

# The Bible and Homosexuality

## Ancient Voices on a Contemporary Issue

by Allen Hilton in 2018

Adapted 23JAN23 for the YDS Con Ed Romans Class)

### Introduction – The Topic of Our Time

Over the past few decades, families, friendships, work teams, schools, and, yes, churches, have found themselves torn apart by disagreement on the issue of gay marriage – except where those groups have decided not to admit “those people” who disagree with them. In our YDS Con Ed Romans class, though, we have far Left, far Right, moderate Left, moderate Right, and every point between, along with being ethnically and culturally quite various; so, this paper is adapted to be useful to a beautifully diverse crowd. I’m sure I’ve failed. (For instance, my main examples come from the U.S., although we have class members from countries around the world. I’m sorry not to have had the time to write a section on international developments.) Thank you in advance for your forgiveness and patience for typos, as I’ve adapted the paper quickly! The paper itself is 14.5 pages long. (If it looks longer, it’s because I’ve attached resources that add another ten pages.) Please use whatever parts of it help you.

As a recent example of the widespread division and controversy around the issues of homosexuality and Christian faith, the United Methodist Church, a venerable worldwide communion that dates for its origin back to the mid-1700s and includes many of you who are in this class, is currently splitting. The church has been in danger of dividing for half a decade, and in recent years schism became inevitable. The issue? Whether gay and lesbian men and women will be eligible for full membership and ordination in UMC churches and whether UMC pastors can perform gay marriages. UMC delegates from around the world have recently deliberated over three plans:

- **Traditional Plan.**  
Affirm the current Book of Discipline language and place a high value on accountability. The church policy book says the practice of homosexuality “is incompatible with Christian teaching” and lists officiating at a same-gender union or being a “self-avowed practicing” gay clergy member as chargeable offenses under church law.
- **ONE-Church Plan.**  
Remove restrictive language and place a high value on contextualization. This sketch also specifically protects the rights of those whose conscience will not allow them to perform same-gender weddings or ordain LGBTQ persons.
- **Connectional-Conference Plan.** This plan would create three connectional conferences based on theology or perspective, each having clearly defined values (accountability, contextualization and justice). The three connectional conferences would function

throughout the worldwide church and the five existing U.S. jurisdictions would be abolished.

UMC voters from around the world recently chose the Traditional Plan (53%), which holds to the longstanding language of the Book of Discipline, disallowing membership and, obviously, ordination to openly gay and lesbian candidates. Language in the plan encouraged conferences and churches who cannot abide by the denominational rules to consider leaving the denomination. The exodus is underway.

The UMC is not alone. Over the past 20 years, the Episcopal Church in America, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), and the Presbyterian Church (USA) have all had similar votes. The UMC is unique among the mainline denominations in one regard: in each of the other cases, the denomination adopted a progressive position and their more conservative churches were given the option of leaving the fold. In denominations with a congregational polity (e.g., the United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, and American Baptist), in which each local church has the autonomy to decide such things, have all seen dissenting congregations exit the denomination due to the “home office” position on the issue. Among more traditionally evangelical denominations, the [Christian Reformed Church voted](#) last summer to include their more conservative position on the issue within their denominational statement of faith, and the [African Methodist Episcopal church voted](#) in 2021 to continue their policy of not performing weddings for gay couples.

You get the familiar picture: faithful Christians disagree vehemently on the issue of homosexuality, and it is an ongoing conflict that continues separately from the law of the land in the U.S.. But the issue behind the issue – the thing that has made this topic such an either/or divider within Christian communities – is the definition of biblical authority and interpretation of the Bible that each side holds. This informal paper engages this specific question of homosexuality and the Bible.

## **Part One: Three Ways That Churches Respond**

The United Methodist Church’s recent debate offers a window to the wider Christian debate. Over the past decade, the Episcopal Church, the Lutheran Church (ELCA), the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the United Methodist Church have engaged in national (and, in the UMC’s case, international) conversations and experienced the threat of schism over this debate. Closer to home, families and friendships have split over this issue.

One way to map the territory is to chart the four broad ways that churches have responded to the issue.

### ***Both Orientation and Behavior Are Sinful***

“We affirm God’s plan for marriage and sexual intimacy – one man, and one woman, for life. Homosexuality is not a ‘valid alternative lifestyle.’ The Bible condemns it as sin. It is not, however,

unforgivable sin. The same redemption available to all sinners is available to homosexuals. They, too, may become new creations in Christ (Southern Baptist Convention website - <http://www.sbc.net/aboutus/pssexuality.asp>).”

This position joins black-letter scripture condemning homosexuality with an assumption that sin is always a choice, and then concludes that same-sex orientation is chosen. This often leads to attempts to reprogram or educate gay and lesbian men and women toward heterosexuality.

### ***Only Behavior (not Desire/Orientation) is Sinful***

“The majority of homosexual people are probably not responsible for their condition [i.e., orientation], though they are, of course, for their conduct...” (John R.W. Stott, Respected British Evangelical Leader, in his book *Same-Sex Partnerships? A Christian Perspective*, Baker Book House, 1998.) John Stott and others, often evangelical in their theological culture, accept that sexual orientation is not chosen, but they are convinced that the Bible teaches that acting on the orientation is sinful. Their call to people of same-sex orientation is not re-education but celibacy/abstinence.

The United Methodist Church has chosen this position relative to ministers, and so will not ordain clergy who are “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” (UMC *Book of Discipline*, 2008). This position is also widely held in more evangelical denominations, like the [Christian Reformed Church](#), and in many non-denominational churches

### ***Orientation and Behavior are God-Given and God-Blessed***

“Since its beginnings, the ELCA has had excellent pastors and lay professionals who are homosexual in their self-understanding. The expectation had been that these leaders would abstain from sexual relationships. At the direction of the 2009 Churchwide Assembly of the ELCA, ministry policies have been changed to allow service in these ministries by people who are in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships.” (<http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/New-or-Returning-to-Church/Dig-Deeper/Homosexuality-and-the-ELCA.aspx>).”

