

**IN THE EASTERN PENNSYLVANIA CONFERENCE
OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

IN RE: THE MATTER OF THE UNITED
METHODIST CHURCH'S BANS PROHIBITING
SAME-SEX WEDDINGS AND ORDINATION
LGBTQ PERSONS AS CLERGY

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**A BRIEF IN SUPPORT OF FULL
INCLUSION OF LGBTQ PERSONS
IN THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

Respectfully submitted,

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Dated: May 13, 2019

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QUESTION PRESENTED

Should LGBTQ persons be fully included in the life and ministry of The United Methodist Church by permitting them to be ordained as United Methodist clergy, by allowing same-sex weddings to be held in United Methodist churches and officiated by United Methodist clergy, and by abolishing the Book of Discipline's statement that "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching"?

Suggested Answer: YES

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church bans same-sex weddings and bars openly gay or lesbian persons from ordination and appointment as clergy. Here is the reason why: There are six passages in the Bible that reference same gender sexual activity, and they all appear to condemn it in the strongest terms. The case for our Book of Discipline's position could be summed up by a bumper sticker: "The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it."

But as William Sloane Coffin once said, "It is a mistake to look to the Bible to close a discussion; the Bible seeks to open one." United Methodists recognize the Bible as a complex book that invites careful study and heart-felt reflection, not reflexive literalism. Scripture is the Methodist's starting point for an inquiry that also examines tradition, reason and experience in a quest to discern God's will in our present age. This approach has led to results such as these:

- There are numerous Bible passages which condone the institution of slavery and none that forbids it; yet John Wesley – Methodism's founder – was compelled by his faith to become an ardent and outspoken abolitionist.

- The Bible plainly states that women are to “remain silent in the churches. They are not to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says ... for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.” (1 Corinthians 13:34-35)¹ Nevertheless, John Wesley licensed a woman to preach in 1761, the United Brethren Church (a predecessor denomination to The United Methodist Church) approved full clergy rights for women in 1889, and the Methodist Church finally followed suit in 1956.²
- Jesus himself said, “I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.” (Matthew 19:9) The Social Principles of The United Methodist Church, however, now provide that “[d]ivorce does not preclude a new marriage,”³ and church law allows Annual Conferences to form their own policies about divorced persons serving as clergy.⁴

How did Methodists reach these results? We interpreted the Biblical text, considering the author’s cultural context and core values from Scripture. Whether the issue was slavery or the role of women in the church or divorce, our interpretation of Scripture has been guided by such Biblical values as the Golden Rule of Matthew 7:12 (“do to others what you would have them do to you”), the command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39), and the message of radical equality reflected in Galatians 3:28 – “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” These same core Biblical values should compel United Methodists to re-think our official position on same-sex marriage and the ordination of LGBTQ persons as clergy.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version NIV Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.

² Why Does The United Methodist Church Ordain Women? <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/why-does-the-united-methodist-church-ordain-women>

³ Social Principles: The Nurturing Community <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/the-nurturing-community#divorce>

⁴ Can a Divorced Person Serve as Clergy in The United Methodist Church? <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/can-a-divorced-person-serve-as-clergy-in-the-united-methodist-church>

FACTS OF THE CASE

There are 6.9 million United Methodists in America and another 5.6 million United Methodists in Africa, Asia and Europe.⁵ A 2018 Gallup poll found that 4.5 percent of American adults surveyed self-identified as LGBTQ, which works out to more than 11 million LGBTQ adults nationwide.⁶ If the poll's results are applied to the UMC's 6.9 million American members, it means that approximately 310,500 LGBTQ persons can be found in the pews of United Methodist congregations in America. One of these 310,500 LGBTQ persons is openly serving as a bishop of the Mountain Sky Conference in the Western Jurisdiction.⁷ An untold number of these 310,500 persons are serving as ordained clergy – some of them openly and others in the closet (for fear of losing their credentials and livelihood). Many, many more of these 310,500 LGBTQ persons are active laity, faithfully serving local congregations as trustees and worship leaders, musicians and Sunday school teachers, youth ministry leaders and delegates to annual conference. They serve the church they love just as their heterosexual brothers and sisters in Christ do. Their myriad contributions to the UMC bring to mind these words of Jesus:

By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. (Matthew 7:16-18)

Yet, despite enjoying their good fruit, the UMC too often treats LGBTQ persons as bad trees. They certainly are not treated as the equals of their heterosexual brothers and sisters. Since 1972, our Book of Discipline has made them second-class Christians by declaring that

⁵ United Methodists At-A-Glance <http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/united-methodists-at-a-glance>

⁶ Fitzsimons, Tim, *A Record 4.5 Percent of U.S. Adults Identify as LGBT, Gallup Estimates*, NBC News (May 26, 2018) <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/record-4-5-percent-u-s-adults-identify-lgbt-gallup-n877486>

⁷ Meet the Bishops, Bishop Karen Oliveto <http://www.umc.org/bishops/bishop-karen-oliveto>

“[t]he practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.” (Book of Discipline, ¶ 304.3)

The UMC’s Ban on LGBTQ Clergy

Consistent with its proclamation that “[t]he practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching,” the Book of Discipline provides that “self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.” (Book of Discipline, ¶ 304.3) As a result, LGBTQ United Methodists who hear God’s call to pursue ordained ministry face a Hobson’s choice: Give up your church or give up your calling. They must leave their beloved church home to pursue God’s call on their lives in a different denomination, or they must suppress that sacred call in order to remain faithful to the teachings of their church. Heterosexual United Methodists face no such choice.

Traditionalists will protest that this is not a ban on all LGBTQ clergy. After all, an LGBTQ person could stay in the UMC while pursuing ordained ministry by remaining celibate, as all unmarried UMC clergy are asked to do. But LGBTQ couples now have the constitutional right to marry anywhere in the United States, just as heterosexual couples do.⁸ A heterosexual pastor’s traditional marriage would be cause for celebration in the UMC. An LGBTQ pastor’s same-sex marriage, however, would be cause for revoking the pastor’s credentials. The married LGBTQ pastor would be a “self-avowed practicing homosexual”⁹ who is ineligible to be

⁸ *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 135 S. Ct. 2071 (2015) https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/14pdf/14-556_3204.pdf

⁹ Under a new rule that becomes effective January 1, 2020, “[s]elf-avowed practicing homosexual’ is understood to mean that a person openly acknowledges to a bishop, district superintendent, district committee of ordained ministry, Board of Ordained Ministry, or clergy session that the person is a practicing homosexual; or is living in a same-sex marriage, domestic partnership or civil union, or is a person who publicly states she or he is a practicing homosexual.” See 2019 General Conference Petition 90032 <https://wesleyancovenant.org/petition-90032-2/>

appointed as a pastor to any United Methodist congregation. The Traditionalists' insistence upon celibacy for gay clergy while heterosexual clergy freely marry and enjoy sex brings to mind Jesus' warning that the Pharisees "do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them." (Matthew 23:3-4)

The UMC's effective ban on LGBTQ clergy has caused gay and lesbian pastors and ministerial candidates to hide who they are, with all the harmful consequences of keeping such a secret. The ban has caused gifted candidates for ministry to give up on fulfilling God's call or to flee to other denominations that do not force them to live a lie. It even has caused LGBTQ pastors to hide lawful marriages from their congregations for fear of losing their livelihood. This is how we are choosing to treat persons God has called to minister to us and the world.

