

What does Genesis 1-3 teach about sexuality, and how should we live in response?

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From the book

Frequently Asked Questions About Sexuality, The Bible, and The Church: Plain Talk about Tough Issues

A collection of essays considering the appropriate participation of gay and lesbian Presbyterians in church life and leadership.

The first three chapters of Genesis do not directly address the church's questions about sexual relations between persons of the same sex. But the creation narratives do say much about God's hopes and purposes for the world. And they do begin to suggest the shape of faithful human responses to God's great, generative act of love in creation – especially when read as part of the whole canon of Scripture. In particular, they describe the centrality of relationships between men and women in the created order. These crucial chapters of Scripture therefore offer important *indirect* guidance for questions about same-sex relations. But what do they teach?

Genesis depicts a created order in which women and men are created good and placed in relationship with one another and with all of creation. Maleness and femaleness belong to this created order. The image of God is found in the human being as male and female (1:26-27). And the Genesis story clearly joins man and woman together in responsibility for filling and ruling the earth, for procreating and controlling God's creation (1:28-30).

I take that Genesis story very seriously. But taking seriously what it says does not immediately tell us what it teaches. The history of the church and of the larger society gives us good reason to pause for reflection before assuming that we know the moral meaning of God's created order. Church and society both have appealed to scriptural accounts of a created order to fix norms for roles and relationships. We have read scripture as declaring that God created a world in which women should be subordinate to men, men should cut their hair and women should not, women should not speak in church, subjects should obey their kings, and slaves should submit to their masters and obey them with the same fear and trembling with which they obey Christ.

The church is still in the process of repenting of its collusion with these systems that claimed to be grounded in God's created order. And we are right to do so. The church has heard in the gospel and in the prophetic and liberating words of both Old Testament and New Testament a counter word that does not fix people in roles and relationships and does not let cultural and social mores become final definitions of who and what we are in the church and kingdom. In this counter word we have heard what the scriptures teach.

A church that takes scripture seriously therefore faces today the same task that has faced communities of faith in every generation. We must interpret the stories of creation as guides and direction for our thinking and acting. But the presence of interpretive questions does not mean that we are bereft of answers. God does not leave us alone for each one to do what is right in his or her own eyes. For generations Reformed Christians have confessed our hope that the Holy Spirit quickens faithful reading. And we have taken as our guides the rule of faith and the rule of love.

The Rule of Faith and the Rule of Love

Interpretation of scripture in the church should not happen without attention to the rule of faith and the rule of love. The rule of faith suggests that our individual interpretations are placed against the community's understanding of scripture in past and present. In the Reformed community, that interpretive backdrop is found particularly in the creeds and confessions, though not only there. The subject of homosexuality has not been a special focus of attention in these documents, and the contemporary possibility of committed same-sex partnerships runs beyond what they can imagine. But it is also the case that the majority of Christian thinkers over time have regarded same-sex sexual activity as sinful. The tradition thus places the present interpreter in a kind of tension. On the one hand, there is inattention to the issue; on the other hand, where the tradition has dealt with the matter, it has generally condemned the practice of same-sex activity.

In that context, it is important that the present interpretive activity of the church be a communal one, that our efforts to think about this issue afresh and in reference to what has been thought already be a corporate engagement and not simply a matter of individual proposals for reading texts. Our interpretation happens in community, and what the community experiences in faith is more

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significant than the experience of any individual. What we say and do together is more to be attended to than idiosyncratic readings of texts by one or a few individuals. This means listening to a broad range of interpretive judgments in the church, including its gay and lesbian members.

The rule of love reminds us that our interpretation of scripture stands under the divine command to love God and neighbor. Thus, what we hear from scripture should not lead us away from the expression of love for others. Or, in the words of the document, "Presbyterian Understandings of the Use of Holy Scripture," adopted by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church ((USA) in 1983,

all interpretations are to be judged by the question of whether they offer and support the love given and commanded by God. When interpretations do not meet this criterion, it must be asked whether the text has been used correctly in the light of the whole Scripture and its subject ... No interpretation of Scripture is correct that leads to or supports contempt of any individual or group of persons either within or outside of the church. Such results from the interpretation of Scripture plainly indicate that the rule of love has not been honored (pp. 19-20).