This third option has become the position, not only of the ELCA but of all U.S. the mainline denominations except the United Methodist Church have opted for this position

### **A Moment for Perspective**

Just before we move to the scriptures, it is worth pausing for reflection on the timeline of the decisions chronicled above. Notice that the ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church of America) was the very first of the major denominations to declare gay and lesbian men and women to be fit for membership and ordination in their churches – in the year 2009. It was in 2015, less than eight years ago, that the Supreme Court of the United States handed down their *Obergefell v Hodges* ruling, which established that the fundamental right to marry is guaranteed to same-sex couples by both the Due Process Clause and the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution. On the scale of American history, both the Christian and the U.S. legal decisions are a microsecond old.

During the cultural shift that has surrounded the denominational decisions and legal change of Obergefell (statistics on American opinion will appear below), progressives have often portrayed the “exclusive” sorts who opposed the decision as Neanderthals with knuckles dragging. They fail to notice that, as recently as 2010, the progressive President Barack Obama opposed gay marriage. In fact, many of the accusers had been recent adopters. Such conversions of mind often carry with them a certain smug superiority that is unbecoming to empathic people.

Similarly, conservatives on the issue have often accused progressives of a valueless relativism and biblical flippancy. These see the cultural change as a spiral downward and away from “traditional Christian values.” Such accusations fly both ways. Instead of granting our fellow Christians and fellow citizens the benefit of the doubt – that we’re all trying to get the issue right – we tend to choose our side and then absolutize it, counting dissenters as ill-motivated or ill-informed.

As we turn to scripture together, to quote Jesus in another context, “so shall it not be among you!” (Mark 10.43 KJV) We enter scripture with inquiring minds, to understand it and one another, rather than crusaders’ zeal that seeks ammunition in a war. As the old saying has it, many Christians look to the Bible as a drunkard looks at a lamppost: more for support than for illumination. We move toward the Bible on this very controversial topic seeking illumination.

## Part Two: The Scriptures

Homosexual orientation and behavior do not comprise a major topic in scripture – Jesus never mentions it directly – but it does appear several times. Below are the five famous passages that pronounce on homosexual behavior and/or desire, according to the English Standard Version translation:

“You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination (Leviticus 18.22).”

“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).”

“Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6.9-10).”

“This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, <sup>10</sup>fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching <sup>11</sup>that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me (1 Timothy 1.9-11).”

“For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse

with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error (Romans 1.26-27).

A sixth passage mentions homosexual behavior, namely, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19. Before I present the passage, here are three headlines that are sure they know what it means...and disagree:

"The Genesis passage is very clear, that the sin of Sodom that brought on the destruction of the city was indeed linked to homosexuality." R. Albert Mohler, Southern Baptist Convention

"Saying that the last recorded acts of the Sodomites -- the demands for same-gender sex -- are proof that they were destroyed for homosexuality is like saying that a condemned man cursing his guards on the way to his execution is being executed for cursing the guards. Sodom was judged worthy of destruction before the incident with Lot and the angels." Inge Anderson

"The activities in Sodom were to homosexuality what rape is to heterosexuality." Anonymous

Now, here is the passage from Genesis 19. Read it for yourself and see what you think.

*The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. <sup>2</sup>He said, "Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way." They said, "No; we will spend the night in the square." <sup>3</sup>But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. <sup>4</sup>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; <sup>5</sup>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." <sup>6</sup>Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, <sup>7</sup>and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. <sup>8</sup>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." <sup>9</sup>But they replied, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. <sup>10</sup>But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. <sup>11</sup>And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door. (Genesis 19.1-11)*

*Then the men said to Lot, "Have you anyone else here? Sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone you have in the city—bring them out of the place. <sup>13</sup>For we*

*are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the Lord, and the Lord has sent us to destroy it.” (Genesis 19.1-13)*

## Contexts

While the Sodom and Gomorrah passage is part of a narrative, the other five mentions of homosexuality in the scripture come in didactic or legal settings. Here are a few things to notice about their contexts.

### *Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13*

The two passages in Leviticus appear amidst a long string of other legal material. Chapter 18 is an extensive list of “you shall not,” passages, mostly about incest of every specific kind. Surrounding 18.22, the law forbids several practices that, despite widespread transgression, no Christians seem to be publicly protesting:

“You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness (Leviticus 18.19)... If a man lies with a woman having her sickness and uncovers her nakedness, he has laid bare her flow and she has laid bare her flow of blood; both of them shall be cut off from their people (Leviticus 20.18).”

“You shall not let your animals breed with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials (19.19).”

There is also an irony in our current U.S. political setting concerning the context of the two Levitical passages. Right now, strong voices from the Christian right are both shouting out against homosexuality because of Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13 AND strongly oppose immigration against the clear commandment of Leviticus 19.33.

“When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. <sup>3</sup>The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God (19.33-34).

For progressives the inconsistency is reversed: during the immigration marches of 2016-17, I saw signs from the Left quoting Leviticus 19 and Leviticus 18 and 20 are nowhere to be found.

As we all hope to discern God’s voice in the scriptures, it is vital to notice when and where we are making arbitrary choices and to be humble about that. Once during a denominational debate, I saw a placard that alerts us to this: “Selective literalism is idolatry.”

### *1 Corinthians 6.9-10 and 1 Timothy 1.9-10*

These two references come within vice lists in Paul. The other vices listed are:

- Fornicators
- idolaters,
- adulterers,
- thieves,
- the greedy,
- drunkards,
- revilers,
- robbers

While this list features character traits of which most Christians would disapprove, the rest of the list has not generally been used by Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to qualify or disqualify prospective members or clergy. I have yet to hear of a clergyperson defrocked or (especially) a prospective member refused on account of her or his greed.

The translation of the Greek word is very important and has been, predictably, controversial. The words and various translations of them are arrayed below.

