

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BIBLICAL TEXTS (Re. Homosexuality) WITH INSIGHTS FROM THE QUADRILATERAL

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Personal preamble: “Anyone who has worked within biblical scholarship knows, or ought to know, that we biblical scholars come to the text with just as many interpretative strategies and expectations as anyone else, and that integrity consists not of having no presuppositions but being aware of what one’s presuppositions are and of the obligation to listen to and interact with those who have different ones.” (N.T. Wright in *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture*, 2005, page 16)

As I have worked to produce this introduction to the Biblical texts that refer to homosexuality (pp. 20-25 below), I have sought to have Wright’s words in the front, as well as the back, of my mind. I hope that readers of what follows will be in dialogue with me and that we can “listen to and interact with” each other in Christian love.

Prologue

In this document I seek to engage in some review and interpretation of the six passages in the Bible most cited as specifically mentioning homosexuality. After my comments and some use of the Quadrilateral to aid in understanding the texts, the reader will find the “six passages” in context from two sources: (1) the NRSV translation (1989) and (2) the CEB (Common English Bible) translation (2011), utilizing 120 scholars from 22 faith communities and largely sponsored by Cokesbury.

The reader may wish to jump to the end of the paper and read the two versions of the “six passages” before reading further in the paper itself. Those passages begin on page 20 and the “six passages” are in **red** for easy identification.

Those two renditions of the “six passages” include enough of the surrounding verses to help put the specific statements about homosexuality into context. Quoting a verse alone, without attention to the context, too often leads to misinterpretation. What is readily evident is that the context of the three Old Testament texts indicates that ancient Judaism had many rules for the people, including some very explicit rules about sexuality — some so explicit as to make some moderns quite surprised to discover that such things

are even “in the Bible!” It is interesting to study how different translations approach these texts and other ancient texts that deal with sexuality, especially homosexuality. Part of the reason is that, often, there is no word in the ancient text that is a direct equivalent for a contemporary English word. In such cases, finding a “one word” equivalent is virtually impossible. In addition, the English words “homosexual” and “homosexuality” are new words in English, having only been around for a little more than 100 years.

It is also true that Biblical Hebrew has relatively few words in its entire vocabulary. And it has even fewer nuanced ways to differentiate several nuanced variations of the same basic thing or act. A prime example is that ancient Hebrew has no word for sexual intercourse. The word that is often used is the Hebrew word for “know/knew” — as in Genesis 4:1, “Now the man knew his wife, Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain...” (NRSV) “Know/knew” also meant the more usual knowledge-based ways in which we use “know/knew,” but many folks don’t know about that sexual meaning in the OT. Sometimes the Hebrew says that the husband “went in” to his wife to mean “had sexual intercourse” with his wife.

Genesis 19:1-11

In Genesis 19, the men of Sodom do not want to “know” the angels/messengers/men in the sense of greeting, shaking hands and getting acquainted with them; they want to gang rape them as an angry act of defilement, degradation and humiliation. Lot’s concern is to provide hospitality to the angels/messengers, according to the sacred duty within Judaism to provide welcome, shelter and food for strangers. In contrast, the men of Sodom are intent on the opposite; they want to rape the strangers as a brutal way of expressing their “unwelcome” to these strangers. Their desire to “know” the strangers has almost nothing to do with sex and is overwhelmingly focused on harming the strangers and expelling them from their city, possibly by killing them. The homosexual intention of the men of Sodom seems primarily to underscore their intention of degrading and humiliating these male messengers/strangers.

Additional word on angels: The word means “messengers,” which is how the CEB translates it in Genesis 19. In the Bible, angels are men (i.e. adult males) who appear suddenly, unexpectedly and by unrecorded means in order to give a message from God to specific people. In Genesis 19 the message given is that Lot and his family are to

leave Sodom, where they are living as immigrants (or resident aliens), as soon as possible, because Sodom is about to be destroyed. Angels/messengers often have special abilities, in this case the ability to blind and confuse the would-be gang rapers. Notice that the negative attention given to the angels/messengers by the men of Sodom seems to be because the angels/messengers are aliens/strangers. And the threat is that, if the Sodomites do not have their way with the messengers, they will do worse to Lot, who is also an immigrant/resident alien among them. Notice also that the ones who escape Sodom are Lot, his wife (only temporarily, of course, until she “looks back”) and his two unmarried daughters — a terrible story about those three follows in Genesis 19. But in that patriarchal society, Lot’s married daughters are not allowed to leave, because they must obey their Sodomite husbands who believe there is no harm coming.

Additional word on winged angels: Angels depicted as women (or at least looking like women to most moderns) with long hair, wings (and/or halos) and sometimes hovering in the air (e.g. remember the artistic renderings of the announcement to the shepherds in the fields regarding the birth of Jesus) are largely the result of the pious imagination of artists, especially Middle Ages and Renaissance artists. The pious imagination of the artists struck a chord with popular imagination; therefore, it is sometimes a surprise to moderns to learn that the Biblical angels/messengers are men bringing a word from God.

Leviticus 18:17-23 & Leviticus 20:8-21

The two accompanying Old Testament texts from Leviticus place the issue of homosexuality within the context of a number of sexual issues. The even larger context is that Leviticus 17-27 is a part of what scholars sometimes call the “Holiness Code,” i.e. a large body of rules for many activities of life — all designed to keep the people in a state of “holiness” in the eyes of God. Please note that the one verse about homosexuality in each quote from Leviticus is surrounded by a number of other rules having to do with sexuality — and to child sacrifice (to Molech) in one. Two of the verses, Leviticus 20:9-10 seem to be extreme to most modern readers, “All who curse father or mother shall be put to death; having cursed father or mother, their blood is upon

them. If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death.”

