

WHY WE GATHER
Caring for Others Through Social Transformation

“LGBTQ”
(Luke 11:37-53)

Dan Collison
March 5, 2017

Luke 11:37-53

³⁷ When Jesus had finished speaking, a Pharisee invited him to eat with him; so he went in and reclined at the table. ³⁸ But the Pharisee was surprised when he noticed that Jesus did not first wash before the meal.

³⁹ Then the Lord said to him, “Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. ⁴⁰ You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? ⁴¹ But now as for what is inside you—be generous to the poor, and everything will be clean for you.

⁴² “Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone.

⁴³ “Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and respectful greetings in the marketplaces.

⁴⁴ “Woe to you, because you are like unmarked graves, which people walk over without knowing it.”

⁴⁵ One of the experts in the law answered him, “Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also.”

⁴⁶ Jesus replied, “And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.

⁴⁷ “Woe to you, because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your ancestors who killed them. ⁴⁸ So you testify that you approve of what your ancestors did; they killed the prophets, and you build their tombs. ⁴⁹ Because of this, God in his wisdom said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute.’ ⁵⁰ Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, ⁵¹ from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all.

⁵² “Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering.”

⁵³ When Jesus went outside, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began to oppose him fiercely and to besiege him with questions, ⁵⁴ waiting to catch him in something he might say.

Introduction

1. “Basis” is a general term used in fields ranging from mathematics and philosophy to science and religion to describe some grounding principle from which all other things in relation to that principle are defined. Since the origins of humanity, human beings have determined the basis of things through a combination of world view, experience and observation. And, from time to time collective opinion changes the basis of things when the basis has proven itself to be, over time and regardless of worldview, that which is “real.” Depending upon the magnitude of impact on existing human systems such as laws and religious traditions, the change in basis can either be a quick and peaceful or a long and violent process.

For instance, from the beginning of astronomical studies until the third century before Christ everyone on the planet assumed that the earth was at the center of our solar system. This basis was held by those who observed the sun, moon and stars in day to day life with the naked eye while standing on earth and was fiercely defended by leaders in the Judeo-Christian traditions because there was no written example or conversation in Scripture of anything other than the earth being at the center of the known universe. And, I use the word universe intentionally, because it is only in the last century that science and technology have enabled us to learn about the previously unfathomable layers of our expanding universe such as billions of other solar systems and galaxies.

2. In the third century BC a *minority* opinion idea of “heliocentrism,” or the idea that the sun is the center of our solar system and earth is just one planet among many that revolve around the sun, was first talked about but didn’t go anywhere. It wasn’t until the 16th century that Nicolaus Copernicus presented the first geometric mathematical model of a heliocentric system that was then elaborated upon and expanded by Johannes Kepler in concept and Galileo Galilei through use of a telescope.¹

Galileo was made famous around the world for a series of events between 1610 and 1633 where ultimately he was put on trial by the Christian Church, that had significant legal power in that time, and condemned as a heretic for his scientific theory of the sun being the center of the universe. Even though, as a respected Italian astronomer, physicist, engineer, philosopher and mathematician, he was simply pointing out what was real. In the end, his books were banned, he was ordered to refrain from teaching or defending heliocentric ideas, and he lived out his days under house arrest until passing away in 1642 at the age of 77. And, while over the following centuries thoughtful theologians and scientists sought to correct the Christian Church’s reaction to what was real, and some Protestant Christian traditions supported Galileo’s findings and other scientific theories, it wasn’t until 1992, *three hundred and fifty-nine years* after his trial, that Galileo was vindicated by Catholic Church leaders saying that he merely observing and reporting that which was real and the theologians and church leaders got it wrong.²

3. Christian religion and reality, just as all religions and reality, are at odds from time to time, and it can have devastating consequences. Especially if the identity of *people* is at stake. This is where Jesus can help us because he often got in-between religion and reality including in today’s Scripture. Gospel biographer Luke chronicles three instances where Jesus had a meal at the home of religious leaders and theologians of his day, and none of them went very well. The first

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heliocentrism> (accessed 2-28-17)

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galileo_affair (accessed 2-28-17)

being Luke Chapter 7, where a woman who Luke says “lived a sinful life,” came to the religious leader’s home with an alabaster jar of perfume and stood behind Jesus weeping and wetting his feet with her tears, and pouring perfume on them. The religious leader judged Jesus for letting her even touch him. Jesus used the moment to remind the leaders of her extravagant reception versus their cold reception, and the women’s incredible vulnerability and confession versus their hard hearts.

4. In Luke Chapter 14 we read about Jesus being a guest in a religious leader’s home and a man coming to the house to be healed from abnormal swelling of his body. The problem in that case was that the day of the meal was the Sabbath day, and there were religious laws against healing on the Sabbath. So, this was yet another awkward confrontation with Jesus healing the man and then reminding the religious leaders to give guests the seats of honor at their table, and even further, to invite the marginalized and those with no resources in their broader community to dine with them as a way to honor God regardless of whether they could be repaid for their hospitality or how their reputation would be perceived. Oh, and as recorded by gospel biographer Mark, that “the Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath.”³
5. Those two meals did not go well, but the worst of the three recorded by Luke was by far our text for today from chapter 11. We are not told if Jesus raised his voice, but as you heard read, Jesus used the “Woe” word several times in direct confrontation some of the leaders and theologians of his religion of origin with his two key points being:
 - First, generosity and forbearance, justice and love, are more important than policing religious and cultural rules and traditions that will likely change over time.
 - Second, we are to prefer others and be ever aware of that which needlessly weighs people down, and be compassionate sojourners with those carrying special burdens.

