveness and acceptance that sets us free from bondage and oppression. For us, as Christians, this is true without exception. This insight on the larger logic of Paul's letter to the Romans will become particularly important when we return later to the opening chapter where Paul uses a rhetorical argument to remind the Roman Christians that they all need redemption which is often cited as an unequivocal rejection of same sex relations.

We need redemption because of sin which, Living Faith reminds us, is "a power present in every human life" (2.5.4). Genesis 3 tells the story of sin. Throughout church history there have been many interpretations of what exactly constitutes sin. Many of these perspectives remain helpful in interpreting the story of how sin grasped the lives of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. For Reformed Christians, the emphasis lies on Jesus' teaching about sin which is demonstrated in our rebellion against God. Sin is fundamentally manifest in our bending away from the "love commandment". Later on, we will say more about Jesus' teaching of the "love commandment" as the key to the Bible's core teaching (Matthew 19:19; 22:37–40; Mark 12:31–33; Luke 10:27; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8 and John's version 13:34).⁴ We will see how Jesus lives out this commandment, and demonstrates for us who we are and who we are to become through his redemption. But Jesus understands sin in a much broader way as evil that brings sickness, demon possession, harm, suffering and oppression. His ministry is thus a demonstration of God's redemptive power to set all people free from the effects of evil and sin.

Is this all there is to say about redemption? Not at all! If we study the four gospels in the New Testament, we find much more biblical material, bearing witness to Christ, his act of redemption and how he taught that it should be understood. Even though the church has often emphasized the salvation of the soul and the forgiveness of personal sin as a key element of salvation, Jesus' ministry and teaching illuminate the power and meaning of sin in a much broader way. Jesus shows that the coming of God's kingdom challenges all kinds of evil, and emphasizes the raising up those on the margins of society and the alleviation of suffering. In Luke's gospel, we learn about the major arc of Jesus teaching and example which addresses these issues. Jesus has a special concern for those who suffer most. In a particular way, Jesus is the Saviour of the most vulnerable (e.g. the poor, the disabled, etc.) bringing redemption through healing and serving and liberation. Right at the beginning of the gospel (Luke 1:52–53), his message of good news to the downtrodden and condemnation of the powerful who oppress them is announced in Mary's song:

He has brought down mighty kings from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away with empty hands.

Through Luke 4:18–19 (citing from the Greek versions of Isaiah in the Old Testament),

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people.

Luke goes on to bear witness to this theme through stories of healing of the poor, powerless and marginalized, and such parables as the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 19:1–31) that continues to demonstrate how God in Jesus Christ regards human suffering and, by extension, our suffering with great love that redeems and sets us free.

When we think about LGBTQI people within The Presbyterian Church in Canada, we will do well to remember that throughout the gospels there is a witness of Jesus challenging the exclusion of people formerly considered unclean, unworthy and abominable.⁵ Scholars such as David Bosch believe that the gospel of Matthew was written to address pastoral problems in an early Christian community where the Jewish Christians had trouble including and accepting the Gentile Christians whom they considered to be second class believers. Matthew seems to hold on to both these ideas in creative tension as it moves to the universal sending of the church in the Great Commission. (Bosch 1991, p. 82) That gospel contains stories of Jesus radically reversing old prejudices. Thus, the Canaanite woman seems at first rejected by Jesus in the story in Matthew 15, but then in verse 28 Jesus declares her an example of true faith. Matthew also further supports the witness that Jesus was particularly concerned with those who suffer most. Thus, in the kingdom story of the final judgement (Matthew 25:31–46), Jesus emphasizes that meeting and serving our suffering neighbours in effect we are meeting and serving God. It is worth citing Jesus' conclusion,

The King will reply, "I tell you, whenever you did this for one of the least important of these followers of mine, you did it for me!" (Matthew 25:40)

In this simple story, Jesus demonstrates the importance of the recognition of the dignity of our fellow human beings and our obligation to take their needs and suffering seriously. This story also illuminates Jesus' emphasis that the law and the prophets (thus all scripture) rest on the great "love commandment" (Matthew 22:37–40). The story of the great judgement makes clear that the love of our neighbour, particularly our marginalized and suffering neighbor, and in the case of the subject of this study – LGBTQI Christians, cannot be separated from the love of God (Matthew 25:31–46).

The implications for the subject of this study are far-reaching. It means that Jesus demonstrates a fundamental moral logic – the logic of love of God and neighbour – for our discernment of God's moral guidance for our lives. Any judgement we make as a community of faith has to be measured and weighed in the light of this commandment.

We will return to this insight to see how Jesus illuminates the meaning of Genesis 1:27 which teaches us that God created all human beings in God's image.

To sum up:

- We all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and need Jesus' redemption.
- That Jesus' redemption is focused widely on evil, suffering and personal sin and in a special way on those who suffer most in our society and culture – those who are poor, marginalized and excluded.
- That the emphasis is on the power of Jesus work to bring full and meaningful redemption to us beginning in the present and continuing on.
- That the human being is considered by Jesus to carry dignity and worth.

1.2 Jesus Christ demonstrates that there are no distinct classes of people before God – we are all equal in God's sight.

Yet again we find this insight into the meaning of being human in Paul's attempt to address a pastoral issue. In his letter to the Galatian church, he addresses pastoral problems related to people trying to impose new rules or laws on other Christians. In the midst of this argument he makes clear that all Christians in the church are equal with his famous words,

You were baptized into union with Christ, and now you are clothed, so to speak, with the life of Christ himself. So there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women; you are all one in union with Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:27–28)

Clearly, Paul's intention here is to make a general statement about the nature, meaning and purpose of the baptised members in the Christian community. These are all inclusive words and make clear that, whatever identity or gender we are, we are considered one in Christ. The letter goes on to celebrate the implications of this unity in terms of the tremendous freedom of Christians (Galatians 5:1). This freedom is rooted in Christ who is our freedom and who makes us equal. In this, Christ transcends the human bounds of institutions such as slavery and even gender. The claim of Galatians 3:27–28 is particularly important because of the way it challenged gender and cultural stereotypes in the time of Paul. We will see later that the category "slave" included a significant number of eunuchs with whom Jesus identifies and which also establishes biblical insight into how Jesus qualifies sexual complementarity to include other gender categories.

This is not just an isolated argument by the apostle. A careful examination of the gospels shows how the early church remembered Jesus as consistently challenging the stereotypes of his time. One such example that demonstrates who we are in Christ, can be found in Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce, and his reorientation of male and female in the light of the reality of other gender phenomena apparent in first century Palestine.

1.3 Jesus Christ redefines the meaning of gender difference

It is not an accident that Matthew places Jesus' comments on eunuchs right after discussing divorce and marriage in Matthew 19, (see also Mark 10:2–12 on which Matthew likely based his version of the story). As mentioned earlier, this gospel is probably addressing various issues of diversity that arose in early Christianity. Matthew recalls stories of Jesus' life and ministry that address these issues. In fact, the gospel culminates with the imperative to bring the teaching of Jesus to all the people of the world. Everything in the gospel builds to the great crescendo in its final chapter that sends the disciples into the world to teach and baptize. The conclusion demonstrates to those Christians (who thought that their identity gave them a special status in the church) that they need to understand that Jesus sends the church to bring his teaching love and grace to all peoples. In various ways, the gospel challenges gender bias. We have already seen Jesus do this with the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15.

In Matthew 19, when Jesus addresses marriage and divorce, we need to understand the meaning of his teaching in the light of cultural practices and biases of the time. The emphasis in Jesus' teaching here is not simply on gender but, particularly, on justice between the male and female genders in the community of faith of that time. In that culture, women and men were not considered equal. Jesus is again responding to a "tricky question" and this time about divorce practices. At the time, these led to the abandonment of vulnerable women to the point of hunger and deprivation while men could simply move on with all their assets and power to another relationship. (Nolland 2005, p. 774–775) An important part of Jesus' teaching on divorce is to emphasize the male's responsibility in a marriage relationship and to challenge the way males felt entitled to simply discard their wives when it suited them. Under Roman law, men were not considered adulterers if they had sexual relations outside of marriage. (Keuffler 2001, p. 82) Jesus thus emphasizes the biblical teaching of human responsibility to one another and the mutual accountability of sexual union (Matthew 19:6–9). He is taking a hard line against exploiting women through patriarchal advantage granted by the law of the time. It is no surprise that the story of the "woman caught in adultery" in John 8, makes no reference to the man caught in adultery with the woman. Jesus' reaction and his challenge to the male accusers reiterates his teaching on just and equal treatment in the world of patriarchal gender imbalance of the time. Because we understand the direction of this text as a matter of relational justice, Presbyterians, in the 1960s called on the Canadian government to alter divorce laws to become more just (A&P 1964, p. 350–51, 357; see also the Commentary on the Westminster of Faith Chapter XXIV of Marriage and Divorce presented to that Assembly). We moved in our understanding of the spirit of Jesus' teaching here to seek out balance and justice in the way we address divorce when it happens in our communities. Discussion on sexual orientation often uses this text to argue for biblical support for the idea that Jesus only recognized the gender binary of male and female and that he elevates this to a norm. However, the text is not about gender norms but primarily

about responsibility within marriage. It is even more instructive that Jesus moves immediately to a discussion of the ambiguous gender category of the eunuch in Roman times following this discussion of divorce.

Three kinds of eunuchs were common in the Roman empire of his time. The American Standard translation renders the text this way:

For there are eunuchs, that were so born from their mother's womb: and there are eunuchs, that were made eunuchs by men: and there are eunuchs, that made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.⁶ (Matthew 19:12)

We can compare this with the description of the Roman Jurist Ulpian (170–223) of the common Roman understanding of a eunuch. He describes three kinds, those born that way, those whose genitals were amputated, and those who were made infertile. (Keufler 2001, p. 33) To understand the implications of the biblical text, we also need to understand that eunuchs were considered inferior and shameful in the culture of that time. Their legal status was uncertain because, in the strongly patriarchal honour-shame legal system, they were not considered to be truly men, even though those sterilized could perform sexually. (Keufler 2001, p. 33) Those eunuchs who were slaves were also often sexually used by their male masters and female mistresses. (Keufler 2001, p. 98–100) Most eunuchs were slaves whose genitals were often defaced in their early teens. Roman and Jewish men of the time looked with derision at anyone who did not express their manliness with aggressive male virility. This included men who, for various reasons, were unable to express their male virility in such ways. Eunuchs were reviled and ridiculed in similar ways that LGBTQI people are often treated today. The category of eunuch that Jesus describes as “born” like that might indicate people born with ambiguous or underdeveloped sexual organs. Some such people would physically have two sets or ambiguous sexual organs. Today we call people who find themselves in this state intersex people. Megan DeFranza notes that between 0.02% to 1.7% of people find themselves in this category. (2015, p. 44) Keufler observes, “The bodies of eunuchs served as visible and tangible reminders of their gender ambiguity.” (2001, p. 34) In the absence of an understanding of sexual orientation and gender identity as we know it today, Jesus discussion of eunuchs and their status presents us with the closest biblical reference to gender ambiguity.

The text does not actually claim that, in this reference in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus associates himself with the category of eunuch, but Christian tradition has long thought of Jesus as remaining unmarried and therefore one of those who “made himself” a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Strictly speaking, such an act, as described in Matthew 19:12 would literally mean self-castration. This actually became a practice among some Christian men in later-early Christianity. A practice that seems to depart from a biblical understanding of the human body and God's created intention for it. The Bible never clarifies if Jesus was married or not. Scholars have pointed to a focus on celibacy in the radical Jewish religious sect of the Essenes (200 BCE – First Century CE) and some have associated Jesus with that movement, but such theories remain unproven, (see Hill 1978, p. 279–282).

