

Sermon Title: **“Null Curriculum #1”**

Bible: **Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 & 1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 26-27**

When: on Sunday, January 23rd, 2022

Where: about 30 people (plus YouTube live streaming viewers) at Gilroy UMC

Opening Prayer

O Lord, I am standing in front of you and your church in fear and trembling. O Lord, please be with us in your love and grace. Let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

1. Two Elephants

To me, learning English is fun and sometimes challenging. I still remember when I first heard the phrase “Please bring your white elephants.” When I heard of “white elephants,” many things were going through my head: “Am I sure to hear white elephants?” “I saw elephants in the zoo.” “But I did not see a white elephant yet.” “How can I bring a white elephant?” “What is a white elephant?” “Is there any white elephant store or brand?”

Thankfully, I learned the meaning of the white elephant: an object which is kind of brand-new, but unwanted by the owner, but that can still be useful or fun for others. Last Christmas season, when Mihyun had a dinner party at her workplace, she needed to bring a white elephant. She wondered what that was. I taught her what white elephant meant.

Recently, I also learned another expression using an elephant: “the elephant in the room.”

What is the elephant in the room in the United Methodist Church?

2. Null Curriculum

In education, there are four types of curricula: explicit curriculum, implicit curriculum, null curriculum, and extra curriculum. For example, English, History, and Math are examples of explicit curricula. An Explicit curriculum has goals, tests, and textbooks. We can also learn friendship, teamwork, and relationships, which can be an implicit part of the curriculum. Extra curriculum can include sports, art, and music classes in the United States. The null curriculum is what is not taught. Because it is not considered important, it is not taught. Sometimes, if the topic is controversial or makes us uncomfortable, that topic can become a null curriculum.

But what is the elephant in the room in the United Methodist Church? As of now, in the United Methodist Church, it is possible and easier to file complaints against LGBTQ+ persons who enter into the ministry. We welcome LGBTQ+ persons as they are, and they can be our church members. But if they decide to enter into the ministry, to become pastors, there is a possibility of complaint. And if pastors preside over same-sex weddings, the church law requires mandatory punishments against those pastors. For the first offense, the pastors lose their salary for one year, and for the second, they can no longer be employed as pastors, and these are only the minimum penalties. In other words, we welcome LGBTQ+ persons, and they can become church members. However, they cannot be pastors, and cannot get married in our churches and by our pastors. That's why we call it not-fully inclusive. What do you think of these restrictions and punishments?

In November 2019, our five active bishops including our Bishop Minerva Carcano, announced the Safe Harbor Declaration, which offers a safe harbor to set aside complaints against clergy accused of being gay or performing same-sex weddings. The 2020 General Conference was postponed due to COVID-19. Even during COVID-19, I have been feeling the elephant in the room here and there. It is important, but has been controversial. So, I have regarded this elephant in the room as a null curriculum. But today's scripture readings from the lectionary changed my mind. "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it." In the book of Nehemiah, people read the Bible with understanding and with interpretation. And I am thinking of at least what I can do.

A couple of recent Saturday mornings, some of our SPRC members and I took Cross-Racial and Cross-Cultural Workshops. Part of the learning there was about getting to know ourselves, to know where we are, to know where I am first. That's because we are like icebergs. A small part of ourselves is visible above the surface, but much more of ourselves is invisible below the surface. So, I will try to share where I am with this elephant. At least, our congregation can know or needs to know where your pastor stands on this, or how your pastor is thinking about it. This is not intended for making any decisions. This is informational and to encourage self-awareness for me and you as we think about where we are. We are different, not only in race and culture, but also theologically. I believe that we are all theologians. There is no THE theology. My theology and your theology are some of many. In my understanding, only our Lord Jesus Christ is THE theology. I also believe that we are

the body of Christ and individually members of it. We are different, but we can be one body and one spirit!

3. Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Tradition

In the United Methodist Church, we have the Wesleyan Quadrilateral with which to do our theology: Bible, Tradition, Experience, and Reason. So, based on these methods, I will try to share my theology today and next Sunday. First of all, according to our Christian and United Methodist tradition, we have increasingly included more and more people in Christianity and our leadership and our process of ordination. In the Old Testament, God was only for Israelites, not for foreigners. But in the New Testament, God is for everyone. Today is the 3rd Sunday after the epiphany. We celebrate epiphany because Jesus Christ was shown to the three wise men, the Gentiles, the foreigners.

The Samaritan woman was a great example in the Gospel. Jesus spoke with the Samaritan woman at the well, and shared the good news. Apostle Paul declared that there was neither Jews nor Gentiles, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female in Jesus Christ. He shared the good news with slaves, females, and Gentiles, and he witnessed the movement of the Holy Spirit upon them. In our United Methodist tradition, we welcome women not only for our membership, but also for our leaders and our pastors. Our church had female pastors in the past. I am so proud of our female pastors and our church. I believe that our tradition goes also beyond color, race, and language. That's why I am here as your pastor. This is my understanding of our tradition. Then, what is our next direction?

4. Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Bible

When I was in Korea, I had not thought of this issue, because LGBTQ+ was just so taboo in Korea. But when I studied theology in the seminary in the United States, I needed to think about this issue. I have read many articles on this issue, especially biblical articles. I love the Bible. The Bible is important to me. To me, the Bible is not equal to God, but the Bible is the main source for me to know and understand God and God's people. I prepared copies of a biblical article, which I think is the best article to explain biblical perspectives on sexuality and gender. As we read the book of Nehemiah, the people in this Bible passage read the Bible with their own interpretation. Nehemiah 8:8 says “⁸ So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.” Likewise, when we read the Bible, we need some understanding or interpretation. As you know, even though we have the same Bible, some denominations do not allow female pastors in the United States in the 21st century. But with our interpretation, we, the United Methodist Church, have female pastors and we are proud of them.

I cannot share all of the articles, but I can share some. When we read the Bible, how many times does the Bible talk about love? A lot. How many times does the Bible talk about homosexuality? In the article that I brought, ONLY five passages have a direct relation to this, and two other passages are indirectly related to this topic. This means that the Bible has very little interest in this issue.

I will just share one famous passage. Genesis 19:1-13 is the story of Sodom's destruction. Why did God destroy the city of Sodom? Because of homosexuality? In the article, it is not because of the same-gender relations, but because of a lack of hospitality. That's how the book of Ezekiel interpreted the story of Genesis. Ezekiel 16:49 says, "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy." There is no interest in gay and lesbian relationships in Ezekiel. Ezekiel's interest is hospitality toward the poor and the needy.

Jesus also mentioned Sodom in Matthew 10:15. It says "Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town." When we read some of the verses from Matthew 10, it goes like this. ⁶ But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'⁸ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. ⁹ Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, ¹⁰ no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. ¹¹ Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. ¹² As you enter the house, greet it. ¹³ If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. ¹⁴ If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town." And then Jesus said, ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land

of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.” When Jesus talked about Sodom, was it for homosexuality or hospitality?

5. Postlude

Please take a copy of the article that I brought, if you are interested in the biblical perspectives. After you read the article, if you want to talk about the article, I am happy to talk with you, as we are all theologians. Please do not hesitate to contact me. Next Sunday, I plan to share my personal experience under the sermon title “Null Curriculum #2.” As the sermon title shows, I am not that comfortable talking about this topic. Today’s and next Sunday’s scripture readings encouraged me to speak up, even with a controversial topic. I hope for us to think about where we are. As I shared, my theology is just one of many theologies. I hope for you to think about your theology, and what your theology is based on.

As we are Methodists, we agree to disagree. But we can still have one love and one spirit, right? My intention with this message is to challenge my theology and your theology, because only Jesus Christ is THE theology. But if this message makes you uncomfortable, please forgive me. But please remember that we are different, but we are the body of Jesus Christ.