In the closing verses of today’s text we also learn a difficult lesson that is repeated over and again in the gospel biographies, and echoed in the voices of others as well: Those who live Jesus’ generous way of doing things will be persecuted.

6. At this point you may be asking, “what does heliocentrism and disastrous dinners of Jesus have to do with a sermon focused on human sexuality?” *Everything, if* we believe that the Christian theological notion of the sacredness of difference applies to those who are lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, or questioning. I say “if” because recent studies are showing that facts and reality rarely change the minds of humans once impressions are made in one direction or another.⁴ And, sadly, like Christianity and Galileo and other religions and “take your pick” person, our religion plays a huge role in first impressions, and for good reason! But, also for poor outcome if it gets something wrong.

For reference, the February 5 sermon helped frame a theology of the sacredness of human difference.⁵ And, for those who are either new or visiting for the first time today, this community of faith has journeyed for several years in conversations about human sexuality along with millions of

³ Mark 2:27.

⁴ <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/27/why-facts-dont-change-our-minds> (accessed 3-4-17)

⁵ Dan Collison. “Disability” February 5, 2017. Pages 1-7 in particular. Go to this link to download: <http://www.1stcov.org/events-blog/2017/2/6/disability>

other Christ followers seeking to be both faithful to Christ and Scripture. We are not all in the same place in the way we understand human sexuality, but we have made the collective decision to consider LGBTQ as equals in the life of our church even while we all journey through this time of discernment.

We are seeking to live out the first point of Jesus' dinner conversation with the Pharisees: show generosity, justice and love over policing religious rules and traditions that change over time in regards to identity. I need to just say this right up front before I get deeper into today's topic and discussing how we hold the Scripture passages that speak directly to same sex attraction and sexuality.

7. My plan for today is to look at our current social context. Then, provide an overview of how First Covenant Church frames and navigates the conversation, and then finally, conclude with an interview with Lisa and Heather Albinson, our volunteer Visual Artists in Residents, about their journey as Christ followers and being a gay married couple in our community alongside other LGBTQ friends.

A. The Current Social Context

1. The current social context in the United States is that of public institutions and religious institutions continuing to wrestle with what is "real" in regards to disability, race, gender, and human sexuality. Strangely, it is the "immortal declaration" embedded in the second paragraph of the United States 1776 Declaration of Independence that continues to frame the ever expanding conversation about what is real and right, and therefore true. The declaration being, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." The basis sentiment at the moment of its' declaration was largely communicating that what was "real" was that human beings should have the right to choose *who* governs them and have a say in *how* those chosen govern them as well.
2. In 1776 that basis was a shocking change of mind in a time where monarchy rule was the brutal norm. It needs to also be said, though, that it would be shallow thinking to assume that the founders of our nation were only thinking about governmental structure when they signed the declaration. If for no other reason because quickly and over time the immortal declaration spread to mean more than equal rights for white European men. It has come to reference real identities of many kinds of people. But, not quickly nor easily.
 - It took 92 years before enslaved Africans were given the legal rights to *begin* the journey of being considered equal that continues even today.
 - It took 144 years since the immortal declaration for women to have the right to vote as citizens of equal standing to men in the United States.
 - It took 188 years before laws were passed to prohibit discrimination *of all kinds* based upon race, color, religion, or national origin.
 - It took 191 years for elder citizens and people of different racial backgrounds who want to be married to be considered equal. That was 1967, one year before I was born.

- It took 214 years before people with disabilities were considered equal in the workforce (1990) and 239 years before people of the same sex were granted the legal right to be married. (2015)⁶

3. Christians and Christian institutions have fallen on all sides of these equal rights identity conversations with contentious battles constantly raging between institutions, their interpretations of Scripture, and their traditional views on reality. In every case the key questions are: “What is real and the way the human experience is designed to work by the Creator of all things?” and “What is a fiction and a distortion of the way the Creator of all things has designed the human experience to work?”

Human sexuality and those who consider themselves LGBTQ: Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, and Questioning, (“Q” sometimes also refers to Queer, but Queer is also sometimes used more generally for all categories outside heterosexual) are the most recent topic of human identity that is front and center on most days, like the story of Mack Beggs, who recently won the girls state wrestling competition for the state of Texas.



Mack was forced to compete against girls because he was logged as a girl at birth. He battled deep depression through his preteen years because his brain identified as male, and, along with 1.4 million people of the US population,⁷ that he was transgender. “I knew who I was,” he said in a video, “but I just couldn’t find words for it.”⁸ Transgender is the term used to describe people whose gender identity differs from the sex the doctor marked on their birth certificate. It is also important to note that it isn’t merely sexual orientation that frames the transgender sense of being, it is a total sense of either maleness or femaleness opposite their physical gender at birth. It’s the entire reality that is, for reasons unknown, different.

8. For Christians who consider the Bible inspired and their basis for truth and life this presents some challenges because, like the heliocentric view of the universe, there is no example of a transgender person in the Bible. The only example of specific people who might or might not have been any category of LGBTQ in the Bible were the gang rapists of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis chapter 19, and that passage doesn’t tell us anything about gender identity or sexual orientation, only about gang rapists.^{9,10}

⁶ <http://www.infoplease.com/spot/civilrightstimeline1.html> (accessed 2-28-17)

<http://www.civilrights.org/resources/civilrights101/chronology.html?referrer=https://www.google.com/> (accessed 2-28-17)

⁷ <https://thinkprogress.org/the-american-transgender-population-is-larger-than-we-thought-it-was-ab83126f33a#.k6vmuhjrx> (accessed 3-3-17)

⁸ https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/highschools/meet-the-texas-wrestler-who-won-a-girls-state-title-his-name-is-mack/2017/02/25/982bd61c-fb6f-11e6-be05-1a3817ac21a5_story.html (accessed 3-1-17)

⁹ Genesis 19.