We should conclude from this interesting passage on the three kinds of eunuchs following on Jesus' teaching about divorce that Jesus expects a level of just accountability in covenanted married relationships that surpasses the cultural norms of our context in ethical excellence. We can also conclude that Jesus introduced an ambiguous gender category – that of the eunuch – as understood and reviled in his time, as reframed within God's kingdom. We can also conclude, through the juxtaposition of these stories in Matthew's gospel (marriage and eunuch), that it is not genitalia and cultural gender assumptions that primarily defines us as human beings but relational accountability. When the early church concludes from the letters of Paul, that Jesus is the new human being (1 Corinthians 15:22) it builds on the conviction that Jesus encompasses all human beings regardless of gender or sexuality. Jesus is thus able to be that new human being for males, females and others (eunuchs) – all are human beings. When Galatians 3:27–28 concludes that in the new reign of Jesus there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, it does so, based on the example and teaching of Jesus as the new human being. He is the one that shows all of us, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, who we are. In fact, the slave category in that text would incorporate the large number of eunuch slaves of that time. Jesus shows us all who we are even if we do not neatly fit into the male or female gender scheme.

Sadly, not all of the New Testament follows the conclusions of Galatians and Romans about our state of equality in Jesus. In our Presbyterian tradition, we have recognized that the parts of the New Testament that contain patriarchal and culturally biased texts contradict the best knowledge we have of Jesus' teaching and ministry. This has led us to conclude that slaves should be set free as a matter of justice – and that women should be considered and treated completely equal to men. This is what Living Faith means when it tells us that “The Bible is to be understood in the light of the revelation of God's work in Christ.” (5.4) Therefore, Jesus' teaching on marriage, and the eunuch, should challenge us again to think carefully about elevating the rightful recognition of male and female gender equality

without equally recognizing other sexual and gender equalities. Jesus clearly understood that gender was not simple in the world he lived in. He recognized that some were born with gender ambiguity and others, through no choice of their own, ended up not fitting the gender categories of the time. Such a gospel example of loving generosity in Jesus Christ should challenge us, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to reappraise biases against LGBTIQI people.

1.4 Jesus Christ illuminates what it means to be creatures of God

As Christians, we understand our origins in terms of the stories of creation in Genesis. Generally speaking, Presbyterians have accepted that the great arc of biblical teaching is that God's story with the world and its people is a story of creation, fall and redemption. That story culminates in Jesus Christ. The book of Genesis plays a key role in this understanding because it tells this story. The Old Testament scholar Walter Breuggemann claims that the great theme of the book of Genesis can be summarized as an expression of God's grace as follows,

“When the facts warrant death, God insists on life for his creatures.” (1982, p. 50)

Although scholars differ on when Genesis reached its final form, there is some evidence that its full written and edited version, as we have it today, was finally established by the time of the exile of God's people in Babylon. (Breuggemann 1982) Breuggemann shows how Genesis unfolds a larger story of promise which would have been a profoundly encouraging message for a people suffering in exile. The promise is of God's redemption of the world and humankind. Within this larger arc of teaching, the opening chapters of Genesis contain the seminal pieces of God's great story of redemption. To take the Bible seriously in reading these texts, we also have to recognize that these texts come to us as poetry and a poetic story. We have to be careful not to literalize these metaphors and we have to be cautious not to make these metaphors into fact. Rather, our task in reading the Bible is to see the depth of meaning contained in poetry and its metaphors. As Presbyterian Christians, we have long acknowledged that the literary nature of these texts is important to their interpretation. So, for example, we do not read Genesis 1–3 as literal or scientific accounts of God's creative process. We understand these great poems as hymns to God and God's relationship with, intention for and love for creation. We also understand these texts as casting light on the meaning and mission of being human in God's world. A good summary of the different theories about the formation of Genesis 1–2 can be found in Terrence Fretheim's exhaustive work, *God and World in the Old Testament*. (2005, p. 30–48) As Christians in The Presbyterian Church in Canada, we understand that we need to read these passages in the light of God's word that came to us in Jesus Christ.

What does Genesis teach us about who we are, and our meaning and purpose? As we saw above, with the Heidelberg Catechism, we understand from these texts that first and foremost we belong to God. Much has been written on how to interpret Genesis 1:27–28 where we find an account of the creation of human beings. Some Christians have read these texts, combined with the second creation account of Genesis 2, as defining the human condition as based primarily on gender complementarity. These interpreters point to Jesus' teaching on divorce and marriage in Matthew 19 to argue that Jesus confirms this understanding. However, as shown above, the text itself shows that Jesus is not primarily addressing a question of gender in Matthew 19. Even though Jesus affirms the natural relationship between male and female, he goes on to expand the understanding of gender categories as well.

We also recognize today that these ancient biblical texts were shaped in a strongly patriarchal society (see above) and HS1994 5.1.7 recognizes that we need to reject the influence of patriarchy when we read these biblical texts. Women theologians have shown how a male or female focused reading of these texts has led Christians to indulge in misogynistic practices. (Gonzales 2007) The Old Testament scholar Terrence Fretheim points out that the texts from Genesis 1 and 2 have also been read in deeply harmful ways in the past, particularly when we make normative rules out of them. (2005, p. 30) So, for example, in the light of Jesus' teaching and the conclusions of the New Testament that there is neither male nor female but only unity in Christ, we need to understand that the male or female gender inequality presented in Genesis was challenged by Jesus Christ. If we are ready to acknowledge that the gender inequality is swept away through our understanding of the gospel, why do we ignore the same logic when it comes to the reality of gender and sexual diversity as we know and understand it today?

A very important consideration can be found in Genesis 1:27 when the poem declares that all humankind is created in the image of God. Many books have been filled with theological interpretations of the meaning of the phrase “image of God”. This is not a bad thing; it bears witness to the wideness of the meaning of the Bible when it speaks to us in poetry.⁷ At the same time, making any of these theological ideas normative risks stretching the intention and meaning of the text. For us, as Presbyterians, our interpretation of that phrase has to begin with Jesus Christ. He demonstrates for us what the image of God is. He embodies the image of God. He is God in human form. He embodies the image of God in the way he engages human beings with respect. He establishes that the image of God in all of us requires a profound loving mutual respect in any relationship. Therefore, a Christ centred reading of

Genesis 1 and 2 on the meaning of the human being should lead us to understand that relational love and accountability is at the core of the image of God as demonstrated in Jesus Christ.

There is an important way in which Jesus Christ illuminates the stories of Genesis 1 and 2 and the meaning of the image of God. In his life and relationships, Jesus Christ demonstrates that human beings are created to live in profound loving relationships.

The movement in Genesis 1:27–28 from the human being (singular) to the human community (male and female), and the movement from Adam (one) to the formation of Adam as a person relating to Eve (Genesis 2), both stress that humans are not created to be autonomous individuals. The image of God in humankind defines us as beings in relationship. Jesus casts light on this relational meaning by demonstrating his relationship of healing love and self-giving with and for humankind. We humans are human in as much as we are in a relationship of love with God and our neighbour through Jesus Christ. The meaning of our lives is to be fruitful and multiply, which is a metaphorical way of declaring that we are to flourish in relationship. (see Fretheim 2005, p. 32) The command to be fruitful, multiply and replenish the earth (Genesis 1:28) is further illuminated by Genesis 2:15 where humans become responsible for the flourishing of creation. (Fretheim 2005, p. 53) This sense of accountable responsibility to one another and God is also what the “love commandment” teaches us.

For all these reasons we do not, in the practice and teaching of the Presbyterian church, elevate “fruitfulness” or “procreative ability” to the level of a biological rule. We do not require couples who cannot have children to abstain from sexual intercourse. We gladly celebrate marriages between people who are beyond child-bearing age. We understand their fruitfulness in many different and creative ways beyond the biological. We see them as grandparents, potential mentors, adoptive parents, and those who fruitfully build other relationships of love and growth for a flourishing community. In short, we understand the biblical teaching of Genesis 1 and 2 to provide metaphorical inspiration for our daily lives rather than a book of casuistic theological rules. It would, therefore, be quite inconsistent for us to insist that the beautiful metaphorical teaching of Genesis 1 and 2 on human fruitfulness must become a normative biological rule of gender complementarity in sexual expressions for people whose gender identity varies from the majority. Why is there gender variance? We do not know the answer to this question. The Bible does not address that question. We do know that such variance exists both among animals and humans. Scientific research tells us that biology plays some role in this, and there are likely a host of other factors. Many people who find themselves in a different place from the majority in the gender spectrum testify that their awareness of gender identity, and sexual orientation is something that is enduring and deeply ingrained from the earliest times they can remember. As we have seen above, Jesus recognizes that gender variance is a reality in creation and he clearly does not condemn it.

1.5 Jesus demonstrates the relational moral logic of the law in the “love commandment”.

“Teacher, which commandment in the Law is greatest?” Jesus replies, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’” (Matthew 22:36–40)

The meaning of being human as related in loving relationship with God and one another is not speculation. It is an illumination of what it means to be human by having flourishing relationships with God and one another in the light of the teaching of Jesus and the witness of the Bible about him.

To be human, then, is to be on a journey with and in Jesus towards becoming like him. This is demonstrated in relationships of respectful love of God and others. Any teaching of the law, any Christian moral insight, has to be subjected to the logic of the “love commandment” because it is the sum of the law and the prophets (Matthew 22:40).

There is much more that can be said about being human in the light of Jesus Christ. For example, we also need to think deeply about the human relationship with the rest of God’s creation. We should also think about our human systems, structures and institutions in the light of Jesus Christ. We also have to explore how we, as human beings, enter the redemptive work of Christ in the world through the mission of the church. This missional dimension of our human call is explored by the report of the Committee on Church Doctrine, “Living in God’s Mission Today”. For the purposes of this biblical study, we will now summarize the discussion above to enable us to move on to hearing the teaching of the Bible on intimate human relationships.

To sum up, the Bible teaches us:

- that we are creatures of God who belong to God in Jesus Christ and who stand in need of liberation from sin, oppression and suffering.
- that we are all equal in Jesus Christ regardless of class, status, race, or gender variance.
- that Jesus, in his teaching about eunuchs, recognizes and identifies with gender difference that goes beyond a simplistic male or female complementarity.
- that as carriers of the image of God, we are relational creatures destined in Christ to be in loving relationship with God and one another.
- that we are made for a moral logic of mutual respect and love as summarized in the “love commandment” taught by Jesus, the law and the prophets.

2. How does our biblical understanding of the nature, meaning and purpose of the human being inform our understanding of appropriate human sexual intimacy within the church?

