

SEXUALITY OVERTURES – CHURCH DOCTRINE REPORTS

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

(A&P 2017, p. 536–40, 28)

Background

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

Moving Forward

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

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

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

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

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

Repentance and Confession

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

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

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

Three Options

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

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

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

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

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

Option A:

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

Option B:

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

Option C:

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

Study and Report

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

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

Recommendation No. 4 (adopted, p. 28)

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

Recommendation No. 5 (adopted, p. 28)

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

THE HISTORIC ARGUMENT CONCERNING HUMAN SEXUALITY

(A&P 2017, p. 480–504, 28)

Introduction to the Historic Argument

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

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

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

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

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

Our Approach

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. What is God’s plan for human life?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.1. The Bible’s Overarching Marital Theology

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.1.1. Genesis 1 and 2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.1.3. Ephesians 5 and Revelation 21, 22

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

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

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

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

Mutual submission: The secret of marriage

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

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

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

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

Revelation 21 and 22

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

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

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

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

3.2. The Seven Commonly Cited Texts

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Isaiah's indictments against the people of Israel, whom he figuratively addresses as Sodom and Gomorrah, are for their idolatry and injustice. Ezekiel 16:49–50 says: "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it." It was incumbent upon the city of Sodom to provide hospitality to sojourners, such was the code of ancient cities. Instead they sought to exploit the guests of Lot, so some commentators speak of a "sin against hospitality". But the way the men of Sodom sought to violate the male guests of Lot was also in a sexual manner. The text says:

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

(Genesis 19:4–11)

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

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

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

3.2.2. Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.2.4. Romans 1:26–27

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.3. Other Texts

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

3.3.1. Acts 10 and 15

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

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

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

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

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

(Acts 15:19-21)

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

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

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

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

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

3.3.2. Galatians 3:28–29

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

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

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

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

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

3.4. Textual Summary

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

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

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

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

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

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

Marriage

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

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

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

Singleness

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Other Considerations

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

A. Hypocrisy

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

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

B. Hate and Homophobia

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

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

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

C. Identity

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

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

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

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

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

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

D. Pastoral Care

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

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

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

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

Image of God

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

Caring Community, Discipleship and Worship

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

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

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

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

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

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

Endnotes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²⁴ See Leviticus 11.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES ON COVENANTED MONOGAMOUS SAME SEX RELATIONSHIPS

(A&P 2017, 505–36, 28)

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

Summary of the study

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

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

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

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

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

In this study, we have two guides:

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Study

Introduction

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

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

This study assumes that,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The motion adopted by the General Assembly in 1994 reads,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Asking the Appropriate Questions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Biblical Study

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

To sum up:

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.3 Jesus Christ redefines the meaning of gender difference

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

To sum up, the Bible teaches us:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Old Testament scholar Renato K. Lings writes,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6.23 God has so created us that we, humans, need one another. Social intercourse is necessary for all. Sexual intercourse, however, is not. Life can be full and abundant for the single, both homosexual and heterosexual, without sexual intercourse, despite the dictates of current society. Sexuality, which is inherent to us all, can be expressed in other ways than by genital activity – in friendship, in affection, in touch and in belonging. The alternative is not between the intimacy of homosexual intercourse on the one hand, and the pain of isolation and repression on the other. The church is called to be a welcoming, nurturing, loving and supportive community, a true church family, where all are welcomed, nurtured, loved and supported. Sadly, the Christian church has frequently shunned homosexuals and failed to minister to them and with them. The church as a whole must repent of its homophobia and hypocrisy. All Christians, whether our sins are of the spirit or of the flesh, whether heterosexual or homosexual, need God's forgiveness and mutual forgiveness as we pursue together the path of holy living. Grace abounds, and in our weakness God's strength is made known.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

HS1994 makes the following argument,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- We need to consider the bias of cultural context.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Endnotes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁹ See Lings 2013, p. 523.

²⁰ HS1994, 6.8.

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

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

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