This is a significant challenge and part of the reason why this conversation is so difficult. Modern studies tell us that 3.4 to 5% of all people everywhere are LGBTQ.¹¹ And, just as there are no mentions of Mayan and Chinese ancient cultures and any number of different human identities in the bible, doesn't mean they don't exist and aren't in the purview of the Creator of all things. We can link such silences to the limitations of specific historic narratives or the development rate of human and religious consciousness, but Scripture is silent to the biographies of those who are LGBTQ in favor of 95% of the population who are heterosexual.

9. Jesus made no specific mention of LGBTQ in his teachings. Depending on how we read and interpret reference and inference, there are six passages of Scripture essentially written by the Apostle Paul and Moses that speaking either negatively or prohibitively to only one subset of the LGBTQ conversation: same sex sexuality.

- Genesis 19 and depending upon how you read it, Jude 7
- Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13
- Romans 1:26-27
- 1 Corinthians 6:9-11
- 1 Timothy 1:8-11

These seven passages have been discussed and debated ferociously in volumes and volumes of books since the LGBTQ civil rights movement began in the United States in the 1970s. The challenge is that these Scriptures speak only to a few author's experiences with same sex sexuality within their religious tradition's construct with no reference or insight into such matters as orientation, gender identity, and developmental human sexuality.

So, then, how does the First Covenant Church community look to Scripture and navigate this current social context?

B. How First Covenant Navigates the Conversation

1. We have very limited time today. And, like all of the identity conversations that we have been covering in this segment of the "Why We Gather" series, topics such as this require deeper study than a sermon or even a few books. In order to be able to care for others through broader social transformation, we need to commit to ongoing learning and walking the path over the long haul. For those willing to dig deeper we hold two class intensives at First Covenant Church:

- "The Deep End" class that meets once a month January to June and speaks to the journey of being a Christ follower in the 21st century.

¹⁰ There is also Jesus' curious mention of "eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:12) To learn more, read Megan K. DeFranza, *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God*. 2015. Eerdmens Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI.

¹¹ Several recent studies for the U.S. suggest a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender population ranging from 3.4 to 5 percent. Gushee, David P.. *Changing Our Mind: A call from America's leading evangelical ethics scholar for full acceptance of LGBT Christians in the Church* (Kindle Location 541). David Crumm Media, LLC. Kindle Edition.

- “Living the Book with Humility” is a fall class intensive that runs from September through December and addresses biblical interpretation broadly and the topics of race, gender, and human sexuality specifically.

These classes are great starting points and safe space to explore these important matters at a deeper level. And, today’s sermon manuscript that is posted to the church website will have footnotes and a bibliography that you can reference for future personal study as well.

2. To the question of our navigation: the starting point of our community’s navigation of this matter is the starting point for most Protestant Christians. We begin by entering into a serious dialogue between Scripture, reason, experience, and our particular tradition, the Evangelical Covenant Church.¹² I will frame Scripture interpretation in a moment and mention the Covenant’s denominational position later. Reason and experience over time are telling us many things about those who consider themselves LGBTQ:
 - First, that sexuality is a complex human archetype. It does not operate simply like an on and off switch that says “on” is heterosexual and “off” is homosexual. Rather, human sexuality is best described as a continuum between poles, ranging from strong impulses to heterosexuality on one end to strong impulses to homosexuality on the other.¹³
 - People who are other than heterosexual are born into every family, culture, and country of the world. They are our grandparents, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, and children.
 - A big turning point in LGBTQ rights in America occurred on June 27, 1969, in New York City when LGBTQ men and women fought back against police brutality and demanded basic civil rights.¹⁴ Today 69% of Americans and 80% of businesses favor nondiscriminatory laws¹⁵ and 53% of Americans support gay marriage.
 - There are many theories as to how or why people become LGBTQ. They include “choice, genetics, biology or influence, brain differences, body differences, family system balances and imbalances, etc.” but at the end of the day, no one (and I mean no one) knows.¹⁶
 - There are large and growing networks of LGBTQ Christians including Evangelical LGBTQ Christians.¹⁷
 - Urban regions have higher percentages of LGBTQ people because, like all minority groups that fear for their safety and rights, they seek solidarity in numbers. In Minneapolis, 12.5 percent of the residents identify themselves as LGBTQ.¹⁸

¹² The “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” is a standard basis for how Protestants frame their theological and sociological commitments. Learn more at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wesleyan_Quadrilateral (accessed 3-4-17)

¹³ Paris, Jenell Williams, *The End of Sexual Identity*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011 (Pages 44-46)

¹⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stonewall_riots (accessed 2-3-13)

¹⁵ <http://www.freedomforallamericans.org/non-discrimination-by-the-numbers-polling-data-statistics/> (accessed 3-4-17) and <http://www.prii.org/research/poll-same-sex-gay-marriage-lgbt-nondiscrimination-religious-liberty/> (accessed 3-4-17)

¹⁶ Refer to research in book “Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gay Vs. Christian debate” by Justin Lee. Chapter 5.