The discussion above makes three things about our human condition clear. Firstly, human relationships are to grow into and take on the shape of Jesus Christ in his love, respect, nurture, and ultimately his self-giving attitude demonstrated in his willing journey to the cross. Secondly, the love and respect for God and neighbour, rooted in our createdness in the image of God, requires a profound relationship of fairness and justice in our human relationships. Thirdly, we need the life journey of sanctification because we will always struggle with the brokenness of sin which remains a “power present in every human life”. (Living Faith 2.5.4)

Notwithstanding many different forms of marital practice through history, the New Testament Christians and the words of Jesus are seen to embrace covenanted monogamous relationships as the context to live out the “love commandment”. We use the word marriage for such covenants. We have already cited Jesus’ teaching on marriage and divorce in Matthew 19. We have also discussed the cultural meaning of that teaching in its historical context. Key to the understanding of marriage in that case is Jesus’ concern for the vulnerability of women where male patriarchal structures exploit women through divorce. Jesus’ teaching on divorce thus stresses accountability and faithfulness. The perspective of the “love commandment” adds more dimensions to such a covenanted relationship such as respect and love for God and one another with the marriage partner as the closest neighbour. The New Testament does not make completely clear why marriage covenants constitute the rightful context for sexual intimacy. It simply speaks of it in terms of the good example monogamy sets within Christian leadership (for example 1 Timothy 3:2 and 12). Different factors seem to play a role in these monogamy instructions. Cultural structures of the time presupposed an institution of marriage. But marriage in first century Palestine was not at all like marriage in our time. The cultural parameters and expectations were quite different from our time, and presumed unequal roles for women and men in such relationships. Certainly, the early Christian communities did not find immoral and unfaithful relationships acceptable. At the same time, the Bible bears witness to a slow reformation of marriage practices towards more equality within early Christian communities. Even though Ephesians 5:22–25 clearly reflects the cultural bias of patriarchal domination and carries that into the church, it also makes clear that the patriarchic, dominant husband needs to give himself completely in love to his wife as Christ gave himself for us. Thus, the seeming support for patriarchal power captured by the instruction for female submission in Ephesians becomes radically reframed by male self-giving love rather than domination in Galatians. It is clear that the Galatians imperative (Galatians 3:27–8), rooted as it is in Jesus’ teaching and example, took time to find traction in early Christian communities and in gender relationships.

Another Biblical perspective on marriage emerges with seeing Christian marriage as a parallel metaphor for the relationship of Christ with the church. The metaphoric relationship between God and the people of Israel, and Christ and the church, as a marriage has its roots in the story of Hosea and his wife Gomer. After their return from Egypt to Canaan, the people of Israel found themselves surrounded by the animistic religion whose worship centred on the god Baal. Baal controlled the fertility of the land through his sexual union with his sister, Ashtoreth, and the worshippers of Baal believed that by a process of imitative magic, the fertility of the land could be improved by sexual intercourse in the temple. Gomer left Hosea to become a temple prostitute and eventually drifted into slavery. Instead of rejecting her, he bought her out of slavery and restored her as his wife. As he contemplated the whole practice of temple prostitution, he saw how, just as he had been betrayed by Gomer, God had been betrayed by the people of Israel, so he altered the image of the marriage of Baal and the land, and saw God as the husband of the people of Israel – a people who had been faithless – had played the harlot as Gomer had played the harlot with Hosea. Hosea speaks of the covenant relationship built between God and his people as they were brought out of Egypt as a marriage. Israel has broken the covenant and failed to live up to the marriage vows. She has gone

“whoring after false gods”. Yet God will not let her go and in the great reconciling last chapter of the prophecy, God speaking through the prophet promises to “love them freely”. (Hosea 14:3)

Ezekiel, the prophet of the destruction of Jerusalem, picks up the image and uses it explicitly, Ezekiel 16:8–15. The fall of Jerusalem is attributable to the sins of the people of Israel couched in specifically sexual terms, 16:25–27, and the judgement of God is in the terms of an angry husband wronged by his wife, 16:35–43. Hosea had seen the possibilities for good as well as the potential for sin in his use of the allegory. Ezekiel uses the image to condemn Israel in strong sexual language. The metaphorical relationship between God and the people of Israel became a very familiar one.

Ephesians 5:25–33 picks up this image as it had begun to be applied to Christ and the church, and literally applies it to marriage and seems to use it to confirm the Roman patriarchal idea of the inferior position of the woman in marriage. But the author starts to move towards a metaphorical reading of Genesis 2:24 – seeing this union not uniquely as gender based, but rather relation based.

But it also applies to you: every husband must love his wife as himself, and every wife must respect her husband. (Ephesians 5:33)

It is true that this text, under the influence of patriarchal culture of the time, still retains a gender imbalance between love and respect, demanding different things from male and female, yet when we read this in the light of Jesus Christ and his teaching, we should find ourselves constrained to read this text for equality. We are not making such conclusions simply based in cultural change in our time, but rather, based in the biblical witness to Jesus Christ. As Presbyterians, we have made similar conclusions on the place and role of women in leadership in the church. The “love commandment” and the logic of Jesus’ teaching and example as witnessed in the Bible lead us to set slaves free and to treat women with just equality.

What then is the moral logic of such intimate Christian relationships? It seems that the texts above move us to understand that marriage in its ideal form is expressed in a covenanted monogamous relationship of mutual love and cherish, bathed in the mutual respect of the partners for the image of God in the other. In fact, the passage in Ephesians pushes this further by urging Christ-like self-giving love between partners. It thus imagines a certain vulnerability – a truthful “nakedness” and honesty before the other. Where relationships take on this level of mutual respect, vulnerability and self-giving love, they become metaphors and even sermons of the relationship between Christ and the church. This represents the ideal of intimate Christian relationships.

Whereas all Christians are urged to live in the fruit of the Spirit which reflect Jesus Christ, the marriage covenant provides an opportunity for a profound deepening of these fruits in vulnerability and tender cherishing of one another. Such examples of Christian intimacy inspire the world and Christian community.

Sexual intimacy also expresses desire and fulfillment. Later Christian tradition has had more problems with sexual desire than is warranted by biblical teaching itself. Although the development of the rejection of the enjoyment of sexual intimacy in late-early Christianity is an interesting and worthy topic, it is outside the scope of this study.⁸ Here we are trying to look at the Bible and its teaching. The Bible tends to be very matter of fact about sexual intimacy. Paul deals with sexual desire as something natural in 1 Corinthians 7:9. “Better to marry than to burn with desire” is his advice to early Christians. In fact, there is a real way in which covenanted intimate relationships within the Christian community becomes a hedge against those things that tempt us into sin. When we “burn with desire”, so that it becomes subject to excessive out of control sexual desire we can hurt, exploit and use others as objects and violate the “love commandment”. We can violate social norms that bring scandal on the Christian community. The implication of Paul’s instruction in 1 Corinthians 7 is that it is not the desire that is the problem, but an excess of it and its misdirection in exploitation and promiscuity. When we live with such desire we need to find the appropriate and loving place to express it to the glory of God. A covenanted, respectful relationship is that place for Christians. Where we work at healthy, loving, accountable and committed intimate relationships, we minimize the risk to those who are vulnerable to sexual exploitation in our Christian communities.

3. How do we understand such a biblical moral logic for people who experience same sex sexual attraction and intimate same sex relations as Christians and wish to recognize covenanted monogamous relationships?

The New Testament teaching about marriage does not speak of same sex intimate relationships. It is uncertain if same sex marriage covenants existed in the Roman culture of the time. We know that later in history Christian Emperors Constantius and Constans banned same sex unions. (Johansson 1990, p. 683) The reason given for this law was not primarily based in the Bible but in the understanding of the male gender role in the Roman culture. That law bans some kind of same sex union or marriage covenant between same sex partners on the basis that one

partner is acting in an “unmanly” way playing an “inferior” female role. However, no actual further historical evidence has been found that explains the ceremonies that formalized such relationships. One of the major scholars on that period, Matthew Keufler, believes that these ceremonies were probably rare and celebrated between Roman men and eunuchs for which he cites Roman examples of marriages between eunuchs and men. (2001, p. 100–102)⁹ We do know that same sex intimate relationships were a phenomenon in Christian communities by the fourth century because Chrysostom preached against such relationships with great vehemence during his tenure in the city of Antioch. (Crompton 2003, p. 141–142) Later, the Emperor Justinian further radicalized anti-same sex laws a persecution of many bishops in same sex relationships that took place. (Crompton 2003, p. 143–144) When reading the New Testament on same sex relationships, we do need to understand that the concept of sexual orientation, now recognized by the church as a reality in people’s lives in the light of science and experience, was not a known concept of that time. Some Christians in early Christianity did engage in intimate same sex relationships and some Christians, particularly in the Alexandrian school in the third century and later in the fourth century, strongly opposed such relationships.

We also know that, in the third century, there developed a tradition against *all* forms of sex with the exclusion of sexual intercourse that could lead to procreation. This development is not rooted in the Bible but rather in the emergence of a monastic movement that emphasized severe self-deprivation. And even in the case of procreative sex, intimacy was to take place without “passion”. In this view, sex served a purpose outside any form of unitive cherishing and enjoyment for its own sake. This understanding is clearly unbiblical. This conception of sexual expression became part of the monastic tradition of the medieval church but was solidly rejected by the Reformers and our own Reformed-Presbyterian tradition.

When we consider LGBTQI people in relationships today, how does the greater moral logic on covenant, monogamy and love help us discern how intimacy should be considered? Also, how does the teaching, example and “love commandment” of Jesus illuminate our discernment with such sisters and brothers?

There are stories of faithful intimacy in the Bible such as the relationship between David and Jonathan. The story begins in 1 Samuel 18:1–4 (International Standard Version),

When David finished speaking with Saul, Jonathan became a close friend to David, and Jonathan loved him as himself. Saul took David that day and did not let him return to his father’s house. Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as he loved himself. Jonathan took off the robe that he had on and gave it to David, along with his coat, his sword, his bow, and his belt.

Several elements of this story are important. First, there is clearly tender love involved between David and Jonathan, it is a covenanted relationship that moves beyond Jonathan’s loyalty to his father, and the vows are sealed with the exchange of symbolic objects. Later, when Saul decides to kill David, Jonathan honours this profound relationship of love. After making sure his servant will not give away the relationship by sending him away 1 Samuel 20:41–42 reports,

Then David came out from the south side of the rock, fell on his face, and bowed down three times. The men kissed each other, and both of them cried, but David even more. Jonathan told David, “Go in peace since both of us swore in the name of the Lord: ‘May the Lord be between me and you, and between my descendants and your descendants forever.’” Then David got up and left, while Jonathan went to the city. (International Standard Version)

In this stage of the relationship, the Bible story recounts intimate physical cherishing of one another to bring comfort in a very difficult and dangerous situation.¹⁰ So profound is the anticipated separation that both Jonathan and David weep as they anticipate the difficult times ahead. Although we know little of the cultural meaning of such relationships in the time of David and Jonathan, we can see clearly that here is a form of profound same sex intimate relationship that involves mutual physical and emotional comfort and covenant. Scholars have noted different cultural dimensions to this story. Thus, it is important to note the theological and political importance of this story to legitimize David’s kingship and the movement from Saul to David’s royal reign. (Gagnon, 2001, p. 147–148 and Heacock 2011:8–14) There may be a dimension of the ancient idea of “brother making” in the covenant between David and Jonathan. The story does not comment on or imply the most intimate forms of sexual intimacy. Nevertheless, biblical scholars have also argued that there are strong elements of same sex love in equality in this story. (Nissinen 1998, p. 55 ff. and Jennings 2005, p. 34–35) Jennings concludes that in the subversion of the power relationship between the older Jonathan and the younger David, this story anticipates something like committed same sex relationships as we understand them today. (Jennings 2005, p. 5) At the very least, this story offers a positive biblical example of same sex love. We can also see that this relationship reflects Jesus’ teaching about

human responsibility and love as between two men as required by the “love commandment”. We have no biblical evidence to claim that David and Jonathan’s relationship was intimately sexual. However, the Bible bears witness to a profound relationship of love between two men that included physical cherishing, holding and kissing.