In both Leviticus texts, it is considered an “**abomination**” for a “man to lie with a man.” Abomination means something that is detestable and to be abhorred or loathed. It is widely used to denote something that is “repugnant to God.” Many of the OT uses of “abomination” have to do with pagan practices, such as idol worship, human sacrifice, cultic prostitution and witchcraft — or other ways of being disobedient to Yahweh. The OT is not specific about **what aspect of homosexuality** is an abomination to God.

Additional word on the Holiness Code: While the primary purpose of the Holiness Code is to “keep the people in a state of ‘holiness’ in the eyes of God,” there is a dark side to the Holiness Code. In fact every strong theological stance or doctrine has a “dark underbelly,” if that stance or doctrine is pushed to its full conclusion without some correction from another stance or doctrine. The dark underbelly of the Holiness Code is that, at its full conclusion, it utterly lacks grace and love, despite the fact that God is overwhelmingly described in scripture as a God of grace and love. Moreover, without a correction from grace and love, those who think they are conformers to a “Holiness Code” are tempted to believe in their own righteousness and to enjoy condemning (sometimes brutally) the beliefs and behaviors of those who do not conform to the code. Proclaiming that certain persons should be put to death for their sins (as some of the attached verses proclaim) would be an example. There is no consideration of the possibility of valuing anyone who offends against “the Code” as being a child of God. It is worthy of note that Jesus’ conflict with the religious leaders of first century CE are often within this realm. On a number of occasions, Jesus is accused by the religious leaders of breaking one or another of the “codes” of that day. In his own way Jesus explains that his purpose is to love sinners and proclaim the kingdom of God — and that that is more important to the Father than strict observance of the various “codes.”

A few other “holiness” verses from other OT books also seem extreme, and un-Christian, to many today, e.g.: Exodus 21:15, 17, “Whoever strikes father or mother shall be put to death... Whoever curses father or mother shall be put to death,” and Deuteronomy 21:18-21, “If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey

his father and mother, who does not heed them when they discipline him, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the gate of that place. They shall say to the elders of his town, ‘This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.’ Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death. So you shall purge the evil from your midst; and all Israel will hear, and be afraid.”

One puzzlement in the midst of the multitude of rules against various sexual practices — many of them repeated on several occasions — is why a reference to homosexuality is made only three times in the OT — and Genesis 19 hardly counts since the homosexuality there is primarily a tool for defilement, humiliation, unwelcome and rejection.

Clearly, some discernment, perhaps utilizing the Quadrilateral, will help Methodist believers to decide which of these various texts should be followed literally and which will do well to be modified by the church’s experience with the dilemmas of life and with the Spirit of God, especially as revealed in the life and teachings of Jesus.

Contextual Background for NT Passages to Follow

Additional word on the approach to the Holiness Code in the NT: Two remarkable stories from Acts indicate how the earliest church, led by the spirit of God, decided that some parts of the Jewish Holiness Code should be set aside.

(1) In Acts 8:26-40, Philip is led by the spirit to encounter the Ethiopian eunuch on the road down to Gaza. Ethiopia is considered to be “at the edge of the earth,” but the Ethiopian has been visiting Jerusalem and knows enough to be reading the book of Isaiah in Hebrew or in the Greek translation (*Septuagint*). However, because he is a eunuch (therefore, ritually un-whole by condition) he cannot be accepted into the Jewish community nor offer sacrifice in the Temple, though he could be present in the Temple’s Court of the Gentiles. When, after conversation with Philip, the eunuch requests baptism into the Christian fellowship, Philip baptizes him right there along the road down toward Gaza.

(2) In Acts 10, Peter, while in Joppa (today’s Tel Aviv, coastal city, more Gentile than Jewish at the time), has a vision of a sheet full of animals being lowered to the earth

and he is told to “kill and eat.” Since many of the animals are considered “unclean and not to be eaten” by the Holiness Code, Peter tries to refuse and is answered three times with, “Never consider unclean what God has made pure.” Then Peter is led/summonsed to Caesarea Maritima (Roman provincial capitol, also more Gentile than Jewish at the time) to meet Cornelius, Gentile Roman commander of about 600 soldiers. Cornelius is described as a “God-worshipper” (sometimes called “God-fearer”), i.e. a Gentile who worships at the synagogue, but has not formally converted to Judaism. Despite the Holiness Code teaching that associating with Gentiles is taboo, Peter meets with Cornelius and his gathered Gentile friends in Cornelius’ house. In Acts 10:34-35, Peter says, “I really am learning that God doesn’t show partiality to one group of people over another. Rather, in every nation, whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” While Peter is talking, the Holy Spirit descends on the gathered, including the Gentiles. Peter decides that, since they have received the Spirit, they may also be baptized into the Christian community. Clearly the modern church will have to give consideration to the interpretation of “whoever worships him and does what is right,” but Acts 10 is a clear rejection of a significant part of the OT Holiness Code.

Two important **additional words**: Hiding in the shadows, but clearly an important part of the context of ancient Hebrew teachings about sexuality, are (1) the Hebrews’ often precarious position in the world, as they were frequently being invaded and occupied by more powerful neighboring empires, and (2) the ancient Hebrew understanding about life after death.