¹⁷ <http://www.createdgay.com/links.html> (accessed 1-31-13)

¹⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_demographics_of_the_United_States (accessed 1-31-13)

- The word “homosexual” is typically offensive to someone who is gay because of the way the term has been attached to false information and vilifying terms and expressions. Sensitive people, when possible, use specific designations or “LGBTQ.”
 - On a national level the perception that Christians are “against” LGBTQ has reached critical mass. Outsiders (of the Church) say Christianity’s hostility toward LGBTQ— not just opposition to politics and behaviors but disdain for LGBTQ individuals— has become virtually synonymous with the Christian faith.¹⁹
3. In regards to our interpretation of Scripture and the seven texts on same sex sexuality. First, a few key reminders that we talk about often at First Covenant. Scripture is central to our Christian formation, but it needs to be handled with great care and humility because:
- The Bible is a complex written revelation that is inspired and authoritative.
 - The Bible is *not* more important or a replacement for God.
 - The Bible is instructive and informs us in the ways of God.
 - The Bible is *not* a technical blueprint or step-by-step instruction manual designed to provide definitive answers for every question and dilemma that we face.

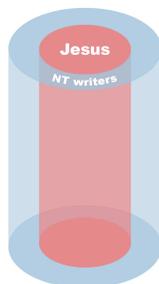
As an aside: A long time ago at First Covenant Church there was a big fight about converting the chapel to the gymnasium we have today. (In a Swedish accent) “Why do we need a gymnasium? I don’t see the word gymnasium in the Bible” some angry Swede said in a church meeting. The meeting convener stood up and replied: There is no mention of urinals in the Bible either, but they’re a really good idea!” The church voted to turn the underused chapel into a highly used gymnasium.

2. A few other reminders about interpreting and applying Scripture, because these apply to the LGBTQ debates:
- We all bring cultural and worldview biases to our reading of Scripture.
 - We are committed to the Protestant ethic of “in essentials, unity; in secondary matters, liberty; and in all things, charity.”
 - While being very careful to not create unnecessary dualities or conflicts between biblical voices, Jesus, and Jesus’ ethics and teachings are paramount and we must recognize and honor an interpretive hierarchy in the Bible.

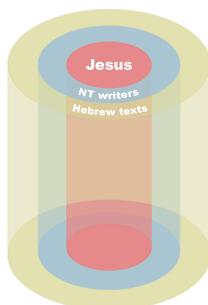


¹⁹ Quoted from the book “Unchristian” by Lee, Justin (2012-11-13). Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays-vs.-Christians Debate (p. 3). Jericho Books. Kindle Edition.

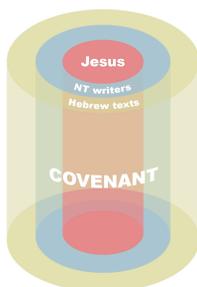
As the writer of the New Testament of Hebrews said so profoundly: Jesus, and Jesus' teachings are the basis for all other truths in Scripture.²⁰ Those closest to Jesus, the Apostle's and their writings, interpretations and theologies are the next voice of authority.



The Gospel biographers and the Apostle Paul wrote most of the New Testament. But, there are a few others as well. Then there are the authors of the Hebrew texts:



The Hebrew authors are significantly reframed in the New Testament writings and especially with Jesus who often said "you have heard it said...I tell you..."²¹ Those are the three layers of voices. Then there are the three crosscutting levels of import with the first and highest being Christ's unconditional New Covenant.



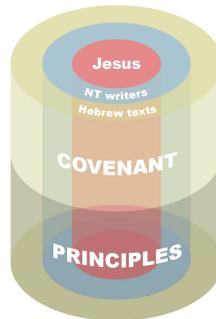
Grace and unmerited favor is the basis here. God's agreement through Christ with humanity is clear--there is nothing that can separate us from the love of Christ.²² In many ways, regardless of how one feels about LGBTQ and what is sin versus what is difference, the entire Christian debate should stop here. All who confess Christ are under the big tent of God's love in Christ. Period.

²⁰ Hebrews Chapter 1

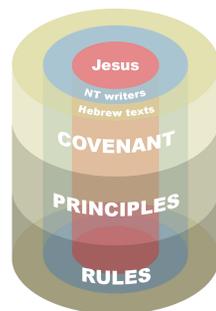
²¹ Matthew 5.

²² Romans 8.

The other two levels are important to recognize and grow in as well with “principles” being next.



Principles are comprehensive assumptions such as the Ten Commandments that say “don’t make an idol before God” and “don’t covet your neighbors stuff,” and the teachings of Jesus such as “love your neighbor and your enemy”, “forgive,” “be generous,” “pray often,” and so forth. Failing to keep these principles is like accepting second best, missing out on being our best selves, and sometimes just making our lives much worse off. In all cases, though, the Covenant of God’s love holds us none-the-less. Then, finally, there are the rules we find in the Bible.



