

To Affirm or Not Affirm? The Church Debate on Homosexuality.

Cameron Hankins

Ph.D. Application Writing

Table of Contents

1. Introduction - 3
2. Non-Affirming - 5
a. Evangelical Presbyterian Church - 5
b. Wesleyan Church - 6
c. Southern Baptist - 8
d. Roman Catholic - 10
3. Non-Affirming General Reasoning - 11
4. Non-Affirming Merits - 12
5. Non-Affirming Criticisms - 13
6. Affirming Denominations - 17
a. Presbyterian Church of the USA - 17
b. United Methodist Church - 18
c. Episcopal Church - 19
d. Evangelical Lutheran Church - 20
7. Affirming General Reasoning - 21
8. Affirming Merits - 21
9. Affirming Criticisms - 23
10. Conclusion – 25
Bibliography - 28

I. Introduction

Homosexuality has been a divisive topic surrounding contemporary Christianity for decades. There was a universal condemnation of homosexuality for the majority of Christian history; however, a contemporary debate gained momentum in the 1960s and 70s. This is epitomized by the division of the United Methodist Church into two churches: the United Methodist Church (UMC) and the Global Methodist Church (GMC). The GMC declared its separation in March of 2022 to practice traditional Christian views of homosexuality, and the UMC will embrace a progressive approach by accepting homosexuality. This long-debated and often heated topic doesn't stop in the Methodist denomination.

According to the Pew Research Center, acceptance of homosexuality is increasing across all denominations of Christianity in America. A study conducted in 2019 shows 66% of all American Christians approve of homosexuality in society,¹ which is up from 54% in 2015 and 44% in 2007.² However, being approved in society and being approved within the church could be separate ideas, since many of the largest Christian groups – like Roman Catholics with 51 million³ out of the 164-169 million American Christians – still vehemently oppose same-sex marriages.⁴ Yet, many denominations have already passed legislation from within allowing homosexual marriage and ordination of practicing homosexuals (e.g., United Methodist Church

¹ Aidan Connaughton, "Religiously unaffiliated people more likely than those with a religion to lean left, accept homosexuality," Pew Research Center, last modified September 28, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/28/religiously-unaffiliated-people-more-likely-than-those-with-a-religion-to-lean-left-accept-homosexuality/>.

² Caryle Murphy, "Most U.S. Christian groups grow more accepting of homosexuality," Pew Research Center, last modified December 18, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/12/18/most-u-s-christian-groups-grow-more-accepting-of-homosexuality/>.

³ Daniel Isaiah Joseph, "Largest Christian Denominations in America: The Top 100," Christianity FAQ, <https://christianityfaq.com/largest-christian-denominations-america/>.

⁴ Pew Research Center, "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace" last modified October 17, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

[UMC], Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America [ELC], and Presbyterian Church of the United States of America [PCUSA]).

An analysis of homosexuality within American churches and their theologies is necessary when examining whether homosexuality has a place within modern ecclesiology. The task necessitates a few boundaries. The first boundary is to avoid using 'conservative' and 'liberal' as labels. These labels often carry preexisting connotations and create unnecessary barriers for people on both ends of the spectrum. Therefore, the language of affirming and non-affirming will be used to hopefully mitigate any stigma. The second boundary is to limit the scope of the conversation to the denominations' views on homosexuality. This means examining what church denominations explicitly believe about homosexuality and why. The reasons given by each side shall be evaluated primarily from a historical and theological perspective. Textual evidence from the Bible will be used, but in-depth textual criticism will not be central, as this could take priority and deviate from the focal point of church denominations. The third boundary set is to use only well-known denominations for examination, so the most popular opinions are expressed, and to avoid the innumerable splinter groups that would take a lifetime to analyze. Scholars from these faith traditions will be included to assist in explaining denominational positions, as church faith statements are not designed to be all-encompassing theological treatises. Lastly, there will be no promotion or argument concerning which is a “better” denomination. Each denomination has its merits and criticisms. Each Christian is in a different stage of their faith and will need to choose a denomination based on their understanding of Scripture and theology. Thus, while the author may have opinions and wishes to elucidate the arguments regarding homosexuality, each Christian must critically apply such knowledge.

The non-affirming groups shall be examined first (Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Wesleyan Church, Southern Baptist, and Roman Catholic) and then the affirming position (UMC, Episcopal Church, ELC, and PCUSA). By synthesizing the theology of many denominations and adhering to the boundaries set, the affirming side makes a more convincing theological argument; however, the reasoning given by certain denominations could and should be elaborated upon with historical and textual evidence.

II. Non-Affirming Denominations

A. Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC)

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) embraces the non-affirming theology regarding homosexuality. The EPC considers human sexuality a “gift from God,”⁵ which derives from humans being made in the likeness of God as male and female; thus, resulting in two genders that complement one another. This is equated to the independent and complementary relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁶ The complementary nature comes from a man and woman being the same (human) but also different (genders). This allows for a formation or a union and the procreation of life. Thus, neither a male-male nor a female-female couple could complement one another. Only a male-female relationship may complement each other.⁷ This ultimately means sex is only good inside the sanctified, biblical marriage between a man and a woman.

The main purpose of life in Presbyterian theology “is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever” (Westminster Shorter Catechism). Therefore, everything humans do is for God’s glory.