#### **Translation of the Greek Words: MALAKOI and ARSENOKOITAI**

male prostitutes, sodomites (NRSV)  
 male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders (NIV)  
 or are male prostitutes, or practice homosexuality (New Living Transl.)  
 nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality (ESV)  
 nor effeminate, nor homosexuals (NASB)  
 male prostitutes, homosexuals (International Standard Version)  
 those who commit adultery, homosexuals (God's Word Translation)  
 nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind (KJV)

#### ***Romans 1***

In this chapter, Paul pictures the impact of idol worship on Gentile morality. He links that worship to moral decline, which he illustrates in several ways: sexual misdeeds are joined by a laundry list of other ways of hurting people. The list is long: “every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious towards parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.”

The connection between Gentiles and sexual licentiousness was common in Jewish rhetoric about idolatry, and, to some extent, it was accurate. (See Rebecca Langlands' [“Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome”](#)) This difference was a significant part of Jewish self understanding. As [William Loder](#) puts it, “sexual issues were a key element of the demarcation between Jews and the wider community, alongside such matters as circumcision, food laws, the sabbath keeping.”

One part of the contemporary debate that surrounds our passage is the question whether Paul means to picture heterosexual men and/or women seeking the sexual company of other men or women (*a la*

Greek educational practices of taking lovers at the time of Socrates, which has a limited presence also in Rome) or whether he is picturing men and women of same-sex “orientation” or desire.

Two examples of biblical scholarship will have to suffice as our brief point/counterpoint: In his popular book, *Romans for Everyone*, the English biblical scholar and churchman N.T. Wright grounds the Romans 1 passage in the story of “male and female” in the Genesis creation narrative. He sees the “male plus female” norm of that narrative as revelatory of God’s character and will. He writes, “Paul’s point...is, ‘This is not what males and females were made for.’” (Vol 1, page 22) Wright’s argument is sometimes called [“gender complementarity,”](#) which is “the idea that men and women are different from one another in essential ways, and that Christian love depends on the pairing of just those differences.” It is a conclusion about the biblical narrative on gender and is a prominent belief among Christians who maintain the traditional rejection of homosexual behavior and relationships as God-blessed arrangement.

On the other hand, in his book, *Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church’s Debate on Same-Sex Relationships*, James V. Brownson, a professor at Western Theological Seminary and member of the Reformed Church in America, claims that gender complementarity is not an assumption of the biblical narrative, and therefore does not confine valid Christian sexual ethics to heterosexuality. Instead, he reads Romans 1 in terms of the specific boundaries

### A Summary of the Scriptural Debate

In one paragraph of his [2014 Christianity Today article](#) reviewing Matthew Vines’ book, *God and the Gay Christian*, Christopher Yuen summarizes very briefly the several arguments against seeing the six biblical passages as condemnations of 21<sup>st</sup>-century versions of monogamous same-sex relationships.

Six biblical passages directly address homosexuality, and Vines insists that none address same-sex orientation as we know it today. Thus,

- ◇ in Genesis 19, the sin of Sodom is not related to loving, consensual same-sex relationships, but to the threat of gang rape.
- ◇ Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are not about committed same-sex relationships, but about the improper ordering of gender roles in a patriarchal society (men taking the receptive, sexual role; women taking the penetrative, sexual role).
- ◇ Paul in Romans 1:26-27 is not referring to monogamous, gay relationships, but instead to lustful excess and the breaking of customary gender roles.
- ◇ In 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10, Paul does not condemn same-sex relationships as an expression of one’s fixed and exclusive sexual orientation, but instead condemns the economic exploitation of others.

In his article, Mr. Yuen, a professor at the quite-conservative Moody Bible Institute, rejects each argument in favor of a more traditional reading, but his summary is compact and useful for our purposes.

### Part Three: A Possible Biblical Analogy – Early Christian Inclusion of Gentiles



The debate over these six passages has reached something of a stalemate. It is unlikely that new data will alter the conversation about what the words mean and how they should be interpreted.

Instead of tracing out these terms from scripture and continuing to battle over them, we might search scripture to find a faithful decision-making process by which Jews or the early Christians arbitrated a dispute about inclusion.

It happens that Acts 15 features just such an occasion. The so-called “Jerusalem Council,” a meeting in which the Christians debated the issue of what requirements would be made of recently-included Gentiles, brought together the major players on a significant church issue. While there were a few exceptions, by Acts 15 most precincts of early Christianity had already decided that Gentiles should be welcomed into churches. Here in Acts 15, they asked what behavior changes would be required of Gentiles on the way in. Specifically, they asked, Would Gentile males be required to be circumcised and would all Gentile Christians be required to keep kosher and ceremonial parts of the Torah? The deliberations of the Jerusalem Church on this very important issue of their day may enlighten our own deliberations on this very important issue of our day.

*Note: I arrived at this passage as I processed my own convictions about homosexuality and the Bible during graduate school. Only later did I discover that others had also found Acts 15 helpful on this issue. For a dissenting look at the history of this argument in scholarship and church life, see [Andrew Goddard, God, Gentiles, and Gay Christians: Acts 15 and Change in Church](#).*

### ***The Circumcision-Is-Required Group***

#### The Case

*Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved (Acts 15.1)...*

*But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses (Acts 15.5).’*

#### Support from the Hebrew Scriptures

*God said to Abraham, ‘As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. <sup>10</sup>This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. <sup>11</sup>You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. <sup>12</sup>Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. <sup>13</sup>Both*

*the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money must be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. <sup>14</sup>Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant (Genesis 17.9-14).'*

#### Additional Backing

Nowhere in all of Hebrew Scripture is God's command in Genesis 17 overridden or relaxed. Any male who seeks membership in the covenant people of God, throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, must be circumcised.

"Circumcised" –

Genesis 17.10-27; 21.4; 34.15-24;

Exodus 12.44, 48;

Leviticus 12.3;

Joshua 5.3-7; and

Jeremiah 9.25

"Circumcise" –

Genesis 17.11;

Deuteronomy 10.16 and 30.6;

Joshua 5.2, 4; and

Jeremiah 4.4.

