

The Christian Faith and Homosexuality: Welcoming but not Affirming¹
Forum on Human Sexuality, Chedoke Presbyterian Church, Hamilton, Ontario

Dr. J. Kevin Livingston
Associate Professor of Pastoral Ministry, Tyndale Seminary
and formerly Senior Pastor of Knox Presbyterian Church, Toronto
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Introduction

Dear friends, I am honoured to have been asked by George and the rest of the planning team here to be with you today. I look forward to sharing together with my friends Hugh and Wes and Karla and all of you... although, to quote W.C. Fields, "I'd rather be in Philadelphia!" What I mean is I'd rather be discussing how to plant new worshipping communities of Christ-followers in our neighbourhoods and cities; or talking about how to foment a new passion for Christ that will transform our anemic, aging congregations into places where lives are being changed by the gospel. That's my day job at Tyndale Seminary where I teach.

But that's not our task today. As Gandalf the wizard wisely said to Frodo, after Frodo had expressed his fear and exhaustion over the task he'd been given to do, "We cannot choose the time we live in. We can only choose what we do with the time we are given."

And the times we live in, and what brings us together today, is the ongoing debate that has arisen within the Presbyterian Church in Canada regarding our historic understanding of homosexuality, particularly as it relates to our understanding of marriage and church leadership. These are weighty and complex matters that touch upon our core beliefs and values as disciples of Christ. In a foundational way, they shape how we believe God wants us to order our lives, our homes, our churches and society at large. And so we enter into this conversation aware that there's a lot at stake in the deliberations and decisions we are being asked to make.

But at the outset it is crucial to remind ourselves that the way we speak and listen and behave toward one another as Christians with whom we disagree is at least as important as the actual decisions we make on this or that controversial topic. Our Lord Jesus tells us in John 13: "*By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you ... love one another.*" So I hope our conversation today and at upcoming meetings in our congregations, presbyteries and General Assembly will reflect in equal measure both the mind of Christ and the spirit of Christ, God's revealed truth as well as God's extravagant love.

In the time I have, I would like to briefly review my own involvement in these matters; then briefly review the Bible's perspective on sexuality; then explore the PCC's historic position; and conclude by laying out reasons why I believe we must reject the revisionist arguments being

¹ I have made extensive use of John Stott's "Homosexual Partnerships?" in *Issues Facing Christians Today* (Marshalls, 1984), pp. 301-324; David F. Wright, *The Christian Faith and Homosexuality* (Rutherford House, 1997); Stanley Grenz, *Welcoming but Not Affirming* (Westminster John Knox, 1998); and the Presbyterian Church in Canada's Statement on Human Sexuality," adopted at the 1994 General Assembly and published by the PCC in 1996 and comment them to every reader.

made.

The Issue at Hand and My Personal Involvement

We are a church in pain! Hurting gay and lesbian Christians and their loved ones wrestling with how to stay in what they feel to be an "uncomfortable" and often condemning church; hurting believers who see their churches moving toward a revisionist interpretation of Scripture with regard to appropriate sexual norms and behaviours, and thus diminishing the authority of the Bible as our supreme norm for faith and life; and ordinary folk in our congregations fearing their beloved church will be torn apart by divisive conflict. The rhetoric surrounding this debate has become toxic. Yet it is not going away, and we are now being called to face the issues at hand.

How should Christians view same-gender partnerships? What does the Bible really teach about sexuality, marriage, and appropriate standards for ordained ministry, and how do these norms square with modern concerns for the full equality and civil rights of gay and lesbian persons? To what extent should changing cultural values and standards influence and shape our understanding of God's will for God's covenant community, the church? Indeed precisely how, and in what ways, *does* God communicate his will to us? More on this in a moment.

I am a member of East Toronto Presbytery where the "Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender (LGBT) Overture" originated. If this overture or something like it is approved at a future General Assembly, it will reverse the PCC's current stance which prohibits same-sex marriage or other public worship services blessing same-sex relationships; and it would reverse our ban on ordaining self-avowed, practicing homosexual persons to offices of ruling elders and teaching elders (ministers). Our presbytery undertook a two-month process of dialogue. Our conversations were respectful and honest, even though it was clear that we remained deeply divided. And it was evident at last June's Assembly in Vancouver that this division is deep and widespread. No less than 41 overtures came from presbyteries and congregations across Canada reflecting a wide variety of opinions on these matters. More will no doubt follow at the upcoming assembly in Toronto this June.

As a denomination, we are now at a crossroads. Will we endorse same-gender sexual relationships and make the requisite changes to our theology of sexuality, marriage and ordination standards? Or will we welcome gay and lesbian persons into our churches yet maintain the historic norms of chastity in singleness and fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman?