(1) The national insecurity of the ancient Jews led to a bias in favor of fertility. A terrible defeat occurred in 722 BCE with the fall of the northern kingdom, Israel (the southern kingdom was called Judah), at the hands of the Assyrians. The brutal and bloodthirsty Assyrians, upon their victory, slaughtered all the males of (and near) fighting age, then forcibly removed all women, children, and older males, scattering them amongst other peoples that the Assyrians had defeated; they also brought other defeated peoples into the territory that had been Israel in northern and central Palestine. Those Jews who disappeared are referred to as “the lost tribes of Israel.” Afterwards the remaining Jews in Judah were invaded and defeated by a series other kingdoms as well.

One result was that a “siege mentality” was developed, including a strong bias that every sex act was expected to have the potential to produce another little Hebrew. Any sexual act that did not have the potential for producing a child was wrong/sin. Thank goodness for the counterweight to that opinion, *Song of Songs*, with its erotic love poetry and its celebration of consensual sensuality!

(2) As strange as it may seem to moderns, the early Hebrew understanding of life after death was closely linked to reproduction. Put briefly, ancient Judaism’s belief in life after death was that all people, “good, bad and ugly,” upon their deaths, went to Sheol, a place of shades vaguely somewhere beneath the earth with little or no meaning or activity. Sheol is quite similar to the ancient Greek understanding of Hades. It would be the progressive minded Pharisees, who, a couple of generations before Jesus, began to talk about heaven (as reward) and hell (as punishment) in the afterlife. Given the more ancient understanding about Sheol, the only way for one to live on in this world beyond one’s death was through their “life force” (sometimes signified by blood — see the prohibitions on blood in the Leviticus readings) in their offspring, especially the life-force of sons, since that was a patriarchal age. Not having children would mean that one’s life force would be “cut off” at death — a big issue in the book of *Ruth*, but with a beneficent resolution.

To be blunt, if a man in that patriarchal society was to be reassured that he would live beyond his death, he had to have children, preferably sons. But to insure that children born to his wife were his children, there arose numerous rules and regulations about sexuality to insure that he could live on after his death through his life force at work in his children.

One consequence of that concern was the “law of Levirate marriage.” In that law, if a married man died with out having fathered children, it was the duty of the deceased man’s brother to marry the widow and have children with her **on behalf of** the dead brother. Somehow, it was assumed that, through the “family blood,” the life force of the dead man could be continued in those children. And the first born son in such an arrangement would be the inheritor of a share of the estate of the dead “father.” Levirate marriage, of course, could be allowed in a culture that accepted polygamy and it may have also provided some security to widows, but the primary concern was to prevent the deceased man from being “cut off.”

Levirate marriage is at the core of the terrible sexual story in Genesis 38 centered on Judah, Onan and Tamar. Levirate marriage is also at the base of Matthew's joke in Matthew 22:23-28. In Matthew's gospel, the Sadducees describe a woman who had been married serially to (and was left a widow by) seven brothers, but had not had children with any of them. The Sadducees then ask Jesus whose wife she'd be in heaven. But, the conservative Sadducees, who believed in Sheol, did not believe in the general resurrection (or heaven); and they opposed the newfangled ideas of the Pharisees regarding heaven and hell. Their attempt to trick Jesus into making a mistake becomes a laughing stock in Matthew's eyes.

Paul's Teachings in the NT

The three New Testament references to homosexuality are from Paul — sort of. Romans and 1 Corinthians are widely attributed to Paul by the scholars. But according to most scholars, after Paul's death, a disciple/student of Paul (and less counter-cultural than Paul) wrote 1 Timothy (and 2 Timothy and Titus) seeking to further Paul's message for a time a few decades after the death of Paul.

All three NT passages express the sin/unfaithfulness of homosexual behavior. But all three make that statement in the midst of **lists** of sins and unfaithfulness. One puzzlement for moderns is why there are only three references to homosexuality in the NT. Another puzzlement is why "those three" get so much attention and the other sins/unfaithful acts mentioned in context with them get so little attention among contemporary Bible readers. It would be interesting to determine how many of the other sins/unfaithful acts are being committed regularly by some of those most insistent on enforcing the ban on homosexuality. (Note: I suppose in that last sentence I have "gone to preaching." My apologies to N.T. Wright! 😊)

Since Paul was in a position to write about homosexuality, it is helpful to ponder what might be the basis of Paul's objection to homosexuality and his perception of the sin/unfaithfulness of homosexuality. Paul's strong Jewish roots and his Roman citizenship contributed to his pivotal position in the emerging early church. A brief chronology with comments may be helpful:

