

THE HOMOSEXUALITY DEBATE IN THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH:
Religious Ethics, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, and
The United Methodist Moral Landscape

BY

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ABSTRACT

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Since the inclusion of a statement prohibiting “the practice of homosexuality” in *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* in 1972, The United Methodist Church has vigorously debated homosexuality. As the debate has progressed, two distinct groupings of United Methodists have formed. One group has developed arguments for the preservation of The United Methodist Church’s prohibitive stance against sexual relationships between persons of the same gender, while the other advocates a revision of The United Methodist Church’s *Discipline* that would remove any statements referring negatively to homosexuality. This study provides one account of how two groups of United Methodists have “mapped” their moral landscape while engaged in the debate of homosexuality. These two groups each utilize the Wesleyan Quadrilateral of Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience in similar yet distinct ways. In providing an analytical account of the mechanisms that guide United Methodist ethics, this study suggests the possibility that United Methodist teaching on homosexuality may change, arguing against Amanda Udis-Kessler (2008). This study employs what one might call an existential map model, allowing for a fresh evaluation of the method employed by United Methodists in ethical reasoning, and has value for religious studies by providing an approach to understanding how selected religious actors make ethical decisions. As Jonathan Z. Smith suggested in his article “Map is Not Territory (1978), it may be that another “map” is required; in this case one that better embraces the discrepancies that exist between United Methodist pronouncements on sexuality and the lived experience of United Methodists. This account also has practical utility for The United Methodist Church, as it is a comparative study of the views expressed in Sample

and DeLong (2000) and Dunnam and Malony (2003). At present these two works represent the two main lines of argument regarding this issue in The United Methodist Church.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Research Problem and Significance

In 1972 The United Methodist Church adopted a statement in their binding denominational document, *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*, that negatively assessed same-gender sexual relationships.¹ The denomination has struggled with the moral questions posed by homosexuality since that time, and debate has been held in pulpits, local church gatherings, regional (or annual) conferences, in written articles and books, and through the mainstream media.² Those supportive of gay and lesbian individuals and their families have opposed this portion of the *Discipline*, as others have sought to defend it. Opponents have deemed these church teachings to be oppressive, exclusionary, and hateful toward gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons, while supporters have argued that the prohibition of same-gender sexual relationships cannot be avoided based on the witness of Scripture and longstanding church tradition. There are others caught in the middle, unsure of how to make sense of this complex debate, and these undecided individuals are overwhelmed by

¹ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville, Tennessee: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004). ¶161G of the *Discipline* states, “The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.” Henceforth I will refer to this document as the *Book of Discipline* or *Discipline*.

² See Maxie D. Dunnam and H. Newton Malony, eds., *Staying the Course: Supporting the Church’s Position on Homosexuality* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003) and Tex Sample and Amy E. DeLong, eds., *The Loyal Opposition: Struggling with the Church on Homosexuality* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000). I acknowledge that the terms “homosexuality,” “gay,” “lesbian,” *et al.* are problematic. Terminology is addressed beginning on page 10.

the scientific, sociological, psychological, biblical, and theological arguments made in support of and against the current teachings on homosexuality.

While The United Methodist Church voted to uphold the current statements on homosexuality in the *Discipline* at their 2008 General Conference, there are many who have not given up their efforts to make The United Methodist Church affirming and welcoming toward the LGBTQ community.³ This conflict will not soon subside, and even if the current statements in the *Discipline* referring to homosexuality are removed or altered, schism may follow. The divide between theological conservatives and liberals is vast. These differences are not only theological and ideological, but reflect geography as well. There are differences existing between Methodists residing in the United States, such as between members of the denomination in the South and from the East and West coasts.⁴ There are also differences between Methodists in the United States and other parts of the world, making the United Methodist debate distinct from other church conflicts concerning homosexuality, such as those within the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA), denominations whose churches are located predominantly within the United States.

The United Methodist Church is geographically diverse, with member congregations on four continents: Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America.⁵ The bulk of The United Methodist Church's members reside in the United States, but missionary efforts of the last century have

³ LGBTQ is an acronym that signifies the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Queer community.

⁴ For sociological data on these trends, see James Routland Wood, *Where the Spirit Leads: The Evolving Views of United Methodists on Homosexuality* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2000).

⁵ Statistics, <http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?ptid=1&mid=3742> (accessed December 4, 2010). The denomination reports 8.2 million lay members in the United States and 1.8 million lay members outside the United States.

yielded growth in other countries, particularly on the continent of Africa.⁶ Differences in culture shape and inform United Methodists from other parts of the world, yielding different social, scientific, theological, and philosophical presuppositions critical for this debate. In some cases, linguistic barriers are also a factor among United Methodists, as I witnessed in 2008 at the United Methodist General Conference in Fort Worth, Texas.⁷

The differences and complexities that have emerged as a result of the global nature of The United Methodist Church have yielded difficulties concerning administration, the formulation of a unified set of social concerns, and the derivation of a fixed, consistent theological method, among other issues. Yet in the case of the homosexuality debate, the agenda has been primarily driven by changes that have taken place within the culture of the United States.