I have pondered and prayed about this subject for a long time now. I have served as an ordained minister of the gospel since 1983 within the Presbyterian Church (USA) and since 1988, here in Canada in three congregations. I served three years on a national committee of the PCC studying the issues of sexual orientation and the roles that gay and lesbian persons can play in our denomination. But long before that, I have known and loved homosexual people.

One dear friend of mine whom I've known since grade 7 and who serves as a corporate lawyer, left his wife and children a few years ago after determining that he was a homosexual. A female friend of mine, with whom I prayed and studied the Bible together for years, is now living in a

committed same-sex relationship and is now on the pastoral staff at an African-American Baptist church in Seattle. In university when I was a Resident Assistant I encountered a number of gay and lesbian persons, some of whom were embracing their orientation and others of whom were struggling mightily against it. One of the six missionaries with whom I spent countless hours for a year and a half during our missionary service in Mexico and Honduras came out as a lesbian after her return to United States. When I served at Knox Church in Toronto, I knew a number of parishioners who confided to me about their struggles in these matters, including courageous men and women who were seeking to live out a God-honouring life of faithfulness and celibacy that we are promised is possible through the grace of God. And I could go on. I think it's important to review my own history in order to show that I realize that we are talking about the lives of dear and precious people here, loved by God. And so we must talk together ways that is civil and gracious and respectful, even where we disagree profoundly, because we are talking about immortal souls, as C.S. Lewis put it, people who must take one another seriously, without flippancy or superiority or presumption.²

A Biblical Perspective on Sexuality (and Homosexuality)

As we approach the subject of human sexuality from the perspective of the Bible, let me make four preliminary observations.

First, we are all human beings. As John Stott has written, "there is no such phenomenon as 'a homosexual.'" There are only people, human persons, made in the image and likeness of God, yet fallen, with all the glory and the tragedy which that paradox implies, including sexual potential and sexual problems. And however strongly we may disapprove of homosexual practices, we have no liberty to dehumanize those who engage in them."

Secondly we are all sexual beings. Our sexuality, according to both Scripture and experience, is basic to our humanness. Angels may be without gender, but God made us humans beings as male or female.³ So to talk about sex is to touch a point close to the centre of our personality. A very deep part of our identity is being discussed, and perhaps endorsed or threatened.... And we all have a particular sexual orientation, somewhere on the continuum between being exclusively attracted to someone of the opposite sex and being exclusively attracted to someone of the same sex, which is what we mean by the term homosexual.

Third, we are all sinners, and more to the point, sexual sinners. Every part of our being has been tainted and twisted by sin, and this includes our sexuality. All of us, at one time or another, in

² C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, **. The exact quote is: "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit - immortal horrors or everlasting splendors. This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play. But our merriment must be of that kind (and it is, in fact, the merriest kind) which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously - no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption."

³ Even as I say this, I realize this is an oversimplification of a very complex phenomenon, in that I am not at this point addressing the matter of *gender dysphoria*, the condition of feeling one's emotional and psychological identity as male or female to be opposite to one's biological sex.

some form or another, have fallen short of God's perfect ideal of sexuality. Nobody, with the exception of Jesus, has been sexually sinless. And so we come to this subject with no sense of moral superiority. All of us stand under the *judgment* of God and are in urgent need of the *grace* of God. Indeed, as Paul makes clear in Romans chapter 1, sexual sins are not the only sins, and not necessarily the most sinful; pride and hypocrisy are surely worse in the eyes of God.

And fourth, we are all Christians. By that I mean those of us who have made a profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and who earnestly desire to submit to his Lordship in every area of our lives. We further believe that Christ communicates his will to his people through Scripture, through the Bible, and so we want to understand what the Scripture teaches on this subject, and to seek God's grace in following God's will when it has been made known, and accept and submit to God's values in all areas of our lives.

Of course many people outside the church and some in our congregations who can't understand what the fuss is all about when it comes to homosexuality. So long as you are responsible and avoid hurting others, surely your sexual behaviour is up to you. It's a private matter. If marriage is lawful between a man and a woman, then why not between two men or two women? If someone seems to have ministerial gifts, why should it matter if they have a same-sex partner? It's an issue of equality, an issue of justice, many say. And if people have a homosexual orientation by nature, as some argue, then isn't it "natural" that they be allowed to express that nature just as much as heterosexuals?

The classic Christian position, of course, is that things are not quite that straightforward. Based on the teaching of Scripture, the Christian church has everywhere and always taught that the only appropriate, life-affirming arena for sexual intercourse is within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman. Sex is a good and God-given gift when we express it within the protective boundaries of a faithful marriage relationship. But why do we believe that?

As people of faith, our perspective on human sexuality is grounded in the teaching of Holy Scripture, starting with the theological account of humankind's creation back in Genesis. Here is the foundation of what God intended for men and women from the very beginning. And so let's begin there.

