

A RESPECTFUL DEBATE ON SAME-SEX ISSUES – REV. DR. CLYDE ERVINE
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There once was an old man whose eyes blinked and whose hands shook. When he ate, he clattered the silverware, missed his mouth with the spoon, and dribbled food on the tablecloth. He lived with his son, having nowhere else to live, but his son's wife didn't like it; "It ruins my happiness", she complained. So the old man was taken by the arm and led him to the kitchen corner, sat on a stool and, thereafter given his food in a bowl.

One day his hands trembled more than usual, causing his bowl to fall and brake. "If you're a pig," said his daughter-in-law, "you must eat out of a trough." So they made him eat from a wooden trough.

This couple had a four-year-old son whom they adored. One evening the father noticed his boy playing intently with some bits of wood and asked what he was doing. "I'm making a trough," he said, smiling for approval, "to feed you and Mamma out of when I get big." The parents looked at each other, then went to the corner, took the old man by the arm, led him back to the table, sat him in a comfy chair, and gave him his food on a plate. From that time on, nobody scolded when he broke things.

That 1812 Grimm Brothers tale tells us what? How observant children can be, or how not to act in front of them, or illustrates Jesus' words: 'do to others as you would have them do to you'. My purpose in telling it is to talk respectfully about sex!

Respect is about how we evaluate and treat others. I'm not thinking so much about civility or good manners, but about attitudes and behaviors rooted in how God treats us, that should shape how we treat others.

Respect has long been thought a good thing. In naming it the preeminent value, Aristotle argued that respect lay in moral worth rather than military might. Yet enlightened as that may seem, it didn't occur to him to include slaves as those to whom respect was due. Respect long retained an elitist air as something merited by the few, or something due to the powerful. That view was challenged by eighteenth-century philosopher, Immanuel Kant, who proposed that respect is owed to 'every rational human being'. All, said Kant, should be respected irrespective of moral worth, for each 'and every reasonable agent exists as an end in himself'. Kant, a Lutheran PK, linked respect to the Bible's command to love our neighbor.

Nowadays, respect is taken as foundational in a democratic society; yet it remains elusive. Respect is complicated. Derived from the Latin word *respicere*, its literal meaning is to look back at or to look again. To respect is to pay attention to or consider something, regardless of moral merit. To respect something doesn't mean that we necessarily approve what claims our attention; the opposite of respect isn't disapproval, but contempt.

With that definition of respect in mind, how has it fared within the church? No doubt church history is replete with people both giving and gaining respect; yet the church's failure to practice respect has been spectacular at times. Rooted in Palestinian obscurity and suspect for centuries within the Roman Empire, which so often persecuted it, the church gained official status in the Empire following the conversion of Emperor Constantine in 312 AD. Thereafter protected, the church, now in the position

to give respect to others, refused to grant to others, not least Jews. As for Muslims at the edge of the Empire, I need only mention the word Crusades.

As noted earlier, respect doesn't necessarily involve approval; it's about taking the other seriously, paying attention to who others are and what they have to say, recognizing that they may be different from us, and may challenge us. But, at least in the West, the church has more often than not, found it hard to enjoy power and practice respect at the same time.

The history of church disrespect toward LGBT folk is well documented. Though few expect the church to endorse all sexual relationships, we've had a heightened contempt for gay people, and really perturbed by this, even though we turn blind eyes to violence, oppression of the poor, sins of speech, as well as various types of heterosexual sin, all of which the Bible condemns.

In one of his biblical commentaries, John Calvin called those who engage in homosexual acts 'beasts'. Such long-established disgust for gay people contributes to currently high rates of bullying, depression, and suicide among gay people. Whether or not the church affirms same-sex intimacy and marriage, and not all gay Christians do, let alone straight ones, it's time that we repented of the ugly sin of homophobia, as we were told to do in the 1994 Report on Human Sexuality adopted by our church.