⁵ General Assembly of Evangelical Presbyterian Church, “Human Sexuality,” adopted by the 37th General Assembly in June 2017, <https://epc.org/wp-content/uploads/Files/1-Who-We-Are/B-About-The-EPC/Position-Papers/PositionPaper-HumanSexuality.pdf>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

When applied in the context of homosexuality, the establishment of a “biblical” marriage between a man and woman is the only marriage or relationship glorifying to God. Anything contrary would be antithetical to the glory of God.⁸ In other words, homosexuality by definition can’t be glorifying to God. It is only in “biblical” marriage that God, “for His own glory, the mutual encouragement of the spouses, procreation, the strengthening of the family, and the welfare of humankind – has instructed *husbands* and *wives* to engage in regular, intimate sexual love.”⁹ These five points the EPC makes will appear frequently and shall be discussed throughout the writing.

The EPC’s beliefs don’t just condemn homosexuality, though. The EPC, following the Reformed tradition, astutely recognizes that everyone is guilty of sexual sins, but through repentance, all are forgiven of their sins.¹⁰ The recognition of everybody’s sins necessitates a repudiation and denunciation of “cruelty, hate, or denigration of those who either disagree with these positions or hold to other positions” and “condemn all injustices, sinful intimidation, and physical violence perpetrated against anyone because of sexual attraction or practice.” While adhering to a non-affirming view, the EPC ostensibly displays genuine love and compassion to those on the other side of the issue.

B. Wesleyan Church

The Wesleyan approach closely resembles the EPC’s view. The Wesleyan church claims God’s plan for human sexuality is derived from creation in which humanity is made male and

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

female.¹¹ The implication of the two gender creation is to assert that only a man and a woman can constitute a biblical marriage, as it “is the only relationship which is divinely designed for the birth and rearing of children and is a covenant union made in the sight of God, taking priority over every other human relationship.”¹² The deeply intimate and unique nature of marriage makes the marriage covenant the “supreme metaphor” for how God interacts with his people. Thus, a homosexual marriage mars the image of God being with his people.

The Wesleyan church heavily relies on the utilitarian aspect of marriage between a man and a woman as well. The human sexual experience is to be enjoyed between a man and woman and used “for the purpose of procreation.”¹³ The purpose of procreation becomes a priority for raising a family in godliness.¹⁴ The Wesleyan’s stance on homosexuality can be summarized in roughly four steps: (1) God created man and woman for the purpose of procreation and enjoyment of one another. (2) This enjoyment is to represent God’s relationship to humankind. (3) Any deviation from this metaphor is against God’s will. (4) Therefore, “[i]t is immoral and idolatrous to live in willful defiance of Him and to place one’s own feelings and desires above voluntary submission to Him. Submission to God’s creative will and authority is essential to personal peace and relational well-being.”¹⁵

Like the EPC, the Wesleyans still call each other to love those with homosexual orientations but caution their congregants not to approve of the behavior. The love of God allows for restoration and reconciliation between those struggling with homosexuality and God.

¹¹ Dr. Jerry G. Pence, “A Wesleyan View of Gender Identity and Expression,” The Wesleyan Church, last modified June 19, 2014, <https://www.wesleyan.org/a-wesleyan-view-of-gender-identity-and-expression-2275>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

C. Southern Baptist

According to Southern Baptist theology, marriage is between one man and one woman, and sexual relations are to build intimate companionship, healthfully have sex according to biblical standards, and procreate.¹⁶ This is the preferred metaphor for discussing how God relates to humanity; however, Southern Baptists emphasize the husband-and-wife submission dynamic. The husband submits to and leads the wife. The wife submits and follows the husband. The church, as the bride (Rev. 21:2), is to submit to the headship of Christ. This submission is meant to bleed out into all of human society for “[a]ll Christians are under obligation to seek to make the will of Christ supreme in our own lives and in *human society*” (italics added).¹⁷ Christians, under the obligation of Christ, should oppose racism, greed, selfishness, “and all forms of sexual immorality, including adultery, homosexuality, and pornography.”¹⁸ Christians are called to impact businesses, government, and society at large by working with men of goodwill and being careful not to compromise anything for their love of Christ.¹⁹ Southern Baptists contradict themselves as they claim the church and state should be separate. The separation only goes one direction: the government should not impact the church. The church, however, should impact the government and instill “righteousness, truth, and brotherly love,” above greed, racism, and sexual immorality.

D. Roman Catholic

While Southern Baptists seem to merely denounce homosexuality, Catholics, still non-affirming, take a more empathetic approach, which can be seen in the United States Conference

¹⁶ Southern Baptist Church, “Baptist Faith & Message 2000,” Last modified 2022, <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

of Catholic Bishops paper, *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care*. The paper, published in 2006, begins by stating that every human “possess[es] an innate human dignity that must be acknowledged and respected.”²⁰ In the same thought, the paper acknowledges the hate those in the homosexual community have faced and declares that it needs to end, and the church needs to help lead the way. Like the other non-affirming stances, Catholics derive their understanding of marriage and homosexuality from the creation. However, there’s more stress on complementarity and natural law, which is “the regular, normal pattern of events...”²¹ Within the present context, natural law says only a “regular” relationship (man and woman) can make a baby and complement one another.

When God created man and woman in his image and likeness, the creation process was over. God rested on the seventh day and, only after the creation of humankind, did God declare creation ‘very good.’²² In other words, only the complementary creation of man and woman warrants the declaration of creation being very good. It is only because man and woman are so different that they complement each other, which reflects God’s “very good” creation.