After creating the universe and our physical world, God created humanity. Genesis 2 speaks of God forming man from the dust of the ground and breathing into him the very breath of life. Man is given a garden to tend and steward, and is placed in relationship with the plants and animals around him. But Adam is nevertheless incomplete and isolated. God acknowledges the man's essential loneliness by saying "*It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him*" (Gen. 2.18). And through God's creative act woman is made who likewise is made in God's image and receives the mandate of stewardship over the garden.

Do you remember what Adam did then? Adam spoke, the first recorded human utterance in the Bible. The man said of the woman that she was "*bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh*" (Gen. 2.23). In other words, here at last was someone who was like him, someone he could share everything with, someone he could commune with at the deepest level. As biblical scholar NT Wright comments, in the Genesis narrative man and woman were made for special

companionship, reflecting a complementarity between male and female, which embodies something fundamental and essential in terms of God's original intention for our world today, and for God's ultimate, future creation of the new heavens/new earth. In other words, this male/female complementarity is the essential configuration stitched into the fabric of creation itself, and not merely a convenient social and sexual arrangement that we may choose or discard at will.⁴ That's what the Scriptures mean when they say in Genesis 2: 24 that "*for this reason a man will leave his father and mother, and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.*" This man and woman were to have a unique relationship -- joined together in the flesh, a beautiful and intimate union, and our heavenly Father ordained it all. The sexual pairing of male with female are grounded in the gift and purpose of God our Creator.

This becomes the fundamental paradigm or model of understanding the way men and women are to relate to one another. And it is this fundamental view of male-female one-flesh covenant relationship that Jesus reaffirms and endorses in Mark chapter 10. Referring back to the Genesis passage, Jesus says: "*What God has joined together, let no one separate*" (v.9).

Throughout the rest of the Bible, the God-given norm of heterosexuality is assumed. The sexuality which God's Word in Scripture invites us to celebrate is from first to last the distinct sexual identities of male and female created for one another.

Some people may be shocked, perhaps, to hear that the Holy God of Israel, the author of the Ten Commandments, created sex as a good gift for humanity. But the Scriptures clearly teach that sex isn't something shameful, or, at best, tolerated by our heavenly Father. Far from it. We learn from the Creation stories that the sexual dimension of our personality is woven into the very fabric of who we are as human beings. Physical attraction between men and women is no accident. It certainly isn't the result of evil. It was a beautiful and important part of God's design for all of us, from the very beginning!

And the rest of the Bible also has this positive view of sex as a sacred gift from our God. Have you ever read the Song of Solomon in the Old Testament? It's a poetic description of romantic attraction between two lovers. I could go on to speak of Paul's frank advice to married couples in First Corinthians 7. But I think I've made my point. God created sex as a good gift for people. And we believers should be the first ones to affirm that wonderful truth!

Yet having said all that, the Scriptures are also very clear and realistic about how easily sex can be misused and distorted and perverted. And that shouldn't surprise us, if we know our Bibles -- or if we look inside our own hearts.

Human beings seem to be experts at distorting the beautiful things God has made. It seems that anything the Lord has created, men and women can mess up. For example -- God created for us a world filled with beauty to enjoy and resources to use. But what have we done? We've become greedy and careless with our environment, and in the name of progress, nations have blighted the earth's beauty and stripped its resources and we now face the peril of global warming.

⁴ See "N.T. Wright on Gay Marriage: Nature and Narrative Point to Complementarity," *First Things* (June 2014), 11-12.

And the same is true about sex. God designed the sexual relationship to bind two people together as one flesh; but men and women have perverted it. We have often misused this most intimate human experience in ways that shatter personalities, provoke self-loathing and shame, and destroy families.

Some people have wrongfully called sex evil, and denied men and women the joy the Lord intended them to share. But many other people have gone to the opposite extreme, ignoring the clear boundaries that God has placed around the sexual experience. But when we do that, when we remove sex from its sacred place within the covenant of marriage, a Pandora's box of devastating consequences has been opened up.

Illicit affairs & painful divorces. The tragedies of abortion and sexually transmitted diseases. These painful realities that damage the lives of human beings whom God loves must make God weep, just like Jesus wept over Jerusalem so long ago.

And that is precisely why God gave us the seventh commandment, "*You shall not commit adultery*" (Ex. 20.14). God wanted to make sure that sex would always be a tool for unity and not for division. God wanted to keep it beautiful by keeping it pure and undefiled. The 7th commandment is not just a rule or a human opinion or a church tradition. It is God's direct provision to protect God's creation. God wants to protect us!

God created a spectrum of pleasures for his children to enjoy, but the sexual experience is to be enjoyed only within the covenant of marriage. I think God did that because God knows that sex is a risky business. He knows that men and women are never more vulnerable than when they lie in bed with one another. It's a time to take off our masks and disclose who we really are -- our thoughts, our feelings, our bodies. But it's also possible that such total exposure can destroy us-- because we risk being rejected, or scorned, or misunderstood.