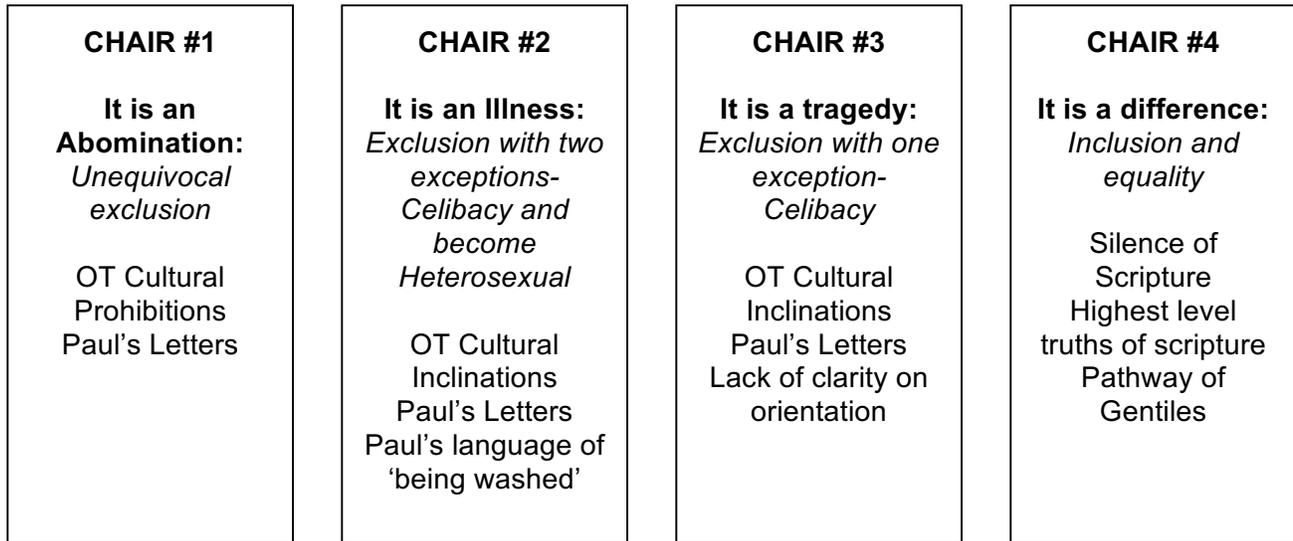
The rules are tricky business. They are prescribed actions. Some very practical. Some bound to Hebrew and Early Christian tradition and not relevant for all time. Some based upon personal conscience like not eating meat, or avoiding pork. Or like having permission to eat meat and including pork. Rules are constantly being evaluated and changed, or given freedom, as discernment over time deems them so. Jesus disengaged and sometimes rebuffed rule keeping religion in favor of Covenant and principles all of the time, including today’s Scripture.

4. Now I am going to explain how our community navigates the nexus of experience, reason, Scripture, and Christian tradition regarding LGBTQ. Generally speaking (and please remember these are generalizations) there are four groups or categorical interpretations and ethics that have emerged in Christian tradition. Using chairs as symbols for categories I will describe each ethical framework.

HISTORIC

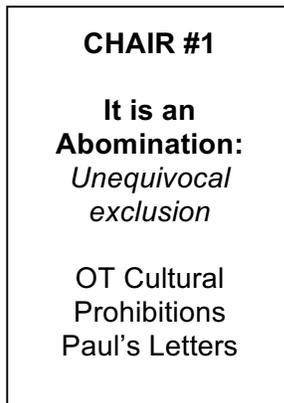


CONTEMPORARY



As you can see, these four positions are on a continuum from historic to contemporary with the third and fourth chair largely coming to the forefront in the last fifty years alongside rethinking Scripture, a more public awareness, social science, and general understanding of who LGBTQ people are in their personhood.

Chair #1:



There are churches and denominations that hold this view and anything other than this view point is banished.

Chair #2:

CHAIR #2

It is an Illness:
*Exclusion with two
exceptions-
Celibacy and
become
Heterosexual*

OT Cultural
Inclinations
Paul's Letters
Paul's language of
'being washed'

Chair #2 is the view that understands same-sex attraction to be a sign of general un-health like cancer to a body. While it concedes that individuals may be born with such desires, or inexplicably struggle with them through adolescence, the believer who suffers such affliction is universally urged to pray for healing and seek change. Because same-sex attraction is associated with sin and being unfaithful to one's faith, promoters of this view encourage LGBTQ people to be married to heterosexual partners and foster friendships with those abiding by heterosexual norms, and to refrain from close emotional attachment to other LGBTQ people.²³ Refraining from physical intimacy with members of the same sex is of utmost importance.²⁴

The problem that many Christians (LGBTQ and straight) have with this view is that of both identity and justice. Exodus Ministries International used to be the largest ex-gay ministry in the world for nearly 40 years. In January 2012 the president of Exodus International, Alan Chambers, during his address to a Gay Christian Network conference, stated that 99.9% of conversion therapy participants do not experience any change to their sexuality and apologized for the previous Exodus slogan, "Change Is Possible."²⁵ They shut down the organization in June 2013. This was a significant testimony from conservative Evangelical Christians that has far-reaching implications.

²³ <http://www.charismamag.com/index.php/component/content/article/246-lets-get-real/20001-the-new-homosexuality>. (accessed 1-31-13)

²⁴ http://www.chastitysf.com/q_homosexuality.htm (1-31-13)

²⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exodus_International (accessed 2-3-17)

Chair #3:

CHAIR #3

It is a tragedy:
*Exclusion with one
exception-
Celibacy*

OT Cultural
Inclinations
Paul's Letters
Lack of clarity on
orientation

Chair #3 equates same-sex attraction to that of an unfortunate tragedy. Christians who hold this view have a high degree of sympathy for those who they perceive suffer this as an unfortunate burden.²⁶ While some may still insist that change is possible, they acknowledge that it is unlikely for a person to ever be completely free of such attractions. Furthermore, they believe that the constant pursuit of reparative therapy may in fact be detrimental to the faith of individuals who struggle to understand why God doesn't respond the way they had hoped. But different people give different advice, and the directive at the end of the day is, "Whatever you do, be celibate."