The complementary nature of man and woman creates a sexual desire that pushes for a bond of marriage and in turn “is directed toward two inseparable ends: the expression of marital love and procreation and education of children.”²³ The complementary argument is enhanced by the natural design in which only a man and a woman can create another life. It is the “intrinsic

²⁰ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care,” last modified November 14, 2006, <https://www.usccb.org/committees/doctrine/general-principles>.

²¹ E.C Lucas, “Miracles,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books*, ed. Bill T. Arnold and H.G.M. Williamson (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2005), EPUB.

²² United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care,” last modified November 14, 2006, <https://www.usccb.org/committees/doctrine/general-principles>.

²³ Ibid.

order of creation.”²⁴ God has declared in Scripture that only a man and a woman shall unite and procreate and engrained it into the fabric of nature itself. Thus, homosexual actions are antithetical to the will and design of God and, thus, morally wrong.

The Catholic Church, on the basis that homosexuality is wrong from a moral and natural viewpoint, claims homosexuality is “not in accord with the natural order of things” and “incapable of contributing to true human fulfillment and happiness. In fact, immoral actions are destructive of the human person because they degrade and undermine the human dignity given to us by God.”²⁵ However, there is a difference between practicing homosexuality and having homosexual inclinations. The difference comes from the will. If one doesn’t will the inclinations, it’s not sinful. If one wills the inclinations or acts upon the inclinations, the person is sinning.²⁶

There is hope for homosexuals within the Catholic Church. The Church offers practical ways to serve homosexuals by offering community, counseling, and growth in holiness. In other words, homosexuals pursuing a life of holiness in the Catholic Church are fully welcome to participate in all the church has to offer in order to grow. In 2023, Pope Leo issued a declaration, *Fiducia Supplicans*, to clarify the Catholic position on homosexuality and “irregular situations.” Catholic priests are now allowed to bless same-sex couples but not in a wedding nor marriage context. Instead, “Such a blessing may instead find its place in other contexts...a shrine, a meeting with a priest...in a group...a pilgrimage...blessings that are given...[are] an expression of the Church’s maternal heart...[but] there is no intention to legitimize anything, but rather to open one’s life to God...”²⁷

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ *Fiducia Supplicans*.

III. Non-Affirming General Reasoning

The non-affirming stances on homosexuality tend to lean heavily on the creation narrative for its justification. They view the creation narrative as an exact prescription for all of humankind in any context. God created man and woman to be fruitful and multiply. Thus, God sanctioned a marriage to be between a man and a woman only. God also created humans so only a man and a woman can conceive a child or children. Therefore, there is something innate that further dictates that only heterosexual relationships are permissible in the eyes of the Lord. Not only does Scripture explicitly go against homosexuality, but nature is against homosexuality. Part of the goodness of human sexuality is the capacity to bear children who may also live a godly life to glorify God.

To ensure nobody can claim that only the Old Testament declares a man and a woman shall be one, non-affirming denominations allude to Matthew 19:5 and Mark 10:8 where Jesus says a man and a woman shall “become one flesh.” If Jesus only speaks of a man and a woman, that must be the only combination, which exemplifies a godly ordained marriage. Jesus himself affirms and seemingly perpetuates the divine sacrament of a marriage between a man and a woman.

In summary, the non-affirming side heavily relies on the creation narrative in Genesis 1-2, the ability to procreate, and the ability to use sexuality as a way to glorify God as a means to promote a biblical view of marriage as one man and one woman. Differences arise depending on nuanced denominational views of the purpose of humankind and the creation narrative. However, with a growing number of people who accept homosexuality in society, does this hold true with the congregants? The affirming side ponders the same questions, but the outcome is different.

IV. Non-Affirming Merits

The strength of the non-affirming side is the desire to remain faithful to the Bible and cautious when interpreting Scripture differently than they have before. After all, when new information is presented, it should be met critically (not cynically) as to avoid falling into the trap of embracing “popular” or “fad” Christianity. This “popular” Christianity runs the risk of becoming subjective and straying away from objective truths. Christianity believes in certain unalienable and objective truths that have long been debated and fought over, so these truths should not easily be changed without critical thinking and scholarship. Perhaps John Yates, an Anglican, best summarizes this point: “Those authorities which triumphantly proclaim the inadequacy of the Bible to deal with this issue, by asserting its ambiguity, diversity, cultural limitations or heterosexism seem blissfully unaware of the epistemological hazards which lie before them. The end of such a path has been for many not certainty but agnosticism.”²⁸

Guenther Haas further elaborates this point by declaring “that practices are condemned within the Holiness Code does not preclude the fact that they have a moral force.”²⁹ Any exegetical approach which seeks to downplay the significance of the Holiness Code, Leviticus, or the Pentateuch journeys down a dangerous path. The path risks barreling into the logical conclusion of postmodern subjectivism, in which truths are relativized to the whims of popular Christianity.

Another strength lies in the ability to show grace and understanding in this topic. Each of the denominations examined used emphatic language when prohibiting homosexuality, yet they all seem to understand this topic isn’t cut and dry. There are some nuances (e.g., some

²⁸ John Yates, “Towards a Theology of Homosexuality,” *The Evangelical Quarterly* 67.1 (1995): 77.