In the latter half of the twentieth century the United States has undergone a number of significant cultural shifts affecting both church and society. Transformative developments have occurred in the areas of race relations, civil rights, the family, technology, education, the economy, and the sciences. While the Civil Rights struggle may be the most well-chronicled revolution that has taken place in U.S. culture, accepted expressions of sexuality have also undergone renegotiation and reconstruction within the United States. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered persons, and their allies have fought diligently for recognition and affirmation,

⁶ See Wood, *Where the Spirit Leads: The Evolving Views of United Methodists on Homosexuality* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2000). For more recent numbers directly from The United Methodist Church, see Marta W. Aldrich, "News Briefing Offers Glimpse into Assembly Changes" posted January 30, 2008, <http://www.umc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=IwL4KnN1LtH&b=2639513&ct=4997799> (accessed December 10, 2010). Aldrich notes, "With United Methodist membership shrinking in the United States and growing in Africa and the Philippines, the makeup of General Conference delegates will reflect those trends. Central conference delegates (those in annual conferences outside the United States) will have 278 delegates, 100 more than in 2004. Annual conferences in U.S. jurisdictions have elected 714 delegates."

⁷ During my visit to General Conference in 2008, I witnessed The Board of Church and Society delay discussion while waiting on translators for members of the delegation who did not speak English. Some exchanges between representatives of different countries were particularly difficult, with "us" and "them" language employed during the session I attended.

lobbying for the eradication of sodomy laws, equal rights to health care, tax benefits, marriage, and the right to adopt children. “Traditional” marriage (often defined as the union of one man and one woman in a religious or legal ceremony) has witnessed an increased rate of divorce, and remarriage has become increasingly accepted in U.S. society and in the majority of U.S. church communities. Gender roles have also changed, as women have entered the workplace in increasing numbers, a fact that has also contributed to changes in the understanding of sexuality within the United States.⁸

The concurrence of the decline of traditional marriage and the rise of the cultural debate of homosexuality should not be viewed as merely coincidental, as each relates to the other. But the rise of this debate is not due to the traditional assumption that the failure of the institution of marriage provides an opening for gay and lesbian advocacy. The heightened sense of urgency by advocates of homosexual relationships for the redefinition of social norms with regard to sexuality is not necessarily attributable to the failure of heterosexual marriage *per se*, but does create a situation where the meaning and foundation of heterosexual marriage can be examined.

David McCarthy Matzko has observed:

Marriage is faltering, and for many, the issue of homosexuality provides footing to take a stand against our culture’s libertarian assault on the practices of marriage. When these defenders presuppose a simple cause-effect connection between homosexuality and the troubled times of marriage, they are mistaken. But they are correct to assume that a justification of same sex unions requires rethinking the meaning of heterosexual marriage.⁹

⁸ See Clem Brooks, “Religious Influence and the Politics of Family Decline Concern: Trends, Sources, and U.S. Political Behavior,” *American Sociological Review* Vol. 67, No. 2 (April 2002):191-211.

⁹ David McCarthy Matzko, “Homosexuality and the Practices of Marriage,” *Modern Theology* 13:3 (July 1997): 371.

Therefore, what is at stake in the United Methodist discussion of homosexuality includes the practice and definition of Christian marriage. The debate is not simply a matter of whether gay and lesbian unions are acceptable as alternative expressions of human sexuality deemed good by the community or by God. This debate concerns whether gay and lesbian unions are equal to heterosexual unions, and how gay and lesbian persons might exercise the rights, responsibilities, and benefits of marriage traditionally reserved for heterosexual couples.¹⁰ This debate involves a re-scripting of sexual mores embedded in Methodism's history of interpreting the Scriptures and the Christian tradition. Thus, this debate is hermeneutical, both with regard to the Bible and to the tradition of the church, and includes not only matters of sex, but the role marriage plays within church communities.

The challenge to reexamine United Methodist teaching on marriage and sexuality is particularly pertinent at this time in the history of the United States, as gay and lesbian issues have risen to the forefront of public consciousness.¹¹ Mainline Protestant Christianity has been an important voice in American public life and is capable of *shaping* and *being shaped* by the surrounding discourse on moral issues, including race relations, international diplomacy, war,

¹⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, "Practice Preaching" in *Sanctify Them in Truth: Holiness Exemplified* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 235. Hauerwas notes that marriage itself is a practice, and because that practice is denied to homosexual couples, sustaining same gender relationships becomes all the more difficult.