The UMC's Ban on Same-Sex Weddings

Our discrimination against LGBTQ persons does not stop with the ordained clergy. Paragraph 341.6 of the Book of Discipline provides, "Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches." LGBTQ United Methodists in America who fall in love and wish to marry now can do so in the eyes of the law, but they are not welcome to hold their lawful wedding ceremony in the church they love and serve. The pastor who provides spiritual care to them in every other instance is suddenly and specifically forbidden to officiate at their wedding. In fact, under new rules passed at the 2019 Special General Conference, which become effective on January 1, 2020, a pastor who officiates at a same-sex wedding automatically will be suspended for one year without pay, and a second offense will result in the automatic defrocking of the pastor.¹⁰

¹⁰ 2019 General Conference Petition 90042 <https://wesleyancovenant.org/petition-90042-2/>

The UMC's discriminatory wedding policy and its harsh penalties accomplish nothing but harm to LGBTQ persons, their families and supporters. Devout and faithful LGBTQ Methodists are told that their marriage – the central human relationship in their lives – is “incompatible” with faith in God. What is a lawfully married LGBTQ person who joins the UMC to do to make oneself “compatible” with Christian teaching? Get divorced? And what of the children of same-sex marriages? They are left to believe they are something less than the children of heterosexual marriages. After all, their family is built upon the foundation of a sinful relationship. The UMC professes that “all persons are of sacred worth,”¹¹ but these lofty words have the hollow ring of a crashing gong or a clanging cymbal when we denigrate the marriages and families of LGBTQ persons.¹² The *de facto* message of the UMC's same-sex wedding ban is this: All persons are of sacred worth, but some are more worthy than others.

To be sure, the UMC's ban on same-sex weddings does not stop LGBTQ persons from marrying. They marry in places other than United Methodist churches and without the aid of United Methodist clergy. One of the many sad consequences of current UMC policy is our lost opportunity to bear witness to Christ's love at same-sex wedding ceremonies. Christ is an integral part of the United Methodist wedding service, as the couple publicly declares their intention “to enter into union with each other through the grace of Jesus Christ, who calls you into union with himself as acknowledged in your baptism.”¹³ Our choice to pursue perceived moral purity over a concrete opportunity to bear witness to Jesus Christ in the LGBTQ community is a sign of misplaced priorities.

¹¹ Book of Discipline, ¶ 4, Article IV.

¹² See 1 Corinthians 13:1 (“If I speak in tongues of men or of angels, but I do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.”).

¹³ United Methodist Book of Worship, *A Service of Christian Marriage I* (1992)
<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/a-service-of-christian-marriage-i>

The UMC's Ban on Funding LGBTQ Advocacy

Under Paragraphs 613 and 806.9 of the Book of Discipline, no “board, agency, committee, commission, or council shall give United Methodist funds to any gay caucus or group, or otherwise use such funds to promote the acceptance of homosexuality[.]” No other identity group of United Methodists is singled out for such discriminatory treatment. United Methodist Men, United Methodist Women and other identity-based caucuses and groups may receive United Methodist funds, but “any gay caucus or group” is barred from receiving those funds.

The funding ban, unlike the clergy ban, is not even limited to “self-avowed practicing homosexuals.” It sweepingly applies to “any gay caucus or group” regardless of purpose – thus evidencing a class-based animus against gays. For example, by the letter of this law, a support group for celibate LGBTQ clergy persons would be subject to the funding ban, even though celibate LGBTQ clergy are permitted under the Book of Discipline’s current standards. The mere fact that it is a “gay group” is reason enough to deny it funding. It is impossible to articulate any reasonable explanation for the breadth of this funding ban but hostility toward LGBTQ persons.

A Larger Pattern of Discrimination

The UMC’s bans on LGBTQ clergy and same-sex weddings are part of a much larger milieu of discrimination. It is beyond debate that LGBTQ persons have been an oppressed minority in American life. For much of this nation’s history, the fields of law and medicine internalized the traditional Christian view that homosexuality was a sin and gave teeth to that belief. But now things are changing.

As late as 1960, anti-sodomy laws criminalized gay sexual relations in all fifty states.¹⁴ One such law was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court as recently as 1986.¹⁵ Legal punishments for sodomy included heavy fines, imprisonment, and, in some states, denial of other fundamental rights such as the right to vote or one's right to a driver's license.¹⁶ It was not until 2003 that anti-sodomy laws were declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court.¹⁷

Not content to leave legalized prejudice against gays and lesbians to the states, the U.S. Government got in on the act in 1996 with enactment of the Defense of Marriage Act ("DOMA"). The popular federal statute was passed by large, veto-proof majorities in both houses of Congress and was signed into law by then-President Bill Clinton. At the time of DOMA's passage, some states had legalized same-sex marriage. DOMA allowed states to refuse to recognize same-sex marriages granted under the laws of other states. DOMA also prohibited the federal government from recognizing same-sex marriages despite their lawful status under state law. This had potentially devastating personal and financial implications for same-sex couples, as more than 1,000 federal laws, rules and regulations confer some benefit, right or privilege upon those who are married. In 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court declared DOMA unconstitutional.¹⁸

¹⁴ *Supreme Court Strikes Down Texas Law Banning Sodomy*, Associated Press (June 26, 2013) <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/26/politics/supreme-court-strikes-down-texas-law-banning-sodomy.html>

¹⁵ *Bowers v. Hardwick*, 478 U.S. 186 (1986).

¹⁶ See de la Croix, St. Sukie, *Chicago Whispers: A History of LGBT Chicago Before Stonewall* (2012) University of Wisconsin Press. p. 248.; See also, *Homosexual to Fight Denial of Car License*, The Day (Nov. 2, 1970) <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1915&dat=19701102&id=oSliAAAAIBAJ&sjid=S3QFAAAAIBAJ&pg=863,1064183>

¹⁷ *Lawrence v. Texas*, 539 U.S. 558 (2003).

¹⁸ *United States v. Windsor*, 570 U.S. 774 (2013).