Respect is a biblical issue, as well as moral one. Admittedly, if you consult a typical theology textbook, you won't find a chapter on respect; yet as the biblical narrative unfolds, respect becomes the air which God's people are to breathe, and the name for the lifestyle which God's people are to live. This is more obvious when we know that respect and the frequent biblical word honor, greatly overlap in meaning.

The Bible tells us to respect or honor God, parents, and leaders; that was uncontroversial in the biblical world; but something subversive shows up in the Bible to challenge the rules then in place as to whom respect was to be given. Recall how Jesus broke conventional rules about who to include or exclude from meal-tables. He shared table-talk with tax-collectors and prostitutes, both of whom flagrantly defied the Commandments, listening to those whom others despised, including women and children whom others silenced. There's not a word in the gospels that leads me to believe that Jesus would withhold respect from LGBT folk.

Respect was a key issue for the Apostle Paul. In I Corinthians he accuses the church in Corinth of treating some of its members with contempt:

...as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you...when the time comes to eat, each...goes ahead with your own supper...one goes hungry and another becomes drunk...do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?

Paul critiques what happens within Corinth's house-churches. As socially prominent members celebrate the Lord's Supper in the dining-room, poor members, many of them no doubt slaves, stand hungry in a hallway. Paul calls it contempt, insisting that every church member is worthy of respect: I Corinthians 12:23: 'those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect'.

So radical is the Bible when it comes to respect, that all, made in the image of God, no matter who we are or what we've done, are seen to deserve it. LGBT church members don't always receive it. Richard Mouw writes:

God created all human beings. Even the shattered and broken ones are still his original works of art. We must engage in the spiritual exercise of seeing others as God sees them, of appreciating others—even in their brokenness...Here is an important lesson for our... world...torn apart by ethnic, racial and religious antagonisms. God wants us to offer a fundamental respect to others purely on the basis of their humanness. Christians and Muslims, African Americans and Jewish Americans, heterosexuals and homosexuals, rich and poor—all are created in the divine likeness.

Respect must be the tone of our church's debate on same-sex issues. But what's the debate about? It's not about whether LGBT people deserve respect; that's not up for debate; nor are we debating whether or not the church should welcome those with a minority sexual orientation; Jesus welcomed all; nor are we debating civil rights for LGBT people, including the legality of same-sex marriage. Our debate is more specific: whether the view of the Presbyterian Church in Canada that sexual intercourse outside of heterosexual marriage, specifically homosexual intercourse, is or is not a departure from God's design for human sexuality. Our 1994 General Assembly endorsed the view that it is a departure when it adopted the Church Doctrine Committee's Report on Human Sexuality. Some want to revisit and revise this view, believing that the Bible can be read in ways that allow LGBT Christians to commit themselves in same-sex monogamous marriage, or marriage-like unions. Though angry militants exist at either end of the spectrum, I think it's possible to debate the issue with respect.

To do that, I want to try to build some common ground by offering the following proposals, some of them stolen from John Stott's book, *Involvement: Social and Sexual Relationships in the Modern World*.

1. We're all human beings. Obviously! But let's make it concrete. The 'masculine' lesbian neighbor whom you keep at arm's length, is a human being; the flamboyantly gay waiter at your local Starbucks, whose antics irk you, is a human being. The Bible says that whether we're straight or gay, we reflect God's image, even if, in all of us, the image is distorted. Each of us is precious, none more so than those who are disrespected and discriminated against because of their minority sexual identity.

2. We're all sexual human beings. John Stott writes:

God made...us male and female. So to talk about sex is to touch a point close to the centre of our personality. Our very identity is being discussed, and perhaps either endorsed or threatened...the subject demands an unusual degree of sensitivity.

Yet our debate is often insensitive; some use the Bible to justify calling gay people names; some call those who believe that the Bible forbids same-sex unions, bigots. We need to do what Jesus did: listen, not least to those with whom we disagree. Our debate isn't an abstract one; it's about the lives of family, friends, and fellow-congregants; so we ought to talk with sensitive respect. As W. B. Yeats once wrote: 'I have spread my dreams under your feet; tread softly because you tread on my dreams'.

