

What Does the Bible Tell Us About LGBT Inclusion?

Tricia Dykers Koenig
Covenant Network of Presbyterians

More and more biblical scholars and other Christians are convinced that the Holy Spirit, speaking through the Scriptures, is calling the church to full inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons. A few of the reasons:

Reading in literary and historical context: The texts often used to condemn homosexual practice were not dealing with the issues we address today – the morality of responsible sexual expression between persons who are not heterosexual in their sexual orientation. The Bible condones sexual practices that the church today rejects, such as polygamy, concubinage, and levirate marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5); it condemns some practices the church now allows, such as intercourse during menstruation and remarriage following divorce. To be faithful today, we must try to understand the *principles* underlying specific biblical provisions, and seek to apply those principles to our circumstances.

The over-arching themes of Scripture: A major theme of the Old Testament is exodus – liberation from bondage and oppression. The prophets continually called for justice. The story of the early church is a history of breaking down barriers that divide people from each other and give some people status over others. Paul insisted that faith in Jesus Christ, not adherence to a set of legal requirements, constitutes membership in the Christian community.

The witness of Jesus Christ: Jesus consistently welcomed, indeed sought out, persons who were labeled outcast by his society. Criticized himself as a lawbreaker, he challenged self-righteousness, judgmentalism, and legalism, making it clear that the purpose of the Law is the protection of human welfare; human beings are not made to keep the Law regardless of its detrimental effects on the well-being of people (Mark 2:23-3:6). Jesus summarized the Law as loving God with one's whole being, and loving one's neighbor as oneself.

The rule of love: Even though it is not intended as such by Christians of goodwill, the presumption that same-sex behavior is always wrong does great damage to many, including some who have never engaged in it: young people unable to will or pray away the attraction they've been taught is evil (even if they don't act on their feelings, they may still grow up with self-loathing); parents despairing about where they "went wrong," when the explanation for anyone's sexual orientation is still a mystery; relationships torn apart by rejection; families which are not whole due to the dishonesty of remaining hidden in the closet. The taboo against homosexuality can lead to loneliness, both overt and subtle discrimination, and even verbal and physical violence.

"Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law." Romans 13:10

The New Testament abolition of categories of "clean" and "unclean": In the Torah's Holiness Code, homosexual practice is a matter of *uncleanness*, along with eating blood and other dietary restrictions, contact with bodily discharges, wearing certain fabrics, and other prohibitions. Jesus challenged his culture and religion's focus on ritual cleanness by associating with women, lepers, "outcasts and sinners" (see also Mark 7). Jesus laid the foundation for the distinction between *moral law* – that which pertains to the rule of love – and *purity law*, which is culturally conditioned. The Book of Acts relates the early church's struggle to appropriate this principle. A good example is in

Acts 10-11: Peter learns through a vision and an encounter with a Gentile, Cornelius, that “what God has called clean, you must not call profane.” Witnessing the gift of the Holy Spirit to those his tradition has considered unclean, Peter concludes: “If then God gave them the same gift that God gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?”

An understanding of celibacy as a spiritual gift: The biblical witness reflects a variety of acceptable patterns of relationship outside of “marriage between one man and one woman,” including polygamy and concubinage. In the New Testament, Paul asserts that celibacy is preferred to marriage, but acknowledges it as a particular kind of gift from God, not given to all (I Corinthians 7:7-9). Churches which require life-long celibacy consider it a special vocation, and endeavor to provide support for those who freely choose such a course. The Reformed tradition, following Luther and Calvin, affirms the goodness of human sexual intimacy and repudiates the requirement of celibate clergy. Requiring celibacy of gays and lesbians does not deprive them of sexual expression alone, but of the opportunity for relationships which are emotionally and spiritually intimate as well.

Valuing relationship and community: The creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2 are descriptions of the predominant pattern of male-female relationships, and affirmations of it; it is an unnecessary leap to insist that an affirmation of one pattern is a prohibition of all others. All human beings are made in God’s image, whether or not they relate sexually to someone of another gender. The values being honored in Genesis 1-2 are relationship and community, not a specific form of relationship. Condemning persons to loneliness because they cannot fit into the predominant pattern is a violation of the spirit of the Scripture. It is ironic that Jesus’ quotation of Genesis in Matthew 19 is often used to justify a continued prohibition of same-sex relationships, when Jesus used Genesis to prohibit *divorce* – a heterosexual practice for which the church has changed its policies and biblical interpretations.

The use of experience: The church has changed its understanding of God’s will many times over the centuries, as knowledge and experience and the working of the Holy Spirit have provided new perspectives. In so doing, the church has been following in the tradition of Scripture itself, which reflects the changing understandings of God’s people as they experienced God in their lives in a variety of circumstances. Because of his experience of the Risen Christ, Saul fundamentally changed his understanding of what it meant to be related to God. The Jerusalem Council listened to the experience of Peter and of Barnabas and Paul in deciding on new standards of Christian faithfulness (Acts 15). When the church listens to the witness of its gay and lesbian members, and observes the evidence of the Holy Spirit in their lives, it is continuing the process that is demonstrated in Scripture itself.

Salvation by grace: All persons stand before God equally in need of forgiveness and reconciliation. We are loved and accepted by God not on our own merits, but because of God’s free decision in Christ. *“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* Romans 8:38-39

For further reading: *Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture:* Position Statement adopted by the 123rd General Assembly (1983) of the Presbyterian Church in the United States.

<https://oga.pcusa.org/media/uploads/oga/pdf/scripture-use.pdf>