Two years later, the Supreme Court found that the fundamental right to marry is constitutionally guaranteed to same gender couples, thereby making same-sex marriage lawful in all fifty states.¹⁹ In his majority opinion, Justice Anthony M. Kennedy penned these words:

No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family. In forming a marital union, two people become something greater than once they were. As some of the petitioners in these cases demonstrate, marriage embodies a love that may endure even past death. It would misunderstand these men and women to say they disrespect the idea of marriage. Their plea is that they do respect it, respect it so deeply that they seek to find its fulfillment for themselves. Their hope is not to be condemned to live in loneliness, excluded from one of civilization's oldest institutions. They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right.^[20]

The medical community also did much to stigmatize LGBTQ persons in America before changing its view. In 1953, the American Psychiatric Association listed “homosexuality” as a “sociopathic personality disturbance” in its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-I).²¹ In the Manual’s second edition (DSM-II), published in 1968, “homosexuality” was reclassified as a “sexual deviation.”²² The 1973 revision to the DSM-II removed homosexuality as a diagnosis, but a disorder called “sexual orientation disturbance” was created for persons “in conflict with” their sexual orientation.²³ This legitimized the harmful practice of sexual conversion therapy,²⁴

¹⁹ *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 135 S. Ct. 2584 (2015).

²⁰ *Obergefell*, slip op. at 28 https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/14pdf/14-556_3204.pdf

²¹ Drescher, Jack *Out of DSM: Depathologizing Homosexuality* (Dec. 4, 2015) <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4695779/>

²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ Accounts of conversion therapy survivors can be chilling, such as this story of a young man who was driven to attempt suicide after undergoing conversion therapy: Clay Waheham, Hannah *Survivor: MIT Grad Student Samuel Brinton Remembers ‘Ex-Gay’ Therapy*, LGBTQ Nation (Aug. 25, 2011) <https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2011/08/survivor-mit-grad-student-samuel-brinton-remembers-ex-gay-therapy/>

which was pushed in some Christian circles despite only anecdotal evidence of success.²⁵ It was not until 1987, with the issuance of the DSM-III-R, that homosexuality was completely de-pathologized.²⁶

In 2007, the U.S. Surgeon General issued a report stating that “there is no valid scientific evidence that sexual orientation can be changed.”²⁷ The American Psychiatric Association now “opposes any psychiatric treatment, such as reparative or conversion therapy which is based upon the assumption that homosexuality per se is a mental disorder or based upon the a priori assumption that the patient should change his/her sexual homosexual orientation.”²⁸ Exodus International, a Christian ex-gay ministry that advocated for conversion therapy, closed its doors in 2013 – a year after its president, Alan Chambers, renounced conversion therapy, saying it did not work and was harmful.²⁹ Fifteen states now ban conversion therapy by law.³⁰

The fields of law and medicine have pushed LGBTQ rights to the fore, not the Church. American Methodists are repeating our unfortunate historical pattern of lagging behind society-at-large in the fight against obvious injustices:

²⁵ Drescher, Jack *Out of DSM: Depathologizing Homosexuality* (Dec. 4, 2015) <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4695779/>

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ Satcher, David *The Surgeon General’s Call To Action To Promote Sexual Health And Responsible Sexual Behavior* (July 9, 2001) <https://web.archive.org/web/20070220184835/http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/sexualhealth/call.htm#III>

²⁸ American Psychiatric Association, *Position Statement: Therapies Focused On Attempts To Change Sexual Orientation, Appendix I* (May 2000) <https://web.archive.org/web/20110407082738/http://www.psych.org/Departments/EDU/Library/APAOfficialDocumentsandRelated/PositionStatements/200001.aspx>

²⁹ Eckholm, Erik *Rift Forms in Movement as Belief in Gay “Cure” is Renounced*, New York Times (July 6, 2012) <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/07/us/a-leaders-renunciation-of-ex-gay-tenets-causes-a-schism.html?pagewanted=all>

³⁰ *List of U.S. Jurisdictions Banning Conversion Therapy*, Wikipedia (viewed March 31 2019) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_U.S._jurisdictions_banning_conversion_therapy

- No one today questions the notion that slavery in America was a great sin. That horrible institution ended in 1865 with ratification of 13th Amendment; yet, the 1844 split in the Methodist Church over slavery would last until the 1939 merger of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church (South), and the Methodist Protestant Church;
- The 19th Amendment was ratified in 1920, giving women the right to vote in America; yet, the Book of Discipline was not amended to allow the ordination of women until 1956. Now, the Book of Discipline unapologetically “affirm[s] women and men to be equal in every aspect of their common life.” (Book of Discipline, Social Principles, ¶162 F);
- In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court declared racial segregation in public schools to be unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education*, holding that separate educational facilities are inherently unequal; yet, the Methodist Church remained racially segregated for another 12 years, until the Central Jurisdiction was abolished in the 1968 merger which created the UMC. Today, no one of good faith doubts that racial segregation is morally wrong.

Slavery. Subjugation of women. Racial segregation. Discrimination against LGBTQ persons. These great injustices all have something in common.³¹ At their heart, they deny the fundamental Biblical truth that all persons are made in the image of God. (*See* Genesis 1:27) As the old saying goes, the Cross may have been on a hill, but at the foot of the Cross the ground is level. At the foot of the Cross, we all stand as equals before God; no one of us stands any higher than the next. It is time to treat our LGBTQ siblings as equals within The United Methodist Church.

STANDARD OF REVIEW **(How We Read the Bible)**

The question of how we read the Bible is at the center of the UMC’s debate about LGBTQ clergy and same-sex marriage. “United Methodists share with other Christians the conviction that Scripture is the primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine.” (Book of

³¹ Traditionalists sometimes argue that one’s sexual orientation should not be compared with an immutable characteristic such as race because it supposedly is a choice. This argument, however, is belied by the abject failure of conversion therapy. As the American Psychological Association states, “most people experience little or no sense of choice about their sexual orientation.” American Psychological Association *Sexual Orientation & Homosexuality* (viewed March 31, 2019) (emphasis added) <https://www.apa.org/topics/lgbt/orientation?item=4>

Discipline, ¶ 105) United Methodists, however, are not compelled by the teachings of our church to adopt a rigid, literal reading of the Bible or to believe that the Bible makes no inaccurate, misleading or contradictory statements of any kind. Instead of demanding belief that the Bible is infallible or inerrant, the historic Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church declare that Scripture contains “all things necessary to salvation.” (Book of Discipline, ¶ 104 Sec. 3, Articles of Religion, Art. V) Likewise, the Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church (a predecessor denomination of the UMC) states that the Bible “reveals the Word of God so far as it is necessary for our salvation.” (Book of Discipline, ¶ 104, Sec. 4, Confession of Faith, Art. IV) The point of Scripture is God’s revelation to humanity of God’s very self and of the things necessary for our salvation.