Closing Prayer

O Lord, I am still in fear and trembling. But I am also in awe, because your Holy Spirit is in us, and because we are the body of Jesus Christ together. Please be with us in your grace and love in this challenging time. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

BIBLICAL SEXUALITY AND GENDER: Renewing Christian Witness to the Gospel

**The Rev. Jay Emerson Johnson, PhD
Pacific School of Religion
The Graduate Theological Union
©2011**

How do Christians proclaim the love of God in Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit today? As in every generation, that broad question needs to be contextualized and addressed in relation to key cultural, political, and economic issues. For more than fifty years, Christian communities have struggled in various ways with their proclamation of the gospel in relation to “homosexuality,” or the lives of those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT).

That struggle has divided many Christian communities, ostracized countless individuals, and weakened Christian witness to the gospel. The Bible has been and continues to be the most frequently cited reason why people either condemn or refuse to accept gay and lesbian people, and more recently also bisexual and transgender people.

Biblical scholarship on these questions over the last fifty years has helped many Christian communities to welcome LGBT people and many LGBT people have likewise found new ways to integrate their sexuality and gender expression with their Christian faith. The following is a review of just some of that biblical scholarship and the role it can play in Christian theological reflection, especially for the sake of bearing witness to the good news of Christian faith today.

It is important to realize, first of all, that biblical writers devoted very little energy and attention to same-sex desire or relationships. There are only five passages in the Bible that are most often quoted and which appear to have any direct relation to this topic:

- Genesis 19:1-13
- Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13
- Romans 1:26-27
- 1 Corinthians 6:9-10
- 1 Timothy 1:8-11

Two other passages are sometimes mentioned as well:

- Genesis 1 and 2
- Jude 6-7

Like every other biblical passage, each of those seven texts deserves careful attention by keeping in mind these three elements of responsible and faithful reading:

- Biblical texts never speak for themselves; they always need interpretation. Indeed, texts don't speak at all. But people do speak, and people of faith often speak with biblical texts. How people speak with biblical texts is informed to a large degree by their cultural contexts and social histories.¹
- Translating ancient languages into contemporary languages always involves interpretation; many words and concepts in both ancient Hebrew and Greek have no direct equivalents in modern languages and translators often disagree about how to translate difficult words and phrases.²
- Excerpting small sections or even single verses from larger narratives and arguments will always distort the biblical writer's message. *Everyone* does this from time to time, and it is not necessarily "bad" or "wrong" to do so. But this also means that everyone needs to take responsibility for how and why a given passage is quoted and for what purpose.³

In addition to those guidelines for reading biblical texts responsibly, passages that deal with human sexuality and gender deserve additional notes of caution:

- The word "homosexual" was invented in the nineteenth century and appears nowhere in the original Hebrew or Greek versions of the Bible. German sexologists invented the term "homosexuality" to describe their view of a particular "sexual orientation" or identity that they believed was evident among some human beings. This concept would have been completely foreign to biblical writers.
- In the ancient cultural contexts of the biblical writers, appropriate sexual relations had very little to do with gender and much more to do with the social status and power of one's sexual partner. Socially acceptable sexual relations were always understood as involving a socially dominant partner with a socially submissive partner. Men were by definition socially dominant. Many others were considered socially submissive: women, slaves (of either gender), lower economic classes (of either gender), and youth (of either gender). The modern notion of "peer marriage" or a union of "equals" would have been entirely unknown in ancient Mediterranean cultures.⁴

¹ Asking what the Bible "says" about a given topic reflects this metaphorical assumption that a text can "speak." For the problems associated with this metaphor, see Dale B. Martin, "The Myth of Textual Agency," in *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 1-16.

² Among the many sources for the challenges in translating ancient languages as well as interpreting across cultural contexts, see the collection of essays edited by Joel B. Green, *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010).

³ See Martin, "Community-Shaped Scripture," in *Sex and the Single Savior*, 149-160

⁴ Stephen D. Moore describes this ancient world view a bit more severely by noting that absolute inequality was intrinsic to both good worship and good sex. In that context, sex is basically "eroticized inequality"

- Contemporary scientific and biological understandings of sexuality, procreation, and gender were completely unknown in the ancient world. Those who today identify as “bisexual” or “transgender” present additional insights into these questions, which need further attention in both scholarly and church settings.⁵

Keeping all those guidelines and notes of caution in view, the following is just one way to read a few of the more difficult biblical passages regarding sexuality (the texts themselves are provided in the first appendix), and especially through the broader lens of the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Rather than merely “refuting” problematic biblical texts, Christian faith communities today, as in every generation, rightly seek insights from the Bible for their gospel mission in the world. Discerning carefully how to read the Bible regarding sexuality and gender thus remains critically important for every Christian congregation. (The second appendix provides a short list of references for further reading and study.)