1. The Christian church began with the resurrection and ascension of Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost around 30 CE in Jerusalem; Christianity quickly spread into the surrounding areas. All of Palestine, and virtually all of the “Middle East,” was under Roman rule.
2. Paul was a Jewish native of Tarsus, near the Mediterranean, in today’s southeastern Turkey. Because of his parentage, he was born a Roman citizen. He had been well trained in Judaism in Tarsus and later by the best scholars in Jerusalem and was, therefore, well trained in Jewish tradition and theology. After his conversion to Christianity, “on the road” from Palestine to Damascus, Syria, sometime in the mid-30’s CE, he spent several years determining and testing his calling.
3. Shortly before 50 CE he began his missionary journeys into Greek-speaking (mainly Gentile) Roman territory, beginning in Crete and eastern-to-middle Turkey (today’s name). His later journeys took him to western Turkey, Macedonia and Greece — all of these areas controlled by the Roman Empire — and finally, his last journey took him to Rome itself.
4. Paul apparently wrote many letters to churches he had founded and/or visited; some of the letters are considered to be holy writ and are part of the New Testament canon. Romans is widely considered to be his last letter in the NT and it was written before he ever visited Rome. The church in Rome had been in existence for some years; church tradition says that it had been founded by Peter. When Paul later arrived in Rome he was a prisoner of the emperor and was, according to tradition, beheaded there in 63 or 64 CE.
5. The Corinthian correspondence is a little earlier than Romans and seems to have been originally at least four different letters, now cobbled into two. Paul apparently was the founder of the Corinthian church; his missionary work in Macedonia and Greece was extensive.
6. It appears that, in both the church in Corinth and the church in Rome, there were several Jewish converts to Christianity, who had been living as practicing Jews outside Palestine (i.e. diaspora Jews) for some time before their conversion to Christianity. It also appears that both churches had a number of Gentile members who had converted to Christianity directly from whichever pagan religion they had been following.

7. The **Jewish Christians** in the two churches, like Paul, would have been very familiar with the teachings of Judaism regarding homosexuality as discussed earlier in this paper. However, the **Gentile Christians** would have been accustomed to a very different attitude toward homosexual practice. That discussion follows below.

Homosexuality and the Roman Empire

A fair amount is known about the practice of homosexuality in the Roman empire during the NT era — not from the NT itself, but from collateral literature of the Roman empire; the Romans were great record keepers. Again there was no word in Greek (used in most of the empire) or Latin (used in Rome and in official documents) for homosexual or homosexuality, but varieties of sexual practices that would be scorned today were rather commonplace and acceptable within the Roman culture, which still had a number of fertility religions (some of which employed temple prostitutes of both genders) within the cult of the emperor, which functioned as a sort of religion on its own.

In the Roman culture there was great stress on the masculinity of males. And males who did not match the description of masculinity were considered to be lesser persons. Male-male sexuality was well known and rather widely practiced and, as long as a male engaged in such as the active participant (to put it crudely, the penetrator) in such encounters, his masculinity was affirmed and he was socially acceptable — even admired. The “passive” participant was considered to be less than masculine and therefore a lesser person — like a woman (in the opinions of that day).

Furthermore, relatively few persons in the Roman empire were actual Roman citizens with rights of protection by the empire. Roman citizens could, in many cases, take sexual advantage of non-citizens with impunity. Slaves had even fewer rights and children had almost none. Roman men of power were well known for being the masculine one in coerced sexual relationships with underlings (male and female), slaves (male and female) and prostitutes (male and female) and it was generally considered normal behavior. In some of the pagan religions, it was considered an act of worship to have sex with a temple prostitute (male or female).

Sadly to many of us moderns, it is well known that many Roman soldiers, scattered around the empire for extended periods of time and with limited sexual outlets, often employed boys as servants in their field assignments. The boys often became “passive” participants in the soldier’s “masculine” sexual expression. You may read more about this

at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homosexuality_in_ancient_Rome. (Note: I have found that *Wikipedia* is usually a reliable source in matters of ancient history including early Jewish and early Christian history.)

Little is known about the time or place or authorship of 1 Timothy, other than to affirm that the author is highly influenced by the ministry and teachings of Paul and is writing for a time a few decades after Paul's death. But clearly 1 Timothy was written within the context of the widespread Roman empire and its influence on a large part of the known world.

Romans 1:26-27

In Romans 1:26-27 Paul's argument against homosexuality is that it is **unnatural** (i.e. in violation of the "natural" way in which life was structured to be in the Genesis creation stories). Thus "same sex" intercourse would be an expression of disorder in human relationships. Paul implies that same sex activity interferes with one's relationship with God and with other persons, because there is something "unnatural" at the core of it. Paul does not state **what** is unnatural. This understanding may reflect Paul's deep grounding in Jewish teaching, especially the siege mentality bias that every sexual act should be intended to produce a child. Of course, as will be discussed later, Paul had a bias that it was best for Christians not to be married (or have sexual relationships at all, even in marriage) in order to give their full attention to serving God in Christ.

I Corinthians 6:9-11

I Corinthians 6:9-11 speaks of people who are unjust and will not inherit God's kingdom. "Both participants in same sex intercourse" (CEB) is on the list. It is interesting that the word "both" is used here in the CEB. The Greek text says, "the weak/effeminate" (transliterated: *malakoi*) **and** homosexuals (literally "lie with men," transliterated: *arsenokoitai*). It seems clear that Paul is here condemning the Roman understanding; i.e. that it was acceptable to be the masculine (macho) participant in a same-sex encounter, but not acceptable to be the weak/receptive participant (who was "like a woman"). Few contemporary English translations acknowledge that the word for weak/effeminate is even in the Greek text. Indeed it is difficult to translate *malakoi* with a word or two without engaging in a cultural bashing of males who seem to some to be effeminate. The CEB seeks to include the understanding of "*malakoi and arsenokoitai*"

by using the phrase “both participants.” Meanwhile, this “both participants” understanding reflects Paul’s strong opposition to the Roman understanding and practices of homosexual relationships. (Note: *arsenkoitai* is a Greek compound word found only in the NT in early Greek writing. The second half of the word comes from the Greek *koite*, meaning to “go to bed” or “entertain in bed.” The first half of the word refers to *koite* with a male. The Latin/English word *coitus* is derived from the Greek *koite*, so the meaning of *arsenkoite* is rather explicit.)