United Methodists are not fundamentalists. For us, interpreting Scripture is not a simple matter of taking the Bible’s ancient words at face value and applying their literal meaning to today’s circumstances. Instead, “[w]e properly read Scripture within the believing community, informed by the tradition of that community.” (Book of Discipline, ¶ 105) “We interpret individual texts in light of their place in the Bible as a whole.” (*Id.*) “We are aided by scholarly inquiry and personal insight, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. As we work with each text, we take into account what we have been able to learn about the original context and intention of that text. In this understanding we draw upon the careful historical, literary, and textual studies of recent years, which have enriched our understanding of the Bible.” (*Id.*)

“While we acknowledge the primacy of Scripture in theological reflection, our attempts to grasp its meaning always involve tradition, experience, and reason. Like Scripture, these may become creative vehicles of the Holy Spirit as they function within the Church. They quicken our faith, open our eyes to the wonder of God’s love, and clarify our understanding.” (Book of

Discipline, ¶ 105) “The Wesleyan heritage ... directs us to a self-conscious use of these three sources in interpreting Scripture and in formulating faith statements based on the biblical witness. These sources [namely, tradition, experience and reason] are, along with Scripture, indispensable to our theological task.” (*Id.*) We do not view the Bible as being at war with the truths found in science or human experience or tradition; instead, we see reason, experience and tradition as aids in properly interpreting the Bible.³²

Armed with these decidedly Methodist principles of Biblical interpretation, let us turn to the task at hand of determining whether “the practice of homosexuality” within the context of a loving marriage of equals truly “is incompatible with Christian teaching.”

ARGUMENT

Jesus Said Nothing About Homosexuality

Whenever we study Scripture to discern God’s will, our first and foremost point of reference is Jesus – “the Word [who] became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” (John 1:14) Reading the Gospels, we discover that Jesus said absolutely nothing about homosexuality, same-sex marriage or same gender sex acts. No part of Jesus’ teachings can be fairly read to forbid same-sex marriage or the ordaining of LGBTQ clergy today.

Traditionalists counter that Jesus describes marriage as being between a man and a woman in Matthew 19. This is true, but Jesus’ words must be read in the context of the question he was answering. Some Pharisees asked Jesus if it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife “for any and every reason[.]” (Matthew 19:3) Jesus replied:

³² This view of the interplay between Scripture, reason, tradition and experience in discerning God’s will has come to be known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. See Wesleyan Quadrilateral, <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/wesleyan-quadrilateral>.

Haven't you read ... that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate. (Matthew 19:5-6)

In Matthew 19, Jesus was not speaking about the issue of same-sex marriage or how marriage is to be defined; he was railing against divorce as practiced in the patriarchal society of first century Israel.

Apparently, the people of Jesus' day (or, more accurately, the men of his day) were taking marriage lightly and seeking divorce for nearly any reason. A man could write up a bill of divorce if his wife "[wa]sn't pleasing to him because he's discovered something inappropriate about her." (Deuteronomy 24:1) The woman had no corresponding right to divorce a husband who "wasn't pleasing" to her. A woman given a bill of divorce could lawfully remarry (Deuteronomy 24:2), but in a society that treated women as property, she was no longer a virgin and thus was considered damaged goods. And a divorced woman might leave the marriage with little more than the clothes on her back. She could find herself disgraced in her community and relegated to poverty. This was an injustice that needed to be set right. Jesus did just that.

The Pharisees regarded the rules for divorce given to them by Moses to be God's unchanging law. Jesus disagreed, saying:

Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery. (Matthew 19:8-9)

Jesus told the Pharisees plainly that the law Moses gave to the Israelites was not God's ultimate will for marriage. He set a new standard. Within the early church, Jesus' teaching swept away the unjust divorce laws that had allowed men to consign their wives to shame, poverty and fear on a whim.

Time and again, Jesus smashed social and moral conventions that had become barriers to mercy and justice for the oppressed and reviled. Jesus ate “with the sinners and tax collectors” (Mark 2:13-17); he healed a suffering man on the Sabbath although it was considered unlawful (Mark 3:1-6); he allowed his hungry disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath in violation of the law (Mark 2:23-28,) and to eat without first washing their hands as tradition required (Mark 7:1-29); he healed the daughter of a foreign woman, who was regarded as a “dog” to the Jews (Mark 7:24-30); he healed the servant of a Roman Centurion – a commander of the foreign occupiers of the Holy Land (Luke 7:1-10); he revealed himself as the Messiah to a Samaritan woman despite the Jews’ notorious and historic hatred of the Samaritans (John 4); and he even casted a Samaritan as the hero of one of his best-known parables (Luke 10:25-37).

So Jesus never addressed homosexuality in general or same-sex marriage in particular. But we do know that Jesus made a habit of standing up for those society treated as the “other.” LGBTQ persons long have been the “other” – the Samaritans – in our society. It is easy to imagine Jesus standing up for them in the UMC’s current debate. It is much harder to imagine Jesus turning to the LGBTQ community and saying, “rules are rules.” That sounds more like something a Pharisee would say.

**The Story of Sodom and Gomorrah is
About Hospitality, Not Homosexuality**

Traditionalists will say that this is not just a matter of “rules are rules;” it is a matter of “sin is sin.” The notion that same-sex relations are inherently sinful is rooted in the ancient story of the destruction of the Canaanite cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. In Genesis 19, two angels arrive at the city gates of Sodom. Lot welcomes these strangers and invites them to spend the night in his home. The men dine with Lot’s family in his home. Then this happens:

Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old - surrounded the house. They called to Lot, ‘Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them.’

Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him and said, ‘No, my friends. Don’t do this wicked thing. Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don’t do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof.’

‘Get out of our way,’ they replied. ‘This fellow came here as a foreigner, and now he wants to play the judge! We’ll treat you worse than them.’ They kept bringing pressure on Lot and moved forward to break down the door.

But the men inside reached out and pulled Lot back into the house and shut the door. Then they struck the men who were at the door of the house, young and old, with blindness so that they could not find the door.

The two men said to Lot, ‘Do you have anyone else here—sons-in-law, sons or daughters, or anyone else in the city who belongs to you? Get them out of here, because we are going to destroy this place. The outcry to the Lord against its people is so great that he has sent us to destroy it.’ (Genesis 19:4-13)

After Lot and his wife and daughters escape the city, “the Lord rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah ... destroying all those living in the cities.” (Genesis 19:24-25) As this happens, Lot’s wife looks back to Sodom despite being instructed not to do so, and she turns into a pillar of salt. (Genesis 19:26)

This story commonly is misinterpreted as a warning against the sin of gay sexual relations.³³ Because of this story, the ugly words “sodomy” and “sodomite” were coined by

³³ For example, televangelist Pat Robertson had this to say about the April 15, 2019 fire which badly burned the magnificent Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris:

It was bound to happen. This is all written in the Bible. We as a society just let everything be gay this and gay that[.] ... Soon enough, there’s just too many homosexuals, and when all those surplus homosexuals started to die, hell commenced with a burning so bright, so intense, there was bound to be some that would spill over to the Earth.

