

Grace Family,

In worship and in our newsletter, I have been sharing information with you on the challenge facing our denomination. United Methodists around the world are searching the scriptures and arriving at different interpretations regarding same-sex marriage. In general, people on both sides care deeply about following God's Word and loving people. Today, some are wondering whether people, churches, and pastors with different beliefs and practices regarding same-sex marriage can remain in the same denomination. To put the question another way, is our devotion to Jesus and God's Word enough to unite us, or must we also interpret God's Word the same way on this topic if we are to stay together?

In the next few editions of our church newsletter, I will share the key scripture passages that are frequently brought up in this discussion, and how various groups of people who are seeking God's truth in Scripture are coming to different interpretations. These interpretations came from thoughtful pastors, Biblical scholars, and followers of Jesus whom I have been listening to and whose work I have been studying over the past decade. When an interpretation involves historical background, I will cite a source to verify the truth of the historical background. I share these interpretations with you, not so that you can agree or disagree with them, but so that you can understand where other Christians are coming from when they read these verses.

As you read, I invite you to move beyond deciding where you stand on the issue of same-sex marriage. This is not the question before us today. The question we are discerning in the United Methodist denomination is "Does my conscience allow me to continue in the same church and denomination with Christians who interpret these verses of the Bible differently than I do?"

If you miss one of these articles or would like to watch the sermon in which I shared about this struggle, please visit <https://www.marcusgrace.com/umcdiscussion>.

Parents, please use your own discretion when deciding how much of these packets to share with your teenagers or children. Due to the nature of the topic and the Egyptian, Greek, and Roman culture, some of the scriptures and interpretations are somewhat graphic.

As you prepare your heart to read these passages, I invite you to HALT. Examine your heart and see if you are Hurried, Angry, Lonely, or Tired. We are seldom able to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to us through God's Word when we are depleted. If you are rested and your heart is at peace, please pray the following prayer with me, and continue reading.

Pastor Chris

God of all Truth, we ask that you reveal your Truth to us as we read your Word.
Give us humility to hold our own ideas loosely, for your ways are higher than our ways.
Give us wisdom to understand those who may disagree with us,
for your Truth is greater than what I can grasp on my own.
Give us a willingness to follow you wherever you lead,
no matter how hard it is.
Fill us with your Holy Spirit to give us a confidence that we are loved as your children.
We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Genesis 2:18-24

¹⁸Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” ¹⁹So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. ²⁰The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. ²¹So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²²And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.”

²⁴Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

One Interpretation	Another Interpretation	Still Another Interpretation	A Fourth Interpretation
Some believe this passage describes marriage as something that occurs between a man and a woman. These verses are part of the creation narrative and are the first time that marriage is mentioned in scripture. This background elevates their importance. At the core of our being as people created by God, God created us for heterosexual marriages, not homosexual marriages. Some believe that God gives us the blueprint for marriage in these verses.	Some believe these verses describe the first marriage, which was between a man and a woman. This makes sense, since God’s goal was to populate the earth. (Genesis 1:28). We should be careful, though, not to turn this ‘description’ of the first marriage into a ‘prescription’ that all marriages should be heterosexual. To do so would be to add to God’s Word.	Some believe it is possible that heterosexual marriage is God’s plan A for people. However, these verses occur before the fall into sin (Genesis 3). When sin entered the world, so did many features of life that are not God’s plan A for us. Today we know that some people are born who are attracted to people of the same sex. Rather than condemn them, we are called to love them for they carry a difficult burden.	When we read scripture, we are called to ask what this passage is trying to talk about. When we use passages about one subject to answer a question about another subject, we can easily misunderstand God’s message for us. Some believe that verse 18 states the problem that this passage was written to address: “It is not good that the man should be alone”. Verse 19 presents a possible solution: finding a partner for the man among the animals. Verse 20 tells us that none of the animals fit for Adam as a partner. In verses 21-22, God provides the solution by creating another human partner for Adam like himself. When, God creates another human, Adam celebrates. He doesn’t celebrate their differentness, that she is of the opposite sex. Instead, he celebrates their sameness, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” (verse 23) These verses say nothing about homosexuality.

Genesis 19

The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. ²He said, "Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way." They said, "No; we will spend the night in the square." ³But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. ⁴But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; ⁵and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them." ⁶Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, ⁷and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. ⁸Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof."