²⁹ Guenther Haas, “Exegetical Issues in the Use of the Bible to Justify the Acceptance of Homosexual Practice,” *Global Journal of Classic Theology* 1.2 (Feb. 1999): 396.

homosexually oriented people don't sin because they don't practice or act upon their inclinations), and it isn't easy for people with homosexual inclinations to feel wanted or embraced by the church. Therefore, these denominations call for peace and not hatred as well as understanding and compassion over obtuseness. These calls demonstrate great and Christ-like humility.

Gary H. Strauss from the Mennonite and Covenant traditions probably exemplifies this best. He writes from a psychological perspective and recognizes the pain experienced by homosexuals. Although Strauss is non-affirming, he sees homosexuality as a phenomenon that requires love from those in the church using Romans 12:15, 15:7 and Galatians 6:1-2 as scriptural evidence for loving homosexuals and not outright rejecting them. Not loving homosexuals causes pain "because it involves becoming involved in homosexual behavior and relationships but believing that one is violating God's command by so doing. The resulting feelings of guilt and shame, and fear of discovery by fellow Christians, typically create significant internal conflict, not infrequently of suicidal proportions."³⁰ In other words, ostracizing homosexuals from a community they hold dear can be a life-or-death situation. The non-affirming side, generally, while rejecting homosexual acts, still realizes the vitality of extending love and grace.

V. Non-Affirming Criticisms

One weakness of the non-affirming side lies in its natural law and procreative logic. With the advancement of scientific knowledge, it has become clear that not all people have the biological ability to procreate. Granted, only a healthy female/male sexual combination can lead

³⁰ Gary H. Strauss "An Evangelical Looks at Homosexuality: From the Wesleyan Quadrilateral to a Postmodern Tetralectic," *Christian Scholar's Review* 26.4 (1997): 516.

to procreation. However, if procreation is a main reason against homosexuality, it only seems logical to also have a theology on sterile men and women in a heterosexual relationship. After all, would a sterile relationship of any kind be glorifying to God? Logically, sterile men and women may be better off not engaging in a sexual relationship to avoid sex not meant for procreation. Also, if sterile men and women did not seek out relationships, it would allow those who want children to have an easier time finding a spouse.

Also, with the ability to adopt and have artificial insemination (something that heterosexual couples also do), having children and raising a family is just as likely for homosexual people. Similar to this issue is the argument that only heterosexual couples may raise a family in godly way. This argument appears to be subjective and biased as women and men as individuals and couples can be godly. It seems unlikely that two godly men or women stop being holy once they enter into a same-sex relationship, unless the relationship itself nullifies any godliness. In fact, Wogaman rightly points out that many homosexual couples desire to have kids. This shows stability and a desire to share what they have and know with another life. In a world with so many unhouse and unloved children, could homosexuals not contribute to society by providing housing, love, and care for these children?

Jesus says in Matthew 18:5, “And whoever may welcome one such very young child in my name, welcomes me” (author’s translation). Jesus doesn’t condition the claim by saying only a heterosexual should welcome a child. There isn’t even a prohibition on single people from taking in a young child. During this time, children were completely subjected to their father’s will. Children were the property of their father and were some of the most vulnerable. Today, children still tend to be the most vulnerable as they are wholly reliant on the provisions of their parents or guardians. Many straight people poorly raise children who go on to be criminals or

drug addicts because they don't know how to live a better life due to ungodly parents. Thus, might two Christian men or two Christian women adopt a child and be able to give him or her a steady life surrounded by love? If that is the case, would Jesus still be welcomed by such people? These are questions non-affirming people and denominations may want to consider to strengthen their positions.

The other major weakness is the rigidity of the biblical interpretation. The Pentateuch holds a unique place in Christianity and Judaism, since it is the first five books of the Bible with supposedly legal texts for guiding a nation. Legal texts from the Old Babylonian period (late-mid 2nd millennium BCE) have been documented since the early 20th century. In the 1960s, scholars noticed many of the legal pronouncements used similar formulas as medical and omen texts.³¹ After decades of scholarly research, most experts now view legal documents from the Ancient Near East as something closer to wisdom literature. The point, therefore, is not to be a legalistic code but a general guidance for a king on how to maintain justice and order on behalf of the gods.³² Given this shift in thinking, John Walton³³ rightly says, “When we turn to issues such as same-sex activity and the related issues of gender identity and gender rules, we should be warned against a naïve extraction of sentences from the Torah for ‘biblical principles’ to substantiate a particular position today as if that position is thereby built on moral absolutes and universal edicts.”³⁴ In other words, the “legal” texts were not laws in the way modern western governments view laws: a series of precise mandates and prohibitions with the ability to be

³¹ Marc Van de Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East, ca. 3000-323 BC*, Blackwell History of the Ancient World, 3rd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2016), 134.

³² John H. Walton, *The Lost World of the Torah: Law as Covenant and Wisdom in Ancient Context*, The Lost World Series (Downers Grove, IL: 2019), 35-36, Google Books.

³³ John Walton is a professor at Wheaton College, which is opposed to homosexuality and requires students and faculty agree to their statements of belief.

³⁴ Walton, *The Lost World of the Torah: Law as Covenant and Wisdom in Ancient Context*, 140.

maneuvered around depending on the exact language. “Legal” texts of the Ancient Near East displayed contemporary cultural wisdom to guide kings and judges in keeping order and upholding justice.

