



Views of Homosexuality
WFTF Session 4
Part One

The Way Forward Commission

- During the past year the Way Forward Commission (WFC) made up of 32 Bishops, Clergy and laypersons met to address the issue of human sexuality, precisely as it pertains to: the ordination of practicing homosexuals and the performance of same-sex marriage ceremonies in the United Methodist Church, both of which are prohibited in the UMC Book of Discipline.
- The WFC recommended three possible ways forward, two of which seem to have some traction. The two plans are called the *One Church Plan* and the *Traditional Plan*.
- A Special General Conference has been called to hopefully determine the way forward regarding this issue for the UMC. It is to be held in St. Louis on February 23-26, 2019.
- The One Church Plan would leave decisions to allow same-gender weddings up to local churches and gay ordination up to annual conferences. It would also eliminate the *incompatibility clause* from the United Methodist Book of Discipline which states that the practice of homosexuality “is incompatible with Christian teaching.” A majority of the United Methodist Council of Bishops support the One Church Plan. The Western Jurisdiction of the UMC has also recently endorsed this plan.
- The Traditional Plan would maintain the denomination’s current stands on homosexuality and marriage, while mandating stricter enforcement in the case of violations.

So, What Triggered all of this?

Several UMC clergy have performed same-sex weddings and some conferences have ordained practicing homosexual clergy. Some have been brought up on charges, some defrocked, some not.

Big triggering point was when Karen Oliveto, a self proclaimed lesbian married to her wife Robin, was elected as a Bishop in the Western Jurisdiction. Dr. Oliveto has been appointed Bishop of the Mountain Sky Conference to which MVUMC belongs.

But it is not a new issue, only its urgency has been ratcheted up several levels by these and other events.

The 1992 UMC Study on Homosexuality

The 1988 General Conference commissioned a comprehensive four-year study of human sexuality. The investigation explored both theological and scientific questions, relying upon scholarly research from a broad spectrum of academic disciplines: theology, ethics, biology, psychology, sociology, and medicine. Delegates authorized the study committee to submit a report with recommendations for action at the 1992 General Conference in Louisville.

Majority Conclusions Reached About Homosexuality:

- Biblical passages alluding to homosexual practice represent cultural patterns of ancient society and not the will of God.
- The scientific evidence is that homosexuality is not pathological or a deviant form of life, but is a human variant that can be healthy and whole;
- Emerging scholarly views in biblical studies, ethics, and theology affirms homosexual relationships that are covenantal, committed, and monogamous; and
- The witness of God's grace of lesbian and gay Christians in the life of the church supports these conclusions.

Majority Recommendation

Based on these conclusions, the committee recommended the removal of the incompatibility clause from the Book of Discipline. The majority report declared: The present state of knowledge and insight in the biblical, theological, ethical, biological, psychological, and sociological fields does not provide a satisfactory basis upon which the church can responsibly maintain the condemnation of all homosexual practice.

Minority Position “The people in the pews back home do not want this report”

A group of 80 traditionalist pastors formed the Memphis Declaration, calling for the rejection of the report and an end to any future denominational research on the topic.

The declaration proclaimed, “The biblical witness and the unbroken tradition of the Church provide the foundation of our understanding.”

Traditionalists continued to press for the maintenance of both the incompatibility clause and the prohibitions on the full participation of gay and lesbian persons based on non-religious concerns and on ecclesial fears of membership loss, division and institutional failure.

Final Result

The delegates did not formally approve the Report on the Study of Homosexuality. Instead, it was “received” but not “approved.”

WCA: History Repeating Itself?

- The Wesleyan Covenant Association (WCA) is a group within the UMC that champions the Traditional Plan.
- Recently it began working on a contingency plan for a Methodist movement within or outside of The United Methodist Church — a plan that depends on the decisions coming from the 2019 Special General Conference.
- The WCA held its first global legislative assembly on Nov. 2 and passed four resolutions, including one that said adoption of the One Church Plan would be “untenable and would force WCA members to leave the church.”
- The association also proposed a gracious exit that would allow congregations and institutions wanting to leave the denomination to leave with all their property and assets following the adjournment of the Feb. 23-26 called General Conference.
- At the general gathering, attendees in unison called out “Unashamed” after an Assembly speaker proclaimed, “I am not ashamed of Jesus Christ and the Bible” in reference to 2 Timothy 1:8. They emphasized the need to be faithful to Scripture and to transform the culture rather than to accommodate it. Others called for an end to *casual Christianity*. “Make no mistake, friends; make no mistake at all: The days of casual Christianity are over,” said Bishop J. Michael Lowry, who leads the Central Texas Conference.

Q&A:

What do you make of all of this?

Is it helpful to label others who interpret the Bible differently *casual Christians*?

Before we continue, I would like to share some of my experiences with individuals with same sex attraction.

Fundamental Views Toward Practicing Homosexuals Expressed In the Congregational Survey

Accepting

Jesus is the ultimate example of God's endless love; we should emulate that love by fully accepting all of God's created children.

Our slogan *Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors* should mean what it says.