Another story of a positive and profound same sex relationship from the Old Testament is the story of Naomi and Ruth. This story forms part of a remarkable set of narratives in both the Old and New Testaments that demonstrates the inclusion and welcome of outsiders as documented in the work of Anthony Spina. (2005; see also Lings 2013, p. 616 ff)

The Old Testament scholar Renato K. Lings writes,

Written in classical Hebrew, the story contains the passionate declaration of loyalty and life-long commitment spoken by a Moabite woman Ruth to Naomi, an Israelite woman from Bethlehem. (Lings 2013, p. 617)

Lings notes that this story has often received little attention in discussion on the biblical perspective on same sex relationships. It is of importance, for our subject, to note that in the opening section of the book an important parallel occurs between Genesis 2:24 and Ruth 1:14. The International Standard Version translates Ruth in this way,

They began to cry loudly again. So Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye, but Ruth remained with her.

However, the phrase “remained with her” in Hebrew is *dovqah bah* which parallels that same language in Genesis 2:24 “Therefore a man will leave his father and his mother and cling to his wife, and they will become one flesh.” In Genesis 2:24, the Hebrew for “cling to” is rendered *davaq beishto*. (Lings 2013, p. 618) Ling refers to Ruth having “clung” to Naomi. This parallel use of the same Hebrew expression lends strong support to Reformed scholar James Brownson’s argument that Genesis 2:24 must be read not simply as a statement of gender complementarity but as a Hebrew expression for the forging of a kinship bond. In this case the bond is between two women. (Brownson, 2013, p. 109) The story continues with the beautiful and loyal covenant commitment made by Ruth,

Because wherever you go, I’ll go. Wherever you live, I’ll live. Your people will be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I’ll die and be buried. May the Lord do this to me – and more – if anything except death comes between you and me. (Ruth 1:16–17)

There is great and wide significance to the story of Ruth where a Moabite outsider becomes an intimate part of the story of the people of God. The story, draws attention to the vulnerability of women in a patriarchal society where protection can only be provided by a male in the extended family – a theme that reappears in a parallel situation in Jesus’ concern for the vulnerability of women in patriarchal divorce practices. The Ruth and Naomi story is one of the transgression of cultural taboos across cultural, racial and gender lines in an intimate relationship between two women who are witnessed by the Bible to be blessed by God in this relationship.

The strength, commitment, loyalty and equality expressed across prejudicial boundaries of race and gender reflect much of what we have discussed about the New Testament teaching on marriage. We find in these two women, a love that reflects a profound reflection of the “love commandment” both in the love of God (your God will be my God) and the love and respect of neighbour. In her study on the book of Ruth, Celena Duncan concludes the following about this story:

Were Ruth and Naomi close in-laws, friends or sexual intimates? Labeling their relationship is to limit and diminish what they had. (Duncan at the end of Ling’s extended discussion of this relationship; see Lings 2013, p. 618–626 for an in-depth discussion of this relationship)

In the story of the relationship between Jesus and the “beloved disciple”, we have a parallel with the stories of David and Jonathan, and Ruth and Naomi. There is considerable debate among scholars about the identity of the “beloved disciple” mentioned 19 times in different variants of the gospel. (Lings 2013, p. 645) Although church traditions often mention John, the son of Zebedee, the evidence for this is slim. (Lings 2013, p. 644; see also Hanks 2000, p. 64; Nissinen 1998, p. 121; Jennings 2003, p. 43) A stronger candidate is Lazarus. (Lings 2013, p. 644) For the sake of this study the particular identity of the beloved disciple is not key to the discussion. However, the biblical witness is that Jesus has a particular loving and special relationship with one disciple that included openly recognized physical cherishing (John 13:23–24). It is significant that, according to the gospel of John, Jesus and this disciple received mutual physical comfort in the face of Jesus impending death. We can all imagine how meaningful physical cherishing can be when we find ourselves in extreme situations of challenge, pain and grief. We find the

key biblical text in John 13:23–24. Here the beloved disciple is acknowledged as one who had special access to Jesus. Biblical scholars note that the presence and role of the disciple is woven into the larger narrative of John's gospel. So, for example, Lings notes that there is evidence that the figure referred to as another disciple (John 18:15–16) might be the same as the beloved disciple. John 13:23–24 in a translation closer to the original Greek than most modern translations in the International Standard Version reads,

One of his disciples, the one whom Jesus kept loving, had been sitting very close to him. So Simon Peter motioned to this man to ask Jesus about whom he was speaking. Leaning forward on Jesus' chest, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?"

In the gospel of John this disciple remains faithful and loyal to Jesus, courageously remains with Jesus right up to the point of his death on the cross. This disciple seems to be the only male disciple present at the cross in the way John 19:26 describes the event. (Lings 2013, p. 645) When the gospel of John tells the story of the resurrection, it stresses that Mary Magdalene first took the news to Simon Peter and the "other disciple", and that disciple outruns Peter to the grave (John 20:2–4). He is the first believer in the resurrection (John 20:8) and the first one who recognizes Jesus on the beach after the resurrection (John 21:7). Many LGBTQI Christians bear witness to having found great comfort and hope in this story when they struggled with rejection, judgement and persecution in their Christian communities. Here is someone who loved Jesus with a great devotion and commitment similar to their experience of loving and following Jesus even in the face of the persecution. Moreover, their experience in relation to their partners felt similar to Paul's reflection on marriage, as a metaphor or sermon on the love between Jesus and the church.

There is no reason to believe, nor is there a biblical argument to be made that Jesus and the beloved disciple engaged in sexual intercourse. The same can be said of Jesus and heterosexual relationships. This is not why this story is discussed here. Rather, this relationship demonstrates that Jesus developed a deep emotional and physical bond with another male disciple who is considered exemplary and blessed.

4. How do texts traditionally associated with a prohibition against same sex intimacy relate to the larger biblical teaching on the human being and appropriate sexual morality within the Christian church?

Our study so far has given us much biblical support for respecting, loving and treating LGBTQI Christians with justice and equality. Primarily, this is rooted in whom we are created and intended to be and become as human beings. It has established that there are biblical examples of profound covenantal and loving relationships of people of the same sex described in positive ways in the Bible. We have also seen that Jesus affirms sexual complementarity with the proviso that it is to be an equal and just complementarity. At the same time, Jesus recognized and may have associated himself with a third category of gender identity in his own time – the eunuch. The three kinds of eunuchs he recognized were males and intersex people whose sexual ability and experience differs from heterosexual norms either for reasons of birth, choice or abusive force. This class of person, in the time of Jesus, was almost completely associated with slaves. Not all of these classes of eunuchs abstained from sexual intimacy. Thus, when we read in Galatians 3 "that there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women" but only unity in Christ we need to consider gender variance as part of that equality. Such recognition follows Jesus' own actions of including those who were excluded and marginalized in his time, and it also reflects the moral logic of the "love commandment".

What we have not addressed so far is if these principles extend to intimate sexual intercourse between people of the same sex. Generally speaking, the principles outlined above should lead in that direction in as much as it would constitute Christians treating each other with loving and just equality. Yet we have to ask,

Could it be that the witness of Jesus and the Bible teaches that people of the same sex can love each other profoundly and exclusively, cherish and support each other physically and emotionally, and even desire each other sexually, yet, to act on that sexual desire would become sinful and unacceptable?

This is the conclusion reached by the Statement on Human Sexuality of the 1994 General Assembly. After doing some biblical study it concludes,

6.20 Is homosexual practice a Christian option? Our brief, exegetical review of biblical texts set within the broader biblical perspective on our vocation as sexual beings leads us to say 'No'. Committed heterosexual union is so connected with creation in both its unitive and procreative dimensions that we must consider this as central to God's intention for human sexuality. Accordingly, scripture treats all other contexts for sexual intercourse, as departures from God's created order. It may be asked, 'If sexuality is God's good gift to humanity, why must there be rules to discipline its expression?' In reply, the Bible refuses to countenance any dualism that would divide spiritual life from bodily life. Contrary to the

culturally-sanctioned sexual practices of a city like Corinth, Paul proclaimed a divinely-ordained morality where Christians must see themselves, body and soul, as being the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:18–20). Although our society demands the right to sexual expression and largely ignores such discipline, the church submits to God's guidance.

6.21 Can one argue in favour of homosexual relationships on the basis of their caring quality? There is no question that the love and commitment of some homosexual relationships can be stronger than that in church sanctioned marriages. However, grace and law are not separated. Law and love are companions, not enemies.

Jesus said: 'If you love me you will keep my commandments.' (John 14:15) Love in the Bible is not a sentimental or indulgent emotion; nor is it primarily sexual. Love honours God and cares for the neighbour. It is made known to us in God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Loving God, loving our neighbour, loving ourselves, will often mean, not the fulfillment of every desire, or the meeting of every perceived need, but the acceptance of denial and sacrifice which is at the heart of the Christian faith.

6.22 Is 'No' the only word that the church has for those who struggle with homosexuality? To be merely negative is lacking in pastoral sensitivity. The church must listen to and share the very real pain of homosexuals and their families. While we cannot ignore the direction of scripture, at the same time we cannot minimize either the human pain or the human potential of homosexual men and women; nor can we ignore our Scriptural calling to witness to God's love of all God's people and the power of grace.

6.23 God has so created us that we, humans, need one another. Social intercourse is necessary for all. Sexual intercourse, however, is not. Life can be full and abundant for the single, both homosexual and heterosexual, without sexual intercourse, despite the dictates of current society. Sexuality, which is inherent to us all, can be expressed in other ways than by genital activity – in friendship, in affection, in touch and in belonging. The alternative is not between the intimacy of homosexual intercourse on the one hand, and the pain of isolation and repression on the other. 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. All Christians, whether our sins are of the spirit or of the flesh, whether heterosexual or homosexual, need God's forgiveness and mutual forgiveness as we pursue together the path of holy living. Grace abounds, and in our weakness God's strength is made known.

6.24 Some will refuse our call for homosexual chastity as impossibly idealistic, or reject it as psychologically unhealthy. Sexual chastity, it is argued, is a gift, and not everyone with a homosexual orientation has this gift. However, the grace offered by the Lord Jesus Christ is neither cheap, allowing us acceptance without repentance, nor is it powerless. The gospel contains within it not only the demand for transformation but the power to achieve it.

Several things must be noted when citing this conclusion by the HS1994 statement. Firstly, the report acknowledges that it only does brief exegetical work. Secondly, the report as a whole wisely concludes by saying,

The implications of this report for pastoral care are far-reaching and deserve much more careful consultation and consideration than your committee has been able to give them. No Christian position on human sexuality can be considered definitive until such implications have been carefully and prayerfully thought through.

It must also be noted that both our understanding of sexual orientation and gender identity has deepened since the time of the report. These understandings contribute to the pastoral care implications mentioned in the conclusion. They include strong evidence that the kind of position outlined in HS1994 does harm to LGBTQI teens and adults who are vulnerable in non-affirming Christian communities. We must also note several points of tension between the HS1994 statement and the biblical study conducted so far. These are,

- The statement assumes a fundamental gender complementarity as the basis for any form of acceptable Christian practice. So far, in our study, such a claim as an exclusive claim is not supported by this biblical study. We will deal with this further below.
- The HS1994 statement does not study or discuss Jesus' teaching on the status of the eunuch. It also assumes a reading of Genesis 2:24 that leads to an exclusive biological rule of gender complementarity in all sexual relationships. Such an exclusive claim is neither obvious nor supportable in the light of the

teaching of Jesus and the “love commandment”, and a recognition of the cultural context and style of the text itself.