Another weakness is the overreliance on the creation stories in Genesis 1-2. Non-affirming denominations fixate primarily on the fact that God created two genders and made them complementary to one another to procreate. While this is true, this severely neglects other aspects of the hermeneutical process. As previously discussed, Genesis is located in the Pentateuch, also known as the Torah, which is usually translated as “law.” However, this is a misnomer; a better translation is “instruction.” The Torah is a form of wisdom and not exact legal texts in the modern age. Therefore, a mere glance at the text hinders proper interpretation and stymies critical analysis. In fact, Genesis 1 displays the same characteristics of an ancient cosmology and mythology. Mythology carries a modern connotation of “fake”, which is a gross misapplication for the ancient world, because a mythology is a culture’s way of explaining how the world works.³⁵ Thus, a litany of questions should be raised when considering what else the original author was trying to say. The author clearly witnessed the biological fact that it takes a man and a woman to procreate, so that was placed into the Genesis 1 mythology. The author may not have cared about homosexuality and just stated this natural fact of life. Admittedly, this could help the non-affirming side underscore their reasoning based on natural law, but, as mentioned above, that also has some issues.

In the same vein, the non-affirming side usually doesn’t make any appeal to any historical settings when interpreting Scripture. For instance, many of the prohibitions of same-

³⁵ Walton, John H. *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*, The Lost World Series (Downers Grove, IL: 2010), Kindle.

sex relationships may be related to a variety of reasons that were prevalent: rape, sex cults, power dominance, oppression, cultural norms, a need for procreation, etc. Hass perhaps most egregiously ignores the historical settings when he discusses Genesis 19 and the Sodomites who wanted to rape the two angels in Lot's house. He recognizes the rape but focuses on the homosexual aspect and overlooks the power and dominance the Sodomites wanted over the angels.³⁶ This idea isn't foreign in modern society, especially in the United States where prison rape is an unfortunate reality. The historical setting of Gen 19 seems to suggest homosexuality isn't the main focus so much as dominance and oppression. This is just one example of many where historical context is ignored.

VI. Affirming Denominations

A. Presbyterian Church of the USA

The PCUSA, like the non-affirming side, draws on the creation narrative for inspiration: "In God's creation, we see and experience God's image expressed across a broad and life-giving expression of gender."³⁷ In other words, God purposefully created humanity with diversity; therefore, by embracing homosexuality (and others in the LGBTQ+ community), the church is able to better understand God. Also, God created humans with inherent dignity and worth, which can't be taken away and allows all to have the right "to live free from discrimination and violence."³⁸

³⁶ Guenther Haas, "Exegetical Issues in the Use of the Bible to Justify the Acceptance of Homosexual Practice," *Global Journal of Classic Theology* 1.2 (Feb. 1999): 389.

³⁷ Committee of Social Justice Issues, "On Affirming and Celebrating the Full Dignity and Humanity of People of All Gender Identities," New Castle Presbytery, presented at 223rd General Assembly (2018), <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3000312>.

³⁸ Ibid.

While the PCUSA recognizes that marriage is traditionally considered to be between a man and a woman, they recognize homosexual marriage is still a “sacrificial love” that unites couples and “sustains them as faithful and responsible members of the church and the wider community.”³⁹ PCUSA even allows for people in a same-sex relationship to be considered for ordination as deacons, ruling elders, and teaching elders.⁴⁰ Thus, the church wholly accepts homosexuality by also embracing leadership from homosexuals within the church.

B. The United Methodist Church (UMC)

In 2024, the UMC officially modified its belief system to affirm and approve of homosexuality for its congregants and pastors. The current language of the UMC states, “Within the church, we affirm marriage as a sacred, lifelong covenant that brings two people of faith, an adult man and woman of consenting age, or two adult persons of consenting age into union with one another.”⁴¹

Rev. Kimberly Scott, a homosexual pastor in the UMC, was interviewed by NPR and discussed the practical reasons why the UMC feels toward homosexuality. When asked by the interviewer, David Gura, where the church stands on homosexuality, Scott first answers by acknowledging the Book of Discipline: “It clearly states that you cannot be an openly-practicing homosexual and be ordained in the United Methodist Church.”⁴² Scott continued by saying, “However, in many conferences in the United Methodist Church, especially here in the U.S.,

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Emily McFarlan Miller, “The ‘Splainer: What happened at the United Methodist General Conference,” Religious News Service, last modified March 7, 2019, <https://religionnews.com/2019/03/07/the-splainer-what-happened-at-the-united-methodist-general-conference/>.

⁴¹ <https://www.umc.org/en/content/social-principles-the-social-community#human-sexuality>

⁴² “United Methodist Church remains fractured over ordaining LGBTQ+ clergy.” Interview by David Gura. NPR, August 28, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/08/28/1119840585/united-methodist-church-remains-fractured-over-ordaining-lgbtq-clergy>.

churches have gone beyond what the Book of Discipline says to make the church open and accessible to gay and lesbian clergy like myself.” The ultimate reason for embracing homosexuality is because it doesn’t seem to be a real or practical issue: “what we should be focused on is just simply doing ministry because there is so much need for just good ministry in the world...And if we’re more focused on who someone is sleeping on – with or what their gender identity is, we’re not doing the work of Jesus.”⁴³ In other words, homosexual people have inherent dignity because they are people, and focusing on homosexuality doesn’t actually help the ministry of Jesus proceed.