"Circumcision" –

Exodus 4.26.

#### ***The Circumcision-Is-Not-Required Group***

##### The Case

*And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them [i.e., the Circumcision-Required Group], Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. <sup>3</sup>So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. \* <sup>4</sup>When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them (Acts 15.2-4).*

*After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, 'My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. <sup>8</sup>And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; <sup>9</sup>and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no*

*distinction between them and us. <sup>10</sup>Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? <sup>11</sup>On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will (Acts 15.7-11).'*

### Support from Experience

The Pentecost explosion and the early expansion of the church in the Book of Acts was all among Jews. Even the conversion of Samaritans (Acts 8.1-24) did not raise the issue directly, because Samaritans practiced circumcision.

The first hint that God might receive Gentiles without circumcision and kosher practices comes in Acts 9., when the Lord tells Ananias to go meet Saul...*for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before **Gentiles** and kings and before the people of Israel (Acts 9.15).*

In Acts 10, Peter has a dream in which God tells him it is OK to eat non-kosher meat:

*About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. <sup>10</sup>He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. <sup>11</sup>He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. <sup>12</sup>In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. <sup>13</sup>Then he heard a voice saying, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' <sup>14</sup>But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.' <sup>15</sup>The voice said to him again, a second time, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' <sup>16</sup>This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven (Acts 10.9-16).*

When he is summoned to the house of a Gentile centurion named Cornelius, Peter applies the dream to his circumstances:

*'You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean (Acts 10.28).*

This episode with Cornelius and Peter is the first time Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit without circumcision. It is a landmark change in the way these Jewish Christian apostles understand God's activity on earth.

*While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. <sup>45</sup>The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, <sup>46</sup>for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, <sup>47</sup>'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' <sup>48</sup>So he ordered*

them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days (Acts 10.44-48).

### *The Council Decision*

#### The Issue

In the debate of Acts 15, black-letter scripture is altogether on the side of the “Circumcision-Required” group. The “Circumcision-Not-Required” group argues entirely from their experience in ministry among Gentiles. Who will prevail? What will wisdom dictate? Let’s listen!

#### The Verdict

After hearing both sides, James responds with a judgment that has listened well to both of them:

*The whole assembly kept silence and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. <sup>13</sup>After they finished speaking, James replied, ‘My brothers, \* listen to me. <sup>14</sup>Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. <sup>15</sup>This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written, <sup>16</sup>“After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, so that all other peoples may seek the Lord— even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things <sup>18</sup>known from long ago.” <sup>19</sup>Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, <sup>20</sup>but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. <sup>21</sup>For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every Sabbath in the synagogues (Acts 15.12-21).’*

#### The Criteria for Discernment

What can we tell about the factors that influenced James’ decision? In his summation, he offers a template for dealing with issues where it seems that “God is still speaking.”

- ◇ Scripture: James states his decision using a scripture (Amos 9.11-12) that expresses God’s plan to include Gentiles.

- ◇ Experience: James also values the apostles' experience of Gentile conversion and the obvious blessing of God on it.
- ◇ Combination: While the scripture from Amos 9 provides James a trajectory of God's active inclusion of Gentiles, it does not explicitly cancel the requirement of circumcision. This he discerns, rather, on the basis of the apostles' experience. By doing so, he implies that this decision fits the God of scripture, even if it departs from many, man literal statements requiring circumcision in scripture.

## Interpretation

There are strong parallels between the early Christian issue of inclusion and the one we are discussing today,

1. Both involve the important question of inclusion: who is in and who is out?
2. Both debate the issue of behavior.

Will Gentiles be required to be circumcised and keep kosher in order to be included in the Christian community?

Will gay and lesbian men and women be required to cease practicing their sexual orientation in order to be included in the Christian community?

3. Application of Acts 15 implies that even a new and wider inclusion is not unconditional.

Gentiles are required to separate themselves from their former practice of idolatry.

Gay and lesbian Christians are expected to be faithful and exclusive to their partners (i.e., monogamous). (See the language of the ELCA statement above.)

4. A decision to include gay and lesbian members fully in the community of Christ is based partly on scripture and partly on experience.

Jesus reaches to all kinds of people who were excluded by the religionists of his day.

Experience tells us that gay and lesbian friends are among the most faithful Christians we know. (i.e., have the Holy Spirit)

## Part Four – Discernment

***Scripture and Experience: Allen's Story*** (See below in Resources: Allen Hilton, "Bridge Building")

The balance between experience and scripture has played an important point in my own attempt to understand this issue faithfully.

- Stage One

Before I encountered scripture, I experienced the traditional values and mores of my small-town upbringing in Sheridan, Oregon. In that setting, I never met anyone whom I recognized as openly gay. Therefore, it wasn't really a category. I don't even remember having the subject come up in my school years.

- Stage Two

As I studied the Bible with church and Young Life groups in high school and then in my small Christian college, the scripture seemed to support the traditional mores of my youth: a rejection of homosexual relationships as a part of what was "proper" or God-blessed.

- Stage Three

In graduate school, I experienced for the first time the lives of devout and faithful gay and lesbian men and women – some of whom were my beloved professors and classmates. This called into question my received traditional assumptions and made me ask what I always ask about things the Bible names as sins: why does God not like this? I found that I could not find a good answer.

- Stage Four

I'm a Bible guy. I don't ever simply say, "I know the Bible says THIS, but I think THAT is true instead. As I asked why God would be against the relationships I saw around me in grad school, I immediately went to work in scripture. I took seriously the six passages, and I took seriously the subject's utter absence from the teaching of Jesus, and I took seriously the broad themes of Jesus' ministry and all of scripture. In this quest, I found my way to Acts 15 (and other passages) that support discerning a wider arc of inclusion in scripture.