You see, sex is a risky business. That's why the Father confines it to marriage, where a covenant has been made, where a life-long commitment has been promised. In the environment of a life-long commitment, trust and security can grow. Fears and anxieties and inhibitions can subside. To be all God intended it to be, sex has to occur in a marriage relationship where there is solid communication, mutual devotion, respect, trust, and most of all, absolute loyalty.

But sex outside of marriage and sex before marriage and sex beyond the bounds of male-female complementarity have all been deemed by our Creator to be inappropriate and harmful ways to express ourselves sexually, particularly for those in the community of faith. This is the consistent teaching of Scripture and has been the unswerving ethical norm of the church universal in all times and in all places.

Seen from this perspective, homosexuality, then, is one of the many signs of disorder in God's creation and of our fallenness before God. And for those with a homosexual orientation it is a particularly painful reality. The Bible lifts up the idea of chastity for those wrestling with homosexual temptation, supported by deep, loving and open friendships within the wider family of God.

For this reason, it is likewise inconceivable for Christians to appoint and ordain people to positions of spiritual leadership in the church who want to ignore clear and consistent biblical teaching in this area and engage in same-sex practice. This is not to pass judgment on the quality of same-sex relationships. Indeed I have no doubt that many are marked by deep love and care. But Christians believe that same-sex genital relationships remain contrary to God's intention for human life.

But our Christian convictions on this matter are under extreme pressure in our day. And this pressure comes from the culture around us and now from within the church itself. Christianity is in decline in Canada and the Western world in general. We are in the minority. And the Judeo-Christian values and ethical standards that Canadian culture once held about a whole range of issues are being replaced with a smorgasbord of other options.

Now for some well-intended Christians who lament this loss of status and influence of Christianity in our culture, the solution seems clear. Why not jettison those Christian teachings or ethical positions that seem out of step with our culture, and accommodate our doctrines to make our faith more credible and relevant to the world? Perhaps secular people will give us a second look if they see we're keeping up with culture instead of fighting against it. And so we see the church being tempted to waffle on this issue.

Another reason that some people urge the church to change its teaching in this area is out of a sense of guilt or shame over the past and the way homosexuals have been treated. And indeed there is no doubt that homosexual men and women in our culture have been victims of deep-seated hostility and revulsion, even violence and persecution. The pain many homosexuals have borne because of jokes and irrational prejudice and mistreatment runs entirely counter to the spirit of Christ, and to the extent we have participated in any of this, we should repent and change our ways.

But the key question still must be faced. If we set aside all sorts of side issues like promiscuity and AIDS and pedophilia, we must ask the moral question of whether homosexual behaviour can ever be a morally acceptable option for a follower of Jesus?

For Christians in the Presbyterian Church in Canada and all other churches who believe that God's Word in Scripture is the supreme rule for faith and life, our answer must be sought here. Even while other sources contribute to our understanding of this subject, like scientific research and reason and personal experience, "the ultimate authority for the Church and for Christian faith and life is God, revealed in Jesus Christ, witnessed to by the Holy Spirit speaking... in the Scriptures." The Bible is the canon, the rule, the standard by which Christ reveals his will for his people.⁵ And even though Scripture does not contain many explicit references to homosexuality, all of them are clear and unambiguous in their rejection of homosexual practice.

Some present-day revisionist scholars have tried to re-interpret the Bible in line with contemporary culture to say that homosexual practice as we normally understand it is not really denounced in the Bible. This is the line taken by such authors as Martti Nissinen, David Myers,

⁵ See the PCC's Statement on Human Sexuality, chapter 2.

Jack Rogers and James Brownson. But I submit that these arguments fly in the face of clear biblical teaching and the vast preponderance of biblical scholarship. I would argue that Protestant biblical scholars and theologians like Robert Gagnon, Stan Grenz, Richard Hays, Marion Soards and Willard Swartley represent the true center of biblical and theological scholarship today, and all of them conclude that this revisionist re-interpretation of what the Bible teaches about homosexuality cannot hold water, in terms of a straightforward exegesis of the relevant texts.⁶ Indeed, even many biblical scholars who profoundly disagree with the church's historic strictures against homosexual practice nevertheless conclude that the biblical witness against it is clear and univocal.

