

# Dealing with Controversy in the United Methodist Church

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### Part 1

There is much in the media these days about how we should deal with volatile issues currently under discussion in our culture. How do we best deal with ISIS? What should we do about the minimum wage? What is the proper balance between security and freedom in these days of terrorism? How shall we deal with an emerging awareness of the complexities of human sexuality?

Most of the discussions I have seen or read quickly deteriorate into unkind accusations and harsh judgments. (And many of those involved are followers of Christ.) I believe this rhetoric leaves much to be desired in terms of Christian conversation or dialogue. Surely we can do better.

I would like to offer you an alternative to attacks and derisive language when discussing controversial issues, especially with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Those of us in the Boston Avenue Church family should strive to maintain high Christian standards of behavior when dealing with others who have differing opinions or divergent views. Often these issues become quickly charged with emotion, which leads us down the wrong path.

In our own United Methodist tradition, we have great resources to help us. The 2016 Book of Discipline (BOD) of the United Methodist Church, which serves as the guide for our life together, gives a framework from which we develop theology and perspective on a variety of issues.

Sometimes called the “Wesleyan quadrilateral,” the four parts of this framework are scripture, tradition, experience and reason. “Wesley believed the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed in reason.” (BOD, p. 82)

As United Methodists, we first look to scripture to see what has been revealed that might help us in dealing with whatever issue we want to discuss or explore. Then we examine what our church tradition says on the issue and how that has developed or evolved over time.

We also want to reflect on our own experience with the issue, and even more, to reflect on any guidance we have discerned from the Holy Spirit. Finally, we are encouraged to think deeply as we sift and organize all we have learned to see if we can make sense of it in our Christian living.

These four are the sources most important as we discuss theological views and our beliefs and practice in a United Methodist Church.

Our 2012 Book of Discipline stated, “We acknowledge that, because [we are] a living body of believers, gathered together by God from many diverse segments of the human community, unanimity of belief, opinion, practice has never been characteristic of the Church from the beginning to this day. From its earliest time, as evidenced in the letters of Paul, the witness of the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and other New Testament texts, diversity of understanding and controversy with regard to many matters has been the reality. Therefore, whenever significant differences of opinion among faithful Christians occur, some of which continue to divide the church deeply today, neither surprise nor dismay should be allowed to separate the members of the Body from one another...” (p. 159)

Since we are not the first Christians to disagree on a topic, our BOD had suggested a way for us to relate in the midst of differences. As a starting place, I suggest we examine a topic Bishop Hayes has asked us to discuss more openly, that of human sexuality.

“We commit ourselves to stand united in declaring our faith that God’s grace is available to all; nothing can separate us from the love of God. In that confidence, we pledge to continue to be in respectful dialogue with those with whom we disagree, to explore the sources of our differences, to honor the sacred worth of all persons, and to tell the truth about our divisions as we continue to seek the mind of Christ and to do the will of God in all things.” (BOD, p. 105)

In a curious turn of events, the above two paragraphs were omitted from our 2016 BOD. Yet, I ask that we use this kind of commitment to guide our discussions. As we do so, we will do well as a family of faith in dealing with controversial issues. Practicing this biblical teaching of growing and working together as followers of Christ is a way for each of us to grow in discipleship.

Let me close with John Wesley’s pithy but relevant question: Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike?”

His answer is: “Without all doubt, we may.” (p. 706, *The Essential Works of John Wesley*, edited by Alice Russie)

## Part 2

In part one of this series, I invited us into a deeper reflection on our Christian behavior when we encounter places where we disagree on issues within the body of Christ, particularly within a United Methodist congregation. I reminded us that we are not the first to live in a time where diversity and differences threaten to divide the body of Christ or stifle the love in which we are to hold each other.

I drew upon the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, which guides United Methodists in our theology and discerning God's will. That invites us to use the sources of our faith, starting with *scripture*, moving on to *tradition*, *experience* and *reason*. I concluded with John Wesley's question, "Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike?"

His answer is, "Without all doubt, we may." (p. 706, *The Essential Works of John Wesley*)

As we use human sexuality as a case study for dealing with controversy, we are aware of the complexities of human sexuality, specifically those around the issues of different expressions of our sexuality. Before we wade into those choppy waters of disagreement, let us start by thinking about the central themes of scripture, as Wesley has commended to us and modeled for us.