Through stages three and four above, I came in the late 1990s to the position that same-sex orientation is a part of the way God made humanity and that committed gay and lesbian relationships are God-blessed unions. I have no claim to be the voice of God on this. Nor do I think that the general cultural shift in U.S. public opinion (see chart below) ought to be an arbitrator of this issue for Christians. I only claim that this is the light that I have at this point in my journey, and heaven knows that humility is warranted when faithful folks disagree as much as we have disagreed on this.

### **Close – What You Believe and Why**

Why do you believe what you believe on this issue? Two of our passages on homosexuality fall in contexts where Moses (Leviticus 18 and 22) and Paul (1 Corinthians 6) remind their audience that they should not draw their morality from their neighbors, but from God. You will see in the

Resources section below that American opinion on gay marriage has changed considerably over the past 25 years – from 27 % to 67% acknowledgement of its validity. For Moses and Paul, truth is truth regardless of what the surrounding culture practices and says.

On first glance, that may sound like a case against inclusion – as if I am denouncing this change. But far from that, I'm wondering why Christianity has historically so often sided so unquestioningly with the *status quo* popular opinion on issues like slavery and homosexuality. The fact that slave-holding faced its first major moral challenge in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries after Jesus roamed Galilee is a blight on Christian history. And the church's blanket condemnation of homosexuality well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, without major voices examining the justice of the issue, shows an absence of moral imagination.

This study is your opportunity to revisit your own convictions on this topic and ask where you got them. It is our Christian vocation to respond faithfully and intelligently to God's character as we have it through scripture and experience and then to bring it to bear on this planet, whatever our peers might think. Let us go forth and do likewise!

## RESOURCES

### A Nation's Recent History with the Issue (Gallup)

<https://news.gallup.com/poll/117328/marriage.aspx?version=print>

Do you think marriages between same-sex couples should or should not be recognized by the law as valid, with the same rights as traditional marriages?

	Should be valid	Should not be valid
	%	%
2018 May 1-10	67	31
2017 May 3-7	64	34
2016 May 4-8	61	37
2015 Jul 8-12	58	40
2015 May 6-10	60	37
2014 May 8-11	55	42
2013 Jul 10-14	54	43
2013 May 2-7	53	45
2012 Nov 26-29	53	46
2012 May 3-6	50	48
2011 Dec 15-18	48	48
2011 May 5-8	53	45
2010 May 3-6	44	53
2009 May 7-10	40	57
2008 May 8-11 ^	40	56
2007 May 10-13	46	53
2006 May 8-11 ^	42	56
2005 Aug 22-25	37	59
2004 May 2-4	42	55
1999 Feb 8-9	35	62
1996 Mar 15-17	27	68



## Presbyterian Church (USA) Amendment to the Book of Order

### Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) approves marriage amendment

<https://www.pcusa.org/news/2015/3/17/presbyterian-church-us-approves-marriage-amendment/>

*By majority vote, Presbyterians have affirmed that marriage is a “unique commitment between two people, traditionally a man and a woman.”*

*Melody K. Smith - March 17, 2015*

#### LOUISVILLE

While the Office of the General Assembly is still awaiting official tallies, it appears that a majority of the 171 presbyteries of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have approved a change to the current description of marriage in the PC(USA)'s Constitution.

At its meeting on Tuesday, March 17, 2015, Palisades Presbytery became the 86th presbytery to approve an amendment to the PC(USA)'s *Book of Order*.

The new language reads:

Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the wellbeing of the entire human family. Marriage involves a unique commitment between two people, traditionally a man and a woman, to love and support each other for the rest of their lives. The sacrificial love that unites the couple sustains them as faithful and responsible members of the church and the wider community.

In civil law, marriage is a contract that recognizes the rights and obligations of the married couple in society. In the Reformed tradition, marriage is also a covenant in which God has an active part, and which the community of faith publicly witnesses and acknowledges.

The 221st General Assembly (2014) of the PC(USA) approved Amendment 14-F last summer, but required a majority of presbyteries to ratify the provision for it to become part of the church's Constitution. (To learn more about how decisions are made, [watch the video “Presbyterian Governance Comes to Life.”](#))

Voting began last fall in the wake of decades of discernment and marriage studies. Since then, pastors (“teaching elders” in Presby-speak) and members of congregations elected to serve as ruling elders have come together to pray, discuss, and try to discern the mind of Christ. In their efforts, they have looked to Scripture, the PC(USA) *Book of Confessions*, and the stories of everyday Presbyterians with whom they minister.

PC(USA) ministers already can perform same-sex marriages in states where such marriages are legal. By a vote of 371–238, the 221st General Assembly (2014) approved an authoritative interpretation permitting ministers and sessions in these states to use their own discernment in conducting same-sex marriages, effective June 2014.

The General Assembly also included in those changes clear language that no teaching elder or session can be forced to conduct a same-sex marriage ceremony if they do not believe it is appropriate. As of March 16, 42 presbyteries had voted against the amendment, demonstrating ongoing disagreement within the church.

The change to the wording on marriage will take effect June 21, 2015, one year after the adjournment of last summer's assembly.

Additional resources are available at the [Office of the General Assembly website](#) and include a "frequently asked questions" document, liturgical resources, and a video podcast by Gradye Parsons, stated clerk of the General Assembly.

"These decisions have been welcomed by some and a disappointment to others," Parsons said in a statement after the decisions of the 221st General Assembly (2014). "Let us pray that we can allow the Spirit to continue to create in us a common call to follow Christ while respecting each other's convictions."

## Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust

Lutheran (ELCA) Statement of 2009

This is an excerpt from an ELCA statement that acknowledges the variety of positions on same-sex unions that are held by conscientious, faithful Christian folk. This church recognizes that, with conviction and integrity:

- On the basis of conscience-bound belief, some are convinced that same-gender sexual behavior is sinful, contrary to biblical teaching and their understanding of natural law. They believe same-gender sexual behavior carries the grave danger of unrepentant sin. They therefore conclude that the neighbor and the community are best served by calling people in same-gender sexual relationships to repentance for that behavior and to a celibate lifestyle. Such decisions are intended to be accompanied by pastoral response and community support.
- On the basis of conscience-bound belief, some are convinced that homosexuality and even lifelong, monogamous, homo- sexual relationships reflect a broken world in which some relationships do not pattern themselves after the creation God intended. While they acknowledge that such relationships may be lived out with mutuality and care, they do not believe that the neighbor or community are best served by publicly recognizing such relationships as traditional marriage.
- On the basis of conscience-bound belief, some are convinced that the scriptural witness does not address the context of sexual orientation and lifelong loving and committed relationships that we experience today. They believe that the neighbor and community are best served when same-gender relationships are honored and held to high standards and public accountability, but they do not equate these relationships with marriage. They do, however, affirm the need for community support and the role of pastoral care and may wish to surround lifelong, monogamous relationships or covenant unions with prayer.
- On the basis of conscience-bound belief, some are convinced that the scriptural witness does not address the context of sexual orientation and committed relationships that we experience today. They believe that the neighbor and community are best served when same-gender relationships are lived out with lifelong and monogamous commitments that are held to the same rigorous standards, sexual ethics, and status as heterosexual marriage. They surround such couples and their lifelong commitments with prayer to live in ways that glorify God, find strength for the challenges that will be faced, and serve others. They believe same-gender couples should avail themselves of social and legal support for themselves, their children, and other dependents and seek the highest legal accountability available for their relationships.

# BRIDGE-BUILDING

Dr. Allen R. Hilton

May of 2005

## AN EXCERPT

### Part III. A People of the Book

Any call to a new and other-regarding unity would be hollow without a plan that might actually work on the ground – a vision for actually building the bridge that I have pictured. If the progressive and the conservative cannot currently carry conversation beyond the weather and the roads, how are we to hope that a new day is dawning? The answer is that we cannot hold that hope, without important changes in the manner of our conversations. This may sound strange, but I think we need to find better ways of disagreeing. I think we need scriptural ways of disagreeing – even scriptural reasons for disagreeing. I think the bridge has already been built for us by God, and the bridge is the Bible.

I can see your hackles rising. “Isn’t the Bible really the problem? Don’t most of our internal battles originate with two different arguments about scripture? How is more Bible going to solve this problem?” It is true that many Christian disagreements start with someone taking a strong biblical position. However, the problem may not be the Bible or even the way we read it. The problem may be with the way we imagine the nature and significance of disagreement.

We have at hand a ready demonstration that a community with strongly disagreeing positions on scripture can co-exist and thrive. For twenty-five hundred years the rabbis have agreed to disagree. They have debated and vehemently disagreed for twenty-five hundred years, yet somehow the conversation continues. From Hillel and Shammai forward, rabbinic debate has featured extreme ideological opposites. Hillel insisted that a man can divorce his wife for doing nothing worse than burning the toast, and Shammai insisted that infidelity alone is a proper warrant for divorce. In fact, Hillel and Shammai disagreed on almost everything. And Hillel and Shammai have their line of descendents. Rabbinic debate can be fierce, but it continues in community. How do they do it?

The key to the relatively harmonious continuation of rabbinic discussion, despite strong disagreement, is an attitude about ideas and intentions. Pirke Avot (“The Ethics of the Fathers,” a tractate of the Talmud) provides the poetic rationale: “Any disagreement for the sake of heaven shall be established in the end. What is a disagreement for the sake of heaven? The disagreement between Hillel and Shammai.” (Pirke Avot 5:17) As one Jewish publication puts it, “Judaism is not a ‘winner takes all’ system. From very early days, our sages recognized that even two good and wise people with good intentions might come to different conclusions. Though in the end we must choose, the fact that we remember Shammai [even as we choose to follow Hillel’s lead on Hanukkah practices] reminds us to be humble in those choices, and to recognize

that others who choose differently may still be acting for the sake of heaven ([www.bj.org/kavannah/kavanah\\_hanukkah\\_5765.php](http://www.bj.org/kavannah/kavanah_hanukkah_5765.php)).” Hillel and Shammai disagree early and they disagree often. In fact the history of rabbinic discussion is characterized by strong disagreement between important figures. But the rabbis agree that the Book is at the center of their argument. They agree about the Book. Not what it says, but its primacy in forming their world.

Sadly, contemporary American Christianity no longer features such commonality and mutual regard for the scriptures. Imagine that you’re on a street in a town or city somewhere on a Sunday morning, and you see a church building. The people walking toward the building are all carrying a Bible under their arms. What sort of church do you imagine you are passing? That is an easy question to answer, right? The church is conservative – maybe a Southern Baptist church or a Willow Creek sort of megachurch or a non-denominational Bible church . But why should that be so? Why should mainline Christians be any less committed to the scriptures than their more conservative brothers and sisters? If “The Battle for the Bible” is a proper name for the 20<sup>th</sup> century debate about scripture, the conservatives won. And so Biblical literacy rates are far higher in conservative churches, because progressives feel like the B-I-B-L-E may not be such a sturdy place for them to stand. When is the last time you saw a “sword drill” in a progressive Christian church? [This is a game in which a teacher names a verse and the kids race to find it in their Bibles.] What percentage of progressive Christian laypersons do carry a Bible to church? The progressive retort will be that “we just read the Bible differently,” but my experience is that a truer claim would be “we just read the Bible much less.” Progressive Christianity has been scared away from the Book by what it experiences as Christian dogmatism on the right. And this flight from scriptures comes at a great detriment to itself and to the church universal.

