

# What are the questions? And what is this booklet?

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*From the book*

## Frequently Asked Questions about Sexuality, the Bible, and the Church: Plain Talk about Tough Issues

A collection of essays considering the appropriate participation of gay and lesbian Presbyterians in church life and leadership.

This booklet is an offering to the church in a season of discernment. It comes from 26 scholars who care deeply about the church. Twenty-four of us are members of the Presbyterian Church (USA), and most of us are ordained. We serve at 19 different academic institutions, including eight seminaries affiliated with the denomination. We write because we love the church and long to help it live more faithfully as the body of Christ.

This booklet grows out of a realization – a confession – that many of our debates about sexuality and ordination have grown thin, stale and mean. We need something more than slightly better answers to the questions we already have. We need questions that help us find better ways of listening together for the Word of God. We need answers that lead us not just on to victory for one side or another, but back more deeply into the heart of the Gospel. And we need to find ways of praying, thinking, writing, talking, and listening together that are themselves a sign of that Gospel.

The short essays in this booklet do not pretend to answer those needs completely. But they represent a good-faith attempt to deepen the church's discernment of the work and will of God. They begin with the assumption that discernment will require questions and answers that are thoroughly theological, widely accessible, intentionally diverse, and open to further conversation.

These essays seek to take debates about ethics, policies and practices and restore them to a broader theological context. Christian discernment requires theological thinking, for it recognizes that lives of faith unfold in response to what God is already doing. Reformed churches have therefore insisted that we cannot begin with the question, "What is the right thing to do?" Instead, as theologian H. Richard Niebuhr argued, the first question of Christian ethics must be, "What is

God doing?" Only in light of that question can we begin to ask, "How shall we respond?"

Our debates go sour when we forget the priority of God's gracious action in Jesus Christ. Both liberals and conservatives have slipped into proclaiming ethical principles that float free from larger understandings of who God is and what God is doing. Conservatives have too often recited a law prohibiting same-sex love without connecting that prohibition to Jesus' table fellowship with people the Pharisees called sinners (Luke 5:27-39), the early church's realization that the Holy Spirit moved among those the law declared unclean (Acts 10-15), and Paul's reminder that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). Liberals have too often insisted on a free-floating mandate for inclusivity without connecting that mandate to Jesus' insistence on the enduring significance of the law (Matt. 5:17) or Peter's reminder that God is working to form a holy people (1 Peter 2:9). And both sides have appealed to ideas of what is "natural" without adequately considering the Reformed tradition's deep wariness about appeals to the natural order as a revelation of the will of God. When we forget that we are

seeking to discern what God is doing and how we might respond - when our conversations cease to be theological - our debates become shallow and spiteful, like church versions of political talk shows.

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It seems easier to debate "abomination" versus "inclusivity" than to seek to name the work of God in the world. And attempts to say what God is doing can end in foolishness and arrogance. But God's ways with the world are not an utter mystery to us. In Jesus Christ the Word

became flesh and lived among us, eager to know and be known. And we trust that by the Holy Spirit, the Scriptures are "the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ," and that the confessions offer "authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do" (Book of Order, G-14.0405). That Word, that witness, and those expositions do not invite us to glib and all-knowing speech. They lead instead to patience and to prayer. They lead us to test interpretations in Christian community. They call for penitent listening - even as they demand that we risk bold proclamation.

Our listening and our proclamation are best when they engage the whole of the gospel. Even theological discernment goes wrong when we consider tiny slices of Scripture and doctrine apart from our best sense of the whole. The essays in

this booklet therefore range more widely than many recent discussions of sexuality and ordination. The essays here address both questions that are in fact “frequently asked” and questions that should be frequently asked. They ask questions about the short list of Bible verses around which so many debates have revolved. But they also ask questions about parts of Scripture these debates have neglected, like the Wisdom literature and, remarkably, the Gospels. The essays take up familiar questions in theology, like ordination and the authority of Scripture. But they also ask questions about relevant topics that our debates have neglected, like sanctification, baptism and marriage. This broader range of questions can enrich the church’s discernment, for discernment demands that we think in light of all that we know about God and God’s ways with the world.

Discernment is not the work of a few experts, but of the whole church. And so the essays here are accessible to a wide readership. They are all fairly short. They use minimal jargon. They reach out to readers from many different backgrounds. While the essays are clear, they cannot be reduced to soundbites. Readers who want to skim and pick up a few “talking points” will be

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disappointed. The essays aspire to the very best of contemporary scholarship, and they do not back away from complexity. But these careful, scholarly essays remain accessible because the authors understand the issues so well that they can consider complex questions clearly.

Because faithful discernment requires attention to many voices, the essays in this booklet reflect many kinds of diversity. All the authors believe the church should affirm the ministries of gay and lesbian Christians with ordination, but we differ in significant ways. We differ not only in gender, race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and institutional location, but also in the ways we understand sexuality, ordination, Scripture, and the church. We use different language, and we work out of different traditions within an overlapping Reformed heritage. The booklet concludes by reprinting two important statements in which scholars speak with unified voices, but it offers no single statement in itself. Instead it serves as a sign of hope that church people need not agree on every point in order to find ways of living together that recognize the gifts of all those God calls to ministry.

The diversity within this booklet is significant, but it only begins to present the whole of the church’s conversation. It invites and even requires other voices. This collection of essays makes no claim to be complete in itself. It lacks the voices

of people who are opposed to ordaining gay and lesbian Christians. It lacks the deeper racial and ethnic diversity of the church we hope for. It lacks the wisdom of people who do not teach in seminaries, universities, and colleges. And it includes too few Christians who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered. But the authors of the essays make room, I think, for voices that respond and even disagree in good faith.

As the booklet invites other authors, it also invites other questions. Beginning to expand the questions we ask only shows how much more work there is to do. This booklet features an essay on baptism but not on the Lord's Supper, on the Wisdom literature but not on the prophets. The booklet is not a final word, but an invitation to deeper and broader conversation about what God has done in Jesus Christ and how we are called to respond.

In its openness to more conversation this booklet presumes that the Holy Spirit still rests upon the body of Christ. It is offered in trust that God is already moving in the church, already drawing into the great work of redemption all the grace, violence, pettiness and loveliness of our life together. Offered in that confidence, these essays do not seek to end discussion and make irrelevant the deliberative bodies of the church. Instead they seek to build up those bodies in a season of discernment, that we may all respond to the Gospel with more faith, hope and love.

For more information about the Covenant Network  
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