C. Episcopal Church

The Episcopal Church relies heavily on inclusion as the justification for its affirming stance. They take pride in having “a legacy of inclusion, aspiring to tell and exemplify God’s love for every human being; women and men serve as bishops, priests, and deacons in our church.”⁴⁴ Thus, following the inclusion factor to one of its logical ends results in viewing homosexuals as “children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the Church.”⁴⁵ The inclusion goes so deep that the church doesn’t even like to use the terms homosexual or heterosexual for “[a]t the deepest ontological level...there are human beings, male and female, called to redeemed humanity in Christ...”⁴⁶ In other words, the Episcopal Church doesn’t wish to emphasize the diversity of humanity but highlights the oneness of people as a reason to be all inclusive.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Anglican Communion Office, “Section I.10 – Human Sexuality,” Anglican Communion, last modified 2022, <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/resources/document-library/lambeth-conference/1998/section-i-called-to-full-humanity/section-i10-human-sexuality>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

D. Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC)

Similar to the non-affirming reasons, the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) focuses largely on the creation narrative in Genesis 1-2. However, the ELC doesn't focus on the creation of male and female so much as the companionship that united them.⁴⁷ In the beginning, God created Adam and Eve to share companionship, which was defined by love and trust. Love and trust are demonstrations of the ultimate love and trust in the relationship God has with human beings.⁴⁸ Thus, if the paradigm of meaningful and biblical marriages is shifted to focus on the feelings and deeper aspects that bond Adam and Eve, gender doesn't matter.

Love and trust constitute the bedrock of community in that "human beings serve their neighbor rather than themselves, they are acting in ways that enhance social trust."⁴⁹ This is ultimately seen in the example Jesus gave to his followers. Jesus greatly loves and embraces humanity; therefore, he brought his people into a relationship with the Father.⁵⁰ The ELC acknowledges the necessity of heterosexual couples to procreate and perpetuate the human race but doesn't allow this natural law to dictate who can marry whom.⁵¹

Although the ELC firmly stands with the LGBTQ+ community, it recognizes that not every church, even within the ELC, has accepted the LGBTQ+ community. They do not try to shame or force other churches to accept these beliefs, since every church operates under a

⁴⁷ Church in Society, "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust," Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, last modified 2009, https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/SexualitySS.pdf?_ga=2.8888124.863094093.1669689775-1346167188.1669254060.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

“conscience-bound belief.”⁵² This means the ELC realizes that every church is diligently working through these issues with conviction and integrity.

VII. Affirming General Reasoning

The creation account, while present in the ELC, doesn’t factor into many affirming denominations. However, they all agree God created all people in his image, which inherently includes worth and dignity. The worth and dignity of people can’t be taken away because these attributes are attached to the image of God, which has remained steadfast despite sin entering creation. Thus, the affirming side doesn’t view homosexuality as an issue. They rather approach and tackle tangible issues like abuse, poverty, hunger, thirst, and all types of injustices. These denominations also wish to address practical issues that perpetually oppress the most vulnerable. Homosexuality has nothing to do with social justice, and the LGBTQ+ community is often the target of oppression and humiliation. Liberating the oppressed truly shows God’s love and trust, and, therefore, true ministry takes place.

VIII. Affirming Merits

Like the non-affirming side, the affirming side has several strengths and weaknesses. The merits for the affirming side include interpreting Scripture from different angles, desiring to include and love all people the best way possible, and being humble in its approach. The affirming side attempts to interpret Scripture from a myriad of views. Not only does the affirming side understand that God created humans with two genders, but they also dive deeper into what made Adam and Eve attracted to one another. The affirming side interprets God’s creative power as originating in God’s love and compassion for his creation. Thus, love and

⁵² Ibid.

compassion underlie the unique bond between Adam and Eve – not their genders. This interpretive move is appropriate when one considers the theology behind the Trinity and God’s reason for creating. God didn’t have to create but chose to because of his love. God is not defined by his creation but suffers with (compassion) his creation, which is epitomized in the sacrifice of Christ. In this dynamic, the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, were created to love each other and mirror the love God has with himself, which led to procreation. Mennonite theologian, Y. B. Setyawan, summarizes this point well: “Sexuality is not only for procreation but for realizing humanity and dignity.”⁵³

The next merit is the affirming side’s desire to include and love others the best way they know how. The affirming side is accurate when it states that all people have inherent worth and dignity, because people are created in the image of God. The image of God has never gone away despite sin trying its best to distort God’s goodness (Genesis 9:6). Jesus came to earth to show people how to live as fully human by demonstrating the perfect image of God to humanity. While sin tried to distort God’s goodness and drive a wedge between people, Jesus reconciled people to each other, himself, and the Trinity. Therefore, it makes sense why the affirming side wants to include everybody – Jesus set the ultimate precedent by dying as an act of self-sacrifice to reconcile all people to the Holy Trinity. Jesus called people to follow him but was never concerned about their gender or sexuality (Luke 10:38-42, 7:36-50; John 4; John 8:3-11).⁵⁴ Jack Roger of PCUSA exemplifies such a thought process: “When we recognize that all of us are

⁵³ Y.B. Setyawan, “The church and LGBTQ: Towards the church as an inclusive communion of disciples,” *Acta Theologica* 42.2 (2022): 318.