This is the position closest to that of the Evangelical Covenant denomination's 2007 theology paper on Human Sexuality. The paper supports the denomination's position of celibacy in singleness, sexuality in marriage, and marriage as defined between a man and a woman. The paper seeks to be compassionate. Instead of condemning gay people as sinners of the worst kind, it articulates:

"No, we all fall short in this as well as other areas of life so let's not judge each other but repent and strive together for holiness as best we can....Much good can come as congregations confess their failure and begin to dialogue with and support individuals and families where a member experiences (same sex) attraction and desire. Conversations with such individuals based on honesty and accurate information will guide the church into being more redemptive and helpful."²⁷

This congregation did what this paper recommends by confessing failure and beginning a congregation wide dialogue in 2012. *And*, because there are a lot of questions left unanswered in the 2007 paper and other position statements in the Covenant, myself and other ordained clergy in the Covenant and this congregation believes there is much more work to be done, which leads to chair #4.

²⁶ Lewis Smedes, (1921-2002) a professor of Ethics & Theology at Fuller Seminary, wrote a landmark book espousing this point of view. *Sex For Christians*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 238-44.

²⁷ Human Sexuality & the Marriage Ethic Part One: Towards a Biblical & Theological Discernment of God in Human Sexuality (pages 24-25)

CHAIR #4

It is a difference:
*Inclusion and
equality*

Silence of
Scripture
Highest level
truths of scripture
Pathway of
Gentiles

Chair #4 is the position that says, “the basis for consensus has the wrong starting point. As with the identity equality conversations for race, gender, and physical ableness, the starting point isn’t lawyering a small group of Scriptures. The starting point is with Jesus and the real. And, because it is self-evident that God made people this way, let’s find ways to honor and protect LGBTQ differences and provide people equality and inclusion in the church and in broader society.”

And by equality, at least for many Christians, this means the same morals as straight Christians. Which is complicated because those who are LGBTQ are as diverse as those who are heterosexual. They are religious, non-religious, pietistic, non-pietistic, marriage seeking, non-marriage seeking, family oriented, and highly individualistic, sexually conservative and sexually permissive.

Christ followers supporting chair #4 advocate for Christian sexuality ethics and marriage in equal measure to heterosexuals. And, a key line of reasoning is this: Just as the majority of persons in the world are dominant with their right hand, but some are more dominant with their left, so same-gender attraction is a naturally occurring minority trait in creation that has no moral value one way or another. And, pursuing sexual intimacy in line with this God-given attraction is natural for such individuals, and there remains no tension between such relationships and living a life of faith dedicated to the pursuit of God.²⁸

The challenge that this position faces is that first, like heliocentrism, (the idea that the sun is the center of the solar system) historically, people who possess minority traits are always at risk of suffering suspicion, harassment, hatred, or exclusion. And, second, also like heliocentrism, there are no positive examples of same-sex couples nor anything that would advocate for it in the Bible. Yet, that doesn’t mean there isn’t an important biblical pathway to inclusion that is just as necessary as old earth-intelligent design-evolution theories that frame belief in the reality of such things as heliocentrism.

The biblical matter of gentile inclusion and gentile versus Jewish identity in the First Century Church is the example we need today. Jewish identity mandated males having their penises circumcised, abstinence of certain foods, and conversion to specific Jewish cultural practices. Some first century Jewish Christians called “The Judaizers” demanded that these things be done

²⁸ This is a quote from the First Covenant Church, Minneapolis staff paper called: “Four Christian Viewpoints on Same-Sex Relations” by Pastor Kyliah Clarke Villa. June 2012.

in order to be fully Christian.²⁹ The Apostle Paul was the strongest and most vocal advocate for gentile inclusion and the exhortation that our identity in Christ was on the basis of Christ and faith alone.

Paul’s advocacy created a vortex of theological and cultural conflict that ripped through the Early Church in ways not dissimilar to race and gender in the recent past, and now the current debate around human sexuality. Ultimately, it cost Paul his life. And, yet he and the Apostle Peter, and others, clung to the experience of the New Testament book of Acts Chapter 10, where God instructed Peter to change his mind. And, further God instructed Peter to not call anything unclean that God has created.³⁰

5. If LGBTQ are who they are as created by God in a similar yet distinctly mysterious way than heterosexuals, there is a “Jesus reckoning” to be had in our time. Just like the dinner conversation where Jesus told the religious leaders:

“...And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.”

Luke 11:46. NIV

There may be no more true passage of Scripture related to LGBTQ in our time, than this. That is why our community is committed to being a helping and including community. Ethically speaking the Christian Church has organized itself with the following grouping of chairs:

<p>CHAIR #1</p> <p>It is an Abomination: <i>Unequivocal Exclusion</i></p>	<p>CHAIR #2</p> <p>It is an Illness: <i>Exclusion with two exceptions- Celibacy and Become Heterosexual</i></p>	<p>CHAIR #3</p> <p>It is a tragedy: <i>Exclusion with one exception- Celibacy</i></p>	<p>CHAIR #4</p> <p>It is a difference: <i>Inclusion and equality</i></p>
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At First Covenant we believe that the current chair alignment betrays Jesus, scripture and our faith, and it needs to change. One of these chairs needs to be separated from the others.

²⁹ Read the book of Galatians.