- The statement makes an assumption that “keeping Jesus’ commandments” means that there is no appropriate place for same sex sexual intercourse in Christian communities. However, in claiming Jesus’ commandment the report does not give attention to fuller biblical understanding of whom the human being is and God’s creative intent in the light of the biblical witness to Jesus. It does not consider that love of LGBTQI sisters and brothers requires a recognition of their dignity as carrying the image of God. Neither does it listen to LGBTQI Christians who bear witness to God’s blessing on their relationships. At the very least, the “love commandment” and the biblical witness to Jesus requires that.
- The statement also diverges, without explanation, from the biblical Paul’s teaching on sexual desire, “It is better to marry than to burn with desire.” (1 Corinthians 7:9) In the process it denies LGBTQI Christians equality in treatment before God and the Christian community, and it denies LGBTQI Christians a holy way to express strongly experienced sexual desire within a loving covenanted relationship. We have to ask: does such a denial of equal treatment and the reality of desire fulfill Jesus’ “love commandment”?

The conclusions of HS1994 are reached by looking at biblical texts that are commonly assumed to say something about same sex sexual activity. But what do these texts actually say? This study will address the same texts under the following themes:

1. Is male or female sexual complementarity a fundamental requirement for holy sexual intercourse?
2. What does the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19) teach us about appropriate sexuality?
3. What does Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 prohibit?
4. Is all same sex sexual activity wicked and “against nature” (Romans 1)?
5. What kind of sexual behaviour do the “vice lists” of the Paul’s letters refer to (the interpretation and translation history of 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10)?

4.1 Is male or female sexual complementarity a fundamental requirement for holy sexual intercourse?

We have already touched on the theory of male or female sexual complementarity in the study above. The question before us is not if male or female sexuality expressed in a covenant of marriage is acceptable within Christian communities. Nor is the question if covenanted relationships are necessary for appropriate sexual relationships in Christian communities. Both these things are assumed and are well supported by biblical teaching in the light of the witness to Jesus and the “love commandment”. The question here is whether the male or female binary is fundamental or essential for an appropriate expression of sexual intimacy? The conclusions against the validity of all same sex sexual relationships in HS1994 fundamentally hangs on the argument that male or female sexual complementarity *is* fundamental and normative. The argument is based on reading the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2 as evidence that God exclusively creates only males and females. It also requires the assumption that procreation is essential to an appropriate Christian sexual relationship. As mentioned earlier, Jesus’ comments on marriage and divorce and his reference to Genesis 2:24 plus the teaching on marriage in the New Testament, which assumes a male or female relationship, is taken as further support for this theory. Sometimes this argument is further developed by reading Romans 1 as meaning that same sex sexual relations are by definition against God’s creational intent and therefore sinful. We will discuss Romans 1 and its place in the letter later. For now, we will focus first on the Genesis creation texts.

The approach followed by the HS1994 statement follows the theological argument that the creation narratives establish the idea that the image of God in humankind is not sexless Divine substance but, rather, sexually differentiated. This means that the image of God has to express male and female gender as well as the biological differentiation. The evangelical scholar Megan DeFranza challenges this view arguing that this particular emphasis, rooted in dialectical theologies of the twentieth century, establishes a binary model of sex differentiation rather than a Trinitarian relational model which recognizes that God and God’s image is beyond gender and sexual organs. (2015, p. 148)

This theological development moves male or female gender difference from the level of “normalcy” to normativity. It is important for this biblical study to remember that this move to normativity, based in the Genesis narrative, is an act of theological interpretation and not simply of biblical interpretation. What happens is that the condition of being either male or female now is understood as part of the God-intended “ontology”. That is, it is part of the nature of the being of human beings and it is God’s only intent that human beings are either male or female. For people born intersex, with unclear distinction of sexual body parts this means that they become less than human in some way. For people who find themselves with a non-heterosexual sexual orientation this means that they are considered in

some way disordered and in some way, in their very being, deficient before God. But the Genesis texts should not be read this way since it denies that our LGBTQI sisters and brothers their place as children of God. This is not what the “love commandment” would lead us to conclude.

We have already discussed the problems with elevating biological gender complementarity to the level of normativity in section 1.4 above (p. 515–16). As we pointed out, Presbyterian Christians do not read these texts literally and normatively when it comes to creation. We understand the 7 days of creation as metaphorical, and the Garden of Eden and the naming of the animals as metaphorical for our relationship with creation. The message of the poem and story of creation is one that emphasizes the rightness and goodness of God’s creation, God’s wish for humankind to flourish together in community, and the proper role of faithfulness between those who covenant together to form a family or kinship bond. There is much more to be learned from these creation accounts. These stories set themselves apart from surrounding cultures by emphasizing God as the God of creation rather than created objects being “god”. Humans are not God but stand in a profound relationship of love, justice and responsibility with one another and creation thus carrying God’s image in some way. Our logic as we read these passages is to understand them in terms of the culture and world-view of the time. We do not expect them to tell us about scientific theories. Just because something, like other galaxies, is not mentioned does not mean that we deny their existence. To read these texts in accountability to our LGBTQI sisters and brothers, therefore, also requires us to be consistent when we apply our understanding of cultural context to sexuality and gender. When Genesis 2:24 states that a man shall leave his father and mother and “cling” to his wife, it does not logically follow that God would not approve of two women who cling to one another in deep covenanted love. James Brownson offers an exhaustive discussion of the concept of “one flesh union” and the Hebrew concept of “cleaving or clinging to”, and challenges an exclusive biological reading of this text.¹¹ We have already argued that as Presbyterians we understand “being fruitful and multiply” in a metaphorical way – indicating community enriching relationships that help humans flourish.¹² In fact, if we read these texts in the light of Christ, his teaching and example, we are led to conclude a more generous, gracious and just recognition of those whose gender identity and sexual orientation does not follow the majority. Simply put, Genesis 1 and 2 are not texts intended to teach us how to understand gender variance and sexual orientation. Our task at hand, to discern a biblical perspective on covenanted intimate same sex relationships require us to imagine how to extend Jesus’ teaching and attitude towards outsiders, unclean gentiles, Samaritans, the gender challenge and variance of eunuchs to covenanted same sex relationships. If we do that, the Bible guides us to be generous, just and hospitable to covenanted same sex relationships.

To conclude, if one approaches the biblical text with the assumption that God rejects same sex sexual intimacy it might lead to an argument for a normative male or female requirement for sexual relations. However, if one considers the poetic and narrative styles of the Genesis 1 and 2 texts, the influence of patriarchy and cultural norms of the time, the teaching of Jesus and the “love commandment”, reaching such a conclusion is not biblically supported.

4.2 What does the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19) teach us about appropriate sexuality?

The Statement on Human Sexuality of 1994 gives the story of Genesis 19 very little attention. Since 1994, there has been a growing body of research on the Sodom and Gomorrah stories. This is particularly relevant because Christian tradition, from the fourth century onwards, developed a teaching against the sin of sodomy. This sin is essentially associated with the story of Genesis 19. It is beyond the scope of this biblical study to discuss this tradition fully. However, it is very important to note several things. Firstly, we need to note that the concept of sodomy and the sin of sodomy is not the same thing as “homosexuality”.¹³ Secondly, the definition and understanding of sodomy took many different forms including heterosexual sexual excesses. Thirdly, the history of this teaching represents some of the most shameful acts committed by the church against those accused of sodomy including, severe torture, public starvation to death, live burning at the stake, and the mutilation of the genitals of the accused. In the Reformed Presbyterian tradition, this abhorrent history continued. In Protestant Geneva, victims accused of sodomy were broken on the wheel (tied and systematically beaten to death); others were publicly burned; a woman accused of lesbianism was held under water until she drowned; slaves were publicly hanged. In the Protestant Dutch Republic, the prosecution of “sodomites” even involved child abuse and drowning teenage boys by holding them down in barrels of water. The important thing to remember here is that the involvement of the Christian church in this tradition was far removed from the gospel of Jesus Christ and the imperative of the “love commandment”. It was without a doubt on the wrong side of Christ.¹⁴

The interpretation of Genesis 18–19 as a text addressing same sex sexual intercourse in general is a post-biblical development most commonly traced to the Jewish scholar Philo of Alexandria. Within the Old Testament, this text

is of great importance and receives mention in 20 places. Whenever it is mentioned in the Old Testament, there are four basic interpretations of the meaning of the story.

- The severity of judgement of destruction, desolation and ruin upon Sodom and Gomorrah (Deuteronomy 29:2; Isaiah 13:20–21; Jeremiah 49:18 and 50:40; Isaiah 13:21; Jeremiah 50:39; Jeremiah 49:17; Amos 4:11; Zephaniah 2:9).
- The pride and arrogance among the Sodomites (Ezekiel 16:56; Ezekiel 16:49–50; Isaiah 13:19; Jeremiah 49:14–18; Jeremiah 50:29; Jeremiah 50:31; Jeremiah 50:40; Zephaniah 2:9–10).
- The identification of the sin of Sodom as apostasy and idolatry (Deuteronomy 29:22–25; Deuteronomy 32:32–33; Isaiah 3:8–9; Jeremiah 50:38; Ezekiel 16:48–51).
- The association of the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah with corruption and oppression (Jeremiah 23:14; Isaiah 1:21–23; Isaiah 1:10; Isaiah 1:15–16).

Clearly, the Hebrew tradition of the Old Testament did *not* associate the sin of Sodom with sexual activity.

Sodom and Gomorrah enjoys mention in nine places in the New Testament where it is used:

- as a metaphor for judgement and the suddenness of the second coming of Christ (Matthew 11:23–24; Luke 17:29–31).
- a failure to heed the gospel message and some connection to hospitality (Matthew 10:15; Luke 10:12).
- in themes similar those of the Old Testament prophets (Romans 9:29; Revelations 11:8).

There are also references in the later biblical material in Jude and 2 Peter. Jude was probably written earlier than 2 Peter, and 2 Peter likely draws on Jude and other extra biblical writings (pseudepigraphical texts – spurious writings, especially writings falsely attributed to biblical characters or times such as *The Assumption of Moses*) for its reference. (Lings 2013, p. 276–278) In this later New Testament tradition, a new emphasis is placed on associating the sin of Sodom with sexual immorality. However, the immorality addressed is not same sex activity but heterosexual excess. (Lings 2013, p. 278; see also Lings’ references to Carden 2004 and Miller 2010) Modern translations that imply that Jude verse 7 refers to “homosexual activities” (e.g. International Standard Version) make assumptions not present in the actual Greek text (which speaks of “other flesh” – not a term used for same sex activity in the cultural context of the time). Jude is citing from spurious sources. The translational bias towards condemning “homosexuality” has its roots in modern prejudice built on the development of the idea of “sodomy” which dates to later Christianity. It would take another two centuries after the New Testament, before the argument of the Jewish scholar, Philo of Alexandria, that the principle sin of Sodom was same sex sexual behaviour was adopted by the architects of Christendom. For the theme of our study it is very important to note how Bible translation has been influenced by later developments in Christian thinking. For a responsible and honest reading of these texts in accountability to LGBTQI sisters and brothers, we need to consider how the later idea of Sodom’s sin has reshaped a view not initially supported by the biblical text.

