

It is important that those who would read this know that I am a pastor of several United Methodist Churches. However, I am neither authorized to speak for the United Methodist Church, nor am I a spokesperson for any District or Conference of the UMC. These thoughts are my prayerful attempt over time to present cogent and rational thoughts about our current crisis and the inevitable emotional responses arguments create.

Rev. Jim Benfer

Biblical Authority vs. Sexual Freedom: The Issue Dividing the Church

There is a debate raging in religious circles today about human sexuality. It is a hotly debated topic, but at its core is a more profound truth—many people who call themselves Christians no longer regard God’s word as authoritative for their living. People are debating whether picking or choosing their own preferred types of sexual relationships are a human right or perhaps even a divine right. This is because our society has been pushing the envelope of what can be called acceptable sexual behavior and relationships. This drive to normalize what God’s word calls perversion has people seeking their right to free sexual expression under our Constitution. Once, what was hidden behind closed doors and socially unacceptable is being pushed to the fore of society and our media has given broad acceptance to these behaviors. These seeking their place in respectable society have gathered under the banner of the acronym LGBTQ+. This debate has thrown the Church into the position of accepting their arguments as either correct or fundamentally flawed. It is dividing the Church into those who hold traditional views and those who hope a progressive view will reinvent how the Church views sexual ethics.

In many minds it has also thrown into question how God’s word in the Bible is to be interpreted. Unfortunately, many of the arguments on both sides of this issue are emotion driven and judgments are hurled back and forth. I believe that the Bible is timeless and accurate when it comes to pointing out our desire towards sin. However, since our society and the Church have arrived at a critical point where many theories are being debated, it would benefit us to take a critical look at some of these controversial ideas. My purpose in presenting these issues to our church is that we might be better informed both on social issues and on God’s word.

However, a word of confession needs to be heard first so that everyone reading this understands that we cannot point the finger of guilt at others without first acknowledging our own corporate sin. The Church has for too long condoned sin that has been swept under its carpets with a wink and a nod. We live in a day and time where the Church has been accused of judgmentalism, and to a great degree society is correct. The Church has been slow to recognize the value of all human beings regardless of sex, race, national origin or other human-defined barriers. Popular examples are the role of women in society, and the slow decline of racism.

We have been slow to say out loud that sexual deviancy does not make a person bad or loathsome any more than being a judgmental bigot does. And who wants to join the host of hypocrites who point a finger of guilt at a homosexual when all the while the adulterer in the church is given a pass? It is my belief that complete honesty needs a hearing before we even think about “removing the splinter from our brother’s eye.”

Sexual behavior has always been a taboo subject for the pulpit. No one wants to bring their family to hear an “R” rated message when they expected it to be a “PG”. Therefore, this subject has by and large been left to those whose anger burned hottest on the subject. Not exactly a perfect mode to reason things out!

I do believe that God does want to bless us, despite the differences in our created being, and in spite of our desires against God's will. What the Church and society should be asking is "How can we be blessed?" The answer from God's word is that when we submit ourselves and our desires to God's plans we can find blessing in our relationships. Furthermore, the Bible teaches that we can bless our offspring by showing them that a man and a woman, however different, can be a blessing to one another, and be more than the sum of their parts. A proper family relationship teaches righteousness to children and to others, but strange experiments to find new ways to interpret family and marriage suffer because they have ignored God's plan. Invariably, such disobedience invites further disobedience. How can a gay or lesbian union be blessed if its foundation is based on a distrust of God's word?

That is not to say that accepting God's will comes easy to anyone. We are all tempted to be selfish individuals out for our own good. Divorce is a reality proving this all too often. Our bodies are not perfect, nor forever young. Therefore, we are tempted into adultery, or to leave the one to whom we have made vows before God. We are born with different genetic make-ups and all are tempted to rail against God for how we are made. Nevertheless, we can bless God and trust that God's wisdom is greater than our own.

Regardless, we have no right as God's children to condemn people or think of them as less worthy than any other human being. We are to love people, but hate sin. Christians are to share the message of God's salvation to all people, and point to the Bible as our guide to wholeness. We are all sinners, regardless of which side of this debate we end up on.

The Bible teaches that sexual behavior outside of God's plan for men and women is sin. The Law of Moses forbade homosexual behavior, but the more full explanation of why such behavior is sin comes in the New Testament. The apostle Paul breaks down in Romans chapter one what he sees as God's case against humankind whereby they are worthy of God's wrath. The main charge is that "they exchanged the truth for a lie." This is not just a failure of behavior, but indicates that the main problem is wrong thought patterns. In other words, what was evident about God is available and recognizable in the creation, but people choose to worship things (idolatry).

When proper worship is exchanged for the worship of other gods, the result is that this humanness, this image-bearing quality that God created within us, is correspondingly distorted. Genesis chapter one explains that only with the union of male and female is the human made complete. Homosexual behavior is a distortion of the Creator's design and humanness is fractured when the truth is exchanged for the lie. The degradation of our humanness begins when we are tempted to believe we know better than God how to bless ourselves and others.