³⁰ <http://gaychristianyes.org/blog/who-are-we-to-hinder-god>

CHAIR #1

**It is an
Abomination:**
*Unequivocal
Exclusion*

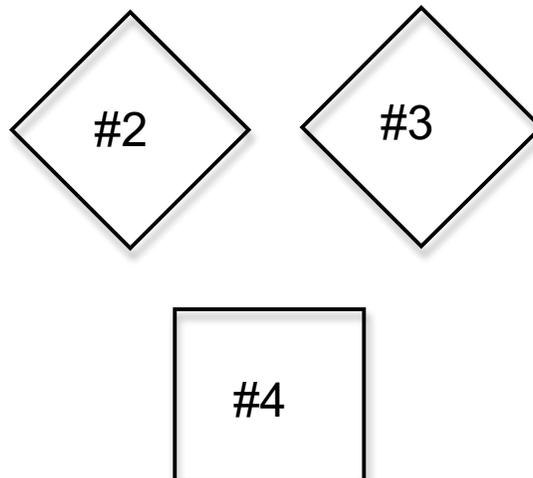
<p>CHAIR #2 It is an Illness: <i>Exclusion with two exceptions- Celibacy and Become Heterosexual</i></p>	<p>CHAIR #3 It is a tragedy: <i>Exclusion with one exception- Celibacy</i></p>
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CHAIR #4

**It is a
difference:**
*Inclusion and
equality*

Chair #1 denies the love of Jesus on this matter and from a sociological perspective can no longer be linked to the others. God loves LGBTQ people, and anyone who waves a sign “God hates...” cannot remain in fellowship with people who believe that God loves everyone. This chair needs to be moved.

Chairs #2 & #3 live out their highest and deepest commitments to Jesus Christ when they invite LGBTQ people into community ...even if we disagree with the more granular points of theology or beliefs about sexual relationships. And rather than see these chairs merely sitting side by side, we propose that we face one another and begin to understand who each of us really is.



Conclusion

1. Before I invite Heather and Lisa forward for a brief conversation some of you may be wondering where this teaching and First Covenant Church Minneapolis fits in the larger Evangelical Covenant Church Denominational conversation. After all, the current denominational positions only affirm heterosexual norms. We are what you call “faithful dissenters.” I get it, that is kind of confusing and sounds like an oxymoron such as “jumbo shrimp,” “happy sad” and “open secret.” What it means is that we have our agreements and our disagreements, and yet we want to remain connected and in community together.

If that still doesn't make sense, faithful dissent is kind of like a concept illuminated in the recent war movie “Hacksaw Ridge.” The movie is based upon the true story of Desmond Doss, an American pacifist combat medic, who was a Seventh Day Adventist Christian.³¹ Doss was compelled to enlist to be in support of his siblings and all Americans in the war effort, but he was a strict pacifist. He made a commitment to rescue lives on even the most dangerous front lines of battle but that while doing so he wouldn't even touch a gun.

He was derided by his commanding officers, fellow soldiers, and even beat up in the basic training barracks. Ultimately, Doss faced a court martial trial for disobeying direct orders that he had to participate in rifle training. He was accused of being a conscientious objector and having no place in the military. To which he responded, “you have me all wrong.” I wouldn't be here if I was a conscientious objector. I am prepared to give my life for my men. I am a conscientious cooperator.” And, in battle he personally saved 75 wounded soldiers, without ever firing a gun.

2. That is a great concept for Christ followers and churches who choose to remain connected to their religious tradition in spite of differences of opinion on matters such as LGBTQ. We are to be advised, though, like the journey of Doss and the passion of Christ alluded to in the closing of today's Scripture, being a conscientious cooperator is a set up for ongoing conflict and even persecution. Yet, it is also the path of resurrection, new life, and freedom for ourselves and those we seek to include at the Christian table of fellowship.

There are several Protestant Christian denominations that have awakened to chair #4 and have changed their policies to support it. It may be 359 years until the Evangelical Covenant and others see this as reality, or it may be 59 years, or who knows, maybe 9 years? To quote author J.R.R. Tolkien's wisdom through his inspirational character “Gandolf” in Lord of the Rings: “...even the very wise cannot see all ends...all we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us...”³²

INTERVIEW WITH HEATHER AND LISA

What are your personal individual stories of life and faith?

LISA: I grew up in a loving Christian home. My family bounced around to a few different churches during my childhood. I actually was a part of the nursery here for a few years as my family roots reach back into the very early years of First Covenant Church. I was always encouraged by my parents to seek my own faith and not theirs. Because of this deep immersion, it's difficult for me to place “that

³¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hacksaw_Ridge (accessed 3-4-17)

³² <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/gandalf> (accessed 3-4-17)

moment” I knew God was God and believed with my whole being, but I usually come back to a time shortly after a trip to the boundary waters in 7th grade. And of course I’ve had moments and times in which my personal faith has wavered- but it’s never really been about God, it’s been about the human element of Christianity and Christian culture.

HEATHER: I also grew up in the evangelical free tradition. Even though I moved away from that religious structure, I always felt that my faith was my own, and ever growing. I came here in January 2012 as one of Bruce's former bass students to play music and run sound as needed. One of my first weeks running sound here was when we combined choirs with a local synagogue, and I thought 'something different is going on here'. I met Lisa in March 2012 in this room, playing music. I didn't come out to myself until November 2013, and starting dating Lisa within 40 hours of this revelation (a long story for a different time).

As a married couple, how do you navigate the world?