But, does the story of Genesis 19 not clearly imply same sex sexual intercourse as the bad things that the men of the city wanted to do to Lot’s visitors? To try and answer this question raises surprising problems of interpretation. The first problem lies in the Hebrew expression “to know” someone. In classical Hebrew the concept to know (*yada*) has often become synonymous with “to have sexual relations with”.¹⁵ However, scholarship on this use of this term in the Old Testament shows that this term has a set of complex meanings. In the telling of Genesis 18–19, its use is further complicated by a parallel in the Hebrew text between God “seeing what is going on” in Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:21) and the men of Sodom wanting “to know” God’s visitors (Genesis 19:5). Scholars point out that the verb used here are two cohortatives¹⁶ of “*yada*” thus implying mutual investigation rather than a sexual act. It appears that Genesis 19 might speak of an attempt at an inquisitorial, violent and torturous, act of interrogation.¹⁷ This understanding, suggested by the shape of the text itself, also bears out the New Testament hints that the sin of Sodom is exploitative and unjust inhospitality to the stranger and the vulnerable. Could the Genesis 19:5 text be read as same sex sexual desire? Perhaps, but then it is also a desire to commit violent rape. Whatever the exact meaning of this text, it speaks of some form of wicked, violent, abusive intent. There is nothing in this story that can be interpreted as a condemnation of covenanted loving relationships between partners of the same sex. This biblical insight also suggests that, as Presbyterian Christians today, we should deal critically with the development of the idea of the sin of sodomy from the fourth century onwards.

4.3 What does Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 prohibit?

When discussing the biblical material HS1994, section 6.7 makes reference to Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. It does not discuss these texts extensively and does not examine the actual texts, who their audience is, and what kind of

behaviour they actually prohibit. HS1994 also observes that the use of texts like this from the “Holiness Code” in the Old Testament for Christian ethics today needs further study. Nevertheless, some Presbyterians continue to claim that these two texts clearly prohibit all forms of same sex intimate relationships. It is therefore important to give the texts themselves a fuller treatment and discussion of what they mean for LGBTQI Christians. There is a vast amount of scholarship on these two texts. Lings shows that there are at least 12 different theories in both Judaism and Christianity about what kind of sexual behaviour is actually prohibited here. (2013, p. 228) Clearly the cultural context and our limited understanding of seventh century BCE Judah makes it difficult to draw clear and unequivocal conclusions. It is important to realize that these texts do not have simple or clear interpretations. Additional insight into the classical Hebrew and its interpretation, as well as issues of context, continue to be debated by scholars.

The first thing we need to establish when looking at these two texts from Leviticus is that, in the patriarchal system of the Hebrew culture of the time, the intended audience is likely married male Hebrew men. The set of other sexual prohibitions in the context of chapters 18 and 20 of Leviticus deals in various ways with the patriarchal system of marriage and how kinship bonds among family might be violated. One of the key violations of the kinship based marriage code that a married male Hebrew man of the time could commit was to deny his wife his sperm. A woman’s place and role in the patriarchal system of marriage was determined by her right to become pregnant by her husband. Sexual acts such as masturbation per se is not proscribed but when seed is spilled in intercourse, such as in the case of Onan (Genesis 38:9–10), it is considered a violation. (Milgrom 2000, p. 1567) Indeed, the accepted practice of using birth control during intercourse by Presbyterians today, would constitute a violation of the marriage bond under the “Holiness Code”. In Leviticus 18, the text associated with male same sex sexual intercourse is also immediately preceded by a discussion of the idolatrous worship of the god Molech.

After examining the prohibitions of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 in the light of the laws of surrounding Middle Eastern cultures of the time, Rabbi Jacob Milgrom concludes that the rationale for this specific prohibition in seventh century Judah is rooted in the lack of procreative purpose in sexual intercourse. (2000, p. 1567) This argument is supported by the context of the texts with other prohibitions that surround them and also the cultural context and the theories of “P” and “H” traditions (“P” is the priestly concern for pure ritual like the worship of Molech, in the preceding verse to Leviticus 18:22, and “H” is the larger concern for purity of the land). Milgrom shows that the Hebrew plural tense indicates illicit sexual relations in the “Holiness Code” while the singular tense indicates acceptable practice. The text literally reads something like this in Hebrew, “a man shall not lie with a man (as) the ‘lyings’ down of women”. We also have to note that other biblical scholars have pointed out that “women” in this text might be better translated with “wives” and “lyings down” as beds. (Lings 2013, p. 206–212) In the biblical context of this text, Milgrom concludes,

Thus since illicit carnal relations are implied by the term *miskiibe ’isso*, it may be plausibly suggested that homosexuality is herewith forbidden for only the equivalent degree of forbidden heterosexual relations, namely, those enumerated in the preceding verses (D. Stewart). However, sexual liaisons occurring with males outside these relations would not be forbidden. And since the same term *miskebe ’isso* is used in the list containing sanctions (20:13), it would mean that sexual liaisons with males, falling outside the control of the paterfamilias, would be neither condemnable nor punishable. Thus *miskiibe ’isso*, referring to illicit male/female relations, is applied to illicit male/male relations, and the literal meaning of our verse is: do not have sex with a male with whose widow sex is forbidden. In effect, this means that the homosexual prohibition applies to Ego with father, son, and brother (subsumed in v. 6) and to grandfather grandson, uncle-nephew, and stepfather-stepson, but not to any other male. (2000, p. 1567)

If we, as Christians, were to take guidance from this Jewish perspective on the “Holiness Code” and its application, we would conclude that this text, even taken as still applicable to our situation today, does not prohibit covenanted same sex intimacy. It does give guidance in terms of prohibiting sexual marital unfaithfulness and perhaps other forms of incestuous exploitation of males within a wider kinship family system. K. Renato Lings makes a strong and persuasive case for reading these two texts in their context and sentence constructions as prohibitions against same sex incest. (2013, p. 232–238) To put it simply, it forbids the kind of sexual intercourse between males that damage bonds of covenant and love. Such a reading of this text also reflects the logic of Jesus’ “love commandment”. Some scholars argue that these texts and their prohibitions constitute such rare constructions in the Hebrew language that reading them as if intended to be a universal rejection of all forms of same sex intimacy simply does not make sense. If that were the intention, they point out, then the text would simply read, “you shall not lie with a male”. (Stewart 2006, p. 97)

Although scholars will continue to debate the finer points of translating these texts and their meaning, what will be clear from the discussion above, is that these texts, taken in their biblical and cultural context, and considered in the light of the problems of translating classical Hebrew, cannot simply be interpreted as a clear and unequivocal normative prohibition against covenanted intimate same sex relationships as we know them today. These considerations also do not yet deal with how Christians are to interpret the moral laws of the “Holiness Code” in Leviticus. The key to that question lies with the biblical witness to Jesus Christ and particularly how the great “love commandment” frames our reading of these texts. The interpreters cited above have begun to map a way for us to understand the moral teaching of Leviticus 18:22 and Leviticus 20:13 as still being valid in the way they point to the profound respect for faithfulness in marriage and respect for not sexually violating others within a wider family circle.

Although other texts in the Old Testament are sometimes cited to prohibit all forms of same sex intimacy, such texts are not really applicable to either same sex relationships or to covenanted faithful same sex relationships. There are no prohibitions of intimate woman to woman relationships in the Old Testament. This is not surprising as the patriarchal system would not consider such female sexual intimacy as violating the patriarchal code of kinship bonds. What then of the New Testament? Does Romans 1 not clearly teach that all same sex intimacy, both male and female is against nature and therefore wrong?

4.4 Is all same sex sexual activity wicked and “against nature” (Romans 1)?

If one were to assume, as later Christianity from the third century onwards did, that Genesis 19, Leviticus 18:22 and Leviticus 20:13 prohibit all forms of same sex sexual intimacy, one would naturally be biased towards reading Romans 1 through that lens. But, what does Romans 1 actually say? What is the context of its statements and what is the intent of the author? Does Paul refer to the Old Testament texts cited above and read them in that way? Is this chapter an instruction in a kind of universal Christian sexual morality?

Having seen how the Old Testament texts that are often assumed to be the basis for Romans 1 do not support a normative rejection of all forms of same sex intimacy, we would do well to proceed with caution in reading these texts in our accountability to LGBTQI sisters and brothers. These texts also need to be read subject to the biblical witness to Jesus Christ and his “love commandment”.

HS1994 makes the following argument,

6.10 In his letter to Romans, Paul widens his condemnation of homosexual practice to include sexual activity of women with women. (1:26–27) Homosexual practice is distinguished from a catalogue of depravity (verses 29–31) as an instance of the divine judgement at work in consequence of the idolatry (verses 21–22) of worshipping the creature rather than the Creator. The suppression of the truth about God leads to a perversion in reasoning (verses 21–28) and opens the road to the practice of all those things which should not be (verses 29–31). In particular, Paul condemns homosexual practice as the exchange of ‘natural’ relations between men and women for relations that are ‘contrary to nature’.

Similar conclusions are drawn by Robert Gagnon (2001, p. 229–230) and Calum Carmichael (2010, p. 173).

We will show here that the argument of HS1994 on the content and meaning of Romans 1:26–31 presupposes a set of assumptions which simply do not follow from the text, its cultural context or current scholarship. The HS1994 statement has a surprisingly sparse section on this passage and seems to be unaware of much of the scholarship on the passage that was already available in 1994. Moreover, it rejects Hendrick Hart’s discussion of the rhetorical structure of this part of Romans (HS1994, 6.1.3), claiming that other scholars disagree without citing a single example or explaining why such authors refute Hart’s argument. At the very least these arguments deserve full attention because they point to the place of the texts under consideration within the larger narrative structure of the book of Romans. It is very important, in our Presbyterian interpretive tradition, to read the text in its biblical and cultural context. Since 1994, the volume of research on Romans has expanded dramatically, casting more light on the text and calling into question the kind of conclusions reached by HS1994. HS1994 assumes, without explanation, that Romans 1:26–27 rejects “sexual activity of women with women”. The authors seem unaware that the early church never interpreted Romans 1:26–27 in that way. Important authors such as Augustine and Clement of Alexandria identified those texts with heterosexual activity. (Brownson 2013, p. 207) In fact, the first time these two verses were read as referring to lesbian relationships is by St. Chrysostom in the fourth century. (Lings 2013, p. 524) Until that time, Christians understood those verses to describe wicked female heterosexual excess. HS1994 also assumes that “homosexual practice” is an all-encompassing category and assumes that the author’s intent is to describe it in that way.

The most comprehensive and up to date discussions of Romans 1, its textual context and cultural context, and what that means for our question in this biblical study can be found in the work of Brownson (2013, p. 204–222) and Lings (2013, p. 521–563). Between them, these authors examine problems of textual translation, interpretation history, cultural context, and their application to these texts. The letter to the Romans is almost certainly written by the apostle Paul. It is addressed to the church in Rome and is aimed to engage that cultural context and questions that arose within that community. It is also one of the most influential books in the history of Christianity. In this letter, Paul makes an extended argument to demonstrate the radical grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ and its implications for differences of opinion and practice within the Roman church. It would be irresponsible to read Romans 1:26–27 outside of this larger context. Moreover, it is of basic importance to read the whole letter in the light of its cultural context including the remarks in the introduction of this study which outline the emerging scholarship on gender bias and misogyny within Roman culture of the time.

As Presbyterian Christians, we have already determined that patriarchal and hierarchical bias has to be considered in our interpretation of the Pauline literature. In addition, we also need to consider the implications of the history of the interpretation of this text.

The interpretation of Romans 1, in the way that HS1994 treats it, represents a particular tradition of interpretation with its genesis in fourth century Christianity. As we have seen, aspects of this interpretation led the medieval church, and later the Reformed and Presbyterian churches, to engage in extreme acts of violence, torture and child abuse against people accused of the sin of sodomy. The most extensive summary of this painful history can be found in the work of Louis Crompton (2003). Paul's phrase in Romans 1:32 "...those who practice such things deserve to die..." has been used to validate these behaviours within the church including our own Presbyterian or Reformed tradition.¹⁸ This, combined with the interpretation of "against nature" has led to some of the most profound and wicked forms of moral failure in Christianity. Even today this interpretive tradition is used to support official efforts to execute LGBTQI people in Africa, and the support of mob violence as well as hate crimes against LGBTQI people. Social science research has shown that religious organisations that hold such views have a negative impact on the mental health of LGBTQI people in their midst. (Myer & Dean 1988, p. 170–182) Our moral conscience should lead us, as Presbyterians in Canada today, to read this passage with great care, listen to the Holy Spirit, and allow the biblical witness to Jesus Christ to enlighten our minds.