⁵⁴ Ian K. Duffield, “The Clear Teaching of the Bible? A Contribution to the Debate about Homosexuality and the Church of England,” *The Expository Times* 115.4 (2004): 114-115.

created by God, that we are all fallen sinners, and that we can all be redeemed by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, homosexuality ceases to be a divisive issue.”⁵⁵

The last major merit is the desire to be humble. The affirming side understands not every Christian, nor every church, is ready to accept homosexuality with open arms. Churches are still doing their due diligence by studying Scripture, praying, and seeking wisdom before making a major transition. This humility allows churches not to feel pressured to make the same choices, which will make the decision to accept homosexuality (if it happens) as authentic and genuine. The Episcopal Church perhaps best displays humility when it recognizes “...it would be disingenuous to say that the entire church is in the same place on this journey...everyone walks at their own pace...But we’re on this journey together, and The Episcopal Church is dedicated to full inclusion and equality in the church as well as in society as a whole.”⁵⁶

IX. Affirming Criticisms

A major weakness of the affirming side closely parallels one of the weaknesses from the non-affirming side – the emphasis of the creation stories. The non-affirming denominations place an exorbitant amount of effort on the creation stories in Genesis, but the affirming denominations swing to the other side and neglect the accounts. The non-affirming denominations do at least address the obvious fact that God did create humankind with two genders, but the exegesis stops there. Even individual and affirming scholars tend to neglect the creation stories. Ian Duffield (Anglican) only examines Gen 19:1-14 and Lev 18:22; 20:13 when discussing Old Testament

⁵⁵ Jack Rogers, “Presbyterian Guidelines for Biblical Interpretation: Their Origin and Application to Homosexuality,” *Sage Journals* 37.4 (2007): 183.

⁵⁶ “LGBTQ+ in the Church.” Episcopal Church, last modified 2025, <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/organizations-affiliations/lgbtq/history/>.

passages used to oppose homosexuality.⁵⁷ Robert Gnuse, professor at Loyola University, in his article, *Seven Gay Texts: Biblical Passages Used to Condemn Homosexuality*, misses the mark when he also only discusses Old Testament passages Gen 9, 19, and Lev 18, 29.⁵⁸ Ignoring the creation accounts entirely, or even mostly, hinders the conversation with the non-affirming denominations and scholars.

When the Sadducees asked Jesus a hypothetical question concerning the levirate marriage laws (Matt 22:23-46), Jesus appealed to Exodus 3:6, “I am the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob,” and explained that there is no marriage in the afterlife and people will rise again. Jesus could have appealed to most of the prophets when answering the question (e.g., Isaiah 26:19-20; Ezekiel 37:7-10; Daniel 12:2-3; Job 19:25-27); however, the Sadducees believed only the Pentateuch held scriptural status. Thus, Jesus engaged with the Sadducees on their level and with their line of reasoning. The affirming side would do well to also engage with detractors on their level and understand their reasoning. That is how one builds a stronger argument, engages with others effectively, and moves the dialogue forward in a progressive manner. Some people may choose to switch sides, but only when there is a good-faith discussion and mutual understanding of each other’s logic.

Another weakness is the over-reliance on subjectivity and emotions. God and humanity are emotional. However, emotions shouldn’t be the only, or sometimes even the main, driving force. The desire to include, accept, and love everybody deserves admiration since it is the foundation of Jesus’ life. In Matthew 25:35-40, Jesus proclaims that the way his followers treat

⁵⁷ Duffield, “The Clear Teaching of the Bible? A Contribution to the Debate about Homosexuality and the Church of England,” 109-115.

⁵⁸ Robert K. Gnuse, “Seven Gay Texts: Biblical Passages Used to Condemn Homosexuality,” *Biblical Theological Bulletin* 45.2 (2015): 68-87.

the least (most vulnerable) is how they treat Jesus himself. There is also a myriad of admonitions to discipline a follower who has transgressed against the community and God (1 Cor 5; Titus 3:10-11; Matthew 18; Romans 16:17; Galatians 6:1; Acts 20:28). There is a tension between accepting the most vulnerable, of whom there are many in the LGBTQ+ community, and still requiring accountability for sinful behavior. Thus, there should be a more robust and scholarly appeal when discussing homosexuality from church denominations.

The topic of subjectivity, like the neglect of the creation story, impedes potential discussion as well by not speaking on the same level. While subjectivity always finds a way into research and debate, there should be some objectivity based on the Bible. When it comes to homosexuality, Reverend Kimberly Scott (UMC) defends homosexuality by stating, “If we focus on sexuality we won’t be doing the work of Jesus.”⁵⁹ Scott’s line of reasoning does not resonate with many on the non-affirming side, because, to the non-affirming side, homosexuality can be an impediment in one’s faith journey.

As mentioned above, subjectivity and emotions can lead people astray, since they primarily rely on human reasoning in lieu of Scripture. This is how many heresies developed. Granted, some heresies arose before there was a formal collection of writings that coalesced into Scripture as it is known today, but there was still a version of the Old Testament, along with many letters from the apostles. Scripture acts as a guide to encourage Christians to press forward and form a better world. Without the primacy of Scripture, Christianity will transform into the image of a human leader and result in disaster.

X. Conclusion

⁵⁹ “United Methodist Church remains fractured over ordaining LGBTQ+ clergy.” Interview by David Gura.

Neither side of the issue seems entirely satisfactory for the reasons stated above. In general, the non-affirming side excels at upholding tradition as a restraint from being engulfed by “popular” Christianity; however, the traditions seem to impede any inclusion of better scholarship and a deeper understanding of the biblical literature. Another way of viewing the non-affirming side is to think of a proverbial “old dog” that won’t learn a new trick. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the affirming side adheres to new research and data but can become overwhelmed by their desire to love people and risk reading their subjective emotions into the Bible. By contrast, this can make the affirming side a “young pup” who runs without a leash. In the case of these particular denominations, they seem to properly restrain themselves and do not advocate for blanket acceptance or approval of every kind of lifestyle. They still set up proper guardrails to stay within biblical principles. This includes advocating for consensual, monogamous sexual relationships within marriage.