One Interpretation	Another Interpretation	Still Another Interpretation
<p>For the Old Testament people of Israel and the early Christian church, this was the primary passage of scripture used to condemn homosexual behavior.¹ It is where we get the word 'sodomy'.</p> <p>For over 3000 years, the Jewish and Christian people of God have looked at this passage and called homosexual behavior a sin. God's Word doesn't change. God's people are called to stand firm upon the truth in the midst of a changing world.</p> <p>Some believe Genesis 19 can serve as a warning for us. God might judge any society that accepts homosexual behavior. God destroyed the city of Sodom for condoning a gay lifestyle. This is why it is so important that we stand upon the truth that God condemns homosexual behavior lest God judge us.</p>	<p>For the Old Testament people of Israel and the early Christian church, this was the primary passage of scripture used to condemn homosexual behavior.² It is where we get the word 'sodomy'. This is why it is so crucial that we understand what was being condemned by God's people and God's Word.</p> <p>No Christian group is trying to justify the behavior of the people of Sodom in Genesis 19. Those who hold to 'One Interpretation' and 'Still Another Interpretation' believe that the sin of Sodom was homosexuality, similar to a homosexual couple who desires to be together in a marriage relationship. Others believe that the behavior of the men of Sodom is better described as gang rape.</p> <p>The gang rape attempted by the men of Sodom is clearly condemned in scripture. But some believe that this homosexual gang rape is very different than two people of the same sex vowing to support and honor one another in the lifelong commitment of marriage.</p>	<p>Some believe that Genesis 19 not only condemns homosexual behavior, it explains what homosexual behavior is at its heart. Homosexual behavior is violent and abusive. It is unnatural. It is condemned by God. We can learn how to respond to this wickedness from the words of Lot, in verse 7, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly." As God's people, we are called to urge those caught in sin to repent.</p>

¹ James R. White & Jeffrey D. Neil. *The Same Sex Controversy: Defending and Clarifying the Bible's Message About Homosexuality*. Bethany House Publishers. Bloomington, Minnesota. 2002, 27.

² Ibid., 27.

What do we need to do?

Pray, study the Scriptures, and listen to one another as you study.

United Methodists around the world are setting alarm clocks to **pray for the future of our denomination each day from 2:23-2:26 (AM or PM)** as we approach the Special General Conference that will take place from 2.23.2019 through 2.26.2019. If that time doesn't work for you, I invite you to find another time to pray for the United Methodist Church as a whole and for Grace UMC in particular.

Continue reading these articles in the church newsletter to understand how Christians who love people and value God's Word can come to different interpretations as they read the scripture passages that relate to same-sex marriage. Sign-up for our church newsletter by sending an e-mail to karen@marcusgrace.com. you miss one of these articles or would like to watch the sermon in which Pastor Chris shared about this struggle, please visit <https://www.marcusgrace.com/umcdiscussion>.

Sunday, Dec. 2 from 3-5 p.m., I will host a conversation on this topic. This conversation will not be designed as a debate. There will be no winners or losers at the end of it. But it is a chance for Christians of different perspectives to hear one another and be heard. There is no need to RSVP. Simply come to the church at 3:00 p.m.

I also invite you to join me in a **3 week discussion, starting in January**. I am exploring options on Sunday afternoons, Tuesdays during the day, and Tuesday or Thursday evenings. If you have a preference between these four times, please me know (pastorchrism@marcusgrace.com).

Final Thoughts

Next week, we will study the next few passages of scripture that people turn to as they seek God's will on this topic.

Some will say that it is critical for each person to know where they stand.

They will ask, "Where do you stand on this issue? Where do we stand as a church?"

There may come a day that we need to make that decision as a church.

Today however, the real question is not "where do you stand?", but "who can you stand?"

Can you stand to be in a denomination with people who interpret these verses differently than you do?

Can you stand to be in a congregation with people who interpret these verses differently than you do?

How much difference of opinion will your conscience allow?

As I reflect on these questions, I am drawn to Jesus' prayer for His church before He went to the cross.

Jesus' Prayer for the Church (John 17:17-26)

¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

²⁰ "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. ²⁴ Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

²⁵ "Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶ I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.