

Fashioned in Love: Biblical and Theological Foundations for Inclusion*

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At the request of the Central District Conference Ministerial Committee, I set out to write my biblical and theological foundations for the full inclusion of LGBTQ persons in the life of the church.

By “full inclusion” I mean welcomed to participate fully: free to become members, to occupy leadership positions, to receive baptism, to marry, to have children dedicated, to contribute potluck dishes, etc. By “LGBTQ” I mean persons who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer, or those who are questioning their sexual and/or gender identity. I will occasionally use the broad term “queer,” intending to encompass all people who claim a minority sexual orientation. By “church” I most specifically mean Chicago Community Mennonite Church, since that is the local congregational setting in which I minister and serve and seek to follow Christ’s way. However, I also mean Mennonite Church USA by extension, given that I do not understand our practice of inclusion to be at odds with our shared denominational core convictions. And I suppose if I’m honest, I also mean the big “C” Church Universal, given that I understand our local practice of inclusion to be in harmony with the gospel of Jesus the Christ.

I recently heard a contemporary Mennonite theologian remark that we are all “walking bundles of debts.” This is indeed true for me. I write in the first person singular for the sake of ease and clarity, but each “I” could just as easily read “we,” and each “we” is so packed full of layers and communities and persons and texts from along my life’s journey that to sort it all out—giving credit where credit is due—is an impossible task. In other words, I claim these biblical and theological foundations as my own, and yet none of them is truly my own, but the product of community discernment. In this way, these foundations are most Anabaptist, having been discerned with the inspiration of God’s Spirit within the context of communities gathered in college dorm rooms and congregational Sunday School classrooms and seminary chapels and city street corners. With no further ado...

I am compelled to first acknowledge the seven biblical passages that are often cited in discussions of “homosexuality” within the church. Seven passages from the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures explicitly name and address something related to same-sex sexual relationships (Genesis 19:1-11, Judges 19:22-30, Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13, Romans 1:24-27, I Corinthians 6:9-11, I Timothy 1:9-10). Simply stated, I do not believe any of these seven passages address loving, mutual and covenanted same-sex relationships as we have come to know them in contemporary church and society. I am happy to provide exegetical resources (of which there are an abundance!) for these few passages if that would be helpful to any on the committee, but I won’t spend any more time addressing them here.

Similar to issues like “women in ministry” and “slavery” and “divorce and remarriage,” it is imperative for the church in addressing “homosexuality” to explore broader biblical themes, to look beyond the oft-cited prooftexted passages, and to return to Jesus as the person and lens through which we read the whole of the Bible, and through whom we most fully see the nature and heart of God revealed. When I do these things, this is what I find...

* While I have chosen to keep my original text, I lament my use of “inclusion” in this subtitle and throughout the paper. “Inclusion” implies an arrogant power imbalance: that one group, to which I belong, has the power and privilege to *include* or *exclude* deviant “others” at our whim. I no longer talk about the “inclusion” of LGBTQ folks in our churches, but the joyous affirmation that all are invited to full participation in the life and ministry of our congregation. If I were to re-write the subtitle, it might read something like: **“Biblical and Theological Foundations for the Joyous and Full and Unapologetic Affirmation of ALL (even, most remarkably, white straight cis men!)”** or something wordy and cheeky like that. Because it prophetically implies the critical question we don’t often think to ask: Who precisely has the power to include whom? And on what basis?