When the positives and negatives are examined, it is the opinion of the author that the affirming side has a more persuasive argument, since they don’t settle for surface-level interpretation but rely on and incorporate new data. While some may view this as “flippant” Christianity, it actually demonstrates humility and a willingness to better understand God’s word instead of residing in preset traditions with no or few questions. The affirming side condones homosexuality but does not restart their entire theology from scratch. Instead, they restrain themselves by following tradition and Scripture to still limit marriage to one life-long couple in a monogamous relationship.

Bibliography

- Anglican Communion Office. "Section I.10 – Human Sexuality." Anglican Communion. Last modified 2022. <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/resources/document-library/lambeth-conference/1998/section-i-called-to-full-humanity/section-i10-human-sexuality>.
- Church in Society. "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust." Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Last modified 2009. https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/SexualitySS.pdf?_ga=2.8888124.863094093.1669689775-1346167188.1669254060.
- Committee of Social Justice Issues. "On Affirming and Celebrating the Full Dignity and Humanity of People of All Gender Identities." New Castle Presbytery. Presented at 223rd General Assembly (2018). <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3000312>.
- Connaughton, Aidan. "Religiously unaffiliated people more likely than those with a religion to lean left, accept homosexuality." Pew Research Center. Last modified September 28, 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/28/religiously-unaffiliated-people-more-likely-than-those-with-a-religion-to-lean-left-accept-homosexuality/>.
- Duffield, Ian K. "The Clear Teaching of the Bible? A Contribution to the Debate about Homosexuality and the Church of England." *The Expository Times* 115.4 (2004): 109-115.
- Episcopal Church. "LGBTQ+ in the Church." Episcopal Church. Last Modified 2025. <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/organizations-affiliations/lgbtq/history/>.
- General Assembly of Evangelical Presbyterian Church. "Human Sexuality." Adopted by the 37th General Assembly in June 2017. <https://epc.org/wp-content/uploads/Files/1-Who-We-Are/B-About-The-EPC/Position-Papers/PositionPaper-HumanSexuality.pdf>.
- Gnuse, Robert K. "Seven Gay Texts: Biblical Passages Used to Condemn Homosexuality." *Biblical Theological Bulletin* 45.2 (2015): 68-87.
- Haas, Guenther. "Exegetical Issues in the Use of the Bible to Justify the Acceptance of Homosexual Practice." *Global Journal of Classic Theology* 1.2 (1999): 386-412.
- Joseph, Daniel Isaiah. "Largest Christian Denominations in America: The Top 100." Christianity FAQ. <https://christianityfaq.com/largest-christian-denominations-america/>.
- Lucas, E.C. "Miracles." In *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books*. Edited by Bill T. Arnold and H.G.M. Williamson. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2005. EPUB.
- De Mierop, Marc Van. *A History of the Ancient Near East, ca. 3000-323 BC*. Blackwell History of the Ancient World. 3rd ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2016.
- Miller, Emily McFarlan. "The 'Splainer: What happened at the United Methodist General Conference." Religious News Service. Last modified March 7, 2019. <https://religionnews.com/2019/03/07/the-splainer-what-happened-at-the-united-methodist-general-conference/>.

- Murphy, Caryle. "Most U.S. Christian groups grow more accepting of homosexuality." Pew Research Center. Last modified December 18, 2015. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/12/18/most-u-s-christian-groups-grow-more-accepting-of-homosexuality/>.
- Pence, Dr. Jerry G. "A Wesleyan View of Gender Identity and Expression." The Wesleyan Church. Last modified June 19, 2014. <https://www.wesleyan.org/a-wesleyan-view-of-gender-identity-and-expression-2275>.
- Pew Research Center. "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace." Last modified October 17, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.
- Rogers, Jack. "Presbyterian Guidelines for Biblical Interpretation: Their Origin and Application to Homosexuality." *Sage Journals* 37.4 (2007): 174-183.
- Scott, Kimberly. "United Methodist Church remains fractured over ordaining LGBTQ+ clergy." Interview by David Gura. *NPR*, August 28, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/08/28/1119840585/united-methodist-church-remains-fractured-over-ordaining-lgbtq-clergy>.
- Setyawan, Y.B. "The church and LGBTQ: Towards the church as an inclusive communion of disciples." *Acta Theologica* 42.2 (2022): 311-328.
- Southern Baptist Church. "Baptist Faith & Message 2000." Last modified 2022. <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/>.
- Strauss, Gary H. "An Evangelical Looks at Homosexuality: From the Wesleyan Quadrilateral to a Postmodern Tetralectic." *Christian Scholar's Review* 26.4 (1997): 514-539.
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. "Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care." Last modified November 14, 2006. <https://www.usccb.org/committees/doctrine/general-principles>.
- Walton, John H. *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*. The Lost World Series. Downers Grove, IL: 2010. Kindle.
- Walton, John H. *The Lost World of the Torah: Law as Covenant and Wisdom in Ancient Context*. The Lost World Series. Downers Grove, IL: 2019. Google Books.
- Yates, John. "Towards a Theology of Homosexuality." *The Evangelical Quarterly* 67.1 (1995): 71-87.