Where do you start in your faith and theology? I find love of God and love of neighbor to be the over-arching theme of the Bible. Together, they are known as The Great Commandment. They are central to the teachings of Jesus.

We do well to remember that the word "love" here is translated from the Greek word, "agape," which means to will the good or do the good for the other. Jesus continually extended the agape love of God to those "others," those marginalized in his society.

In regard to the complexities of human sexuality in our day, consider the fact that Jesus never mentions homosexuality, yet some move it to the center of their thinking about faith these days. If Jesus did not consider this to be a primary issue, on what basis do we move it to the center in our faith life today? Yet in some United Methodist circles, this discussion stirs so much emotion that it consumes much time and energy, as if it were central to Christian faith.

Even if one thinks that this is more central, when considering faith and life, and a stronger basis for judgment than the love commandment, it is important to think about how Jesus applied judgment in his day. He typically reserved harsh judgment for the religious leaders of his day. We read story after story where Jesus included those that the religious leaders were busy excluding. The stance and approach Jesus takes causes me to be very cautious in judging others in a negative and exclusionary manner.

I think the cautious way is a way of Christian humility. That fits well into the “prayerful, studied dialogue” called for in our *United Methodist Book of Discipline*: “We affirm our unity in Jesus Christ while acknowledging differences in applying our faith in different cultural contexts as we live out the gospel. We stand united in declaring our faith that God’s grace is available to all, that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.” (BOD, page 106, Preamble)

I will conclude this second part in the series with this question: What is the role of scripture, and specifically the teachings of Jesus, in your consideration of these issues around human sexuality? Next week, in part three, I will examine the scripture texts most commonly used in discussions around homosexuality.

### Part 3

Next, we will investigate the passages in the Bible that specifically mention same gender sexual acts. There are six that are primarily quoted in the current debate about the Bible and homosexuality - two in *Leviticus*, chapters 18 and 20; one in *Genesis*, chapter 19; one in *Romans* 1; one in *1st Corinthians* and one in *1st Timothy*.

Before we look at each one in context let me remind you, particularly as people who follow Christ, that Jesus never addresses the topic. Further, the fact that there are so few references to this, out of all the thousands of passages in the Bible, causes me to pause and consider why this issue has become so central and volatile.

Maybe there is a basis beyond the Bible that fuels such interest. What do you think?

Consider your own experience of understanding your sexuality as we review these biblical passages. Here is the question: Do humans choose their sexual orientation or discover it? Most people become aware of their sexual interests during puberty. When certain hormone levels rise, they change our interests. I can tell you my experience. I did not choose one day to begin liking girls and wanting to be around them. I just experienced my body and mind changing and my interests (and my sexual orientation, if you will) began to emerge. I didn’t choose it or have to think about it. My experience is that it simply came upon me.

If mine is a normative case, that suggests that this is not a moral choice as much as it is a personal discovery. How does your experience inform your thinking about human sexuality?

Another important thing to consider as we study these scriptures is that during biblical times there was no sense of sexual orientation as varied. None of the texts actually uses the word “homosexuality.” The only concept was heterosexuality, so all of the references we will examine assume that everyone is heterosexual by birth. Operating

from that assumption means that none of these passages address someone who was born with a different sexual orientation.

See if you think any of these passages address what we see today as two consenting adults loving each other and therefore committing to a same gender partnership.

In *Leviticus* we have what are called the “Holiness Codes.” They are filled with very specific prescriptions about behavior that are designed to mark the Jews as a “holy,” or set apart people. In *Leviticus 18:22* and *20:13* you will find a command against males lying with other males.

You also find commands against cutting one’s hair, wearing clothing made of mixed fabrics, cross breeding animals and sowing different grains in the same field. None of these get any attention. Why is that?

Does anyone advocate that we view all those as binding today? If so, does that mean we should put to death all men who have ever experienced a sexual act with another male? (Note there is no mention of female sexual relations here.)

In chapter 20, *Leviticus* also calls for any who have committed adultery to be put to death. It forbids God’s people to eat pork or even touch the carcass of an unclean animal (think pigskin, i.e., a football). Are we ready to use those as central directives for our faith today?

In *Genesis 19* there is a very long story that includes the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. This story includes a number of strange incidents - a mob of men wanting to engage in homosexual acts with visitors in their town, an offer by Lot give them his two daughters instead, and a double dose of incest is described. It all seems barbaric and bizarre to me.