Scripture may not be as clear about homosexuality as a literal reading might suggest.

Not So Accepting

It is an issue that churches should not have to address.

Homosexuality is not a natural condition or an unchangeable trait, but a chosen life style.

It is against God's will as stated in the Bible.

Issues we will address over the next two weeks:

- Old and New Testament Scriptures regarding homosexuality
- Some cultural aspects of the time pertaining to the topic
- Competing interpretations of Traditionalist and Progressive United Methodists.
- Key issues that may influence one's reasons for defending or rejecting some Scripture passages as still or no longer relevant or authoritative.

An Issue I do not intend to address over the next two weeks:

The precise definition of what each of the initials of LGBTQIA+ means other than to say they refer to persons who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersexual/intrasexual, asexual, and those who identify with other various gender identities. We will focus on the more global issue of homosexuality or if you prefer, same-sex relationships.

Note:

We will use the terms traditionalists and progressives to identify two groups within the United Methodist Church that have differing views on the topic we are studying. They are labels of convenience for teasing out differing perspectives. Traditionalists are not uniformly traditional on all issues and progressives are not uniformly progressive on all issues. Neither group are biblical literalists.

The Prayer of St. Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy;

O Divine Master,
Grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled as to console;
To be understood as to understand;
To be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

La Villa Real de la **Santa Fe** de San Francisco de Asís, the Royal Town of the Holy Faith of Saint Francis of Assisi



St. Francis' Final Resting Place,
The San Francesco Basilica in Assisi Italy

Key points from Pastor Michael's Biblical Interpretation

- The Bible is foundational to our faith.
- Interpreting the Bible is an essential but not easy task
- United Methodists use the Wesley Quadrilateral for Bible Interpretation:
 - Scripture, Tradition, Experience, Reason
- Bible contains both divine and human views including:
 - eternal truths
 - time, culture and knowledge limited material, and
 - personal agendas
- Some guidelines can be helpful when interpreting Scripture
 - Does our understanding make us more like Jesus?
 - Does our understanding foster greater love for God and neighbor?
 - Does our understanding lead us to just deeds and faithfulness with our neighbors?
- Additional aids:
 - Commentaries
 - Interpretive books by scholars
 - Common sense in today's world
- Some take a ways
 - Meanings across cultures do not translate easily
 - Developments in human knowledge have been staggering over the centuries
 - It is sometimes difficult to understand what issue an author is addressing from a vastly different time and culture.
 - God's revelation revised Scripture (e.g. from OT to NT) and is still speaking today.

Q&A:

Is there anything you would like you add to this brief review?

Was there anything new or even disturbing that you heard during these sessions?

This week we will focus on the Old Testament. Next week, the New Testament

The Old Testament:

- Consists of 39 Books, 929 chapters, 23,214 verses and 622,771 words.
- Written pertaining to events as far back as 3500 years ago with much of it put into written form during or shortly after the Babylonian Exile, approximately 2500 years ago.
- Written to distinguish the Israelites from their surrounding cultures and provide them with a foundational narrative.
- Written in several genres including wisdom literature, poetry, historical and ahistorical narrative and faith aspirations.
- Influenced by the culture of the time, state of knowledge, personal biases and differing agendas.

“God said it, I believe it, that settles it”

Should we ever take the Bible at face value?

Yes, and No.

For example:

- Love your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and your neighbor as yourself (Duet 6:5, Lev 19:18); do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8)? Yes, most definitely!
- Stone to death a neighbor gathering firewood on the sabbath (Num 15:32-36), a disobedient son (Duet 21:18-21) or a woman raped in town who was not heard screaming during her ordeal (Duet 22:23-24); bring to the priest a ram without blemish from the flock for sacrifice (Lev 5:18)? Probably not!
- Do not plow with an ox and a donkey yoked together (Duet 22:10) . Perhaps still good advice, but irrelevant for most of us!

Clearly as the centuries have unfolded some Old Testament admonitions are eternal truths to be followed and some are no longer relevant or appropriate. We have just touched on some, there are others related to concubines, dietary restrictions, treatment of enemies and others.

What Does the Old Testament Say About Homosexuality?

- Not a whole lot.
- Two verses out of 23,214 in the Old Testament, both in Leviticus, condemn same-sex relationships. The reference is to same-sex relationships between men.

A word About Leviticus

Scholars divide the various decrees in Leviticus into three categories:

- (1) civil laws, the codes necessary to govern the Israelites
- (2) ceremonial “purity” laws, the ritual requirements to remain clean and therefore holy before God; and
- (3) moral laws, the timeless ethical decrees that are binding for all people at all times.

The challenging problem about these categories is that Leviticus does not explicitly make such distinctions, so there is not widespread agreement regarding the applicable category for each decree.

Leviticus Verses¹ Pertaining to Homosexuality

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

And

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death. (Leviticus 20:13)

That's it for the Old Testament.

Why bother with the Old Testament? Haven't Christians replaced much OT thought with NT thinking?

Yes, but these passages are the fundamental references some use to interpret NT passages regarding same-sex relationships.