Let me cite just one example. In his magisterial work *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, Richard Hays, the United Methodist scholar of New Testament ethics at Duke University Divinity School, states that while the Bible rarely discusses homosexual behavior, in both the Old and New Testaments, the texts are “unambiguously and unremittingly negative in their judgment.” In a tightly-packed argument, Hays concludes that “marriage between man and woman is the normative form for human sexual fulfillment, and homosexuality is one among many tragic signs that we are a broken people, alienated from God's loving purpose.” His chapter on homosexuality puts forth “a consistent ethic of sexuality that is based in God's design, Scriptural support, and the tradition of the church.”⁷

We have looked at the fundamental biblical teaching on sexuality from Genesis, and endorsed by our Lord Jesus. Because of time, I will not look at two other New Testament texts that refer to same-sex practices in First Corinthians 6, verses 6-10 and First Timothy 1, verses 8-10. But I would like to look at Romans 1, verses 26 and 27, because this text points back to Old Testament teaching in Genesis and Leviticus and Judges, and because it provides the most substantial theological critique of homosexual practice in the New Testament.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul speaks about homosexual practice in the midst of his longer section describing the manifold ways that men and women have descended into sin because of the way they have suppressed the truth about God and devolved into idolatry – that is, they have turned from the living God and worshipped other things, created things, rather than the Creator. As he puts it in verses 21ff:

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

And three times, Paul uses the phrase “*God gave them over*” – in verses 24 and 26 and 28, to describe instances of God's resulting judgment at work as a consequence of their idolatry, of

⁶ Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Abingdon, 2002); Stanley Grenz, *Welcoming but Not Affirming* (Westminster John Knox, 1998); Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (Harper San Francisco, 1996); Marion Soards, *Scripture and Homosexuality: Biblical Authority and the Church Today* (Westminster John Knox, 1995); and Willard Swartley, *Homosexuality: Biblical Interpretation and Moral Discernment* (Herald Press, 2003).

⁷ Trevin Wax, “Richard Hays and the New Testament's Witness on Homosexuality,” **gospel coalition blog finish footnote**. If there is one essential thing to read in this debate, I would commend this resource above anything else.

their worshipping some creature or man-made object rather than the Creator himself. Paul is saying that the suppression of the truth about God leads to a distortion in reasoning, in our minds, that then opens the road to all kinds of practices that should not be. And he catalogues a long list of vices in verses 29 through 31. And Paul's condemnation of homosexual practice – including sexual activity of men with men and women with women -- seems to be an instance of this divine judgment at work. Homosexual behaviour is an one clear sign, among others, of the way human beings have turned from the true God.

In particular, Paul condemns homosexual practice as an exchange of natural relations between men and women into what he calls “unnatural” or “contrary to nature.” Here Paul is not talking about what feels natural or right to you or to me, but what is natural in the sense of being “in accordance with the intention of the Creator” or “contrary to God’s intention.”⁸ And homosexual activities are simply not the way God has created us to function, according to the creational norm set in Genesis.

The type of homosexual behaviour Paul is speaking about here has been subject to some debate. Did he have in mind the repugnant Roman practice of brief, one-to-one relationships between grown men and young teenage boys? Was he talking about male prostitution? I don't think so. Paul does not use any specialized vocabulary that would denote these options. No, he speaks generically about males, then about females, involved in what we might understand as genuine, same-sex love relationships. And it is hard to see how any homosexual acts whatsoever would escape Paul's withering critique.

But surely, some would say, this is Paul and not Jesus. *Jesus* never mentioned homosexuality. His code was to love God and love your neighbour as yourself. And Jesus was far more impatient with legalism than with sexual misdemeanors. He was non-judgmental in his attitudes. Look how accepting he was in his treatment of the woman caught committing adultery. Well, yes...

But we cannot set the Jesus who extended and lived by grace against the Jesus who was concerned to live by God's law. To divide the two is to drive an unnecessary wedge between two aspects of his person that Jesus held together in perfect harmony. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus did not relax or cancel the Seventh Commandment forbidding adultery; instead he strengthened it by extending its scope to cover a lustful mind as well as the act itself. And Jesus did not tell the woman in John chapter 8 that adultery was not sinful; in fact he told her to stop sinning. He did not “affirm” her but he forgave her. The Rich Young Ruler who came to Jesus seeking the key to eternal life was reminded of the moral law, of the commandments, by Jesus (Mark 10.7-20). And when he was challenged about the grounds for divorce, Jesus took a stricter line than the law of Moses did. When his disciples complained about how strict and rigorous his standards were in Matthew 19, our Lord did not soften his demands but spoke instead about renunciation and self sacrifice for the cause of he kingdom of God.

The core message of Jesus was not “I love you and accept you just as you are – without any demands or conditions...” It was “*The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel*” (Mark. 1.15). Those were our Lord's very first recorded words. Self-

⁸ See C.E. B. Cranfield's comments on 1.26 and 27 in *The Epistle to the Romans Vol. 1* (T. & T. Clark, 1975),123-9.

denial and taking up the cross must be the marks of those who would be his followers. And there is no evidence that Jesus reduced the traditional Hebrew standards regarding marriage and sexual ethics. Jesus undoubtedly accented love more than law, but he did not polarize the two as we often do. In fact, he wanted us to show our love for God and for others by seeking to fulfill the heart of God's law and not the merely the letter of it.

So what are we to take from all this? Jesus expects us to bring our sexual lives, along with everything else about us, under his Lordship. We have no right to pick and choose which of his standards we will accept or reject if we want to be his follower.