Just as sure as the Lord rained fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, ... that’s what we’re witnessing in Paris today. Paris has encouraged these behaviors. Paris encourages the men there to wear light,

approximately 1300 AD to describe same gender sex and the persons who engage in it.³⁴ But look at the conduct at issue in this story: All the men of the city, young and old, form a riotous mob with the intention of gang-raping the two foreign men who have taken refuge in Lot's home. All the men of the city? Surely, the men of Sodom were not all gay. This story is not about homosexuality; it is about brutal domination over the "other." The men of Sodom wanted to rape these newcomers just like a prison gang might rape new inmates – as a violent act of domination and control. This story teaches us nothing about whether a loving same-sex marriage of equals in 21st century America should be considered a sin. No such relationship is found in this story.

In the Old Testament, God repeatedly commands God's people, "Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt."³⁵ (Exodus 22:21) To this day, Semitic cultures consider hospitality and generosity to strangers as sacred duties.³⁶ Interestingly, the apocryphal book Wisdom of Solomon³⁷ equates the Egyptians who enslaved the Israelites with the men of Sodom who attacked the strangers visiting Lot's home. Both groups committed the

airy fabrics and to kiss full on the mouth. Paris has gone against the Lord's word and the Lord's wishes, and now the fire and brimstone has bubbled over the nestle right in their holiest of houses.

Robertson Claims Notre Dame Cathedral Fire The Result Of "Hell Bubbling Over With Burning Homosexuals", Brown Valley Observer (April 15, 2019) https://brownvalleyobserver.com/2019/04/15/pat-robertson-claims-notre-dame-cathedral-fire-the-result-of-hell-bubbling-over-burning-homosexuals/?fbclid=IwAR0dkuLR0GDvDH8u-mMSHYx0B3_4cCtlf-x_VqSOVtGMcLbD7uLiCDbdca0

³⁴ *Sodomy*, Online Etymology Dictionary (as viewed 4/11/2019) <https://www.etymonline.com/word/sodomy>

³⁵ Other examples can be found at Exodus 23:9; in Leviticus 19:10, 33-34, and 24:22; in Numbers 15:15 and 35:15, and in Deuteronomy 1:16, 10:19, 14:28-29, 24:14, 19-20, and 27:19.

³⁶ See *Arabic Customs and Traditions*, Arab Academy (as viewed 4/12/2019) <https://www.arabacademy.com/arabic-customs-traditions/>

³⁷ The full text of Wisdom of Solomon is available at: https://ebible.org/pdf/eng-web/eng-web_WIS.pdf

same grievous sin of mistreating strangers in their midst. Here is what the Wisdom of Solomon says:

Punishments came upon the sinners ...
for the hatred which they practiced toward guests
was grievous indeed.

For whereas the others didn't receive the strangers
when they came to them,
the Egyptians made slaves of guests who were their
benefactors.

And not only so, but God will visit the men of Sodom
another way,
since they received as enemies those who were
aliens[.] (Wisdom of Solomon 19:13-15)³⁸

Jesus himself mentioned the story of Sodom while discussing hospitality, not homosexuality. When he sent out his disciples in pairs to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus gave them these instructions:

If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, leave that home or town and shake the dust off your feet. Truly I tell you, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town. (Matthew 10:12-15)³⁹

The sin of Sodom was not homosexuality; it was a lack of hospitality to the “other.” The hero of this story is Lot, who embraces and protects strangers who are different than himself and

³⁸ Similarly, the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel describes the sin of Sodom as arrogance and unconcern for the vulnerable, making no specific mention of same gender sexual relations:

Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen. (Ezekiel 16:49-50)

The New Testament's Epistle of Jude states that “Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion.” (Jude 1:7). But certainly, the heinous act of attempted gang rape counts as sexual immorality and perversion. The sexual violence condemned in the story of Sodom is not the moral equivalent of a loving same-sex marriage. A story condemning the former teaches us nothing about the latter.

³⁹ See also Luke 10:10-12

is blessed as a result. The villains of the story are the men of Sodom, who seek to discriminate against the “other” in their midst in a most violent way and are themselves destroyed as a result. When read as a parable about the core Biblical value of hospitality, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah says more about our sin when we deny LGBTQ persons equal treatment in the church than it says about the sin of two persons living in a same-sex marriage.

The Holiness Code of Leviticus Does Not Bind Us as Christians

While the story of Sodom is the oldest Bible passage used (or rather, misused) to condemn homosexuality, two verses of the “Holiness Code” from Leviticus may be the ugliest:

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. (Leviticus 18:22 (NRSV))

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. (Leviticus 20:13 (NRSV))

These verses label sexual relations between males as “an abomination” and prescribe the death penalty for offenders.

The Holiness Code, of which these two verses are but a small part, is a collection of Old Testament regulations “stress[ing] that the people of Israel are separated from the rest of the world because Yahweh (God) has chosen them. They are to demonstrate their unique election by disassociating themselves from profane worldliness and by retaining their ritualistic and moral purity.”⁴⁰ In addition to regulating sexual activity, the Holiness Code covers such topics as what to eat (or not eat),⁴¹ what to wear (or not wear),⁴² how to worship,⁴³ what crops to plant⁴⁴ and

⁴⁰ *Code of Holiness*, Encyclopedia Britannica (as viewed 4/14/2019) <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Code-of-Holiness>

⁴¹ For example, shellfish are not to be eaten because Leviticus 11:10 states that “all creatures in the seas or streams that do not have fins or scales ... you are to regard as unclean.”

how they are harvested,⁴⁵ how to cut one's hair,⁴⁶ and more. Unlike the Jews of the Old Testament, 21st century Christians generally do not consider these laws to be binding on our lives despite their presence in our Bible. How did this come to be?

Christianity began, of course, as a movement within Judaism led by a rabbi named Jesus. After his death and resurrection, the movement began to spread beyond Jesus' original disciples into the greater non-Jewish world. As Gentiles became Christians, a dispute arose in the early church about whether these non-Jews needed to become Jewish and follow the Jewish law (such as the Holiness Code) to be followers of Jesus. The apostles and elders of the early church met in Jerusalem to resolve this dispute, as is recorded in Acts 15. The result of their deliberations was set forth in a letter, carried by messengers to the Gentile Christians, which read:

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farwell. (Acts 15:28-29)

The Bible itself thus testifies that the rules of the Holiness Code were not God's unchanging laws for all times and all cultures.

Traditionalists will argue that the Holiness Code's rules concerning sexual conduct – such as the Code's ban on male same gender sex – are preserved by the apostles' letter in Acts 15. After all, the letter expressly calls for Gentile believers to “abstain ... from sexual immorality.” (Acts 15:29) A review of these Old Testament laws, however, quickly establishes

⁴² Leviticus 19:19 (“Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material.”).

⁴³ Leviticus 23 (describing festivals to be observed).

⁴⁴ Leviticus 19:19 (“Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed.”).

⁴⁵ *See, e.g.*, Leviticus 19:9 (“When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ... Leave them for the poor and the foreigner.”).