Additional word on *arsenkoitai*/lie with men/homosexuals: Contemporary English translations have various ways of translating this word which is used in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. It is disappointing to note that the NRSV, which is usually quite accurate and sensitive to possible misinterpretations, translates *arsenkoitai* in both verses as “sodomites.” While “homosexual” and “sodomite” have often (and for many decades) been used interchangeably in English, an adequate understanding of Genesis 19 would show that the intentions of the men of Sodom are primarily about harm, degradation, humiliation and expulsion (if not murder) of the strangers. “Sodomite” (i.e. a resident of Sodom) is **not** a good equivalent for translating as “homosexual.”

1 Timothy 1:9-10

In 1 Timothy 1:9-10, the *arsenkoitai* are among the list of those unspiritual ones who need the law, but resist the law and engage in unholy behaviors. They are also apt to commit fratricide, matricide, common murder; and they include “kidnappers, liars, individuals who give false testimonies in court, and those who do anything else that is opposed to sound teaching.”

A Question for Pondering

Was Paul writing what he wrote about homosexual relationships out of his Jewish background as discussed earlier in this paper or was he critiquing the coercion (and violence) involved in “masculine” Roman men having their way with impunity with men and women of lesser status and having little or no capacity for refusing the sexual advances of the “masculine” man? Romans 1 may reflect the former and 1 Corinthians 6

may reflect the latter. Otherwise there is nothing in either Romans or Corinthians to help us decide. Perhaps Paul was addressing both. We can be sure that having sex with a temple prostitute (male or female) would have been totally unacceptable to Paul; it would constitute worshipping a false god as well as participating in an unfaithful act.

Paul's Agenda: Celibacy

Of course, Paul had another agenda. As expressed in 1 Corinthians 7, where Paul thinks it is best for Christians to be celibate in most cases, Paul was convinced that the second coming of Jesus and the culmination of the kingdom of God were quite imminent. Therefore he believed that anything that took focus away from being prepared to meet the Lord was rather unimportant — including the desires of the flesh. In truth Paul would have preferred that Christians not even think about sex, much less bother with engaging in any kind of sex at all.

Homosexuality as Choice and/or Consensual?

One thing that is clear is that all of the Biblical quotes seem to assume that sexual preference is a **choice** and that homosexual persons can (and should) change in their preferences. Clearly the church has to consider how to evaluate that assumption over against the overwhelming findings of current science — more on that later in the paper.

Another thing that is rather clear is that none of the comments above and none of the Biblical statements on homosexuality say anything about a cultural situation in which **same-sex partners are substantially equal and where their sexual behavior is mutually consensual.**

What Is the Sin in Homosexuality?

All of the above leads to a big question that is hardly ever mentioned, “**What is the sin** in homosexuality?” Consider the possibilities:

1. Is the **sin** of homosexuality the sin of having sex in a way that cannot produce offspring? If so, perhaps it would be a sin for heterosexual married couples to engage in sexual activity in circumstances (infertility or using contraception) in which a child cannot be conceived. Some Christians have that belief, but that would seem a strange belief for almost all members of the UMC.

2. Is the **sin** of homosexuality the domination, humiliation and actual harm inflicted when persons are coerced unwillingly into homosexual activities by a person with the power to command such? All Christians would agree that such coercion (and its results) would be sin; but **is it sin** when the sexual activity is **mutual** and **consensual**?
3. Is the **sin** of homosexuality the physical attraction that some men feel for men (or that some women feel for women) rather than feeling the attraction to persons of the other gender? A common modern expression is “We can’t control how we feel, but we are responsible for our actions.” If married heterosexuals sometimes feel attraction to persons of the other gender (not the marriage partner), but decide to refrain from acting on those feelings for the sake of the partnered relationship, they would be applauded for their faithfulness. So, where is the sin for partnered homosexuals who **behave** with similar restraint?
4. Is the sin of homosexuality the disobedience of the word of God in the six noted passages regarding homosexuality in the Bible? If the sole criterion is a literalist interpretation of the six passages with no consideration of context or concerns about the intentions of meaning of the ancient words and texts, then the answer is, “Yes, disobedience in the sin.” But Methodism has not embraced the literalist interpretations that have been promoted by our ultraconservative and fundamentalist brothers and sisters for the past century and a quarter. Since the time of the Wesleys, Methodism has embraced four standards for evaluating theology and Biblical interpretation; they are scripture, which is primary, tradition, reason and experience (a bit more about them follows in the next sections). Working together and informing each other, they guide us in making theological judgments and ethical decisions. In recent decades, taken together they have become known as the Quadrilateral. It may be that by using the Quadrilateral it can be determined that homosexuality may be faithful Christian practice in some situations.
5. Is the **sin** of homosexuality the desire of committed (and faithful) same sex couples to share in the activities of life and to share emotional intimacy with each other? If so, with whom is it acceptable for homosexual persons to share activities of life and emotional intimacy — or are they to live a life void of such companionship? There

are no easy answers, but the question, “What is the sin of homosexuality?” is worthy of exploration.