Our enemies are not those who would be angered by my words, rather our enemies are those who whisper rebellion into the ears of the ignorant and make it more palatable by abetting it with half-truths and deceptive lies. It is one thing to live a self-destructive life-style, recognizing it for what it is, grieving over it, and urging others to avoid it if they can. It is another, more damnable thing to call evil good and good evil. Once truth becomes obscured by the lie, the process of dehumanization is complete and may well prove irreversible. Let us address some of the main arguments made in this serious spiritual matter.

The first argument is whether or not being "gay" is a biological fact or a choice. My background in genetic selection and breeding of animals has shown me that all animals are born with different chromosomal and hormonal differences which tend toward male or female, but there are exceptions where the lines are blurred. In other words, we don't all fit within the well-defined norms of a two-sex species.

Are we to question how God ordered this world and how we do or don't fit well within it? I believe sexual proclivities are both biological and choices. To deny this is to deny well established science and psychology. Christians should not be in a debate about either of these things, but we must not at the same time downplay God's sovereignty.

When we blame God for the degree to which we do or do not fit the accepted societal norms, we begin to deny our createdness. Gay and lesbian people feel cheated by the one-man with one-woman model the Bible affirms that God blessed for the pattern by which we are to live. Therefore, they look for new ways to define what God has blessed. Nevertheless, our attempts to redefine our urges and desires contrary to God's pattern is problematic and by definition, sinful.

Whether we consider ourselves "gay" or "straight" does not remove from us the problem of sexual desires which are contrary to God's created order for us. These desires work in all people. For example: Polygamy, which isn't prohibited by the Bible, is shown to be harmful to family relations. It pits one partner against another and dilutes proper affection. Adultery is condemned by the Bible for the very same reasons, and is called sin. Both problems arise from a desire to live outside the parameters that God has said will bless us. While neither of these examples has anything to do with being "gay" or "straight," they exemplify how ignoring God's plan of one man and one woman in relationship curses, rather than blesses husband and wife. Biological urges and the desires they create within us must be reigned in regardless of our predilections if we are to please God and bless those close to us.

Whether one believes they were created one way or another is not the central issue here. The real issue is whether one will become obedient to God's command. However, to push for new sexual expressions as civil rights is a matter of that society's moral compass. Regardless, societal recognition of sexual rights doesn't make them right in God's eyes, nor does it give Christians a "green light" to discard God's commands.

The second argument is whether God's love ought to cover any misgivings we have about recognizing homosexual and queer relationships in the Church. "Can't we all just get along and love one another as God intended?" says one argument. Well, yes and no. Yes, the Church is a hospital for sinners and its doors must always remain open to minister to souls hurt by the anger and hate so prevalent in our society. And no, because the Church is the body of Christ, and cannot condone sin as if sin does no harm to those caught up in it.

In reaction to the recalcitrance of the Church in correcting its way, there has been a call for all Christians to celebrate diversity. However diversity can include categories that are defined by their prohibition in scripture. Why should a Christian celebrate something condemned in scripture? Should we celebrate it just because it is different?

The good name of the Church can only be restored by confession and repentance of past errors, and then moving carefully and prayerfully onward. It is important that the Church not lurch toward new positions and so overcorrect its course in the name of accommodating all people. Society will always be in flux, but the body of Christ must hold fast to God's word or it will lose its ability to point at truth. If the Church did authorize and ordain forbidden sexual relationships, it would also have to cease warning people about sexual temptation. As one cowboy puts it, "If we take down the fences, the cows will get out." Unrepentant examples of behavior outside God's plan should never be held up as examples for others. We are to warn our brothers and sisters against sin, but not judge them for it. If they flaunt the Church's authority over them, then, and only then should they be put out of the Church because they endanger the body of Christ by diluting and adulterating the truth.

Yes, God loved us in spite of our sin and sent us a Savior. Is there any other path to follow than the love which we have been shown? No, but love also requires that we must warn people of sin, never coddling it, and help put people back on a path to obedience.

The third argument is whether we should accept openly homosexual people into the church. I know that for many churches the answer is no in every case, but we need to proceed carefully to be sure that we are not making ourselves judges of one another. Who is going to pick up and throw the first stone? Who is also without sin? So, the short answer to this question is yes, there is a place in the Church, but with caveats. If an individual recognizes homosexuality as a sin and is repentant, as God's word affirms, then yes, the Church is in the business of helping sinners like these, as well as the rest of us sinners. The very work of God among us must speak of the same love that accepted us in our own sin.

However, if an individual is not repentant, and who openly flaunts God's word on this matter, then no, there is no place within the body of Christ for those who are in opposition to the Bible's teachings. Their presence in the Church would be oppositional to our order and our teachings. To coddle such sinful behavior and turn a blind eye towards it is the same as denying the truth found in God's word and it endangers others who might be tempted by it.

The fourth argument is about the proper path for the Church into the future. Progressive thinkers want to argue that the Church must stay in step with society to remain relevant to that society. They point out that the Church may have "baptized" ancient understandings about sexual purity which must be adapted because of the past insensitivity of the Church. They also argue that sexual orientation is a part of God's good design and we must bless those who have been created differently.