3. We're all sinful, sexual human beings. That may shock you, but it's what our church teaches. Living Faith says:

Sin is a power present in every human life, even at birth. It issues in such sins as pride asserting itself against God, indifference towards God and neighbor, untruthfulness, greed, lust, laziness, gluttony, envy, and selfish anger.

Living Faith refers to the maligned doctrine of total depravity, whose point isn't that we're totally evil, but that every part of us, including our sexuality, is affected by sin. It means that none of us, straight or gay, is sexually pure. So, to paraphrase Jesus, heterosexuals should take the beam from their own eyes before tackling the speck in homosexual eyes.

Sigmund Freud may have something to teach us here. As with an iceberg, only a tenth of which is visible above water, so it is, said Freud, with the human mind. There lies hidden in us a vast domain of unconsciousness where are to be found, he wrote, 'urges...passions...repressed ideas and feelings...a great underworld of...unseen forces that exercise an imperious control over [our] conscious thoughts and deeds'. In that underworld, Freud located powerful sexual desires that impact everything we are and do. Dr. Merville Vincent, a Harvard psychiatrist, concluded: 'In God's view I suspect we are all sexual deviants'.

4. We're biblically-focused Christians. The debate is between affirming and non-affirming Christians. So, to engage in it with respect, we charitably assume that those who affirm the legitimacy of gay sex in certain circumstances, do so, not because they're licentious, but because they're persuaded by their reading of the Bible that such can be legitimate. And we assume that those who do not affirm gay sex as a Christian option, do so, not from bigotry, but because they're persuaded of that view by their reading of the Bible. The debate is between Christians, none of whom seeks approval for unlimited sexual activity. What's being debated is whether there's a biblical basis for changing the boundaries that the church believes the Bible sets for sexual activity among believers. Advocates for the approval of some specific forms of gay sexual relationships within the church seek a change in those boundaries, not their removal. For example, the Overture sent by the Presbytery of East Toronto to the 2015 General Assembly, asks for the inclusion in the church of those in 'committed, faithful relationships with people of the same sex' i.e. monogamous same-sex unions or marriages, not casual sex!

5. We're all called to sexual discipline. I'm expect that most of us believe that the Bible demands sexual discipline and self-control, and that whether we're traditionalist or revisionist, self-control implies saying no to some of our sexual desires. Traditionalists and revisionists may disagree as to where the line lies; but we agree that there is one. Indeed most revisionists desire a similar discipline for homosexual Christians as traditionalists do for heterosexual ones. It's important to all of us that the church, in a society that recognizes few sexual boundaries, continues to do so. At Colossians 3:5 Paul writes: '...Put to death...whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire'. Paul is eager that the church witness to the world Jesus' plan to rid it of sin and establish his kingdom. To that end, Jesus calls his church to embody that coming kingdom by living out its values, not least a sexual ethic that challenges and contradicts the world. For Paul, the sexual integrity of the church is a missional responsibility; that's why we're all called to sexual discipline.

6. Sexuality is to a degree a mystery that we don't fully understand. Ethicist Lewis Smedes, in his book *Sex for Christians*, writes:

We who are heterosexual need to exercise humility when we talk about homosexuality simply because we are very ignorant. Most of us can only guess what it is like to be homosexual. In fact, not

even homosexual people are experts; their sexuality is a mystery to them just as heterosexuality is a mystery to most straight people

After years of research, scholars still ponder homosexuality's origins. Are they genetic; or is sexuality to some extent shaped by environment? And what about the possibility of changing sexual orientation? Though most agree that sexual orientation can be plotted along a spectrum, exclusively homosexual at one end and heterosexual at the other, few now advocate for the possibility of fundamentally changing sexual identity. What does seem clear is that most who identify as gay, experience their identity, not as something they chose, but as something with which they were born. We're dealing with mystery here, so let's talk with respect.