Measured by the rule of love, the church has fallen far short in its use of scripture in dealing with homosexuality – including those texts that deal with the topic indirectly, like Genesis 1-3. The rule of love, which says that our interpretation is correlative with the way we live, raises serious questions about what we have done with the plain sense of scripture. If it is a means by which we inflict pain and put down other Christians – or other human beings of any stripe – then our interpretation is under question.

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We therefore need to ask about the preeminence of the gospel and of the grace of God as a guide for our proper response to scripture. That response may not be the same as what the plain sense of some texts would indicate. We are not to lose sense, however, of what it is that "the Scriptures principally teach," as the Catechism puts it (Book of Confessions, 7.003). The answer to that question is what we are to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of us. It is no accident that the verses accompanying the Westminster documents are Micah 6:8, John 3:16, and John 20:31. These are fundamental formulations of the gospel, of the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ, and of our

responsibility to “do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with your God.” It is precisely the manifestation of justice and kindness that in this, as in all instances, is a fundamental criterion of our interpretation of scripture. What is ultimately at stake is the triumph of grace in the church.

A foundation, not a limit

Genesis 1-3 gives no direct, plain-sense teaching about contemporary same-sex relationships. But how might the church understand its indirect teaching, if we read in ways that are guided by the rule of faith and the rule of love?

The Genesis stories picture an ideal of enduring companionship of man and woman – one that features sexual relationship for procreation – as central to the human story. The Apostle Paul will articulate a different vision, but the Genesis stories tell us something very fundamental about who and what we are. The defining relationship in the human community is man and woman. That relationship often is manifest in the establishment of a commitment between a man and a woman that perdures and is fruitful in every respect.

Of course, for many human beings that particular ideal is not their experience. They may be single and so do not know the man-woman relationship as one of enduring and intimate companionship, sexual and otherwise. They may be childless and so do not know the procreative fruit of the relationship that God intends. They may be homosexual and so do not know the experience of existing in sexual relationship with a companion of opposite gender. Yet all of these

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persons, whose numbers are legion, are truly members of the human community God has made and of the community of faith. As persons who in their varied ways and relationships live out lives of service to God, lives of faithfulness, love, and justice, caring for one another and loving God, their place in the community of faith and my judgment of them are not determined by their conformity to the kind of relationship given central place in Genesis.

In *The Decalogue and a Human Future*, Paul Lehmann acutely perceives the different possibilities for receiving and drawing upon the Genesis account of the creation of man and woman. His comments are indicative of the fact that what the text says does not yet tell us what it teaches; that happens only when the text is perceived from some angle of vision. For Lehmann, as it should be for us all, that angle is the gospel, which he described as what God was and is doing to make and keep human life human. Lehmann teaches us how to

read Genesis from the angle of the gospel, guided by the rule of faith and the rule of love.

Lehmann reads Genesis 1-3 as giving a norm in the form of what he calls a foundational instance. Lehmann describes a foundational instance as a normative center. He contrasts it with what he calls a limiting instance. If a foundational instance establishes a center, a limiting instance draws a boundary. Lehmann argues that Genesis describes a created order in which a generative, enduring sexual relationship between a man and a woman plays a central role. But the centrality of one kind of relationship does not imply the sinfulness of every other kind of relationship. The sexual relationship between woman and man provides a foundational instance – but not a limiting one. If the woman-man relationship were a limiting instance, it would draw a line that excluded every other kind of relationship from participating in God’s great work of love. But there is nothing in the Genesis narrative to demand that we read a heterosexual relationship as a limiting instance.

On the contrary, the story of creation stresses plurality, fullness, and the rich variety of God’s creative power. The man-woman relationship instead appears as a foundational moment, what Lehmann calls “the liberating instance in relation to which divergent possibilities may be pursued and assessed” (174). Read in light of the gospel, under the rule of faith and the rule of love, Genesis depicts a created order in which procreative sexual relationships between women and men are a central – but not the only – faithful response to God’s work of keeping human life human.

Because we read by the rule of faith, I am glad to place my interpretation in conversation with other readers, past and present. But however we interpret Genesis 1-3, we must read the story of creation by the light of the gospel and by the rules of faith and love. For me, it is no less than the power of the gospel in the church that is at stake.

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