WWJD

Finally, there is the absence of any comment whatsoever about homosexuality in the words attributed to Jesus. It is interesting that most of the church has agreed in recent decades that the words attributed to Jesus in the gospels regarding remarriage after divorce need to be reinterpreted to allow for the grace and love that Jesus taught and exemplified to be applied to that painful dilemma. But many are insisting that teachings about homosexuality that are **not attributed to Jesus** must be taken literally with no reinterpretation.

For a few decades many Christians in the United States have been enthusiastic about asking, “What Would Jesus Do?” in any number situations involving ethical decision-making. However, those same WWJD Christians have been strangely silent about using the WWJD formula in the homosexual dilemma. How do we apply WWJD where Jesus is silent?

Perhaps we need to review Jesus’ love for and advocacy for any number of outcast and downcast sinners and to review Jesus’ criticism of the prevailing religious establishment of his own day and time regarding several issues. Perhaps we need to ask, “**What would Jesus do** about consensual relationships, including sexual activity, between two same-sex persons who are committed to God, committed to each other and committed to their relationship together?”

The UMC Quadrilateral

Perhaps we can employ the UMC Quadrilateral (**scripture, tradition, reason** and **experience**) to re-think homosexuality: All of the above is an effort to re-examine the Bible passages that speak directly to homosexuality. That effort acknowledges the acceptance of **scripture** (and faithful interpretation of scripture) as the **primary** source in utilizing the Quadrilateral. The other three components are **tradition, reason** and **experience**.

Tradition

Clearly the long **tradition** of the church, until recent decades, has reflected an almost universal bias against homosexuality and homosexual activity. We have to accept that that is a long tradition, as we consider whether to move in a new direction. Still, moving in a new direction can be done. The early church took new directions with parts of the old Holiness Code, as illustrated in the examples of Peter with Gentiles and Philip with the Ethiopian eunuch. And longstanding church tradition has, in recent decades and centuries, been re-examined and changed in regard to slavery, the role of women, “divorce and remarriage” and other issues, when life experiences, use of reason and fresh interpretations of scripture led the way.

Reason

What does **reason** tell us? **Reason** and science grew out of the fountainhead of the Age of Enlightenment which was beginning to emerge around the time of the Protestant Reformation (early 1500’s and following) and had a huge impact on thinking in the western world, especially from the mid-1600’s to the late 1700’s. The founding fathers/brothers of the United States were largely products of the Age of Enlightenment. And the Wesley brothers and other early Methodist leaders were informed by Enlightenment insights as well.

Despite the fact that it has been traditionally believed that homosexuality is a choice and that homosexual identity can be converted to heterosexual identity, the consensus of modern medicine/science/reason is that homosexual identity is somehow genetically “hard-wired” into the identity of some persons and that it cannot be changed, by any means currently known.

For decades the UMC *Book of Discipline* has included two statements which seem to many to be in contradiction to each other. Those statements are, “We affirm that all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God. All persons need the ministry of the Church in their struggles for human fulfillment...” (2012 Discipline, par. 161.F) **and** “The UMC does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching” (2012 Discipline, par. 162.F). Other paragraphs address the UMC’s present opposition to “practicing” homosexuals serving as UMC clergy and other rulings disallow UMC clergy from

officiating at homosexual marriages or congregations allowing such in UMC worship spaces.

Meanwhile, there have been unsuccessful attempts to modify one or both statements above at every General Conference for four decades. When the 2016 General Conference seemed unlikely to reach agreement on the issue, “An Offering of a Way Forward” was approved. It states that the Council of Bishops will appoint a commission to examine all statements in the *Book of Discipline* related to human sexuality. The commission is charged with making recommendations related to the changes in the *Book of Discipline*. Those changes would be considered by the 2020 General Conference; the option of having a special General Conference in 2018 or 2019 to consider those matters before 2020 is also available.

The 2016 session of the S.C. Annual Conference then voted to have “learning sessions” in each district regarding the scope of responsibility of the commission and the options that may come before the next General Conference. It is my hope that these district “learning sessions” will happen and that additional “learning sessions” will be scheduled in other settings.

One question that could be discussed in a “learning session” is, “**If** God has created homosexual persons as they are, sexual identity and desires included, and **if** the church is to treat them as persons of sacred worth, and **if** these persons seek to be faithful Christians, **then** what **behaviors** are considered to be **faithful to God** and what **behaviors** are considered **unfaithful to God**?”

Perhaps the “learning sessions” could discuss whether par. 162.F of the *Discipline* might be changed to read (at least in part), “The UMC does not condone the practices of sexual promiscuity, sexual coercion, sexual prostitution, predatory sexual behavior or sexual trafficking, and considers such practices incompatible with Christian teaching.” That might be a change the commission would do well to consider.

Experience

What might our experience contribute to the discussion? Many of us have family, friends and colleagues who are Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgendered (LGBT). Some of them are persons on whom we rely for medical, legal, financial or other forms of professional service. Many of them are quite dear to us. What does our **experience** with them contribute to the dialogue? I will venture to share some of my own observations.