7. We all need love and are capable of loving. Humans were made to love and need each other. Though the setting for the Genesis phrase 'It is not good that man should be alone' is the one-flesh union of Adam and Eve, its meaning applies more broadly. That is: we all crave intimacy; we all need to know another and be known by another. Some of this comes from family and some from friendship, whether opposite-sex friends or same-sex friends. The Bible's most famous example of a profound same-sex friendship is the love of David and Jonathan. Whatever we end up saying about the legitimacy of gay sex for Christians, we ought not to deny the need each one of us has for love, nor diminish the rich capacity for love that gay couples and gay friends frequently exhibit.

8. We're people of the Book! That is, we treat the Bible with great respect. Living Faith sums it up in the words:

The Bible has been given to us by the inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life. It is the standard of all doctrine by which we must test any word that comes to us from church, world, or inner experience.

Though some liberal Christians say that God has no more interest in same-sex issues than in whether we're right-handed or left-handed, such a claim disrespects the Bible. At our best, Presbyterians take the Bible seriously, seeking to hear and obey its word. But on opening the Bible to see what it says about same-sex issues, we find a handful of texts that seem to repudiate all homosexual activity. For some traditionalists, that ends the conversation. It's more respectful and responsible, however, to take the time to review the Bible's negative references to homosexuality, and consider if and how they apply to us today.

At the risk of oversimplification, revisionists tend to fall into two groups. One group tends to read the Bible's negative texts in ways that limit their application. For example, in his book, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, James Brownson reads the prohibition of male-male sex in Leviticus 18 as being based on a patriarchal foundation; that is, it prohibits a man from sexually using another man as he would a woman, because that would reduce the used man to the inferior status of a woman. Since Christians no longer operate out of such patriarchal prejudice, says Brownson, this text can no longer be used to prohibit consensual gay sex.

A second group of revisionists reads the Bible's negative texts and agrees with what the church has traditionally interpreted them to say; but this group then refuses to be bound by that traditional reading. Biblical scholar Luke Timothy Johnson sees the task of biblical interpretation like this:

The task demands intellectual honesty. I have little patience with efforts to make Scripture say something other than what it says, through appeals to linguistic or cultural subtleties. The exegetical

situation is straightforward: we know what the text says. But what are we to do with what the text says?

What Johnson does with the negative biblical texts on homosexuality is to admit what they say, but then reject what they say. He argues that the debate about same-sex issues isn't really about sex, but about how to read the Bible and how it exercises authority in the church. Johnson doesn't try to reinterpret the negative texts; he overrides them. This all suggests that the church must pay great attention and respect to how it handles the Book

9. A final proposal: all biblical interpretation is fallible and must be open to reform. Traditionalists may misread the Bible if homophobic prejudice causes them to dismiss new ways of reading. Revisionists who want to offer gay folk something more positive than "No", or who feel that the church in saying No will find itself on the wrong side of history, may read into the Bible the conclusions they want to find. We need to read the Bible with care; in particular, gay and straight Christians need to read it together.

Let me illustrate: for a long time we in Canada have read the Bible through Western eyes; in recent decades we've heard the Bible being read by the poor of the developing world. They see things in the Bible that we fail to see. Similarly, in his article, Like the wideness of the sea, Lewis Smedes reflects on how the Christian Reformed Church once debated divorce and remarriage. For a long time, that church read the Bible as forbidding the remarriage of divorced persons, a stance that was relatively easy to take before WWII, when divorce within CRC families was rare. But by the 1950's, divorce and remarriage were no longer so remote, notes Smedes; those whom the Church had once shunned were now in the pews, the sons and daughters of elders. That being so, the Church began to read the Bible differently, taking the painful fact of failed marriages into consideration.

I'm not saying that the church must abandon its traditional view on same-sex relationships; I'm saying that we'll read the Bible differently if LGBT people are present. For a long time, they've been invisible in the church. That's changing, as gay members, both sexually active and sexually abstinent, reveal their orientation. In either case, we need to read the Bible together, seeing things that we might otherwise miss.