But what difference would it make if mainline Christians turned back to the Bible? All the difference in the world! People and communities are shaped by the stories we hear and tell, and the effectiveness of that shaping will be determined by the frequency and quality of the recitations. During a recent summer class here at New Canaan Congregational Church, we read Buechner’s *Godric*, a novel set in the Middle Ages, in which men talk to snakes and other animals and then listen back. One of our readers came to class one night with a story about gardening. “I was pulling weeds yesterday on my knees, when an ant crawled across the ground and up my leg. I got a leaf, scooped it up, and moved it away from me. Then it crawled back across the ground and up my leg again. So I scooped it up with a leaf and put it a bit farther away. From there it took the same path across the ground and back up my leg. Any other time in my life, I would have assumed that there was a food supply somewhere near; but this time I truly wondered if it had something it wanted to tell me.” Our stories shape our experiences. If they are good ones, we live into them.

The stories that should identify and shape Christians are the stories of scripture. Our faith is formed as we hear tales of a small man who built a big boat on dry land with no rain in the forecast, because he heard what he swore was God’s voice; of an aging, childless couple who had to explain to their neighbors that God had ordered both the moving van AND the baby carriage; of a lad who felled a giant with smooth stones, only to be felled later by a prophet’s

rough words of rebuke against his royal overreaching; of a poor teenage girl who heard an angel offer her a turbulent future with a controversial son, and replied, "Let it be!"; of fishermen and tax gatherers and prostitutes and revolutionaries who left their small everythings to follow One who had already left His very large everything to find them; of the kid who wrecked the family car, drained the family savings, soiled the family name and then returned home to his father's unlikely, extravagant embrace; of a carpenter nailed to a crassly simple contraption of wood; and of mournful women walking their solemn duty, who are astonished by their glimpse, through the morning haze, of a stone rolled away. These are surprising and compelling stories. They are our stories. And the more we tell and hear them, the more we will live into them and be transformed by God through them.

You will want a practical example of this dynamic at work. For the purpose of this paper, one very current instance will suffice: namely, the issue of homosexuality in the church, the divisive impact of which we recounted earlier. As you know, the debate about homosexuality has been argued primarily around five passages in the scripture – two from Leviticus, one from Romans, one from 1 Corinthians, and one from 1 Timothy. Each of those five passages condemns homosexual activity of some kind. For the most part, the church's debate on this issue over the last thirty years has concerned the nature of the relationships pictured in those five passages. Traditionalists draw a one-to-one correlation between the acts described and any form of homosexual behavior, including the monogamous homosexual relationships that exist in our time; progressives suggest that homosexual orientation is a modern category and so not known by the biblical authors. We have all heard the arguments over and again.

It is important for us to notice here that the progressive argument for inclusion of homosexuals is a defensive and a negative one – attempting to prove that the Bible does not say what it seems to say. While I have heard appeals to Jesus' reach to all kinds of people as a rationale for inclusion, I have not seen a single attempt to establish an affirmative scripture-based case for inclusion. I have not seen compelling attempt to ground inclusion in the practices of Jesus or the early church. The five passages have controlled the debate, and the progressives must therefore simply counter-argue. I believe that this inability of Christian progressives to make an affirmative case for inclusion may be a result of the disuse into which the scriptures have fallen in progressive churches.

The issue we face is a question of inclusion and its conditions. No credible voices on the right claim that homosexual orientation is sinful. Rather, homosexual desire is placed alongside pre- and extra-marital desire as natural but not to be acted on. John R.W. Stott is both representative and influential among evangelicals: "The majority of homosexual people are probably not responsible for their condition [i.e., orientation], though they are, of course, for their conduct..." Stott reads the five passages faithfully as a literalist, so he knows that behavior is in view. He calls the homosexually oriented believer to a life of chastity not unlike the monastic vows. If he is anything like evangelical friends of mine, he wishes it were otherwise, because he knows and loves real people who are clearly oriented to the same sex; however, he considers it a matter of Christian obedience to honor the clear sense of the text. The important point here is that inclusion of homosexuals is not the issue; rather the issue is behavior.

A very similar issue faced the earliest Christian church. The ninth through the fifteenth chapters of the Book of Acts chronicle the church's struggle with the issue of Gentile inclusion. What we often miss is that the issue is not really whether or not Gentiles ought to be included in Christian churches – that measure passes with only a very little resistance from Peter in a dream, and it doesn't even require a great council for ratification. No, what the earliest Christians really have trouble deciding is whether the Gentiles will need to observe the kosher laws and receive circumcision. We know that from Paul's Galatians and Romans, and we know it from the so-called Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15. The issue of Gentile inclusion was not about orientation, so to speak; it was about behavior, and in that sense we have a parallel case to our current debate on inclusion of homosexuals.

A second important parallel between our current discussion and the one the early church faced appears in the one-sidedness of the scriptural witness. The gathering in Jerusalem was occasioned by reports from Paul and Barnabas, among others, that God was giving the Holy Spirit to Gentiles. The traditionalists had no problem with Gentile inclusion. A clear voice within the Hebrew Scriptures, especially in the prophets, announces that God's blessing would be extended to Gentiles; and, in fact, the acceptance of Gentile converts had already become widespread in Judaism during the Second Temple period. This probably explains the quickness with which the earliest Church opened the doors to ethnic Gentiles. No, the traditionalists had no problem with Gentile inclusion.

Paul and Barnabas were not merely suggesting that Gentiles be accepted, however. They were suggesting that Gentiles be accepted without the usual behavior changes of circumcision and kosher observance. Unlike Gentile inclusion, the suspension of circumcision and kosher requirements has absolutely no biblical support. Beginning with the covenant God struck with Abraham in Genesis 17, entry into the people of God was contingent on circumcision of all males in the household. Beginning with Sinai in Exodus 20, continuation in the people of God was contingent upon the keeping of both the moral and ceremonial Law of Moses, including kosher laws. Not a single passage in the entire canon of Hebrew Scripture (our Old Testament) relaxes those requirements.