- In my 44 years as a UMC pastor and hospital chaplain in SC, I have known many LGBT persons (most of them “L” or “G”), some as friends and some as persons for whom I have provided pastoral care and/or counseling. To the best of my knowledge, not one of them is a sexual predator or child abuser. I believe that some LGBT persons are predators and/or pedophiles, just as I believe that some heterosexuals are predators and/or pedophiles — sadly, I have known a few of those. I have known several LGBT persons (and several heterosexuals) who were sexually promiscuous; some (in both groups) have repented of that behavior and are now faithful to their partners, but others (in both groups) are still promiscuous.
- As I have listened to (sometimes in the context of counseling with) many LGBT persons, I have heard them ask questions for which I did not have answers:
 - If God made me like this, why do God’s people hate me for it?
 - Do people really think that I chose homosexuality? With the way our culture treats homosexual persons, I’d have to be crazy and/or masochistic to choose to be gay!
 - Why do they think I can just change? They don’t know the ways I have tried to change. And I have always failed. I believe I will always fail to change, because this is just the way I was created to be.
 - Why do people treat me like trash because of who I am? Don’t they know that their disdain discourages me from trying to be the best person I can be, even if I am gay?
- I have also listened, sometimes with horror, to some of the desperate and self-harming (and self-demeaning) things that some LGBT persons have done to themselves or gone through at the hands of others in order to try to change. Then it was my task to try to help them with their shame and grief that, even with all that trauma, they have failed to change.

Additional note from a personal experience: Almost 40 years ago I was in a one-to-one mentoring conference with a chaplain student, when he decided that it was time for him to “come out” and openly reveal his homosexuality — and to do so in that conference with me. I am grateful for his trust in me. And I am grateful for what he taught me about LGBT concerns in my following sessions with him. He had done many things to try change himself, including, in his college days, trying to make a bargain with

God about what he would do for God if God would change him into a heterosexual. His bravery and faith were such that, even when that failed to make him heterosexual, he still sought to be faithful to God by giving himself into a form of full time Christian ministry. As I sought to help him negotiate the complicated (and sometimes terrifying) issues of “coming out” to family, friends and colleagues, I watched and listened at close hand to his complicated struggles and excruciating pain. I became more sensitive to the burdens of LGBT persons, burdens that those of us who are heterosexual rarely have to bear.

My **experience**, noted above, teaches me that the UMC, at the level of the General Conference, will do well to re-think its stances and seek to define what **Christian faithfulness** might look like for LGBT persons. Clearly, some practices like coercion, promiscuity, predatory behavior and child abuse will be sin/wrong/unfaithful practice **for anyone**. But are there behaviors between consenting, committed homosexual partners that could be honored in the eyes of the church? Not only are LGBT persons “persons of sacred worth in need of the ministry of the church,” many of them are faithful Christian persons seeking to lead a life worthy of God’s love for them. I think that the church is in need of what those Christians have to offer.

BIBLICAL TEXTS REFERRING TO HOMOSEXUALITY (NRSV)

Genesis 19:1-11

1 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. ² 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." ³ 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. ⁴ 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; ⁵ 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." ⁶ Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, ⁷ and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. ⁸ 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." ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. ¹¹ 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.

Leviticus 18:17-23 (note: 18:22)

¹⁷ You shall not uncover the nakedness of a woman and her daughter, and you shall not take her son's daughter or her daughter's daughter to uncover her nakedness; they are your flesh; it is depravity. ¹⁸ And you shall not take a woman as a rival to her sister, uncovering her nakedness while her sister is still alive.

¹⁹ You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness. ²⁰ You shall not have sexual relations with your kinsman's wife, and defile yourself with her. ²¹ You shall not give any of your offspring to sacrifice them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord. ²² You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. ²³ You shall not have sexual relations with any animal and defile yourself with it, nor shall any woman give herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it: it is perversion.

Leviticus 20:8-21 (note: 20:13)

⁸ Keep my statutes, and observe them; I am the Lord; I sanctify you. ⁹ All who curse father or mother shall be put to death; having cursed father or mother, their blood is upon them.

¹⁰ If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death. ¹¹ The man who lies with his father's wife has uncovered his father's nakedness; both of them shall be put to death; their blood is upon them. ¹² If a man lies with his daughter-in-law, both of them shall be put to death; they have committed perversion, their blood is upon them. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ If a man takes a wife and her mother also, it is depravity; they shall be burned to death, both he and they, that there may be no depravity among you. ¹⁵ If a man has sexual relations with an animal, he shall be put to death; and you shall kill the animal. ¹⁶ If a woman approaches any animal and has sexual relations with it, you shall kill the woman and the animal; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them.

¹⁷ If a man takes his sister, a daughter of his father or a daughter of his mother, and sees her nakedness, and she sees his nakedness, it is a disgrace, and they shall be cut off in the sight of their people; he has uncovered his sister's nakedness, he shall be subject to punishment. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your mother's sister or of your father's sister, for that is to lay bare one's own flesh; they shall be subject to punishment. ²⁰ If a man lies with his uncle's wife, he has uncovered his uncle's nakedness; they shall be subject to punishment; they shall die childless. ²¹ If a man takes his brother's wife, it is impurity; he has uncovered his brother's nakedness; they shall be childless.

Romans 1:26-32

²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, ²⁷ 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.

²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. ²⁹ They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³² They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

⁹ Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, ¹⁰ thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

1 Timothy 1:9-11

⁹ 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, ¹⁰ fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching ¹¹ that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

BIBLICAL TEXTS REFERRING TO HOMOSEXUALITY (CEB)

Genesis 19:1-11

1 The two messengers entered Sodom in the evening. Lot, who was sitting at the gate of Sodom, saw them, got up to greet them, and bowed low. 2 He said, "Come to your servant's house, spend the night, and wash your feet. Then you can get up early and go on your way."