The issue comes down, I think, to the truth that all of us are divided people, living – even as believers – in two worlds. Created in God's image and wonderfully made, yet marred by sin and deeply fallen. That is our lot in this life. And it requires the grace and wisdom of God to deny and crucify that part of our nature – including our sexual nature - that is fallen and marred by sin; and to affirm and value that part of our nature which is redeemed and being made new by Christ.

The PCC's Historic Position on Homosexual Orientation and Practice

Having laid out this basic biblical perspective on human sexuality, let me summarize in bullet point form what our Presbyterian Church in Canada teaches about human sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular. Everything I now share comes from official statements of our church from a variety of General Assemblies in the past.⁹

- Human sexuality is an integral part of our humanity and has emotional, physical, cognitive, ..., spiritual, personal and social dimensions. Our sexuality permeates every aspect of our being. It is central to who we are as persons.¹⁰
- Sexual intercourse is an outward and visible expression of love and respect that provides a sense of mutual acceptance and support in the various experiences of life.¹¹
- Marriage is the proper context for [such] sexual relationships. Sexual relationship in marriage is grounded in creation and affirmed by Jesus.¹²
- The values of mutuality and equality, inherent in marriage, require faithful monogamy.¹³
- Single people are called to abstinence from sexual intercourse.¹⁴

⁹ Along with the Bible and our doctrinal standards the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and *Living Faith*, I would urge you to access two critical documents that summarize these matters much more fully than I can possibly do today. The first document is the *Statement on Human Sexuality*, approved by the General Assembly in 1994, which includes a section on homosexuality. The second document is a helpful summary of official church actions and statements on these matters in the *Social Action Handbook*, which can be accessed online at our PCC website.

¹⁰ "Human Sexuality", Board of Congregational Life Report, *A & P 1987*, pp. 328-331.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

- The church has a responsibility to preach and teach Christian belief and practice in sexual as well as in other matters, with honesty and humility, candour and compassion, showing a pastoral concern for all those who struggle with these issues in their daily lives.¹⁵

So far, so good. But now things get a bit more complicated. Because when we broach the subject of homosexuality, we are touching on a sensitive issue that causes much pain and consternation on all sides, both in society at large and within the church. Here, in points, is what we the PCC currently believes about homosexuality:

- First, homosexual orientation is not a sin. The weight of scientific evidence suggests that sexual orientation is innate, established early in life, and not a matter of choice.¹⁶ [This, I might add, is the reason the PCC cautions against so-called “conversion therapy” to change one’s sexual orientation].
- Second, the church does not limit the roles of its members on the basis of their sexual orientation. These roles include church school teachers, musicians, youth leaders, ruling elders, and ministers.¹⁷
- Third, we must oppose the form of hatred known as homophobia as vigorously as any other.¹⁸ Anger, hatred, and acts of denigration towards gay and lesbian people should not be tolerated within a congregation or the greater community.¹⁹
- Fourth, the church is called to be a welcoming, nurturing, loving and supporting community, a true church family, where all are welcomed, nurtured, loved and supported.²⁰
- Fifth, Scripture does however treat homosexual practice as a departure from God’s created order.²¹ It is a sign, among many others, of our fallenness.
- Sixth, neither scripture nor church prohibits ordination on the basis of the direction of one’s sexual attraction to others, whether homosexual or heterosexual.²² But both scripture and church do, however, concern themselves with the proper and acceptable expression of sexual attraction in sexual activity.²³
- Seventh, a celibate homosexual may be ordained/designated as a minister under the

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “Human Sexuality,” Committee on Church Doctrine Report, *A & P 1994*, pp. 251-274, 56.

¹⁶ *A & P 2003*, pp. 526-547, 26, 34, 37-41, 43-45.

¹⁷ *A & P 2003*, pp. 526-547, 26, 34, 37-41, 43-45.

¹⁸ *A & P 1985*, pp. 238-241.

¹⁹ *A & P 2003*, pp. 526-547, 26, 34, 37-41, 43-45.

²⁰ *A & P 1994*, pp. 251-274.

²¹ *A & P 1994*, pp. 251-274.

²² *A & P 1998*, 474.

²³ *A & P 1998*, 474.

present laws and practices of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.²⁴

- Finally however, the Presbyterian Church in Canada is not prepared to ordain self-avowed, practicing homosexuals or to allow public worship services blessing same-sex relationships.²⁵

In its 1994 report, the Church Doctrine Committee wrestled with the question of whether a faithful, committed, homosexual relationship ever a Christian option? After a reviewing the key biblical texts and a variety of current options, the committee concludes – and I quote:

In the light of the biblical norm of the one flesh union of male and female, the Bible consistently rejects homosexual practice. . . . Is homosexual practice a Christian option? Our brief exegetical review of biblical texts set within a broader biblical perspective on our vocation as sexual beings leads us to say ‘No’. Committed heterosexual union is so connected with creation in both its unitive and procreative dimensions that we must consider this as central to God’s intention for human sexuality. Accordingly, Scripture treats all other contexts for sexual intercourse as departures from God’s created order. . . .