LISA: It would be misleading to say that we navigate the world in the same way any married couple does. Sure, there are certain similarities- like we dream of owning a house at some point and maybe starting a family, we stress about money and plan meals and dates together, we scoop out the cat box and sleep in the same bed- but there are different fears that we carry around with us that shape our daily choices as a gay couple. Minneapolis is, for the most part, a very welcoming city for two women to be seen together in public holding hands. But any time we start to think about going on a trip, we have to take in to consideration the safety of our relationship. Middle America doesn't seem like a wise place for us to hang out in too long. And it's not even that we are afraid for our physical safety so much as we are for our emotional safety. And, unfortunately, I would argue that where we often feel most emotionally unsafe or concerned or even unwelcome, are evangelical spaces. It's tricky and it's complicated and I know that we have work to do in ourselves to stand up and be unapologetic about who we are, but this is our reality.

As our volunteer visual artists in residence, how do you understand your work in this community?

HEATHER: Being the volunteer visual artists in residence in a place we care for so much is an incredible honor. It challenges us to find visual communication that re-frames our language for spiritual as well as everyday concepts. We are continually challenged by and thinking of you, the congregation, because your response to our work is what gives it the most value and importance. We love the challenge of it, and are continually surprised by what keeps happening, and are grateful for the staff and leadership for not only providing this opportunity, but also for their input as the creative process unfolds.

Video “Love has no labels”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-xScLlevw0>

Communion

1. This video honoring of the sacredness of human difference was designed by people who have both awakened to the sacredness of human difference and long been on the path of protecting the journey of people who have been historically persecuted and excluded because of difference. The

struggle we witness on some of the faces in the video is not new because we see such things in ourselves. This is because, as a thoughtful Christian thinker once said:

“God is clearly more comfortable with diversity than we are, and God's final goal and objective are much simpler. God and the entire cosmos are about two things: differentiation and communion.”³³

This profound wisdom lands in a no more fittingly space than the Christian practice of Holy Communion that is quintessentially an experience of differentiation and communion in and through Jesus Christ.

2. If Christian faith and community is new or unformed in your life--I want you to know that at First Covenant we are a grace-filled gathering of people who see ourselves as a family of equals, everyone humbly in need of grace. And, we are committed to a journey of generous and openhanded faith in which everyone is given safe space to journey toward Jesus Christ.

The act of becoming a Christ-follower is the convergence of God moving upon your heart and mind to become a Christ-follower...and you making the decision to believe that Jesus is the Incarnation of God, that he died, rose again, is here right now, and can and *does* forgive our sin and heal the brokenness in our lives.

The result of such convergence is the greatest mystery of all—spiritual awakening to the eternal presence of Jesus Christ dwelling in our souls through the presence of God’s Holy Spirit leading and guiding us for the rest of our lives.

3. New to Christ or renewed in Christ we are *all* invited to the table of God where Christ invites all of us to eat and to drink.
 - At the point you are ready to receive communion I invite you to move into the two main isles and then return to your seats on the outer isles.
 - As you come down the isle please come in a single line so everyone can return to their seats even when a line is present.
 - We have wooden bowls for the purpose of our monthly benevolence offering for those in our congregation who face special financial need.
 - We have gluten free crackers for those whose diets require that alternative.
 - There will be people here to pray with you if you have specific requests to be prayed for.
 - This is an extended time of refreshing that the worship leaders will guide us in.
4. Hear now, the invitation of Jesus to this banquet table of mercy. Jesus said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, he said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim Jesus Christ until he comes again.³⁴

Please pray with me.

³³ Richard Rohr, "Where the Gospel Leads Us"

³⁴ 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Prayer

God we are here today because of your relentless pursuit of us. We revel in your embrace. We are humbled at the invitation to differentiation and communion and the ways your Spirit honors all that we are and yet transcends our differences with bonds forged through grace and held because of love.

Meet us here. Speak to us now. As we eat and drink these elements, fill us with your presence and renew our souls. In Jesus name, amen.

Benediction

As our week now begins, may we remember to let the starting points of our conversations about human identity be where Jesus and reality meet justice and love.

Go in Peace. Amen.

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Recommended Reading from Marin Foundation Website

<http://www.themarinfoundation.org/resources/recommended-reading/>

Bridge Building:

Friendship at the Margins by Chris Heuertz and Christine Pohl

Love is an Orientation by Andrew Marin

Sexuality (Chairs #2 and #3):

Homosexuality and the Christian by Mark Yarhouse

Out of a Far Country by Christopher Yuan

Sexual Identity by Mark Yarhouse and Lori Burkett

Slaves, Women and Homosexuals by William Webb

The Bible and Homosexual Practice by Robert Gagnon

Washed and Waiting by Wesley Hill

Welcoming But Not Affirming by Stanley Grenz

Sexuality (Chair #4):

Bulletproof Faith by Candace Chellew-Hodge

Fall to Grace by Jay Bakker

God and Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships by Matthew

Vines

[Homosexuality and the Christian Faith](#) by Walter Wink

[Jesus, The Bible, and Homosexuality](#) by Jack Rogers

[Stranger at the Gate](#) by Mel White

[The New Testament and Homosexuality](#) by Robin Scroggs

[What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality](#) by Daniel Helminiak

Other:

[Almost Myself DVD](#) (transgender) by Tom Murray

[Besides the Bible: 100 Books that Have, Should, or Will Create Christian Culture](#) by Dan Gibson, John Pattison and Jordan Green

[Bridging the Gap DVD](#) by New Direction Canada

[Brother Outsider DVD](#) by Bennett Singer

[For the Bible Tells Me So DVD](#) by Bishop Gene Robinson and Daniel Karlake

[Mere Churchianity](#) by Michael Spencer

[Real Sex](#) by Lauren Winner

[Red Letter Christians](#) by Tony Campolo

[Stonewall](#) by David Carter

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