A careful reading of Romans 1:26–27 does not necessarily lead to the conclusions drawn by HS1994 because:

- We need to consider the bias of cultural context.

Much of the scholarly debate on Romans 1:26–27 centres on what Paul might have meant or intended when he wrote these words. No one can offer a definitive answer to that question. Some claim Paul meant his statements as a universal rejection of all same sex intimacy. Others claim that Paul only rejected heterosexual people who became so erotically wicked that they indulged in unbridled sexual orgies that involved them in sexual intercourse regardless of gender. Brownson shows, for example, that Paul's language in these texts is appropriate to the excesses at Gaius Caligula's court, well known and reviled by all self-respecting Romans of the time. (2013, p. 156ff) As we have seen earlier, the early church interpreted Paul's statement about women in Romans 1:26 as a form of heterosexual excess and not lesbianism. None of the various theories can be finally or definitively proven. What we do know is that Roman and Judaistic culture of the time did share a deep misogynistic gender bias which extended to passive male partners in a same sex relationship. It is therefore reasonable to assume that Paul, as a Jew and a Roman citizen, would share such bias. There is no reason for us, as Presbyterians who believe that the gospel calls us to mutual respect and love and in the application of Jesus' "love commandment" to all biblical texts, to continue that cultural bias. We do not support misogyny, and we do not judge people based on a bias that assumes that women or woman-like-behaviour is base, carnal and unworthy of deep relationship with God.

This does not mean that these texts are meaningless for our context today. Paul clearly rejects excessive sexual behaviour that breaks all covenants and can lead to damage to others and the Christian community. In fact, the list of additional characteristics of the wickedness Paul describes includes, "...greed, and depravity...full of envy, murder, quarreling, deceit, and viciousness...gossips, slanderers, God-haters, haughty, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to their parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, and ruthless" (Romans 1:29–31). It is abundantly clear that Paul is describing exceptionally and willfully wicked people here. There are moral implications to draw from this list. It must also be clear that assuming that LGBTQI Christians in covenanted relationships in the Presbyterian church are like that or uncritically

associating them with such behaviour would simply be a lie. We simply cannot reach such a conclusion about LGBTQI sisters and brothers with any truthfulness. To do so would be bearing false witness against them and a clear denial of the “love commandment”.

- We need to reconsider the interpretation of “against nature”.

In both verses 26 and 27, there is allusion to an exchange of what is natural for what is unnatural. This statement, through a long evolution, became the “sin against nature” in the medieval theology of Thomas of Aquinas (1225–1274).¹⁹ HS1994, citing Richard Hays as source, concludes that Paul’s expression of needs that are “against nature” to be understood as against their gender identity as either male or female. (HS1994, 6.11) Although it is possible that Paul meant it this way such a belief would reflect a patriarchal and misogynistic cultural bias that we, as Presbyterians, reject today. Moreover, as HS1994 goes on to rightly point out, Paul is here busy indicting pagan Rome. He argues that such pagans, in their consciences, know the truth about what is natural. We thus have Paul writing to Roman Christians about *what their culture considers natural* about women and men. The “natural” here seems to mean “what Romans consider naturally good”. This use of the Greek phrase (*kata phusin* or *para phusin*) in this way is common in the literature of the time, but more importantly used elsewhere in the Pauline literature as meaning “what is considered culturally natural”. So for example, Paul uses this word “*phusin*” when arguing that men should not have long hair – a cultural belief and practice in his time intimately related to the Roman misogynistic gender bias outlined earlier (1 Corinthians 11:14). We can conclude from the text, its cultural context, and the use of the same phrase elsewhere by Paul that it is most reasonable to assume that Paul means the natural to refer to what is considered “natural” in the Roman cultural context.

- We need to read these texts in the larger context of the letter to the Romans

In Romans 1, Paul is clearly building a rhetorical argument. He is seeking agreement from his readers. As he denounces practices that good Roman citizens would consider abhorrent, he is seeking to engage his readers emotionally in their condemnation and judgement of such behaviour. That is the intention of statements such as those made in Romans 1:18–32. However, Paul’s argument takes a powerful turn in Romans 2:1:

Therefore, you have no excuse – every one of you who judges. For when you pass judgement on another person, you condemn yourself, since you, the judge, practice the very same things.

It is instructive to consider how we as Christians tend to use Romans 1:18–32 to condemn others while we are slow to move to the self-examination intended by Paul’s argument as witnessed in 2:1. Paul’s intention here is to demonstrate that the condemnation of others by Roman Christians for their arguably wicked behaviour is self-righteous since they seem to believe themselves beyond judgement. This is part of the first section of the letter which is building up to a demonstration of the sinfulness of all people while, at the same time, celebrating the radical news of the gospel – that we are saved by grace through faith and not by our performance before God (Romans 3–5). Eventually, Paul goes on to use this larger argument to instruct the Romans in mutually respectful behaviour which accommodates diversity of belief (Romans 14). This does not mean that what Paul describes in Romans 1:18–32 not wicked. However, the intention of the text is not to teach about “homosexuality” or “same sex” relationships, but rather, to demonstrate forms of commonly understood undesirable behaviour. Our understanding and critical consideration of cultural gender bias should lead us to understand these texts as condemning excessive and destructive sexual behaviour of all kinds without drawing the conclusion that this means that God in Jesus Christ condemns sisters and brothers who are LGBTQI and in covenanted intimate relationships.

- We need to understand if and how Romans 1:26–27 draws on the story of creation in Genesis 1 and 2

Some authors have claimed that what is described as “unnatural” must be understood as referring to God’s intention in creation to create only male and female, and to diverge from male/female sexual intercourse is to become unnatural. Although HS1994 does not make a direct connection in its discussion of Romans 1:26–27, it implies something close to that claim. The problem with such an argument is that it approaches the text with a pre-set bias to find its interpretation in Paul. There is no indication in Paul’s argument in Romans 1 that he is making any reference to Genesis 1 or 2. Reading the text itself, does not suggest such a connection – the text itself and parallel usage of similar phrases elsewhere by Paul – suggests that Paul is thinking of what is considered “natural” and “unnatural” in a Roman cultural context. It is possible that Paul believed that all same sex intimacy is wicked because God created male and female only. James Brownson discusses Romans 1:26–27 in great detail in relation to the larger cultural frame of honour and

shame in Paul's day and concludes that the interpretation of these texts must be cognizant of the moral logic of the honour-shame code of the Greco Roman world. (2013, p. 222) After taking into account a critical appraisal of the cultural bias of Paul's time, Brownson shows that we can and must evaluate carefully if these texts can be applied so straightforwardly to LGBTQI Christians today. (2013, p. 222) As the Holy Spirit has led us to reshape our understanding of slavery and the equality of races and genders in the church, so too, can it guide us to see LGBTQI sisters and brothers who are in covenanted relationships in the light of the gospel witness to Jesus Christ.

To read Romans 1:26–27 as a clear and unequivocal rejection of covenanted intimate same sex relationships is to stretch this text beyond its contextual intent in the letter to the Romans, it is to ignore the misogynistic honour-shame gender bias in Greco-Roman culture which considered patriarchal manliness as “natural”, and it is to bear false witness against LGBTQI Christians in our communities who do not wilfully display the kind of wicked behaviour Paul continues to describe towards the end of chapter 1. Most of all, it is to miss Paul's point in chapter 2:1 where he invites us, as readers, to examine ourselves when we set ourselves up in judgement over others. This text is not an appropriate text to use to condemn covenanted intimate same sex relationships.

4.5 What kind of sexual behaviour the “vice lists” of the Pauline letters refer to?

There are two “vice lists” in the Pauline literature that are often cited in support of a complete Christian censure against intimate same sex relationships. The texts specifically cited are 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. Many of us can be forgiven for taking these two vice lists as clearly and unambiguously condemning “homosexuality”. After all, the International Standard Version makes clear that “homosexuals” will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:10). In a very brief discussion HS1994 seems to reach the same conclusion (6.8). Surprisingly, in this short paragraph, HS1994 offers what appears to be definitive translations of Greek words (“male prostitute” and “sodomite”) that have puzzled biblical interpreters. It gives its authority for such views in terms a vague reference to “most scholars agree” without citing who these scholars are. In 1994, scholars did not agree on interpreting these words. Since then much more work has been done on interpreting these lists and that work makes clear that the use of “male prostitutes” and “homosexuals” or “sodomites” in translation of these texts cannot be supported. The two Greek words translated in these texts are *malakoi* and *arsenokotai* (*arsenokoitais* in 1 Timothy 1:10 – *malakoi* does not appear in 1 Timothy).²⁰

What is the interpretation and translation history of 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10? The word *malakos* could literally be translated as “soft” or “soft ones”. When Jerome translates this word in the Latin Bible (Vulgate), he uses the Latin *mollis* which literally means “soft, pliant, flexible or subtle” but it could also mean effeminate, unmanly, womanish, feeble or weak. (Lings 2013, p. 494) Wycliffe translates *malakos* with “lecherous men”, but Tyndale (1526) and Coverdale later translate this word with “weakling”, and the Geneva Bible (1560) uses “wanton” with a footnote that explains that this means behaviour that is immoral, unchaste and lewd. (Lings 2013, p. 495) The King James Version translates *malakos* as “effeminate”. Subsequent translations will render this word with many different interpretations including “catamites” (James Moffatt's Bible), “passive homosexual partners” (Lexham English Bible), “homosexuals” (New King James Version) and “male prostitute” (New Revised Standard Version). These translations are particularly interesting in contrast to how the same translations render the same word when it appears in Matthew 11:8. Here, almost universally, the word is understood to indicate the contrast between the enjoyment of soft rich clothes with John the Baptist's austere dress. So far it is important for us to realize that the HS1994 conclusion that *malakos* refer to “men and boys who are passive partners in homosexual activity” is a long stretch from the complexity of understanding the use of this word and the way it was understood in the time of Paul and throughout church history. There is another problem signaled by the translations that go so far as to translate *malakos* and the word *pornoi* that precedes it with “male prostitute”. What this highlights is the different theories about what the word *pornos* or the plural *pornoi* meant in New Testament Greek. Mostly it is understood to mean “fornicator” (Danker in Lings 2013, p. 499) but older dictionaries also allow for it to mean “male prostitute” (Berg in Lings 2013, p. 499). One thing that becomes clear as one examines the translation history is that there has been a revision from understanding this word to indicate a certain sense of weakness (perhaps lack of commitment and nerve in the faith) to sexual categories associated with the modern concept of homosexuality. Given the uncertainty of the meaning of these words, we cannot with any certainty reach the conclusion of HS1994. In fact, the best and probably the most consistent rendering of *malakos* in the New Testament is achieved by the New Jerusalem Bible which renders the word in Matthew 11:8 as “fine” (clothes) and in 1 Corinthians 6:9 as “self-indulgent”.