❖ The Creation Accounts: Genesis 1 and 2

In Genesis 1:31 God declares that the creation, and especially humanity, is “very good.” Yet the goodness of human sexuality and gender continues to raise a number of difficult questions. Genesis 1 and 2 are sometimes cited, for example, to support two interrelated convictions: first, “gender complementarity” describes God’s creation of human beings as male and female; and second, such complementarity is best expressed in the procreation of children within monogamous marriage. The extensive biblical scholarship available on these passages – in both Jewish and Christians traditions – nuances those two convictions in some important ways.

In the first of the two creation accounts in Genesis (1:26-27) distinct gender differentiation is attributed to the whole human species rather than to individuals, just as both male and female alike apply to God, in whose image humanity is made.⁶ Similarly, the command to “be fruitful and multiply” (1:28) is given to the human species, not to each individual. If this were not the case, this text would lead to some rather troubling if not actually

(*God’s Beauty Parlor and Other Queer Spaces in and Around the Bible* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001]), 153.

⁵ Both sociologists and biologists are urging a much broader view today of what constitutes gender in relation to sex. The supposition, for example, that any species, including humanity, can be neatly and strictly divided between male and female derives mostly from modern cultural assumptions. See: Christine Gudorf, “A New Moral Discourse on Sexuality,” in *Human Sexuality and the Catholic Tradition*, ed. Kieran Scott and Harold Daly Horell (New York: Roman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 51-69; and Joan Roughgarden, *Evolution’s Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2004), 5-6. For a good introduction to Roughgarden’s work and perspectives, see the interview with her, “Nature Abhors a Category,” in *The Gay and Lesbian Review*, 15 (January-February 2008), 14-16.

⁶ This text raises a host of questions which the text itself does not address concerning gender and sexuality in both humanity and God. See Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

absurd conclusions. For example, we might need to “view those who are single, celibate, or who for whatever reason do not have children – including Jesus of Nazareth – as being disobedient sinners.”⁷ Moreover, the generative aspects of loving and faithful commitment can be seen in many different ways and not only in bearing and raising children.⁸

The second account in Genesis provides specific reference to the creation of distinct individuals (2:7-22), and, for the first time, something that is *not* good in God’s creation. “It is not good,” God declares, “for the human being to be alone.”⁹ Here the story turns on the importance of companionship and not, as in the first account, on the procreation of children. Significantly, the companion God provides for the solitary human is not defined by “otherness” but by suitable similarity. In this passage, “there is no emphasis...on ‘difference’ or ‘complementarity’ at all – in fact, just the opposite. When Adam sees Eve, he does not celebrate her otherness but her sameness: what strikes him is that she is ‘bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh.’” Reducing this story to the fitness of particular anatomical parts, as some have done, misses the poignancy of this story: “God sees the plight of this first human being and steps in and does whatever it takes to provide him with a life-giving, life-sustaining companion.”¹⁰ Moreover, neither of these two chapters in Genesis refers explicitly to marriage. The purpose of these creation accounts, rather, is to affirm God as the creator of all things and “the priority of human companionship.”¹¹

Genesis 1 and 2 can and should continue to shape, inform, and energize the Church’s faithful witness to the God revealed in Scripture. The Church can, for example, proclaim God as the creator and affirm the goodness of God’s creation, which includes the dignity of every human being as created in God’s image. This affirmation remains vital, not least for the sake of embracing the full humanity of women. The unqualified dignity with which the biblical writer treated both men and women in the account of their creation stands out as quite remarkable in the patriarchal culture in which it was written.¹²

St. Paul, furthermore, would urge Christians to read the Genesis accounts of creation through the lens of the *new* creation, which God has promised in Christ, the first fruits of which

⁷ William Stacy Johnson, *A Time to Embrace: Same-Gender Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 115-16.