⁴⁶ Leviticus 19:27 (“Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard.”).

that Christians do not judge sexual immorality simply by what the Holiness Code says. Old Testament law does condemn some sexual practices that Christians uniformly consider to be immoral – such as bestiality (*see, e.g.*, Leviticus 20:15), incest (*see, e.g.*, Leviticus 20:17) and adultery (*see, e.g.*, Leviticus 20:10). But the Holiness Code clearly permits polygamy, choosing to regulate it rather than ban it.⁴⁷ Christians generally, and Methodists in particular, regard polygamy as immoral. If Traditionalists wish to use Leviticus to define marriage as “the uniting of one man and one woman in a single, exclusive union,”⁴⁸ then they must explain how they ignore the fact that the Holiness Code permits the uniting of one man with two or more women, provided those women are not sisters or mother and daughter. (*See* Leviticus 18:18, 20:14)

Traditionalists who read Leviticus to prohibit gay sex also must explain how they separate the “crime” from its prescribed punishment – which is the death penalty for both men involved. (Leviticus 20:13) If same gender sex is inherently wrong because Leviticus 20:13 says so, can one really brush aside the penalty which that same Bible verse prescribes for the offense? One cannot dodge this dilemma by observing that the Old Testament Hebrew nation was a theocracy defined by Biblical law, while America is a secular nation. Christians advocate all the time for America to change her laws to more closely reflect the Kingdom of God. No legitimate Christian group is advocating for a constitutional amendment to re-criminalize gay sex

⁴⁷ For example, Leviticus 18:18 provides, “Do not take your wife’s sister as a rival wife and have sexual relations with her while your wife is living.” Leviticus 20:14 provides, “If a man marries both a woman and her mother, it is wicked. Both he and they must be burned in the fire, so that no wickedness will be among you ” The Holiness Code of Leviticus does not ban polygamy; instead, it regulates it.

⁴⁸ *What We Believe*, Wesleyan Covenant Association (as viewed 4/18/2019) <https://wesleyancovenant.org/wca-statements-and-beliefs/#purposes>

and impose the death penalty for violators because Christians today rightly consider the death sentence for gay sex to be barbaric⁴⁹ – no matter what Leviticus says.

The Holiness Code devotes as many verses to prohibiting a man from having sex with a woman while she is menstruating – two verses – as it devotes to prohibiting same gender sex between males. (*See* Leviticus 18:19, 20:18) No Christian views the first of these two sex acts as a sin, but Traditionalists assume that the second of these two sex acts is inherently sinful. What these two equally prohibited sex acts do have in common is that neither one will lead to the conception of a baby. This suggests that these two rules were driven by a need to promote procreation – a value which makes sense when the Hebrew people are entering the Promised Land and trying to subdue it. For a new nation trying to establish itself in a new land surrounded by hostile peoples, procreation would be a paramount value. A pro-procreation policy even explains the Holiness Code’s failure to condemn polygamy. More wives have more babies. Frankly, the sexual regulations of the Holiness Code make more sense when viewed through the lenses of a pro-growth national policy and patriarchy than when viewed through the lens of sexual morality.⁵⁰ This should cause us to question whether the sexual regulations of the Holiness Code truly represent God’s moral law for all times and cultures.

⁴⁹ There are only seven countries – all of which employ sharia-based criminal laws – that currently prescribe the death penalty for the crime of gay sex: Afghanistan, Brunei, Iran, Mauritania, Nigeria, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen. *Death Penalty for Homosexuality*, Wikipedia (as viewed 4/18/2019) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_penalty_for_homosexuality In America, the last state to prescribe the death penalty for gay sex was South Carolina, which did away with it in 1873. *Id.*

⁵⁰ For example, Deuteronomy 22:28-29 requires that, “[i]f a man happens to meet a virgin who is not pledged to be married and rapes her and they are discovered, he shall pay her father fifty shekels of silver. He must marry the young woman, for he has violated her. He can never divorce her as long as he lives.” Morality wholly fails to explain why a virgin woman who is raped before she marries would be sentenced to a lifetime of marriage to her rapist. This is a truly cruel result for the woman. A combination of pro-procreation policy and patriarchy, however, explains the result. The woman who was raped is now damaged goods, having lost her virginity. Who would marry her but her rapist? If this were not the rule, then the woman would remain single the rest of her life and would bear no children. And only patriarchy explains the fact that monetary damages are paid to the father of the woman who

Traditionalists no doubt cringe at the notion that we would subject the Bible to ethical criticism, thinking that we display a low regard for Scripture when we do so. But even sacred texts should not be immune from ethical scrutiny. These were Jewish scriptures long before they were Christian holy texts, and there is a deep rabbinic tradition of debating and reinterpreting the meaning of Mosaic law for contemporary life and times.⁵¹ A rabbi named Jesus famously engaged in critical reinterpretation of the law in his Sermon on the Mount, repeatedly saying: “You have heard it was said, ... but I tell you...”⁵² When we understand the cultural context in which the Holiness Code was written, it is unreasonable to conclude that Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 were intended to address the then-unknown concept of same-sex marriage.

Homosexuality and Same-Sex Marriage were Unknown Concepts to the Authors of the Bible

The notion of homosexuality – *i.e.*, that one could have inherent sexual attraction to persons of the same sex – is a concept that did not develop until the late 1800s.⁵³ To the authors of the Bible, same gender sex acts typically were known in three contexts. None of these contexts is morally and ethically comparable to a loving same-sex marriage of equals committed exclusively to each other for life.

is raped, not to the woman herself. It is the honor of the father, not the honor of his daughter, which mattered in that society.

⁵¹ When it comes to the proper interpretation of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, the debate continues to this day within Judaism. Reformed and Reconstructionist Judaism both permit same-sex marriage and LGBTQ rabbis. Conservative Judaism voted in 2005 to accept two contradictory *teshuvot* (positions) on homosexuality in *halakhah* (Jewish law) – thereby allowing its rabbis, synagogues, and other Conservative institutions to choose whether or not to permit same-sex wedding ceremonies or to hire openly gay or lesbian rabbis and cantors. Orthodox Judaism, however, continues to prohibit same-sex weddings and LGBTQ rabbis. *Jewish Views on Homosexuality*, My Jewish Learning (viewed 4/19/2019) <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/homosexuality-in-jewish-thought/>

⁵² For example, reinterpreting Leviticus 24:20, Jesus said: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.” (Matthew 5:38-39)

⁵³ *Homosexual*, Online Etymology Dictionary (as viewed 4/20/2019) <https://www.etymonline.com/word/homosexual>

First, there were acts of male on male sex (more accurately, rape) committed to demonstrate one man's dominance over, subjugation of or humiliation of another. The victim of this act might be a slave owned by the perpetrator, an enemy of the perpetrator who was captured in battle, or a foreigner (as in the story of Sodom). This act has nothing to do with the sexual orientation of either participant. It certainly has nothing to do with love. It is an act of violence, an abuse of power and an expression of hatred. Condemnation of this behavior does not establish that sex within a loving same-sex marriage would amount to sin. To the contrary, the mutual love and respect displayed between two partners in a same-sex marriage condemns the conduct in the Sodom story as sin by comparison.