Hospitality: The hospitality preached and practiced by Jesus emerges from a long tradition of hospitality he inherited from his Hebrew forebears. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, God calls on the Hebrew people to take special care of the widow and orphan, to show hospitality to the foreigners in their midst, to reach out to the strangers at the fringe. For a desert people, extending hospitality (or failing to) was often a matter of life and death, and so God's imperative that the Hebrew people be a people of hospitality was nonnegotiable. Jesus took this core religious and biblical value and throughout his life preached and practiced a radical form of it, transgressing social boundaries left and right. He extended hospitality to the most despised and disempowered outsiders of his day: tax collectors like Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), people outside the Jewish faith like the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21-28), those deemed "unclean" by religious law like the hemorrhaging woman who reached out to touch his cloak (Mark 5:25-34), and so many others. Jesus taught that the law could be summed up in a greatest commandment and a second like it, which together described three loves: love of God, neighbor and self. Then, in answer to a follow-up question, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus elaborates "neighbor" as the suspect and dubious "other" in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Jesus taught his disciples to invite outcasts when throwing a banquet, and in the follow up parable of the great dinner said, "go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled" (Luke 14:12-24). In one of his last teachings, Jesus instructed his disciples that we would be judged by how we treat the least of these, the outcasts, the hungry, thirsty, naked, imprisoned and rejected "others" of our day (Matthew 25:31-45). On the night before he was arrested, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, instructing them (and us, by extension) to do likewise, to be servants to one another, to love one another and to be known as his disciples by that love, to show hospitality to all, even as Jesus showed this grace to the ones who would betray and deny him (John 13). The writer of Hebrews picks up on this core theme taught and lived by Jesus, "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured" (Hebrews 13:1-3).

Fruits of the Spirit: When asked by John the Baptist's disciples whether he is the Messiah or whether they are to wait for another, Jesus responds by inviting them to report on the fruits of his ministry: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard; the blind receive their sight...the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me" (Luke 7: 22-23). When would-be disciples wanted to ask Jesus questions about his ministry, he replies with an invitational, "Come and see" (John 1:39). In his Sermon on the Mount warning against false prophets, Jesus elaborates that good trees bear good fruits, and that "You will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:15-20). Repeatedly, Jesus invites the skeptical to come and to see and to make judgments based on the fruits born of an individual, a ministry, a community. So, while Peter is shocked when the Spirit falls on the Gentiles in the most fascinating saga of Acts 10-15, he has Jesus as a precedent and cornerstone for recognizing God's presence and blessing by the fruits born of unlikely others: "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (Acts 10:47). This testimony lays the foundation for the eventual decision of the Jerusalem Council to welcome Gentiles into the fold without requiring of them circumcision.

Relationship: In the first account of creation, God declares everything "good," including humans (Genesis 1). The first "not good" thing in creation that we encounter is in the second account of creation (Genesis 2), and that "not good" thing is for a human to be alone. Humans were created *by* God to be in relationship, and humans were created *in the image of* God who, from the very beginning, is plural. Jesus turned the concept of family and intimate relationship on its head, while continuing to lift up the primacy of relationships in a life of faith. He described the formation of chosen kinship groups as at least, if not more, important than biological kinship groups (Matthew 12:46-50; Mark 10:28-30). These teachings of Jesus have left us with some puzzling and even troubling words with which to wrestle in regards to biological family (Matthew 10), and yet it is clear that Jesus holds dear the formation of community and mutual dependence on others. Jesus' teaching and practice of

chosen kinship paved the way for Paul to claim “adoption” as a key theological metaphor for illuminating the church as God’s family (Romans 8:15,23; 9:4; Galatians 4:5; Ephesians 1:5).

Covenant: If anything surpasses “hospitality” as a central theme of the Hebrew Scriptures, it is “covenant.” The Hebrew people are a people of the covenant, and the First Testament documents the story of a people seeking to live out a covenant made and then broken and then re-established and then broken and broken again with their God. Because of its centrality to their religious identity and understandings, it is unsurprising that Jesus, too, uses covenantal language in his own ministry, specifically in the Last Supper with his disciples, establishing his very life and death as the new covenant, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). We are called into covenant with God, and with one another, and we are called to faithfulness in the covenants we make.

Having reflected on these four foundational biblical themes I find most helpful in discerning the place of sexuality minorities in the church, and before I more explicitly apply them to a case for queer inclusion in the church, I turn to one additional point for consideration.