⁸ See Paul Marshall, *Same-Sex Unions: Stories and Rites* (New York: Church Publishing, 2004) 38-39.

⁹ Genesis 2:18 (for the significance of this translation of the verse, see Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 114-115, 117).

¹⁰ Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 120.

¹¹ Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 112.

¹² Johnson notes, for example, that in ancient Mediterranean society, women were considered human beings but decidedly deficient ones and were therefore rightly subservient to men (*A Time to Embrace*, 275, n.16). Dale Martin likewise relates this ancient view of the inferiority of women – as “deficient men” – to the difficulties in translating, let alone interpreting, two Greek words in the New Testament that have been frequently cited regarding “homosexuality.” Those words appear in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. The words “sodomite” or “homosexual” have appeared in some English translations of those verses, but the meaning of the Greek in both cases is obscure and elusive. Martin believes it likely that these words referred to cultural practices involving sexual exploitation (perhaps including rape) and also effeminate behavior, which for men in that society triggered both alarm and disgust (“*Arsenokoites* and *Malakos*: Meanings and Consequences,” in *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*, ed. Robert L. Brawley [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996]).

God has provided by raising Christ from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:20-25). Living into that promise and anticipating its fulfillment, Paul urged the Christians in Galatia to understand their baptism into Christ's death and resurrection as erasing the social and cultural hierarchies with which they were most familiar: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).¹³

❖ The Destruction of Sodom: Genesis 19:1-13

Many biblical texts in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures rely on the significance of hospitality, which should be understood well beyond its relegation in western society to proper manners. Scripture regards hospitality, toward both friend and stranger, as evidence of covenantal obedience and fruitfulness.¹⁴ A particularly dramatic biblical reminder of the importance of hospitable relations has also been frequently cited to oppose gay and lesbian relationships: the story of Sodom's destruction in Genesis 19. Popular interpretations of this passage, however, rely less on the biblical story itself than on the cultural reception of this story over many centuries of European history.¹⁵

The narrative in this passage turns on whether certain visitors to Sodom will be received graciously and hospitably by the city's inhabitants or exploited and even raped. The sin of Sodom's citizens thus refers explicitly to the codes of hospitality in the ancient near east rather than to same-gender sexual relations.¹⁶ Other biblical writers who referred to Sodom never highlighted sexuality or even mentioned it at all. Ezekiel, for example, was quite direct in his interpretation of the story: "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy" (16:49).¹⁷ Jesus likewise evoked the story of Sodom, not for the purpose of sexual ethics but in the context of

¹³ See Martin, "The Queer History of Galatians 3:28: 'No Male and Female,'" in *Sex and the Single Savior*, 77-90.

¹⁴ Exodus 22:21, Leviticus 19:34, Deuteronomy 24:19-21, Malachi 3:5, and Hebrews 13:2, among many others. For an overview and analysis of the centrality of hospitality in Scripture and in early Christianity, see Amos Yong, *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008).

¹⁵ The term "sodomy," for example, does not appear in Scripture, and what it has come to mean (including within North Atlantic jurisprudence) is not supported by the biblical references to it. See: Jay Emerson Johnson, "Sodomy and Gendered Love: Reading Genesis 19 in the Anglican Communion," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, ed., Michael Lieb, Emma Mason, and Jonathan Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 415-434; and Michael Carden, *Sodomy: A History of a Christian Biblical Myth* (London: Equinox Publishing, 2009).

¹⁶ The definition of "sodomy" varied rather widely throughout Christian history and coalesced exclusively around particular sexual acts only in the eleventh century; see Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

¹⁷ Ezekiel's description represents the approach most often taken by writers in the Hebrew Bible in which the sin of Sodom is always in association with violence or injustice; see Daniel Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*, rev. ed., (Tajique, NM: Alamo Square Press, 2000), 47-49. In the New Testament, Jude 7 is sometimes cited as well, yet that verse does not describe "sexual immorality" with any precision (it could refer to rape, for example) and the "unnatural lust" of Sodom's inhabitants could also refer to the fact that the strangers sent to Sodom were actually angels (see Genesis 6:4).

sending out his disciples to do the work of ministry. Those who did not receive his disciples, he said, would suffer a fate worse than the citizens of Sodom (Matthew 10:15), which underscores the centrality of hospitality in that ancient story.

