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## Listening and responding to voices of inclusion

*Simple observations on arguments for same-sex partnerships and on the witness of Scripture. Those holding a traditional rather than inclusive stance on this issue may have thoughtful reasons for doing so.*

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We are tired, but we must talk together on homosexuality. *Does the Spirit of God want our church to fully include persons in same-sex partnerships, blessing their covenants of lifelong love and credentialing their pastoral gifts?* There is wisdom in our denomination's foundational documents presenting our teaching position on the matter and then immediately calling for continued dialogue. Vital unity comes less through past documents shaping our stance and more through current discernment shaping the church.

We must talk about homosexuality, even though divorce and premarital sex and porn are much more pervasive in the church. Only with same-sex are persons and groups advocating that the church change its stance. Only on this issue is the unity of the church strained to its limits.

As one individual voice I offer reflections that support our church's official collective light on the matter — which includes saying that pastors "may not perform a same-sex covenant ceremony" (*Membership Guidelines*, 2001), and that ministerial credentials will not be recognized if given to "persons living in same-sex relationships" (Executive Board of Mennonite Church USA, June 30, 2014). I also will continue to listen to those who are making concerted efforts to change our denomination's official stance. No matter how sure any of us are on this issue, no individual or group decides for the church; we search together, all of us.

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## On arguments for full inclusion of those in same-sex partnerships

Common arguments that convince many in the church of the rightness and holiness of same-sex partnerships are nonstarters for me.

- Many persons hold that *justice calls our society to grant marriage equality to gays*. This also means that *our congregations should affirm gay partnerships*.

**A response:** Justice calls our society to offer freedom of religion. But advocating that persons should have the right to follow Buddha does not mean that the church affirms following Buddha. So also a conviction that justice calls us to advocate for gay marriage in our nation does not mean that we should bless gay marriage in our churches. The fact that persons should be given the right to do something does not mean it is the right thing to do.

- Many point out that *a same-sex orientation is an essential, natural part of LGBT individuals, something God gave them*. And say that, *therefore, acting on it must be good*.

**A response:** Few argue that God wants us to do something just because it is "natural" to us. Consider those who are anxiety-prone or those who are hot-headed; we do not tell them that having a nature justifies acting according to that nature's weaknesses as well as its strengths. Every temperament and nature has aspects that need to be restrained.

- Many assert that *we see God placing a seal of approval on those in same-sex partnerships by giving them the Spirit, empowering and working through them*.

**A response:** What if the Spirit falls on an army officer (Acts 10)? Is everything in his life thereby holy? Many of us know church leaders who were disciplined for sexual sin. During the time the sin was occurring, the Spirit was ministering through them; yet that did not mean the leaders' sexual relations were somehow holy. God in grace meets us sinners where we are at and comes into any area of life that we open to the Spirit.

- Many point out that *the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 overturned a long-held understanding that Gentiles need to be circumcised before they can be included in the people of God. And if the Spirit of God led the church to overturn scriptural teaching on the uncleanness of the Gentiles, we must be open to the same concerning two men or two women loving one another.*

**A response:** The practice being overturned in Acts 15 was a ceremonial or ritual law. Such laws were indeed often set aside by Christ and the apostles. Homosexuality, in contrast, is a moral issue (note behaviors it is listed with in Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 6).

- Many want the church to *bless and affirm same-sex covenant relationships because to do otherwise can convey a harsh message to persons with same-sex attraction, pushing them away from the church.*

**A response:** We don't decide our convictions by noting their impact on others; for instance, we don't decide if God the Son died on the cross by looking at how Muslim neighbors react. **Another response:** It is possible to call into question another's decision to act on an inner propensity without violating their value and dignity as a person, or communicating that we reject them and that God does not love them.

- Many cite texts saying that *it is not good for a human to be alone (Genesis 2:18) and it is "better to marry than to burn with passion" (1 Corinthians 7:9) and infer that God will not insist on mandatory celibacy for anyone, gay or straight.*

**A response:** This inference has great force for those who believe that sexual fulfillment is necessary for human flourishing. But we know that these texts would not say, "Better to engage in a sinful marriage than to be alone or to burn." In other words, this argument only has force for those who assume that same-sex marriage can be holy. God will always call us to forgo sin. And help us do so. A robust and vital faith in the Christian story ([read an example](#)) — and strong, supportive church friendships — makes celibacy possible.

My above responses show why arguments affirming same-sex partnerships are not compelling to me (so far). But they are not the final word; I may have failed to understand those arguing for inclusion, or my responses may be flawed. Where that is the case, I invite conversation.

## On the biblical witness concerning same-sex sex

The witness of Scripture is the main consideration that moves many of us in the church toward the traditional approach to same-sex relations. We want to be a people of the Book as well as of the Spirit. For Jesus, "Scripture says" and "God says" were interchangeable phrases, and we see the Bible giving unbroken testimony against all same-sex behavior.

Here are simple core understandings of the biblical witness on homosexuality.