The role of sexual minorities within the community of faith: In reading the biblical narrative, I am struck again and again at the key role played by sexual minorities along the way.

More well known: all four women in Jesus’ genealogy recorded by Matthew deviate from the sexual norm. Tamar cleverly cons her father-in-law Judah into sleeping with her, impregnating her, and giving her a child who vaults her into the family line of Jesus. Rahab, a prostitute, who helps to spare the life of Israelite spies, lands in the lineage of Jesus. Ruth boldly initiates a sexual encounter with a drunk and sleepy Boaz on the threshing room floor, catapulting her into the family of Jesus. Bathsheba, a married woman seduced (raped?) by King David, who, after her husband is sent to his death by King David, conceives with King David a child who paves her way into the ancestry of Jesus. Strange that Matthew would record *any* women in a patrilineal genealogical record; fascinating beyond measure that each would in some way represent what would have been labeled a deviant sexuality.

Less well known: Eunuchs are given a preferential place in God’s beloved community. According to Torah, eunuchs were to be excluded completely from worship and family life (Deuteronomy 23:1). And yet, according to the opening verses of Third Isaiah, not only is there a place for this most excluded class of sexual deviants in God’s Reign, there is a place most highly regarded, set above those known as God’s children.

“Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, ‘The Lord will surely separate me from his people’; and do not let the eunuch say, ‘I am just a dry tree.’ *For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.* And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; *for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.* (Isaiah 56:3-8, emphasis mine)

Strange that eunuchs would be mentioned at all; fascinating beyond measure that God would reserve a place of greatest honor for these sexual minorities.

And finally, flying completely beneath our radar: When Jesus sends the disciples into Jerusalem to prepare the Passover feast, which will be their last supper together, he instructs them to look for a man carrying a jar of

water (Mark 14:13 and Luke 22:10, Matthew omits this detail). Because of the cultural gap that exists between the text and us, we miss what ancient readers would never miss: carrying water in jars was strictly women's work. It would have been socially improper for a man to do so. Some commentators have said this is the equivalent in our times of Jesus instructing the disciples to look for the man wearing lipstick and a skirt. While it would be anachronistic to suggest this man may have been queer-identified, he was certainly transgressing a strict gendered boundary in his behavior. Some have posited that, indeed, the ancient version of queer space in ancient Jerusalem would have provided the safest space for Jesus and his band of trouble-making radicals, since boundary-transgressors would be well practiced in evading the attention of religious and political authorities.

Application: Applying these foundational biblical themes to the question of queer inclusion in the church, I make these biblical and theological claims. I believe that we have been created wholly spiritual and sexual beings, with differing sexual identities. And I believe that God has called that act of creation, with its diversity of sexualities, "good." I believe that God desires for us relationship, community and intimacy. While some may be called to lives of celibacy, I do not believe there is any ground—biblical, theological, or otherwise—for conflating a minority sexual identity with a call to celibacy. Covenanting our lives to one another is a virtuous way to be, and so it is with straight and queer alike. I believe the onus is on those with restrictive view of marriage to make case *against* biblical imperatives applied broadly to all. In other words, I believe that biblical teachings related to marriage and intimacy apply to any who wish to make lifelong covenant with a partner, regardless of their gender. For example: "Let marriage be held in honor by all" (Hebrews 13:4) applies to *all* couples. I believe that God delights when any two people willingly and mutually make public vows and enter into lifelong covenant with one another.

I believe that the Bible reveals a God who has always especially loved those at the margins, and that Jesus embodied that divine favor in his life and ministry. It is instructive that Jesus persistently speaks and lives a bias *for* the outcast and *against* authority that is obsessed with maintaining purity codes and perpetuating oppression. It is instructive that Jesus actually *lives* at the margins, occasionally reaching out to those in the mainstream, or those in positions of authority. Repeatedly, humans attempt to restrict, to exclude, to limit who's in and who's out. Repeatedly, God calls people away from their exclusionary impulses to recognize the width and breadth of God's welcome.