As early as the 1950s, biblical scholars attempted to place Genesis 19 in its original cultural context and to revive an interpretive approach to that story that resonated with the intra-biblical witness to it.¹⁸ Scripture, in other words, would have us read Genesis 19 as applicable to all people rather than only to some, and the lesson for all is the primacy of hospitality, or the love of neighbor, as Jesus himself commanded.

❖ “Abominations”: Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

Ancient Hebrew is often more difficult to translate than ancient Greek. For both, the work of translation is always already a work of interpretation, which involves appreciating the significant social differences between ancient Israelite culture, first century Greco-Roman culture, and twenty-first century western culture. Biblical texts were written in and for those particular communities with shared concerns and perspectives about their lives in relationship to God.

Noting the significant cultural differences between the households of ancient Israel and today’s western nuclear families can, for example, inform our interpretation of another biblical passage that has been cited to reject “homosexuality”: Leviticus 18:22, and its analogue, 20:13.

These two verses belong to an extensive array of dietary restrictions, commandments, and ritual practices often referred to as the “Levitical holiness code.” Two features of ancient Israelite society can provide important assistance in interpreting these difficult passages: the process of constructing a religious identity for Israel distinct from its surrounding cultures; and the strict gender hierarchy of the ancient Mediterranean world.¹⁹

Leviticus 18:22 condemns sex between men, and more particularly, treating a man like a woman. The Hebrew word used for this condemnation, translated as “abomination,” appears most often with reference to the cultic practices associated with the worship of foreign gods. Similar condemnations of child sacrifice and bestiality in this same chapter strengthen the connection to idolatrous rituals.²⁰ An “abomination,” then, could refer to any practice taken from Israel’s surrounding cultures and which diluted or distorted Israel’s unique religious and cultural identity.

¹⁸ One of the earliest examples of this approach was Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (London: Longmans, Green, 1955).

¹⁹ Insights from Jewish commentators and scholars on these and other important aspects of biblical interpretation deserve renewed attention in Christian communities. See for example: Steven Greenberg, *Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in Jewish Tradition* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005); and Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1995).

²⁰ See Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 37-56. St. Paul would likely have known the connection between the Levitical holiness code and idolatrous cults as well, which lends further support to interpreting the first chapter of Romans with reference to temple prostitution (see the section below on Romans).

Equally important, the patriarchal ordering of that ancient society relied on male privilege. Sexual practices reflected this gendered ordering as men were expected to assume an active role and women a passive one, which both reflected and perpetuated the dominance of men in all other spheres of cultural and religious life and reinforced the treatment of women as property. More bluntly, sex in the ancient world was always understood with reference to penetration: one partner penetrates (the socially dominant one) and the other is penetrated (the socially inferior one). Sexual relations in those ancient cultural contexts, in other words, were defined by who rightly had power over whom. Sex between men in that worldview would thus violate male privilege and disrupt the patriarchal ordering of society.²¹

In these and other ways, ancient Israelite culture, which the Levitical holiness code was meant to uphold, differs significantly from the egalitarian ideals toward which many Christian families strive in modern western culture (and indeed in other locales as well).²² Likewise, the distinctive concerns shared by the ancient Israelites (and the Apostle Paul as well; see the next section) to reject the sexual practices associated with idolatrous cults are in no way applicable to the lives of faithful Christians who also identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

These historical and cultural differences, however, do not render these biblical passages irrelevant. To the contrary, Scripture continues to bear witness to the primacy of covenantal relationship with the one true God of Israel, whom Christians believe and proclaim is revealed decisively in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Rather than shaping our lives and households based on ancient cultural patterns, the challenge in each new generation is instead to discern how that covenantal relationship with God informs all of our relationships today.