It is hard to see how this story relates to our current discussions, if we are thinking about two consenting adults being involved in a loving, committed relationship. The main theme in this story has more to do with hospitality to strangers than actual sexual acts. I think we would agree that all of these acts were abusive, yet none of the named characters are explicitly condemned or punished in the story. That seems to be in conflict with the Levitical codes. Is there disagreement among these texts?

In the Christian scriptures, we have only writings from Pauline sources that possibly relate to this discussion. Paul mentions “male prostitutes” and “sodomites” in *1st Corinthians 6*. In *1st Timothy*, “sodomites” are mentioned again in a list of sinful behaviors.

The commentators I have read suggest that this is a reference to prostitutes and the men who consort with them. I do not think prostitution is a healthy practice, or what God

intends for us. It also does not pertain to what we are discussing in the present, as I read it.

In *Romans 1*, Paul speaks of “unnatural” relations, reminding us that Paul assumes all people are created to experience heterosexual behavior as “natural.” That does not seem to be the case. (Decades of research has found that people identify across a broad spectrum, from heterosexual to bisexual to homosexual.) Additionally, Paul lists those who covet, hate, envy, argue, deceive, gossip, slander, boast, etc., as being in the same situation because they have worshipped improperly and that is why some commit one or more of these “unnatural” acts.

Paul is engaged in a larger discussion about proper worship of God and recognition of God’s grace. He adds that none of us should judge another lest in “passing judgment on another you condemn yourself.” (2:1) That insight seems more important and worthy of consideration than other ideas mentioned here as we endeavor to live as deeply devoted disciples of Christ.

Some argue that this is an issue of biblical authority. They would suggest if we view these passages as less than strict laws used for condemnation, we will lose the basis of our faith.

I disagree. I think it is a case of biblical interpretation and how we approach the Bible. Exploring context, culture and linguistic usage can lead us to a clearer understanding and a stronger, more loving and Christ-centered faith. Has that been your experience?

In part four, we will explore what we have said as United Methodists about family, marriage and sexuality.

## **Part 4**

In previous installments I invited us into a deeper reflection on our Christian behavior when we encounter those times when we disagree on any number of issues within the body of Christ, and particularly within a United Methodist congregation. I reminded us that we are not the first to live in a time when diversity and differences threaten to divide the body of Christ or stifle the love with which we are to hold one another.

We do well to draw upon the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, which guides United Methodists in doing theology and discerning God’s will. As you may recall, that invites us to use our faith, starting with scripture, then moving on to tradition, experience and reason.

In the last two installments we explored the use of scripture in considering how we might deal with the complexities of human sexuality.

We often ask, "What makes someone homosexual? I find it more helpful to ask, "What causes anyone to be a sexual being?" We find help in considering this as we move to our tradition. What our tradition tells us can be an additional resource as we contemplate how we deal with this issue - specifically as United Methodist.

Our organizational structure calls for a "General Conference" to convene every four years to be the only official voice of the United Methodist Church. General Conference brings nearly 1,000 elected representatives together from around the world for worship, fellowship and decision making. Changes to *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (which documents our tradition) can only be made at General Conference.

The most recent edition of *The Book of Discipline* (2016) includes statements in Part V, entitled "Social Principles," which covers a very wide array of topics. I will direct us to statements specifically about family, marriage and human sexuality that can help us think deeply about our perspective on these topics as followers of Christ.

*"The Social Principles, while not to be considered church law, are a prayerful and thoughtful effort on the part of the General Conference to speak to human issues in the contemporary world from a sound biblical and theological foundation, as historically demonstrated in United Methodist traditions. They are a call to faithfulness and are intended to be instructive and persuasive in the best of the prophetic spirit. The Social Principles are a call to all members of The United Methodist Church to a prayerful, studied dialogue of faith and practice."* (p. 105)

Our current discussion falls right into line with this practice of United Methodists. In Section II, entitled "The Nurturing Community," we read: *"We believe the family to be the basic human community through which persons are nurtured and sustained in mutual love, responsibility, respect, and fidelity. We affirm the importance of loving parents for all children. We also understand the family as encompassing a wider range of options than that of the two-generational unit of parents and children (the nuclear family)." (p. 111)*

*"We affirm the sanctity of the marriage covenant expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity between a man and a woman."* (p. 111)