[But] Is ‘No’ the only word that the church has for those who struggle with homosexuality? To be merely negative is lacking in pastoral sensitivity. The church must listen to and share the very real pain of homosexuals and their families. . . . God has so created us that we humans need one another. Social intercourse is necessary for all. Sexual intercourse, however, is not. Life can be full and abundant for the single, both homosexual and heterosexual, without sexual intercourse, despite the dictates of current society. . . . The alternative is not between the intimacy of homosexual intercourse on one hand and the pain of isolation and repression on the other. The church is called to be a welcoming, nurturing, loving and supporting community, a true church family, where all are welcomed, nurtured, loved and supported. Sadly, the Christian Church has frequently shunned homosexuals and failed to minister to them and with them. The church as a whole must repent of its homophobia and hypocrisy. All Christians, whether our sins are of the spirit or of the flesh, whether heterosexual or homosexual, need God’s forgiveness and mutual forgiveness as we pursue together the path of holy living. Grace abounds, and in our weakness God’s strength is made known.²⁶

I find myself agreeing wholeheartedly with this perspective.

As Presbyterians, we acknowledge there are numerous sources of authority used to determine what we believe (doctrine) and how we are to live (ethics). Arguments are rightly made from reason, church tradition, scientific evidence, and human experience. But the Bible is our primary rule for faith and life. We read the word of God in Scripture through the lens of Christ’s teaching and practice and within the cultural settings out of which it emerged (*Living Faith* 5.4), but we are bound to receive it as our supreme authority, as “the standard of all doctrine by which we must test any word that comes to us from church, world, or inner experience.” (*Living Faith* 5.1)

²⁴ A & P 1995, 435.

²⁵ A & P 1995, 435.

²⁶ A & P 1994, pp. 251-274.

To do anything less is to lose our identity as Presbyterian and Reformed Christians.

By my reading of Scripture, I am not convinced that a change in our church's historic position on these matters reflects the will of Christ for the church. And I am not convinced by recent attempts by certain biblical scholars and theologians to reinterpret the texts to make them say something other than how the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church has understood the biblical teaching on homosexuality for almost 2,000 years. The scholarship is simply not there to convince me that the clear, univocal teaching of Scripture has been reversed by a novel reinterpretation of it that fits with our culture's new perspectives on sexual behavior.

For me, and others like me, the case will need to be made on *biblical and hermeneutical grounds*. Yet the revisionist argument is terribly weak precisely at this point (and might I add, so too is the recent Study Guide on Human Sexuality issued recently from church offices). They lack sufficient biblical and theological reflection to warrant overturning the church's historic position. Arguments people make from changing Canadian cultural values or appeals to generic "justice" or "inclusiveness" are not, in the end, a sufficient basis for changing our doctrine. And the vast majority of today's global church – Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Pentecostal, and Evangelical Protestant – continue to maintain the historic position that our Presbyterian Church holds.

What we really need is not a change in doctrine but an honest and in-depth church-wide study of biblical hermeneutics – of how we are meant to read and interpret the Bible – and then proceed to discern whether we can still live together as one family or whether our disagreement about the authority and interpretation of Scripture is so deep that we must part company with one another.

A Top-Ten List Reasons to Reject the Revisionist Argument

In the moments I have left, let me offer some reasons to reject the revisionist argument, both pragmatic reasons but more importantly, reasons related to faithfulness and truthfulness.

First, the case to revise our interpretation of Scriptural teaching on homosexual practice is inadequate. Despite arguments made by revisionists and the scholars they cite, I believe a fair reading of Scripture would concur with the contention of the Church Doctrine Committee back in 1994 that "in light of the biblical norm of the one flesh union of male and female, the Bible consistently rejects homosexual practice." No amount of interpretive gymnastics can make the Bible say something different from what it clearly teaches on this matter. We may *disagree* with what the Bible teaches or attribute it to outmoded cultural perspectives, but we cannot change the author's intended meaning.

Second, making this change will undermine the church's confidence in the inspiration and authority of Holy Scripture as our supreme standard for faith and life, for proper belief and right behaviour. This is by far the most critical reason given by evangelical Presbyterians within our denomination. This is not so much a debate about the status of gay and lesbian persons but about our whether or not we believe that God speaks truthfully and authoritatively through his Word in the Bible - or not.

Third, the revisionists' argument essentially ignores the teaching of our confessional standards (both the *Westminster Confession of Faith* ch. 24 and our own more recent *Living Faith* 8.2.3) and simply asks that the church declare that we will believe and behave in ways that contradict and undermine the subordinate standards of our church, which clearly envision marriage as a lifelong covenant between a man and a woman and maintain that ordained church leaders are to adhere to the normative sexual standards contained in those same confessions.