❖ “Unnatural” Relations and Idolatry: Romans 1:26-27

The Apostle Paul had a number of opinions and perspectives about human sexuality that may seem a bit peculiar to the modern reader. He recommended to the Christians in Corinth, for example, that the work of Christian ministry is best done by remaining unmarried (1 Corinthians 7:25-32). But for gay and lesbian people, the first chapter of his letter to the Romans (especially 1:26-27) has played a significant role in the Church’s debates over sexuality.

Several important issues arise when interpreting this Pauline passage, including the difficulties in knowing what Paul meant by “unnatural” in those verses, to whom he was

²¹ Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*, Revised ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 68-69.

²² The treatment not only of women but also of children as property, as well as the practice of concubinage and slave-holding in ancient Mediterranean households marks these differences even further. See: Carol L. Meyers, “Everyday Life: Women in the Period of the Hebrew Bible,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Sharon H., and Sharon H. Ringe, Expanded ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1998), 250-59; Gale A. Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman As Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 29-58; and Amy L. Wordelman, “Everyday Life: Women in the Period of the New Testament,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Sharon H., and Sharon H. Ringe, Expanded ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1998), 482-88.

addressing these concerns, and the rhetorical purpose of his letter overall.²³ It is particularly important to note, however, that Paul's description of sexual behavior in the first chapter appears in direct relation to his condemnation of idolatry. For Paul, the consequence (not the cause) of worshiping false gods is a distorted understanding of sexuality, its purpose and goal (1:22-23).

The Greco-Roman world of the first century exhibited many different kinds of sexual relationships and practices (just as the world does today). It's not at all clear precisely which kind of sexual practices Paul had in mind in this passage, though he is clearly troubled by them. Since Paul was writing to Christians in Rome, some have suggested that he was concerned particularly with the religious cults devoted to fertility gods and goddesses. Some have claimed that these cultic rituals may have included self-castration, drunken orgies, and having sex with young temple prostitutes (both male and female).²⁴ Christians rightly condemn all those behaviors as violations of the human body, which Paul likewise insisted is the very temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16-17); it is just as important to realize that those alleged cultic practices have nothing to do with LGBT Christians today, about which Paul would not have had any experience or knowledge.²⁵

Some have also noted that the rather unusual phrase Paul uses to describe those sexual practices (*para phusin* in Greek, which could mean "against nature" or "contrary to nature") appears again in this same letter, but there he uses it to refer to God. In chapter 11, Paul describes Gentiles as belonging to a "wild olive tree." God lops them off that tree and, "contrary to nature," grafts them on to the one true tree of Israel (11:24). This should, at the very least, give readers pause as they consider what "unnatural" really means in this letter.²⁶

Paul's broader insight about idolatry in the first chapter, however, still compels the Church to continual discernment and assessment of its common life. Contrary to how most people in contemporary western society think about such things, Paul would urge us to make a direct link between faithful worship and proper sexual relations. Our sexual lives, in other words, are intertwined with our relationship with God, and vice versa.

The primacy of our covenantal relationship with God in Christ can shed even further light on Paul's recommendation to the Christians in Corinth that they remain unmarried. "Single" people can play an important role in bearing witness to the good news of the gospel: Human sexual relationships of any kind are not the purpose or goal of human life; union with God in Christ is the goal for all, including the whole created order, as the rest of Paul's letter to

²³ See L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today*, Revised ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 119-123. See also Martin, "Heterosexism and the Interpretation of Romans 1:18-32," in *Sex and the Single Savior*, 51-64.

²⁴ For the controversy over ancient fertility cults and the alleged sexual practices associated with them, see Robert A. Oden, Jr., *The Bible without Theology: The Theological Tradition and Alternatives to It* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), chpt. 5, "Religious Identity and the Sacred Prostitution Accusation," 131-153. For more on the Greco-Roman cultural background of the New Testament and the sensibilities of first century Palestinian Judaism, see Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for a Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

²⁵ See Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, 103-113.

²⁶ See Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 98-99; and Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says*, 80-86.

the Romans makes clear (8:18-25).

At their best, human relationships can only point us toward our final fulfillment which God has promised in Christ. People who make an intentional decision to remain unmarried, then, offer important signposts on that spiritual journey to which all of us are called and in which nothing, including marriage, should supplant our primary devotion to God and to God's household, the Church.