Second, the authors of the Old Testament would have been familiar with same gender sex as it occurred in ritual temple prostitution. Same gender sex acts were a part of pagan worship in Egypt (from which the Hebrew people escaped slavery) and in Canaan (to which the Hebrew people emigrated from Egypt).⁵⁴ Interestingly, Leviticus 18, which condemns sex between men at verse 22, begins with these words:

You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. (Leviticus 18:3)

Given this introduction, it is at least arguable that Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 specifically address ritual temple prostitution between men. There are Biblical references to this behavior reappearing periodically among the Hebrews despite the Holiness Code.⁵⁵ But whether it was

⁵⁴ Barenblat, Rachel, (*Re*)*Reading Leviticus 18:22*, Velveteen Rabbi (May 17, 2004) https://velveteenrabbi.blogs.com/blog/2004/05/rereading_levit.html

⁵⁵ See 1 Kings 14:24 (“There were even male shrine prostitutes in the land; the people engaged in all the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites.”); 1 Kings 15:12 (“He expelled the male shrine prostitutes from the land and got rid of all the idols his ancestors had made.”); 1 Kings 22:46 (“He rid the land of the rest of the male shrine prostitutes who remained there even after the reign of his father Asa.”); 2 Kings 23:7 (“He also tore down the quarters of the male shrine prostitutes that were in the temple of the Lord[.]”).

part of the worship of foreign gods or misguided worship of Yahweh, temple prostitution is not the moral equivalent of a loving same-sex marriage of equals committed exclusively to each other for life. The former is rightfully condemned; the latter should be celebrated.

Third, by New Testament times, Roman culture had encroached upon the Hebrew people and exposed them to Gentiles with very different sexual norms. For the male Roman citizen, socially acceptable sex was not a matter of the gender of his partner but instead depended upon him taking the active penetrating role, with someone who was his inferior taking the passive receiving role. A woman would be an acceptably inferior partner, as would be a male prostitute or a male slave (who would nearly always be non-Roman).⁵⁶ Pederasty – sex between an adult male and a boy or young adult male – was condoned if the younger male involved was not a free-born Roman citizen. A slave boy was not protected by Roman laws against rape, and in some instances the sex-slave would be castrated to preserve his boyish appearance as he aged.⁵⁷ This exploitative and abusive behavior is not the moral equivalent of a loving same-sex marriage.

Given that the Biblical authors generally knew of homosexual sex only in contexts such as rape, ritual temple prostitution and later pederasty, it is no wonder that the Bible's few references to same gender sex acts are exclusively negative. These exploitative acts are deserving of condemnation.

There is no moral logic, however, to condemning same-sex marriage because of the Bible's condemnation of rape, ritual temple prostitution and pederasty. When we condemn "the

⁵⁶ King, Helen, *Sowing the Field: Greek and Roman Sexology*, Sexual Knowledge, Sexual Science: The History of Attitudes to Sexuality (Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 30.

⁵⁷ *Roman Law and the Banning of "Passive" Homosexuality*, Ancient Origins (Sept. 17, 2013) <https://www.ancient-origins.net/ancient-places-europe/roman-law-and-banning-passive-homosexuality-00832>

practice of homosexuality” within a same-sex marriage on the basis of the Old Testament’s story of Sodom or the Holiness Code of Leviticus, or on the basis of the New Testament writings of Paul that we will examine next, we are resting our view on texts that were written to condemn acts which were altogether different than consensual sex within a loving, exclusive marriage of equals. We cannot assume from the Bible’s condemnation of rape, ritual temple prostitution and pederasty that the Biblical authors would not approve of same-sex marriage today.

The Biblical authors could not conceive of the notion that a man may have an inherent sexual orientation that causes him to be attracted to other men, or that a woman may have an inherent sexual orientation that causes her to be attracted to other women. The very concept of homosexuality did not arise until the late 1800s. There is not even a word for “homosexuality” or “homosexual” in Old Testament Hebrew or New Testament Greek. The Biblical authors certainly did not foresee that persons of the same gender would marry in the 21st century and form families that function just as heterosexual families do. These marriages and families are no less deserving of our love and support than a traditional family. They are in greater need of our love and support because they face hatred, fear and discrimination fueled in part by the Church’s historic misapplication of the isolated Scripture passages examined in this brief

The Sin Lists of 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy Present a Case of Translation Malpractice

The New American Standard Bible (NASB) translates the Apostle Paul’s words to the fledgling Church in Corinth to include the following:

[D]o you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-10 (emphasis added))

When gay or lesbian persons read this translation, the message to them is unmistakable: Their homosexuality will prevent them from inheriting the Kingdom of God. It is not even a matter of their actions; it is a matter of their sexual orientation. They are homosexuals. The Bible says there is no place in heaven for them.

Gay and lesbian persons would draw the same conclusion from reading the same passage in the New King James Version (NKJV), which states:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. (emphasis added)

Again, being a “homosexual” disqualifies one from the Kingdom of God, regardless of whether one acts on that sexual orientation.

But wait. A closer comparison of the NASB and the NKJV reveals something odd. The word translated as “effeminate” in the NASB has been rendered as “homosexuals” in the NKJV. The word translated as “homosexuals” in the NASB has become “sodomites” in the NKJV. What’s going on here?

The New International Version (NIV) is no help in clearing up the translation confusion in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. It reads:

Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (emphasis added)

The two distinct categories of sin translated as “the effeminate” and “homosexuals” in the NASB now are replaced with one category: “men who have sex with men.” Being a homosexual no longer appears to disqualify one from the Kingdom, but acting upon that homosexuality if you are a man does.

Then there is the granddaddy of all English language translations, the King James Version (KJV). The KJV, which predates the creation of an English word for “homosexual,” reads:

Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind
Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. (emphasis added)

Reading the KJV’s condemnation of the “effeminate” and the “abusers of themselves with mankind,” it is unclear what exactly is being condemned.

What is clear is this: When Bible translators used the word “homosexuals” in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, they were committing translation malpractice. Paul could not have been condemning “homosexuals” because the concepts of homosexuality and sexual orientation did not exist in Paul’s day. Translators irresponsibly applied a 19th century concept to Paul’s 1st century words, and in the process they told gays and lesbians that they were condemned to hell for their sexual orientation regardless of whether they acted on it. Other translations, such as the English Standard Version (ESV) and New Living Translation (NLT), drew a finer distinction – echoed in the UMC’s Book of Discipline – by limiting their condemnation to those who “practice homosexuality.” But Paul was not referring to homosexuals – practicing or otherwise. The concept of homosexuality would have been foreign to Paul. Imagine the damage done over the years to the faith of gays and lesbians who picked up a Bible and read mistranslations of Paul’s “sin lists” found in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:8-10.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ In the New American Standard Bible, 1 Timothy 1:8-10 reads as follows:

But we know that the Law is good, if one uses it lawfully, realizing the fact that law is not made for a righteous person, but for those who are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers and immoral men and homosexuals and kidnappers and liars and perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to

The two Greek words that have given translators fits in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 are *malakos* and *arsenokoites*.⁵⁹ *Malakos* literally means “soft,” and it is used in many different metaphorical ways, just as the English word “soft” is.⁶⁰ It can mean mild, gentle, cowardly, morally lax, lacking self-control, effeminate, weak or loose.⁶¹ The only other time it is used in the New Testament is in Matthew 11, which recounts John the Baptist using the word in its literal sense to refer to “soft” clothing:

What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. (Matthew 11:8 (NRSV) (emphasis added))

The translators of the NKJV curiously ignored many well-established meanings of *malakos* to render the word to mean “homosexuals” in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10.