*"We affirm that sexuality is God's good gift to all persons. We call everyone to responsible stewardship of this sacred gift...All persons, regardless of age, gender, marital status, or sexual orientation, are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured and to be protected against violence...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, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling*

*relationships with God, with others, and with self. The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. We affirm that God's grace is available to all. We will seek to live together in Christian community, welcoming, forgiving, and loving one another, as Christ has loved and accepted us. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.” (p. 113)*

*“Violent, disrespectful, or abusive sexual expressions do not confirm sexuality as God's good gift. We reject all sexual expressions that damage the humanity God has given us as birthright, and we affirm only that sexual expression that enhances that same humanity. We believe that sexual relations where one or both partners are exploitive, abusive, or promiscuous are beyond the parameters of acceptable Christian behavior and are ultimately destructive to individuals, families, and the social order.” (p. 113)*

And then these words make an apt conclusion to this reflection: *“We believe we have a responsibility to innovate, sponsor, and evaluate new forms of community that will encourage development of the fullest potential in individuals. Primary for us is the gospel understanding that all persons are important because they are human beings created by God and loved through and by Jesus Christ and not because they have merited significance.” (p. 110)*

That gives us all something to think about. I assume all of us find parts of the above that we agree with and parts we disagree with as we reflect on our own views. My hope for all of us in the Boston Avenue Church family is that we will continue to engage in our deliberations in a “prayerful and thoughtful” manner (as proposed above) as we dialogue about how we best proceed to practice our Christian faith with God's love at the center.

## **Part 5**

In part four of this series I offered a glimpse into the resources of our United Methodist tradition by sharing a variety of statements that are contained in *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (2016). They covered a variety of topics including “family,” “marriage” and “human sexuality.”

Now, I want to offer you a few more ideas from that same Part V, entitled “The Social Principles.” I have been reading these statements since my teen years and they truly have played a role in shaping me as a person, a Christian and a United Methodist. I believe they can be helpful to anyone who will take time to think about them prayerfully.

Often, in discussions around human sexuality, I hear people make broad statements that ignore the intricacies, complexities and possible ramifications of the issues under



consideration. I find our United Methodist statements contained in *The Social Principles* make a great effort to delineate more specifically some of these finer points.

For example, last week I quoted: “All persons, regardless of age, gender, marital status, or sexual orientation, are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured and to be protected against violence.” Too often we miss the connection between rhetoric about religious or political views and the consequences of those views.

In the context of this series, as you think about your particular views about homosexuality, I ask, “Do you believe the basic civil rights for all people should be protected in our country?”

Our *Book of Discipline* says: “*The rights and privileges a society bestows upon or withholds from those who comprise it indicate the relative esteem in which that society holds particular persons and groups of persons. We affirm all persons as equally valuable in the sight of God. We therefore work toward societies in which each person’s value is recognized, maintained, and strengthened. We support the basic rights of all persons to equal access to housing, education, communication, employment, medical care, legal redress for grievances, and physical protection. We deplore acts of hate or violence against groups or persons based on race, color, national origin, ethnicity, age, gender, disability, status, economic condition, sexual orientation, gender identity, or religious affiliation.*” (p. 119)

That kind of statement helps me think about social issues in a theological manner, and it gives me a broader context for contemplation of the related issues.

Or this: “*Certain basic human rights and civil liberties are due all persons. We are committed to supporting those rights and liberties for all persons, regardless of sexual orientation. We see a clear issue of simple justice in protecting the rightful claims where people have shared material resources, pensions, guardian relationships, mutual powers of attorney, and other such lawful claims typically attendant to contractual relationships that involve shared contributions, responsibilities, and liabilities, and equal protection before the law. Moreover, we support efforts to stop violence and other forms of coercion against all persons, regardless of sexual orientation.* (p. 123)

Those statements broaden my reflection on areas in which I am not an expert. They allow me to see some of the connections between my theological views and these issues. Further, they inform me as I consider how we may best proceed when dealing with emerging realities around human sexual expression. I find that these statements, out of our tradition, deepen my thinking about different perspectives and make me aware of realities that I have never thought of or experienced.

I am grateful for such a thoughtful presentation from our United Methodist Church, whether I agree or disagree with any specific statements. Our theological and faith heritage is one that has encouraged us from the beginning to stay in relationship with each other as Christians, even when tension arises around certain issues.