We have to note that Robert Gagnon continued to make a case for reading *malakos* as “effeminate males who play the sexual role of females” and *arsenokotai* as “males who take other males to bed”. (Gagnon 2001, p. 303–304) In this case, Gagnon's argument is based on the assumption that Paul shared the Jewish scholar Philo of Alexandria's

particular form of misogynistic patriarchal rejection of gender roles considered unnatural amongst Roman men. There is no evidence that Paul was familiar with Philo's writings although some scholars believe it is possible. It has to be noted that Paul does not echo Philo's central focus on the story of Sodom as a story of same sex sin. However, Gagnon's argument that Paul might have shared some of the Roman cultural bias against same sex relationships and particularly against free Roman male citizens who played a "passive role" in sexual intercourse or who behaved in "womanlike" ways, has some merit. If that is the case, then our consistent understanding within The Presbyterian Church in Canada is to be critical of this cultural bias, particularly its misogynistic assumptions about male and female genders. Notwithstanding this observation, the stronger evidence on *malakos* would be that it has to do with behaviour that is self-indulgent, and lacks the courage of Christian faith.

So far we have dealt with *malakos* but there is also the second term, *arsenokoitai(s)*, which occurs both in the 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. The HS1994 statement seems confident that this word means "male homosexuals and pederasts" (6.8). Robert Gagnon also makes a case for reading *arsenokoitai* as a rejection of active same sex sexual activity. He bases his argument in reference to Leviticus 18:22, particularly in its Greek translation in the Septuagint version of the Old Testament. (2001, p. 315) The translation of this word is one of the most difficult puzzles of translation. The problem is that this word does not occur in general Greek literature of that time.

The only extra biblical references in Greek to this word occur as references to its use in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. The word could be translated literally as "male-liers" (not liars). But the part of the word translated with liers could also mean "beds". Clearly this word has something to do with illicit sexual behaviour of men in beds. In Romans 13:13, the word for "liars" (*koite*) is usually translated with something like "promiscuity". The fact is that we simply do not know what this word means exactly. (Helminiak in Lings 2013, p. 503) The best we can do is to deduce that Paul and the author of 1 Timothy are referring to some kind of abusive or exploitative male sexual activity. (Helminiak 2000, p. 115; Hanks 2000, p. 108) Scholars like Harrell have noted that in 1 Timothy 1:10, *arsenokoitais* is placed between "fornicators" and "slave traders" suggesting some form of abusive sexual behavior. (in Lings 2013, p. 504) Perhaps, following the tradition of translation of Romans 13:13, we could say with some confidence that this word refers to promiscuous exploitative males. The fairly common tendency to move away from the wisdom of Tyndale and the King James Version translation which emphasize male sexual abuse (abusers of themselves with mankind) towards translating *arsenokoitai(s)* as sodomite or homosexual, says more about the bias of the translators than the actual text. Claiming with certainty that *arsenokoitai(s)* indicate gay Christians who are in covenanted intimate relationships is not sustainable.²¹

5. Do our conclusions on covenanted monogamous same sex relationships bring well-being or harm to one another within the church?

Christians are called to love one another and to bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2). The early church, when confronted with diversity of practice between Jews and Gentiles concluded that no extra rules besides sexual fidelity in marriage and abstinence from idolatrous practices should be put on one another (Acts 15:28). We are called to follow the love commandment as summarized by Christ and to live out the "new commandment of love for one another" (Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:33; Luke 10:27; John 13:34; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8). Love and justice are not in opposition; they are parts of the same justice of God as demonstrated in Jesus Christ. We are therefore required, as we read the Bible in The Presbyterian Church in Canada and as we teach the gospel, to examine the impact of our teaching on one another. Does our teaching reflect Jesus Christ? Does the attitude relayed by our teaching reflect the character and attitude of Jesus Christ? Does our teaching bring wholeness and flourishing life and harmony with God or does it cause harm? It is therefore important for us as Presbyterian Christians, in accountability to our LGBTQI sisters and brothers, to consider the body of social research that shows that our present teaching may be harmful. One of the most important studies in the area is compiled in a book edited by G.M. Herek. In one of the chapters in that book, I.H Meyer and L. Dean show that religious communities that are not affirming to homosexual members raise significant mental health risks. The *Body, Mind and Soul* study guide has documented the research of CAMH (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health) and other bodies on the high risk of teen suicide among LGBTQI youth.²²

Within The Presbyterian Church in Canada, we have LGBTQI members who have spoken about the dark burden they carry because of the present teaching of the church. Ministers have born witness to LGBTQI identifying parishioners committing suicide. Within Canada, despite being a fairly open and affirming society towards LGBTQI people, most violent hate crimes are perpetrated against LGBTQI people. When we consider the biblical study above, the many reasons why texts traditionally associated with the complete rejection of all same sex intimate relationships cannot simplistically be applied to covenanted intimate same sex relationships, it behooves us to reconsider the church's present teaching and attitude.

Conclusion

The Bible, in its multifaceted witness to Jesus Christ, offers us a strong and inspiring picture of who we are as human beings. We are created to give glory to God in our love of God which is inseparable from our love of neighbour as demonstrated in the life, work, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are created to be with other human beings. We are created for love and community. Where our lives are expressed in this way we give glory to God and reflect the image of God in our lives and actions.

The Bible, in its multifaceted witness to Jesus Christ, teaches us that our ability to live in Christ and his “love commandment” is marred by sin. We all stand in need of the grace of God in Jesus Christ through whom, by faith, we can journey towards becoming like Christ in discovering God’s intention for our lives.

The Bible, in its multifaceted witness to Jesus Christ, teaches us that we are called as sexual, relational beings to express our sexual desire in ways that glorify God. Such a sexual ethic will show that sexual immorality is where we live in ways that fracture relationships, seek our own selfish gratification at the detriment of another, and damage the Christian community through disrespectful, violent, oppressive and unloving sexual behaviour. The guidance of HS1994 here is wise and, given our biblical study, as a matter of dignity, justice and equality, should also apply to LGBTQI Christians,

In some cases, in long term cohabitation, the church would regard such a relationship as a de facto marriage, where it is so regarded by the couple. The task of the church is to affirm the central values we believe are at the heart of marriage: love, commitment and fidelity. (HS1994, 5.3.2)

In the very few places the Bible seems to speak negatively of same sex intimacy, it is always in contexts of strong patriarchal bias, marriage infidelity, harm to others in community, and unbridled sexual excess. It speaks more often and strongly against the same kind of behaviour in heterosexual contexts.

After reading the Bible carefully following the interpretive guidance of, and with a sense of accountability to our LGBTQI sisters and brothers, we cannot now reach the conclusion made 22 years ago in the HS1994 statement that,

Scripture sees evidence of sexual distortion to God’s creation pattern in adultery, rape, incest, promiscuity and homosexual relationships. (6.1.9)

Including “homosexual relationships” in a list with adultery, rape, incest and promiscuity is unacceptable. Indeed, we can agree that when either heterosexual or homosexual behaviour involves adultery, rape, incest and promiscuity the Bible is very clear in its rejection of such behaviour. But, on the basis of this study, the Bible does not clearly and unequivocally prohibit covenanted faithful same sex relationships. A careful reading of the Bible, and prayerful consideration of the teaching and example of Jesus Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit should lead us towards repentance from harmful condemnation of our LGBTQI sisters and brothers who seek to follow Christ in covenanted relationships.

Endnotes

¹ LGBT – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender orientations. From here on the study will refer to LGBTQI adding the categories of Gender Queer and Intersex people to address a fuller sense of gender identity and sexual orientation. These contemporary descriptors refer to both sexual orientation and gender identity. None of these categories by definition exclude covenanted monogamous intimate relationships.

² The “Holiness Code” is a name often used in biblical studies for Leviticus 17–26 which has a distinct vocabulary and the repetition of the Hebrew word for “holy”. Various theories exist about its place and origin.

³ Although scholars continue to debate which letters were written by Paul, we will simply refer to Paul in this study as representative of the Pauline letters, including letters where biblical scholars still debate the authorship.

⁴ The universal presence of the “love commandment” in all the Synoptic gospels, in the Pauline literature as well as in James with a different version in the gospel of John attests to the centrality of this summary of the meaning and intention of the Bible in the ministry of Jesus and the understanding of the early church.

⁵ Tax collectors, Samaritans, lepers, the lame, eunuchs, gentiles of various kinds, and people with questionable moral behaviour.

⁶ Some translations such as the ISV (International Standard Version) translate the Greek word *eunuchos* with “celibate” but such translations are simply wrong. Eunuch was a well-recognized social and physical category in the Roman Empire and it was associated with infertility but not necessarily with celibacy.

⁷ There are at least four basic ways that Christians have interpreted the meaning of the “image of God”, “substantive”, “ethical”, “relational” and “sacramental”.

⁸ Later in this study (under “C”) we will comment on the “Alexandrian Rule” and the contra-biblical trend in third century Christianity to reject almost all forms of sexual relationship under the influence of higher Greco-Roman culture.

⁹ Keufler notes that the law literally reads, “when a man marries in the manner of a woman [in *feminam*], as a woman who wants to offer herself to men, where sex has lost its place, where the offence is that which is not worth knowing, where Venus is changed into another form, where love is sought but not seen”.

¹⁰ See Lings, 2013, p. 625–629, for a careful and full description of different scholarly discussions on this text.

¹¹ The meaning of “one flesh” union is another dimension of the argument for essential male-female complementarity. James Brownson discusses the various arguments in great detail and he discusses how the idea of “one flesh” appears in Genesis 2:18–25; Matthew 19; Ephesians 5:21–33; and 1 Corinthians 6:12–20. He points out that the normalcy of male-female sexual intimacy in these texts does not necessarily warrant making it normative. (Brownson 2013, p. 105) He points out that none of the biblical references to “one flesh” includes procreation as a factor, and he concludes that gender complementarity has to be understood in the larger cultural frame of kinship bond. (Brownson 2013, p. 106) As we saw earlier Ruth can “cling” to Naomi (as a profound kinship bond) just as a husband can “cling” to his wife.

¹² See the lengthy discussion by the renowned Reformed ethicist Nicholas Wolterstorff on justice and same sex relationships, [youtube.com/watch?v=NkFE0sSF0fU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NkFE0sSF0fU).

¹³ For a full exploration of the history of the idea of sodomy in Christian tradition see Jordan (1997).

¹⁴ See Crompton’s exhaustive description of the terrifying persecution in eighteenth century Protestant Dutch Republic. (2003, p. 462–471)

¹⁵ This meaning of the English verb “to know” is the eighth given out of seventeen meanings in the Oxford English Dictionary and the first citation is to the sexual relations of Adam and Eve in the 1382 translation of the Vulgate by John Wycliffe.

¹⁶ “In this case on text in Genesis illuminates the contents of another. In the example analyzed here, one may conclude that, semantically speaking, the two Cohortatives of *yada’* in Genesis 18.21 and 19.5 are comparable to the investigative roles adopted by the Qal forms of the verb in 38.26 and 39.6, and 39.8.” (Lings 2013, p. 111)

¹⁷ For a full and detailed discussion of the wider meaning of *yada’* and its use in the Old Testament see Lings 2013, p. 82–119.

¹⁸ For more detail on Protestant Geneva see Monter 1980 and Crompton 2003, p. 323ff. For the terrible history of the abuse of teenage boys in the Reformed Dutch Republic in the name of “sodomy” see Crompton 2003, p. 462 ff.

¹⁹ See Lings 2013, p. 523.

²⁰ HS1994, 6.8.

²¹ See also Brownson’s discussion 2013, p. 273–275.

²² See footnotes on p. 60 of the *Body, Mind and Soul* document, presbyterian.ca/sexuality/body-mind-and-soul-study-guide-on-human-sexuality/

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