And so, as the leaders gathered that day in Jerusalem, the biblical deck was stacked in favor of the circumcision party. While Acts 15 does not record the speeches of the circumcision party, we can imagine that they were sprinkled with extensive quotations from Torah. The impact for people as biblically observant as Paul and the rest must have been powerful. Perhaps they were even a bit shaken when they rose to state their own position. We do have the speeches of Paul and Barnabas and Peter, at least in a compressed form. They are striking for the utter absence from them of any biblical allusion. These apostles simply tell what they have seen and heard: God has given the Holy Spirit to Gentiles before circumcision or kosher observance. Paul and Barnabas and Peter make the case for a less strict inclusion entirely on the basis of their experience.

Ultimately, James is called upon to settle the dispute. After a time of deliberation, this leader of the Jerusalem church rises to render his verdict to an expectant crowd that is hanging on his every word. In his ruling, James serves the spirit of each party in some measure: he honors the circumcision party's scripture by quoting Isaiah's inspired vision of all peoples coming to receive the healing of God, and he honors Paul, Barnabas, and Peter's experience by recounting what they have seen. In the end, James decides that God's own verdict on the matter had been sufficiently issued when God gave the Spirit to Gentiles (a scriptural fulfillment) apart from observance of circumcision or kosher laws (a point with no scripture to back it). Scripture frames the decision, but ultimately the future goes to a verdict that God is opening the doors wider than before. Gentiles may enter the people of God. The scriptures say as much. And they may enter without circumcision or kosher. Experience says as much. That is the voice of the earliest church on inclusion.

One important element of James' response remains to be emphasized: The acceptance that he advocates is not *carte blanc*. He insists "that [the Gentiles] abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood." In other words, this is not an undisciplined community of inclusion. There are boundaries for behavior. Gentiles will need to know this as they enter. The vision of James and these first Christians is of a "disciplined inclusion."

Why do I tell this story? It is certainly not to claim that Acts 15 decides once and for all the question of homosexuality and the church. Nor is it to state my own position on that issue. I produce this story from Acts 15 because it should have been brought into this conversation long ago. It raises the debate to a higher and more biblical level. Progressives have been talking for a long time about the importance of experience in deciding the issue of homosexuality and the church. "These aren't bad people!" they have said. But someone, somewhere should have said, "You know, this idea of including homosexuals is kind of like James' decision about Gentiles." It should have reached our biblically-tuned antennae, because we are a people with a story who ought to be disciplined by that story.

No, what is important for our conversation here today is not our ultimate verdict on the issue of homosexuality. We can and will talk about that another time. And another. And another... What is important for our purposes is the fact that those five passages from Leviticus and the Pauline letters are not the only words spoken about homosexuality and inclusion among ancient biblical communities. As a people of the Book, we are called to live into our whole story – not just its propositional line items – and a story about the early Christian debate on whether to welcome into the people of God a formerly-excluded group should reach our antennae. Their story is our story.

The experience of our spiritual ancestors in Acts 15 may raise our own debate to a higher level, by opening the possibility for a literal AND progressive reading. For in it we see a literal precedent for God's acting against the grain of all prior scriptural witness. Within the pages of scripture, then, we see a precedent for a disciplined and inclusive position on the issue of homosexuality and the church. The story in Acts 15 does not solve the issue of homosexual



inclusion. But it does make it a conversation that can be entered boldly and scripturally by all parties.

I should name another important aspect to the Acts 15 verdict. Did you notice that in these verses, we see a biblical precedent for a UCC campaign that has been seen by some as an evasion of scripture: “God Is Still Speaking.” In Acts 15 God continues to address Godself to humanity and open new doors to understanding – even ones that transcend what has already been written in scripture. There God asserts God’s freedom to move beyond the bounds of what is written. It is John Robinson’s precept: “The Lord hath more truth yet to break forth out of his holy word.”

In Acts 15, then, the UCC’s “Still Speaking” campaign has a biblical warrant for its message. But the congruity of that biblical precedent with the message of the “Still Speaking” campaign appears to be altogether coincidental. I searched for thirty minutes through every page of the “Still Speaking” portion of the UCC website – thirty minutes and I found only one reference to scripture, a brief allusion to the hope “that we all may be one” from John 17.21. Giving the benefit of the doubt to the “Still Speaking” staff in Cleveland, I assume that the convictions expressed on that website are formed by the scriptures; but the authorizing voice of that source is never credited. Scripture is never cited. Consequently, an anthropologist or casual inquirer at the site would assume that it is a movement generated by human ingenuity. What is clear is that no one, by any stretch of the imagination, could come away from the “God Is Still Speaking” website with a notion that she or he had been invited into a people of the Book. Until the mainline churches reclaim a proclaimed and practiced fidelity to the scriptures, conversations between congregations on the left and right will continue to be terse and tense and unproductive. If the mainlines do openly and boldly dive back into the world of the Bible, it will open a whole new avenue toward healthy ecumenism.

When I graduated college, I traveled with a choir through Europe. Our first concert stop was in little St. David’s Presbyterian Church in Edinburgh, Scotland. One image from that worship service remains vividly in my memory to this day. After early hymns and liturgy, there came a point in the service where the little minister climbed the steep stairs to an exalted pulpit. There he read the scriptures – Old Testament, Epistle, and Gospel ringing out to us from above. But the remarkable moment was yet to come: after closing the last reading with a heartfelt “Amen,” the little man climbed carefully back down and entered a much more humble space, directly below the other. From that pulpit he preached. No word needed to be spoken that day to explain the priorities of that church. Their architecture spoke the minister’s message very plainly: “Anything I say down here springs directly from the word that I read out up there. In this church, we stand under the text.”

Under the text is a complex and difficult place to stand. Standing there, you hear one voice saying, “They must be circumcised!” and another saying, “But God gave the Spirit...” You hear one voice saying, “Five ironclad passages!” and another voice saying, “But Acts 15 is inclusive!” Under the text is a confusing and sometimes tense place to be. But under the text is where the very best and most generative conversations take place – ask Hillel and Shammai! – and under

the text is where God calls us to be: under the text, beneath the cross, in compassion. In my ministry in this congregation and in the United Church of Christ, I humbly hope that this is where I will find myself. Because under the text IS on the bridge.