**Leviticus 20:13** ("If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination" [NRSV]; also 18:22). This ban on homosexual behavior is not to be thrown out simply because it is in Leviticus. Yes, *many of this book's proscriptions deal with ritual uncleanness, like wearing clothing made of two materials or eating shellfish.* But Leviticus 18-20 also deals with moral law — prohibitions of vengeance, theft, injustice to the poor, bestiality, and so on. We will see if the New Testament treats this ban as moral law.

**1 Corinthians 6:9-10.** Paul's list of persons excluded from the kingdom of God includes "male-bedders" (*arsenokoitai*), a compound word formed of two words found in Leviticus 20:13 in the Greek version that Paul used. From its components, the word seems to be a general reference to males choosing same-sex sex. Arguing from its components to what a word means in a particular context is dangerous, with one exception: when the word is so rare that it could not have, through use, shifted away from its inherent morphological meaning. This word is indeed so rare in the Greek world that Paul may have coined it. It could not have, through use, developed a range of meaning beyond the general concept of males choosing same-sex sex; thus it is very tenuous to make the common argument that *this word is limited to relationships involving promiscuity or exploitation*. English translations of this word are all over the place; but that is due to the church's awkwardness at talking about the topic, not due to ambiguity of meaning.

**Romans 1:26-27** ("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" [NRSV]). Paul begins a catalog of fallen human behavior with that description. Is he thinking of same-sex relations in general (including loving, committed ones)? Or only some kinds of same-sex relations?

Persons suggest that *Paul had in mind those with heterosexual affections who engage in homosexual acts*. But only a thoroughly modern person with our emphasis on the individual would be sure that Paul meant an individual's rather than humanity's natural relations. In ancient Greek texts "unnatural" (*para physin*) is the standard terminology for homoerotic acts with their lack of physical fit.

Others suggest that *the phrase "consumed with passion" shows that Paul was thinking of out-of-control, destructive lust and not the desires of loving, committed couples*. However, if Paul, like all Hebrews of his day, viewed same-sex sex as sin, then in his mind even loving same-sex relationships would be instances where desire has ballooned out of control, leading persons to go where the law of God forbids.

Others suggest that *Paul had in mind same-sex relations involving exploitation or pagan temple prostitution, not loving, committed relationships*. However, the mention of lesbianism shows that Paul was thinking of more than exploitive relations like pederasty. The language of mutual desire ("*for one another*") shows that he was referring to behavior that is consensual rather than something like prostitution. Indeed, his language suggests the same-sex relationships we see today.

**Jesus was silent on homosexual practice.** Persons reason that *since Jesus refrained from speaking against homosexuality, we should also*. His silence is not significant, however. Jesus also never specifically spoke out on the violent sexual sins of incest or rape. He had no need, for his culture stood against all those behaviors, with no dissenting voices. When Jesus spoke against sexual immorality (*porneia* - Matt 15:19, Mark 7:21), everyone in his culture would have understood him to be including homosexual behavior.

Further, Jesus cited both creation accounts while teaching on matters of sexual morality. And both accounts show heterosexual relations as the intended pattern: in Genesis 1 the creation of humanity as male and female leads directly into the mandate "Be fruitful and multiply" and in Genesis 2 the story of the woman being formed culminates when the man "leaves father and mother and clings to his wife."

If Jesus wanted to communicate a stance different than Genesis and his culture, he would have had to do so deliberately.

### On attempts to deflect the Biblical witness

The Bible leads us toward the church's historic stance that same-sex sexual activity is sin. Yet the matter is not settled. More conversation is in order, for persons in the church note many things that might lessen the impact of the above biblical passages.

**The ambiguity of all language, especially ancient words,** means that *much can be said that raises uncertainty about the meaning of the above Scripture texts*. Those difficulties enable persons, in good conscience, to not let Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 6 shape their sexual ethic.

**A response:** Almost all written texts (except ones for which we today pay good lawyers!) have uncertainties. Our common sense approach to ambiguous words is to weigh probabilities and take the meaning that is simplest (without being simplistic) and most straight-forward (without being literalistic). Taking the biblical material in that manner leads us toward the traditional understanding; the textual observations raised in the above discussion on Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 6 are hard to surmount without special pleading.

**The biblical theme of inclusion** is often used to predispose us toward full inclusion of those in same-sex partnerships. *Since a main thrust of the Bible is one of acceptance and embracing diversity, surely we as a church should hesitate to go against this movement and exclude a group of persons. If we err, it should be on the side of inclusion, giving the benefit of the doubt to the biblical interpretation which helps the church more fully include a group of people who have been excluded.*

**A response:** Incidences of inclusion are indeed present in beautiful measure in our Spirit-inspired Word. But that theme is not the centrally-defining one that trumps all others. In the Bible, acts of giving grace and hospitality to the marginalized are preceded by and followed by calls to love God and be faithful to God's commands. The one who said "I do not condemn you" to the vulnerable woman in John 8 also in the same conversation insisted, "Go and sin no more." As we read through Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, every nudge toward welcome and inclusion appears with multiple calls to radical, costly obedience. Ted Grimsrud [writes](#): "Jesus' message of welcome is not based on ignoring the call to faithful living." David Gushee [writes](#): the "broad themes of liberation, justice or inclusion of the marginalized" do not "invalidate the need to deal with the texts cited on the traditionalist side."