However, if we only regurgitate back what society believes, then we have already become irrelevant. The Bible tells us that as Christians we are to be in the world, but not of it. In other words, we have been given truth that the world often denies, therefore we are to go and let that light shine brightly. That's never been popular, except when the Church has turned the light down so as not to make it objectionable. Cases in point: The Church has for too long accepted with a wink and a nod the adultery that has crept into it. The Church for centuries has relegated women to inferior roles in church and society. The Church has accepted living together outside of Holy Matrimony as if it were no big thing.

But these are big things. Every compromise the Church makes brings us closer in step with society and its debauched moral code. If we cannot speak the truth in love, then we have ceased to be a force that can call people back to repentance.

There is no righteous shield behind which those who claim sexual sin to be God's good design can defend themselves. To believe that God loves everyone is correct. Jesus died for all sinners, you and me included. Human love, however misdirected, cannot be an excuse for what God has forbidden.

One's true motives are often discerned by examining the beliefs of those that they agree with. Those seeking to change the Church today have lumped together lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, plus other patterns of non-conformity (LGBTQ+). By doing so, they lobby for the right to do and be as they want.

Let's think about that for a moment. In a free society there ought to be a place so that most sexual relationships can be tolerated. However, the Church is an exclusive society where Christians are to live by God's word as the ultimate authority to define acceptable behavior and what is not, because we believe that sin has serious and deadly consequences. At least the gay and lesbian coalition will argue the meaning of God's word with you to try and change your

mind about its authenticity and meaning, the others will not—nor do they have any basis to begin.

Bisexual relationships are selfish expressions of sexuality that seek to do what they want with whom they want, with little regard to forming stable relationships. This is a “do it if it feels good” mentality. Individuals in these relationships tend to view others as objects of their sexual desire, rather than being committed in both body and spirit. Transgender and intersex individuals do not accept the way God made them and want to change their createdness. Admittedly, some of these people were born with undifferentiated sexual drives, and some with both male and female anatomy. These people don’t need a lecture, but they do need our compassion. However, their dissatisfaction is not an excuse to rebel against their createdness. Queer is defined as anything not currently appropriate to society. The plus sign (+) recognizes that there are sexual deviancies so far beyond God’s word that they are reprehensible to almost all of us.

This coalition is rushing the gates of the Church and demands it to change. Should the Church just swallow one new agenda now and another one later, or should we swallow the whole lot at one time? This is foolishness to even consider! Every compromise will be used against us later to leverage the Church into greater pollution.

The last argument is about whether the Church should be blessing monogamous, loving homosexual relationships. The arguments being made for these relationships sound just like the ones made for a young man and woman seeking to be married. “Shouldn’t two committed people be allowed to marry and seek God’s blessing?” “Isn’t the denial of such a commitment inflicting a devastating blow that purposely causes their anguish?” “If the Bible isn’t opposed to the acceptance of gay Christians, then it shouldn’t be against a loving relationship for them.” And so on.

We must first be honest and admit that our society is susceptible to appeals to emotion and fairness regardless of what God’s word actually says. Many will argue scripture by scripture with you trying to point out that what was being addressed in scripture was never God directing people against homosexual or deviant relationships, but against practices of pagan nations. They will also argue that the Old Testament is full of laws that are no long relevant because Jesus’ sacrifice has negated the Mosaic Law. It is true that Christians are not under the Law, but that does not make the Law irrelevant. God’s word remains truth, it still identifies sin, and one can only accept it or reject it. Leviticus 18:22 and following is very clear about God’s children avoiding sexual impurity of all sorts. But denying the Bible’s authority to speak to us, and thinking ourselves more astute and informed than God is folly.

Furthermore, arguments appealing to emotion and fairness hold no jurisdiction in God’s court. Yes, God is a righteous judge, but we have no standing to tell God what is right or wrong, or what’s fair or unfair. The grace God has offered us at Jesus’ expense isn’t fair, so don’t go arguing for God to treat us fairly! God made us how we are, and we must live to the best of our ability within the limits God has set. There are no hearings where we appeal our cases seeking to have God move the limits of sinful and righteous behavior so that we may feel good about our choices. Yet, here is a group at the door of the Church demanding we change and repent of our ancient, judging ways. As in any generation, God’s people must humble themselves and pray, and continue to be courageous to speak God’s truth in love.

In summary, this is not a scripture by scripture appeal to see God’s word in its correct historical context, nor is it an emotional appeal to fairness. These arguments are made in the hope that each one of us will read God’s word in an exegetical fashion and let it speak its truth to us. Unfortunately, far too many today will try to read God’s word isogetically, reading into it

their own cultural biases and through the lenses of what they would desire it to say. Truly, Jesus said that the truth will set us free. My prayer is that we will continue to let God's word speak truth to our hearts and minds, and free us from the entangling passions to which these feeble human spirits are made subject.

Rev. Jim Benfer
Pastor, Dardanelle First United Methodist Church