¹ All biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

A perspective on patriarchy, the status of women, exploitive same-sex relationships and the worship of Yahweh in the Old Testament:

- **Note:** It was reprehensible in the ancient world for a man to be lowered to the status of a woman. For a man to sexually penetrate another man was to lower that man to such a status. It was a way to denigrate a fellow human being.
- **The Sodom Example:** Genesis 19: 4-8
 - But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.” Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, “I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.” (Genesis 19: 4-8)
- What do you think is going on here? What does this say about the stature of women vs. men, the indignity of subjecting visitors to degradation, the loss of ego of Lot if he let men under the protection of his household be exploited?
- This episode is not about sex between two committed homosexuals, but rather the degradation of a male visitor to the city through forcible anal rape of a man by another man, an act so reprehensible that sacrificing one’s virgin daughters paled in comparison.

We have looked at some of the guidance provided by Leviticus and other Old Testament Scriptures, finding some of them still relevant and some not.

Perhaps it would be useful to consider other Levitical guidance pertaining to the worship of God to help us put these Scriptures into a context of their ancient culture and thus so help us ascertain how seriously we should read into Levitical guidance.

The context and Levitical guidance for the worship of Yahweh

First Consider Yahweh's Competition:

Ritual worship in the ancient near east included the sacrifice of first born children and use of temple prostitutes for both opposite-sex and same-sex intercourse to appease the gods and hopefully bring fertile growing seasons and bountiful harvest. (e.g. see Hosea 4:14, Ezekiel 16:20-21, Ezekiel 20:31)

The Role of Blood

In the ancient world blood was considered the life force of all creatures and was believed to be a purifier.

Blood from sacrifices was used to purify the altar, the Mercy Seat covering the Ark of the Covenant, and priestly vestments (Leviticus 7:1-2, 8:19, 8:24, 9:12, 9:18, 16:14-16).

It was even used in the ceremony to ordination priests by dabbing it on their ear lobe, finger and toe (Leviticus 8: 22-24).

The sins of the Israelite community were believed to physically defile the altar and Mercy Seat which were purified by sprinkling blood on them. Professor Stephen Finlan has likened blood to a *spiritual detergent* used to purify holy items.

We no longer dash blood about the alter or dab our ministers with blood at ordination. In fact if we did I think we would have fewer pastors and church custodian.

Nor do we put to death our neighbor for gathering wood on the Sabbath or a disobedient child.

We no longer consider women to be lesser beings or attempt to disgrace and humiliate men by having sexual intercourse with them (at least in polite circles).

Our culture over the centuries has evolved beyond much of the vision and guidance offered in Leviticus and other Old Testament passages. But not in all cases, we still uphold guidance offered in Leviticus 18 as for example eschewing sexual relations with your mother, father, sister, favorite animal, etc.

So, the question becomes, what should we make of:

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

And

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

???



Before we discuss this, let's review the arguments posed by both traditionalists and progressives

The Levitical Controversy

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

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

Traditionalists

- Contend that these verses are explicit condemnations of same - sex behavior, at least same - sex behavior between men.
- In Leviticus 20: 10 - 16, homosexual acts are included in a list that condemns other forms of sexuality that we still admonish today, namely adultery, incest, and bestiality.
- If all these other sexual practices remain sinful in the eyes of the modern – day Christian, what basis do we have for making an exception for homosexual behavior?
- Yet these passages make no reference to same - sex attraction or feelings; only the behavior is forbidden. Thus, individuals should not be denounced for having sexual yearnings toward people of the same sex, although acting on these feelings cannot be condoned.

Progressives

- Believe that the two passages in Leviticus are culturally specific.
- There are many laws in Leviticus that Christians no longer follow because we assume that, rather than being mandates of God’s timeless will, they were legal or ceremonial practices narrowly intended for the people of ancient Israel.
- Levitical decrees that Christians tend to ignore include the eating of shellfish (prohibited in 11: 9 - 12), the blending of two different types of fabric together (prohibited in 19:19), tattooing of our bodies (prohibited in 19: 28).
- Leviticus is full of similar restrictions that Christians no longer find binding or relevant, and progressive Christians include the laws against same-sex relations among the prohibitions that are obsolete.

Do these passages:

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

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

Pertain to homosexuals practice in a committed long term relationship, or to all homosexual practice?

Should they be dismissed as the “Four Year Study” suggested because they represent cultural patterns of ancient society and not the will of God?

Why or why not?

Ending Contemplation: The Bible's Evolving Revelation

Old Testament prophets sometimes moved away from the structured guidance of Leviticus and ceremonial practice to loving kindness and a faith not of ritual but of giving of self.

Consider:

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5: 21-24)

Or

With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

So, what does doing justice, righteousness, loving kindness and walking humbly with your God mean to you with regard to homosexuals? And,

- Does your understanding:
 - Make you more like Jesus?
 - Foster greater love for God and neighbor?
 - Lead you to just deeds and faithfulness with your neighbors?

Next week our focus will be on the New Testament. Until then.

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