**At times the church sets aside biblical commands.** A high view of Scripture does not mean saying that every teaching of Scripture is for today (for instance, we rarely greet one another with a holy kiss in our churches, even though that command is given five times in the New Testament). Many suggest that *we can disregard the biblical texts on same-sex relations just as we disregard the texts on slavery and exclusion of women from ministry.*

**A response:** We pass over the New Testament passages on slavery and women because there is a clear grace-energized trajectory within Scripture toward inclusion of the marginalized, viewing all persons — slave and free, women and men — as valued in Christ. We see, for instance, Paul calling Philemon to view Onesimus as his brother and not his slave, and Paul writing of many women who are co-workers and leaders in the church. However, there is no such gospel trajectory leading us away from sexual mores. Instead, the New Testament teaching on marriage and sexual sin is consistently prohibitive and radical (eg., "don't even look at a woman with lust"). So we today let its restrictive teaching on sexuality still stand even though we don't let its restrictive teaching on slavery and women still stand.

**We accommodate divorce and remarriage in the church.** *In spite of Scriptures saying that divorce is wrong, our church allows persons who are divorced and remarried to be fully included in church life; we bless their covenants and credential their pastoral gifts. Perhaps we can do the same with persons in same-sex partnerships, even if such relations are sinful. Could not the church accommodate a male couple who is making a lifelong covenant, resisting the general pattern of promiscuity around them? Should not the church support the relationship of a lesbian couple who have children by adoption or some other means?*

**A response:** Scripture leads us in accommodation on divorce: it allows divorce when one partner has left or joined with another (Matthew 5:32, 19:9, 1 Corinthians 7:15) — after all, it's impossible for an abandoned spouse to continue a marriage alone. But no Scripture suggests similar pastoral accommodation for same-sex relations. When Scripture does not lead us somewhere, we must tread carefully if we go there.

**The cultural distance between the world of the Bible and our world** is also used to deflect biblical passages like Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 6 from shaping our stance on same-sex partnerships. Many say that *the biblical texts were addressing a different kind of same-sex behavior than we see today, that the ancient world had no concept of sexual orientation, no understanding of loving, lifelong, covenantal same-sex unions. So linking today's homosexual behavior with the behavior that Scripture prohibited is like comparing apples and oranges.*

**A response:** This is an argument from silence — there is no exegetical support for it. Further, the facts seem against it. Scholars point out that the ancient world "knew a great deal about what people today would regard as longer-term, reasonably stable relations between two people of the same gender" (N.T. Wright ). William Loader, who has written eight significant books on sexuality in Judaism and early Christianity and is a strong proponent of same-sex marriage, points to examples of lifelong, consensual, same-sex adult partnerships in the Greco-Roman era. Lesbian scholar Bernadette Brooten agrees, saying that, according to primary source material collected from his time, Paul's world knew of long-term committed, equal gay and lesbian relationships as well as unequal abusive ones. Brooten also says that the ancient Greco-Roman world had its own concepts of orientation.

**Perhaps Paul was not inspired by the Spirit of God** when he penned 1 Corinthians 6 or Romans 1. More and more, persons who assert that some forms of homosexual activity can be holy also assert that *Paul's stance was prompted more by his rabbinical background than by God.* Instead of letting Scripture change their view on same-sex behavior, they change their view on Scripture.

**A response:** We as a church cannot follow persons in this without redefining who we are. We are a people committed to submit to the intent and trajectory of Scripture's teaching, a people who see the Bible as "the fully reliable and trustworthy standard for Christian faith and life" (*Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, Article 4). I believe that we can tolerate variance in our denomination as long as it is present without variance over the value of Scripture. But if persons trying to change our church's stance on same-sex behavior show uncertainty about whether Scripture is our authoritative source for faith and life, it will be hard for us to find common ground on this issue no matter how long we dialogue.

As I listen to voices for inclusion, I do not sense (so far) that their stance is shaped by the Spirit and the Word. Society may have a larger influence than realized ([read more](#)). Christian support of same-sex marriage may be new enough that it has not yet been rigorously examined by those who want it to be true. For instance, has there been examination of the unexpected pattern of non-monogamy in male couples ([read more](#))?

Perhaps I am the one who is wrong. Much more can be said by those who want our church to fully include persons in same-sex partnerships. And I will continue listening, particularly to that which is succinct (the more one understands something, the simpler one can describe it) and marked by a spirit of peace. I will welcome persons setting forth their motivations for inclusion, perhaps reasserting ones I called into question above.

It may seem naive and overly optimistic to think that through dialogue and discernment we will come to understand each other and move toward each other. Yet the Spirit of God in our midst gives grounds for hope. And realism says that if we don't talk together, our rift will only continue to grow worse.

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