Fourth, the vast majority of the Christian church around the world in all its ecclesial diversity maintains the classic or traditional Christian understanding of these matters, and to make this change will remove us in many ways from our fellowship with other Christians - most especially our brothers and sisters in the Two-Thirds World where the Christian church is growing most rapidly and where opposition to matters advocated by the revisionists are overwhelming.

Fifth, a change in our doctrine in these matters will divide the PCC, and there will be families, ruling and teaching elders and entire churches who will leave our denomination should this change in doctrine and practice be implemented. Already, there are overtures petitioning General Assembly to provide for a congregational opt-out clause from the PCC with their property should this change occur. In the Presbyterian Church (USA), (the church in which I was originally ordained), the denomination is in free-fall over this same change in doctrine initiated in 2012. More than 200 congregations have left the denomination with many more in the process, including my own home congregation, the First Presbyterian Church in Seattle. The PCUSA has lost 5% of its membership every year since 2012, almost 200,000 in the last three years. It now numbers less than half of what it was in 1983 – the year I was ordained! And as my friend Donald MacLeod puts it, to make matters worse, “the losses have been largely among the dynamic congregations characterized by demographics that the rest of the denomination would die for. And many of the churches founded by the once dynamic missionary vision of the church – such as Brazil and Mexico, both larger today than the PCUSA, have now severed their links with the denomination that birthed them.”²⁷ This will surely be true of our relationship with some of PCC mission partner churches as well should we adopt the changes the revisionists propose. We will be severing our continued relationship with sister denominations overseas with whom we have had long fraternal and missionary relationships.

Sixth, this doctrinal change will deeply alienate most of our so-called ethnic congregations – our Korean, Chinese, Ghanaian, Arabic and Hispanic brothers and sisters- who are uniformly opposed to the revisionist argument. These particular congregations are one of the only sources of growth and vitality left within our church across Canada, and to move in this polarizing direction in this way would be extremely unwise.

Seventh, this change will sap what little energy and vitality we have left as a denomination, both at the national and local levels, in protracted, painful and polarizing debate, when we should be focused on missional outreach into our communities, on the revitalization of our churches, and on the planting of new congregations. This is doubly tragic as we continue to decline precipitously in our membership – down now to an all-time low of 93,543 according to the 2015

²⁷ Donald MacLeod, “Blog on Body, Mind and Soul – Study Guide on Human Sexuality” at his website – citation needed.

Acts and Proceedings, while our Canadian friends in the various Pentecostal, evangelical and Roman Catholic Churches continue to grow, albeit modestly.

Eighth, proponents of this change maintain there will be liberty of conscience on this matter, so that ministers and sessions will continue to have freedom to dissent from the church's new position with regard to same-sex marriage and allowing practicing gay and lesbian persons to be ordained. But I have heard some ask how long this would last. In a few years, will we be forced to accept this new practice whether we agree or not, much as happened related to the matter of women's ordination, where now one cannot hold an opinion on this matter as an ordained minister? Please hear me carefully -- I am not arguing against women's ordination. I fully support it as a biblically faithful practice, and have for 35 years. But will we one day be required to agree with gay ordination and marriage, as all of us now are required to submit to our church's doctrine regarding women's ordination? The recent history of the PCC on these matters leaves me little comfort!

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, and not to be forgotten in all this... A revision of our perspective on these matters will clearly hurt and confuse many of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters who are currently in the PCC, who are attempting submit to the gospel's demands in this area of life and trying to live out a God-honouring life of faithfulness and celibacy that we are promised is possible through the grace of God. To make this change will be to throw into question the hard and faithful path they have sought to walk, through the enabling grace of God.

Conclusion

Those of us who hold to the church's historic position on these matters face two great challenges. First, we will need to hold fast to the teaching of God's Word in the face of an increasingly hostile culture and a divided, compromising church. We can do no other without betraying our loyalty to Christ and his gospel. But we also face another great challenge: to build genuinely welcoming communities rooted in God's love and God's truth, communities that are spiritually warm and vital, abounding with genuine, caring relationships; places where individuals struggling with sexual brokenness and confusion can find companionship, and healing and restoration.

In a sense, the gay movement's greatest impact on the church of Jesus Christ is not the pressure it puts on Christians to change our doctrinal and moral convictions as much it is a nudge from the Holy Spirit to awaken spiritual renewal in our congregations. What a challenge we have been given by God!

- To be places, day in and day out, where people suffering from our world's sexual and emotional brokenness can find genuine love and nurture rooted in a living relationship with Jesus Christ.
- And to be places where persons of all sorts and conditions are welcomed with the love of Christ, but also graciously called, by the grace of God, to live a lifestyle of sexual holiness in a world that is deeply fallen.

The question really is, can the Presbyterian Church in Canada be a living embodiment of the gospel? May God help us to be so! Amen.