But they said, "No, we will spend the night in the town square." 3 He pleaded earnestly with them, so they went with him and entered his house. He made a big meal for them, even baking unleavened bread, and they ate.

4 Before they went to bed, the men of the city of Sodom—everyone from the youngest to the oldest—surrounded the house 5 and called to Lot, "Where are the men who arrived tonight? Bring them out to us so that we may have sex with them."

6 Lot went out toward the entrance, closed the door behind him, 7 and said, "My brothers, don't do such an evil thing. 8 I've got two daughters who are virgins. Let me bring them out to you, and you may do to them whatever you wish. But don't do anything to these men because they are now under the protection of my roof."

9 They said, "Get out of the way!" And they continued, "Does this immigrant want to judge us? Now we will hurt you more than we will hurt them." They pushed Lot back and came close to breaking down the door. 10 The men inside reached out and pulled Lot back into the house with them and slammed the door. 11 Then the messengers blinded the men near the entrance of the house, from the youngest to the oldest, so that they groped around trying to find the entrance.

Leviticus 18:17-23 (note: 18:22)

17 You must not have sexual contact with a woman and her daughter. You will not marry her son's daughter or her daughter's daughter, thereby uncovering her nakedness. They are her blood relatives; it is shameful. 18 You must not marry your wife's sister as a rival and have sexual contact with her while her sister is alive. 19 You must not approach a woman for sexual contact during her menstrual uncleanness. 20 You must not have sexual relations with the wife of your fellow Israelite, becoming unclean by it. 21 You must not give any of your children to offer them over to Molech so that you do not defile your God's name: I am the LORD. 22 You must not have sexual intercourse with a man as you would with a woman; it is a detestable practice. 23 You will not have sexual relations with any animal, becoming unclean by it. Nor will a woman present herself before an animal to mate with it; it is a perversion.

Leviticus 20:8-21 (note: 20:13)

8 You will keep my rules and do them; I am the LORD, who makes you holy. 9 If anyone curses their father or mother, they must be executed. They have cursed their own father and mother; that person's blood is on their own heads. 10 If a man commits adultery with a married woman, committing adultery with a neighbor's wife, both the adulterer and the adulteress must be executed. 11 If a man has sexual intercourse with his father's wife, he has uncovered his father's nakedness. Both of them must be executed; their blood is on their own heads. 12 If a man has sexual intercourse with his daughter-in-law, both of them must be executed. They have acted perversely; their blood is on their own heads. 13 If a man has sexual intercourse with a man as he would with a woman, the two of them have done something detestable. They must be executed; their blood is on their own heads. 14 If a man marries a woman and her mother as well, it is shameful. They will be burned with fire--the man and the two women--so that no such shameful thing will be found among you. 15 If a man has sexual relations with an animal, he must be executed and you must kill the animal. 16 If a woman approaches any kind of animal to mate with it, you must kill the woman and the animal. They must be executed; their blood is on their own heads. 17 If a man marries his sister--his father's daughter or his mother's daughter--and they have sexual contact with each other, it is a disgrace. They will be cut off in the sight of their people. Such a man has had sexual contact with his sister; he will be liable to punishment. 18 If a man sleeps with a woman during her menstrual period and has sexual contact with her, he has exposed the source of her blood flow and she has uncovered the same. Both of them will be cut off from their people. 19 You must not have sexual contact with your mother's sister or your father's sister, because that exposes your own close relative; both of you will be liable to punishment. 20 If a man has sexual intercourse with his aunt, he has uncovered his uncle's nakedness. The man and the aunt will be liable to punishment; they will die childless. 21 If a man marries his brother's wife, it is indecent. He has uncovered his brother's nakedness; the man and the woman will be childless.

Romans 1:26-32

26 That's why God abandoned them to degrading lust. Their females traded natural sexual relations for unnatural sexual relations. 27 Also, in the same way, the males traded natural sexual relations with females, and burned with lust for each other. Males performed shameful actions with males, and they were paid back with the penalty they deserved for their mistake in their own bodies. 28 Since they didn't think it was worthwhile to acknowledge God, God abandoned them to a defective mind to do inappropriate things. 29 So they were filled with all injustice, wicked behavior, greed, and evil behavior. They are full of jealousy, murder, fighting, deception, and malice. They are gossips, 30 they slander people, and they hate God. They are rude and proud, and they brag. They invent ways to be evil, and they are disobedient to their parents. 31 They are without understanding, disloyal, without affection, and without mercy. 32 Though they know God's decision that those who persist in such practices deserve death, they not only keep doing these things but also approve others who practice them.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

9 Don't you know that people who are unjust won't inherit God's kingdom? Don't be deceived. Those who are sexually immoral, those who worship false gods, adulterers, both participants in same-sex intercourse, 10 thieves, the greedy, drunks, abusive people, and swindlers won't inherit God's kingdom. 11 That is what some of you used to be! But you were washed clean, you were made holy to God, and you were made right with God in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

1 Timothy 1:9-10

9 We understand this: the Law isn't established for a righteous person but for people who live without laws and without obeying any authority. They are the ungodly and the sinners. 10 They are people who are not spiritual, and nothing is sacred to them. They kill their fathers and mothers, and murder others. They are people who are sexually unfaithful, and people who have intercourse with the same sex. They are kidnappers, liars, individuals who give false testimonies in court, and those who do anything else that is opposed to sound teaching.