John Wesley saw clearly that it is impossible for all people to think alike. He wrote, "Every wise man, therefore, will allow others the same liberty of thinking that he desires they should allow him; and will no more insist on their embracing his opinions than he would have them to insist on his embracing theirs. He bears with those who differ from him and only asks the one with whom he desires to unite in love that single question, "Is your heart right, as my heart is toward your heart?" (p. 706ff in *The Essential Works of John Wesley*, edited by Russie)

In the same sermon Wesley suggests, "These remaining as they are [those with differing opinions], they may assist one another forward in love and good works."

May it be so for our Boston Avenue Church family.

## **Part 6**

I began this series before the U. S. Supreme Court ruled on marriage equality. Now that they have ruled that same gender unions are to be considered marriages with all the legal status and rights that includes, it changes the arena in which we navigate as we contemplate these topics and our response to them. Once again, there are many strident voices speaking from various perspectives available for our consideration.

It will be interesting to see how this works itself out in our country over time. I am reminded of the major debate in our country over slavery years ago, leading up to the Civil War. In fact, the Methodist Episcopal Church (our predecessor denomination) split over this very issue in 1844. The Methodist Episcopal Church, North, and The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, resulted from that split. Boston Avenue was started by a missionary pastor of the South branch. The two reunited in 1939, nearly 100 years after the split.

In the history of that debate, you can find people quoting the Bible on both sides. However, once the country moved past slavery's being legal, those arguments using the Bible to support slavery all but disappeared.

Today, Bible passages have not changed, yet they are utilized in a different manner, which raises this question: "Does the Bible interpretation drive the discussion or does the current social issue drive our biblical interpretation?"

We can think of other issues, in addition to slavery, such as the role of women in the church or workplace, interfaith or interracial marriage, and divorce in the church or among the clergy. In the early church, there was heated debate about whether chastity was superior to marriage. All of these have stirred controversy and fueled emotional debates.

As each of these issues evolved, it was not the end of the country or of the church, though the changes seemed so cataclysmic to some at the time that they predicted this would be the case.

I have suggested we use these current deliberations around human sexuality as our case study to consider how to best deal with controversial issues as United Methodists. I wonder how we will use scripture going forward, since the legal decision has been made.

In our use of the Wesleyan quadrilateral (scripture, tradition, experience and reason) we are now to the point of employing reason to try and put all of this into perspective.

It puts United Methodist churches and pastors in a curious position. All of our church law (from the *Book of Discipline*) prohibits clergy from doing same-gender unions or marriages and prohibits United Methodist congregations from hosting such a ceremony.

Related to this is the fact that pastors and churches also have the right to refuse to host a wedding or perform a wedding ceremony. That has always been the case in my time as a pastor. We are not compelled by the state, or anyone else, to officiate at a wedding ceremony if we have serious reservations about the health or veracity of the relationship.

In *If The Church Were Christian, Rediscovering The Values of Jesus*, author Philip Gulley wondered, in focusing on being a disciple of Jesus and on his commands to love one another, if we might ask the following questions: "What are the characteristics of gracious, mutual love?" "Are these qualities confined to marriages?" "Are these qualities limited to heterosexual relationships?" "Does a blessing by the church make a difference in the quality of the marriage?" "Does God only bless Christian marriage?"

I believe that discussing any and all of these questions is a healthy exercise and practice for us as individual Christians and as a family of faith. I look forward to further dialogue with you.

Remember the challenge I offered in part one of this series, which came from our 2012 *United Methodist Book of Discipline*: "*We commit ourselves to stand united in declaring our faith that God's grace is available to all, that nothing can separate us from the love of God. In that confidence, we pledge to continue to be in respectful dialogue with those with whom we disagree, to explore the sources of our differences, to honor the sacred*

*worth of all persons, and to tell the truth about our divisions as we continue to seek the mind of Christ and to do the will of God in all things.*" (p. 105) I hope we will continue to embrace that commitment as members of the body of Christ together.

As I close this series, let me remind you of this saying often attributed to our founder, John Wesley: "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity." This wisdom is a good watch word for us as we continue to "think deeply, grow spiritually and love generously" as a Boston Avenue family.

Much of Wesley's ministry was spent helping people "watch over one another in love." If we can adopt that core theological strategy in our life together, we will do well.