Now to sum up! Respect is hard work; it takes time, patience, and humility to pay attention to, and to thoughtfully debate those with whose views we may disagree. Because respect is hard work, it's tempting to short cuts. I've taught enough theological students to know that they're tempted to avoid hard work out of either intellectual or emotional laziness! That shows up in our current debate. Some of those who argue for a traditional stance are tempted to take two particular shortcuts. One is to downplay or disregard the trouble, and sometimes the tragedy, that often accompanies the lives of LGBT people. Keen to quickly solve this contentious issue, they will not take the time nor spend the emotional energy to listen to the stories that LGBT people have to tell. Another tempting shortcut for traditionalists is to reach for the Bible and simply declare, "The Bible says", downplaying and disregarding the significant distance that lies between ancient inspired texts and our twenty-first century lives. On both counts, disrespect is the result, and debate among us flounders.

But some who call for our church's view on same-sex issues to be revised are also tempted by shortcuts. One of them is to use words with great emotional power, but with imprecision. One such is the word inclusion. The Open Letter to the Presbyterian Church in Canada found on the Presbyterians

for Inclusion website is in many ways a fine letter, for it is beyond question that Jesus had a special concern for marginalized people, offering hospitality and inclusion where others offered contempt. Yet I question the Open Letter's use of the word inclusion.

Inclusion is a word that our society places high in its pantheon of virtues. And because the word carries such rhetorical power, it's tempting to use it in the church as a trump card that promises to give its promoters the moral high ground, and send those who in any way qualify inclusivity, to political purgatory. Such a move, even if unintentional, can be a shortcut that closes down debate. Given the contentious issue at the core of our church's current debate, the word inclusion, used so broadly in the Open Letter, cries out for greater precision and theological reflection.

As I said earlier, Jesus included those whom others treated with contempt. Inclusion is 'a good thing'. But we need to analyze this tricky word. In his Letter to the Romans, for instance, Paul says that we're all sinners, without exception: 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God'. Now I'd call that inclusive, though I'm not sure it's the sort of inclusivity our society has in mind when it uses the word inclusion. Paul then goes on to say in Romans 5 that 'while we were sinners Christ died for us', a most inclusive solution for our sin. I suggest that the cross is actually the most inclusive place in history. And for inclusivity, what can beat John 3:16?

So far so good. Yet with respect, the cross is the most exclusive place in history, for it's there, and nowhere else, says the New Testament, that God's Son took away the sin of the world. The author of Hebrews 7, comparing Christ to the high priests of the old covenant, writes:

Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself.

Living Faith expresses this soteriological exclusivity like this:

God's way of salvation has been revealed in Jesus Christ.
Through the death and resurrection of Christ our sins are forgiven.
Salvation means life, forgiveness, healing, wholeness.
It comes from God's grace received through faith in Christ alone

So, the New Testament, inclusive in some ways, is exclusive in others, not least in its succinct baptismal confession, 'Jesus is Lord'. In light of that, our church's Book of Common Worship calls those becoming church members to affirm an exclusive commitment to him.

But it isn't just at the point of belief that the church exercises exclusivity; from the beginning, the church has called for the exclusion of sinful behavior. Accordingly, the Book of Common Worship asks new members, 'Do you turn away from sin, renounce evil and all powers in the world that rebel against God? Or take the story in John 8 of how Jesus intervened to protect a woman 'caught in the...act of adultery'. He treats her with great respect, and says to her, 'neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again'. It's a story that includes a sinner but excludes her sin. This pattern continues right to the Bible's final page, when people from all nations are envisaged as entering God's kingdom-inclusivity; yet 'nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood'-exclusivity [Rev. 21:26-27].

A respectful debate on same-sex issues demands greater precision than I find in the Open Letter, whose admirable call for the inclusion of LGBT people doesn't acknowledge the specific issue in the

debate, namely, the sexual practices of LGBT people to be included in, or excluded from, the church. After all, as the witty Episcopalian priest Fleming Rutledge says, 'the...inclusivity of religion always fails...because, eventually, some- body has got to say no somewhere to somebody'.

That quote brings me back to where we began. What is our debate about? It's essentially this: can the church interpret the Bible in ways that allow faithful, gay Christians to enter into committed same-sex marriage or marriage-like unions, or not?