Similarly, the meaning of the word *arsenokoites* is unclear at best. It is a little-used word in Greek. Paul’s two uses of it in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy are the only uses of the word in the Bible and the first known appearances of the word in Greek-language writing.⁶² It thus is possible that Paul coined this word. It is compound word comprised of *arseno* (meaning “man”) and *koites* (meaning “bed”). Of course, one must be careful when trying to derive the meaning of a compound word from its component parts. For example, “understanding” does not mean one who stands under something.

sound teaching, according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, with which I have been entrusted. (emphasis added)

⁵⁹ The word *arsenokoites* also appears in 1 Timothy 1:10 but without the word *malakos*.

⁶⁰ *The Effeminate & Sodomites in 1 Cor 6:9-10*, Gay Marriage and the Bible (viewed 4/22/2019) <http://www.gaymarriageandthebible.com/the-effeminate-in-1-corinthians-6>

⁶¹ *Id.*

⁶² *Bible Abuse Directed at Homosexuals* (viewed 4/23/2019) <https://www.stopbibleabuse.org/biblical-references/paul/arsenokoites.html>

While the word *arsenokoites* may well refer to some sexual sin involving men, its meaning is indefinite, as evidenced by the various ways translators have rendered the word. The Good News Bible renders it “sexual perverts;” the New Revised Standard Version renders it “sodomites;” the English Standard Version translates it “men who practice homosexuality;” the King James Version renders it “them who defile themselves with mankind.” Whatever Paul meant by the word, this much is obvious: We do not have enough certainty about its meaning to read it as a condemnation of same-sex marriage – something which did not exist in Paul’s day. The rush of some modern translators to equate this ambiguous word with homosexuality – a concept which likewise was unknown in Paul’s day – suggests that prejudice may have crept into Bible translation.

**Romans 1 Condemns Ritual Shrine Prostitution,
Not Homosexual Sex in the Context of a Marriage**

In the first chapter of his letter to the church in Rome, Paul denounced the idol worship of the Gentiles, writing this:

Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator - who is forever praised. Amen.

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error. (Romans 1:22-27)

Traditionalists rely heavily upon this passage to argue that Paul found same gender sexual relations to be “unnatural” and “shameful” regardless of whether they were between men

or were between women.⁶³ On the other hand, advocates for full inclusion of LGBTQ persons in the church argue that Paul is not condemning homosexuals at all; instead, he is condemning heterosexuals who choose to engage in sex that is “unnatural” for them – *i.e.*, he is condemning heterosexuals who engage in homosexual sex acts.⁶⁴ Neither of these readings of Romans 1, however, accounts for the context in which Paul is mentioning sex acts between persons of the same gender.

In Romans 1, Paul is making the point that Gentiles have fallen into the sin of idolatry by worshipping false gods – man-made images in the form of humans or birds or animals or reptiles. There were shrines to these false gods all over the ancient world, and the worship of these gods could involve ritual shrine prostitution, as discussed earlier. Read in its context, Romans 1 was not written to make the point that homosexual sex is inherently wrong. It was written to make the point that idolatry is wrong. One of the consequences of that idolatry was that its practitioners partook in the shameful practice of ritual shrine prostitution. Men and women were engaging in same gender sex acts with shrine prostitutes as part of their idol worship. The Mosaic law had expressly forbidden this sexualized extension of idol worship. Deuteronomy 23:17 mandated, “No Israelite man or woman is to become a shrine prostitute.” Paul, a Pharisee of Pharisees, is understandably denouncing the practice of shrine prostitution just as the Old Testament had done. To Paul, this sexual excess was a sign of the extent to which these Gentiles had fallen away from the one true God.

Sex outside of marriage with a prostitute as a lustful act of worship to a false god is an obviously immoral act. It also is an act that bears no resemblance ethically to sex within a

⁶³ Interestingly, this is the only apparent reference in the entire Bible to lesbian sex.

⁶⁴ *What Does Paul Mean in Romans 1?*, Queer Grace (viewed 4/23/2019) <http://queergrace.com/romans/>

loving, exclusive union of two persons of the same gender. Romans 1 does not condemn same-sex marriage.

**The Law of Love Should Guide Us to Full Inclusion of
LGBTQ Persons in the Life and Ministry of the Church**

Traditionalists in the UMC's debate over same-sex marriage and LGBTQ clergy are rightly concerned with our faithfulness to God's law. In Romans 13, Paul writes that the Christian fulfills the law by living a life of love:

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not covet,' and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. (Romans 13:8-10)

Similarly, in Galatians 5:14, Paul writes that "the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

What does it mean to love your neighbor as yourself in the midst of the UMC's debate over same-sex marriage? It certainly involves applying the Golden Rule. As one United Methodist pastor recently said from her pulpit:

I am very hopeful that I will soon have the freedom to officiate at same gender weddings, and my clergy colleagues who would like to be married to someone of the same gender will be free to do so. I know that not everyone sees things that way. I want to tell you, I did not always see it that way, either. I was raised in a pretty conservative community, and I figured, if someone is gay, then they can simply be celibate. But one day I thought about the Golden Rule. I love being married! If I am doing to others what I would have done to me, I realized I want people in same gender relationships to be able to marry! I realized, I want same gender marriages to have all the blessing and support that my husband and I have appreciated from the church over the years. I am a person who, in my adulthood, changed my mind on this issue. Maybe some of you have changed your minds over the years, too.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Newcomer, Rev. Dorry K., *Thoughts on The United Methodist Church's Way Forward* (Sept. 23, 2018) <https://pastordorry.tumblr.com/>

It is not too late to change our minds. Whoever loves others fulfills the law. We fulfill the law when we treat our LGBTQ siblings as we would want to be treated – that is, as equals fully included in the life and ministry of The United Methodist Church.

CONCLUSION
(Benediction)

The prophet Micah spoke these words to God’s people: “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)

- May justice compel us to permit same-sex weddings and ordain LGBTQ clergy.
- May mercy move us to extend unconditional love and support to LGBTQ persons and heterosexuals alike.
- May humility convict us to admit that we have misused Scripture to condemn homosexuality and have caused great harm as a result.

May we the people of The United Methodist Church act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God on our way forward. Amen.

Respectfully submitted,

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Dated: May 13, 2019