Conclusion: Abundant Life

Christians have always read the Bible in many different ways over many centuries. Christians have likewise always insisted on finding a living word in these ancient texts for their own day and circumstances. In that work, Christians have frequently turned to the four gospel accounts as their primary guide and inspiration in proclaiming the good news of God's love in Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus promised would lead his followers deeper into truth (John 16:13).

The Spirit continues to lead the Church into shared discernment over a wide range of issues that biblical writers could not have anticipated. Paul himself understood this and reminded the Corinthians that our knowledge will always be incomplete and partial (1 Corinthians 13:9-10). Meanwhile, and just as Paul urged, Christians strive to live with faith, hope, and love, and to bear witness to the greatest of these, which is love (1 Corinthians 13:13).

The Church today can continue in that faithful, hopeful, and loving discernment in a number of ways. Over the last sixty years, for example, social, psychological, and bio-medical sciences have contributed to a gradual cultural shift regarding sexual orientation and gender identity. "Homosexuality" is no longer considered a pathological condition, as it once was in the early twentieth century, and which carried severe social consequences. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people now participate openly in nearly every profession and walk of life. Just like different-gender couples, many LGBT people form stable and enduring relationships and some also raise children in their families.²⁷

This cultural shift in understanding can inform faithful readings of the Bible concerning LGBT people, especially in the light of modern biblical scholarship. Many Christian communities and clergy have come to believe that the truth into which the Spirit is leading them today resembles Peter's spiritual insight concerning Gentiles: No one, he declared, should be called "profane or unclean" (Acts 10:28).

As the Church embraces that insight, it can extend the reach of God's radical welcome and extravagant generosity, striving always to follow the One who came that all might have life, "and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

²⁷ The 2000 U.S. Census showed 22% of gay male couples and 33% of lesbian couples were raising children, which increased in 2010 census data (<http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2010.html>; accessed Sept. 1, 2011). Recent studies have shown no discernible difference in the health and well-being of children raised by same-gender couples compared to different-gender couples (<http://www.livescience.com/6073-children-raised-lesbians-fine-studies-show.html>; accessed Sept. 1, 2011).

Appendix 1: The Biblical Passages

(The New Revised Standard Version)

♦ **Genesis 1:26-27**

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

♦ **Genesis 2:4b-8; 18-22**

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed.

Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.' So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,
'This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken.'

♦ **Genesis 19:1-13**

The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. He said, 'Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way.' They said, 'No; we will spend the night in the square.' But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, 'Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.' Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, 'I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.' But

they replied, 'Stand back!' And they said, 'This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them.' Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door. Then the men said to Lot, 'Have you anyone else here? Sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone you have in the city—bring them out of the place. For we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the Lord, and the Lord has sent us to destroy it.'

♦ **Leviticus 18:22**

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

♦ **Leviticus 20:13**

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.

♦ **Romans 1:26-27**

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

♦ **1 Corinthians 6:9-10**

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.

♦ **1 Timothy 1:8-11**

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

♦ **Jude 6-7**

And the angels who did not keep their own position, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains in deepest darkness for the judgment of the great day. Likewise, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which, in the same manner as they, indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.

Appendix 2: For Further Reading and Study

A wide range of biblical and theological scholarship is available from the last fifty years on questions regarding human sexuality and gender. The following is just a small sample of that work, particularly suitable for Christian congregational study.

- Robert L. Brawley, ed., *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).
- Michael Carden, *Sodomy: A History of a Christian Biblical Myth* (London: Equinox Publishing, 2009).
- L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today*, Revised ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).
- Steven Greenberg, *Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in Jewish Tradition* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005).
- Daniel Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, Revised ed. (Tajique, NM: Alamo Square Press, 2000).
- William Stacy Johnson, *A Time to Embrace: Same-Gender Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2006).
- Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).
- Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*, Revised ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).
- Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor? A Positive Christian Response*, Revised ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1994).
- Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for a Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).
- Gray Temple, *Gay Unions in Light of Scripture, Tradition, and Reason* (New York: Church Publishing, 2004).
- Walter Wink, ed., *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).