Like the astonished Peter confronted with the impossible—Gentiles filled with the Holy Spirit—when our congregation began a practice of welcoming sexual minorities many years ago, despite differing opinions on whether or not "homosexuality" was "sinful," we came face to face with growing evidence of another "impossibility"—GLBTQ folks filled with the Holy Spirit. Indeed, we have witnessed that God's Spirit falls on gay and straight, single and partnered alike. And so we are no longer astounded by this fact; we have come to expect it. "What God has made clean, you must not call profane" (Acts 11:9). We are richly blessed by the gifts of all, and would be spiritually poorer without the gifts of our queer members. The Spirit has made the way clear to us by the good fruits that we together bear (Matthew 7). I believe that Jesus did away with bounded-set conceptions of community (questions of who is in and who is out), and instated a centered-set model in which we are gathered around him and all are welcome, invited further in, to encounter Christ who is at the center of who we are and all we do. We are one in Christ. There is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, straight nor gay.

As a minister ordained by God and the church, I have a pastoral responsibility to all in my congregation. In our congregation, we have long welcomed queer sisters and brothers[†] among us. I may not discriminate in ministering to each one whom God has sent to our community. When I witness love and commitment in a couple, I will do all in my power to support, encourage and bless that love and commitment.

And finally a word related to justice, another great biblical theme, and a call to repentance for the church's culpability in a tragic system of injustice.

Sin of homophobia: We need to repent of the sin of homophobia. As members of Christ's church, we are culpable in every case when a queer person walks away from Christ and the church—we have been a stumbling block for the faith of many. We are also culpable, even more brutally, in every case when a queer person commits suicide, because the church has judged queer people harshly, because the church has remained silent in the face of homophobia, because the church has been shy or ambivalent about proclaiming and extending God's wide embrace. We have contributed to the homophobic culture which is death-dealing to many queer people, conforming ourselves to this world's sinfulness, and we have failed to be agents of Christ's light and God's love for all. I believe that we are called, rather, to be transformed by the renewing of our minds into a church that plainly and clearly denounces the sin of homophobia. Queer members of our body are hurting, and when one hurts, we all do. Queer members of our body are also rejoicing and we have failed to share in their joy. In other words, we have failed to be the body for one another. I believe that Anabaptists, in particular, have no excuse in continuing the persecution of the queer community given our shared history of persecution and its resulting ethical obligation to look out for the least, the lost, the last. We have an ethical obligation to side with those challenging the religious status quo, to reject a "second-class citizenship" for queer individuals in our church, and to actively and boisterously speak good news to all those living lives deep in a destructive closet.

This is a start, a work-in-progress. I thank you for the opportunity to do this holy work. It has been a daunting yet rewarding task. I look forward to sharing this with sisters and brothers[‡] in my communities, and seeing how it begins to shift and take different shapes after being tested by the Spirit in community. For now, please accept this draft as a place to start our intentional conversation regarding biblical and theological foundations for queer inclusion in the church.

In the Spirit of Christ who has made us One,

Megan M. Ramer, Pastor
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[†] I am so very grateful to be learning and growing in community with kinfolk who have vulnerably and powerfully shared their experiences of (vibrant!) life outside of (restrictive!) gender binaries. I would no longer use the gender binary language of "sisters and brothers." Instead, I would now choose to use expansive language, e.g. "...we have long welcomed queer *kindred* among us."

[‡] See above footnote. I would now choose to use non-binary and expansive language, e.g. "I look forward to sharing this with *kindred*..."

[§] I am now blessed to serve as Lead Pastor of Seattle Mennonite Church, another congregation seeking to be a community of radical hospitality and celebrative liberation for folks of all sexual orientations, gender identities, and other image-of-God diversities we embody. Other than the changes noted in these footnotes, I stand behind the heart of this work as my biblical and theological foundations for ministering in this liberative way. (Megan M. Ramer, Lead Pastor, Seattle Mennonite Church, May 2019)