¹¹ For example, see Melinda S. Miceli, "Morality Politics vs. Identity Politics: Framing Processes and Competition among Christian Right and Gay Social Movement Organizations," *Sociological Forum* Vol. 20, No. 4 (December 2005): 589-612, Debra L. DeLaet and Rachel Paine Caufield, "Gay Marriage as a Religious Right: Reframing the Legal Debate over Gay Marriage in the United States," *Polity* Vol. 40, No. 3 (July 2008): 297-320, and Stacey M. Brumbaugh, Laura A. Sanchez, Steven L. Nock and James D. Wright, "Attitudes toward Gay Marriage in States Undergoing Marriage Law Transformation," *Journal of Marriage and Family* Vol. 70, No. 2 (May 2008): 345-359.

health care, and, now, human sexuality.¹² The United Methodist Church constitutes the second largest Protestant Christian body in the United States.¹³ Thus, the relationship between United Methodism and the cultural landscape of America must be taken into account. Amanda Udis-Kessler observes:

[T]he UMC sexuality struggle should be of interest to those concerned with LGBT equality more generally because of just how “American” United Methodism is, and because of just how Methodist the United States has been in the past. The extent to which U.S. Methodism and American culture have historically informed each other suggest that the UM struggle may provide insights about the possibilities and challenges facing LGBT people and their allies in society more broadly.¹⁴

In addition, because of United Methodism’s presence on four continents, the state of United Methodist discourse serves as an important subtext to the larger conversation pertaining to human sexuality worldwide.

This study provides one account of how two groups of United Methodists have “mapped” their moral landscape while engaged in the debate of homosexuality.¹⁵ These two groups, which I have labeled “conservative-traditionalist” and “liberal-progressive” United Methodists, each utilize the Wesleyan Quadrilateral of Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience in similar yet

¹² For an example of how denominations can influence public policy with regard to homosexuality, see Fred Van Geest, “Changing Patterns of Denominational Political Activity in North America: The Case of Homosexuality,” *Review of Religious Research* Vol. 49, No. 2 (December 2007): 199-221. See also Philip Schwadel, “Individual, Congregational, and Denominational Effects on Church Members' Civic Participation,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* Vol. 44, No. 2 (June 2005): 159-171.

¹³ The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Affiliation: Diverse and Dynamic, February 2008.” <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf> (accessed January 26, 2011). According to this study, United Methodists represent 5.4% of the U.S. adult population. Southern Baptist are the largest Protestant denomination, representing 6.7% of the U.S. adult population.

¹⁴ Amanda Udis-Kessler, *Queer Inclusion in The United Methodist Church* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 4.

¹⁵ This project is primarily descriptive in nature. For theoretical approaches to homosexuality and religion, see David C. Comstock and Susan E. Henking, eds., *Que(e)rying Religion: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Continuum, 1997), Jeremy R. Carrette, *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality* (New York: Routledge, 2000), and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

distinct ways.¹⁶ In providing an analytical account of the mechanisms that guide United Methodist ethical deliberation, I will suggest the possibility that United Methodist teaching on homosexuality may change, arguing against Amanda Udis-Kessler (2008).¹⁷ I will suggest that the possibilities for change to United Methodist teaching on homosexuality are latent within the tradition, and will shed light on these possibilities through the employment of an existential map model. Though he did not refer to it as such, I utilize a model presented by Jonathan Z. Smith in his article “Map is Not Territory”(1978). This article has particular significance for my topic, because Smith illustrates how given two existing prevailing interpretative approaches to a subject, one does not necessarily have to choose either one. This model is utilized to reveal how United Methodists employ their theological method, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, in a way that yields two disparate responses to a single ethical problem. Thus, this model illustrates both the utility and the inherent challenges human beings face when employing religion to make sense of the world.

Tasks

This study of The United Methodist Church and the debate of homosexuality has three central concerns. First, this study provides an analytical approach to the present state of United Methodist discourse on homosexuality by introducing key terminology and contextualizing the debate, providing a brief history of discourse surrounding this ethical issue. Second, this study

¹⁶ I have coined the terms “conservative-traditionalist” and “liberal-progressive” to refer to United Methodists representing different and opposing positions on homosexuality. In keeping with conservative and liberal United Methodist presentations of their positions, I have used “traditionalist” and “progressive” to reflect charitably on each group. Those seeking to retain the current language in the *Discipline* understand themselves as defenders of what the Christian “tradition” has taught concerning sexuality. “Progressives,” on the other hand, believe that changing the *Discipline* to be inclusive of gays and lesbians would be a positive development for the denomination, marking a form of social progress.

¹⁷ Udis-Kessler, 175-192.

examines United Methodist sources of ethical reflection, namely Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason, and demonstrates how two main groups of United Methodists employ these criteria when faced with moral and ethical questions. Homosexuality, therefore, serves as a test case for how these criteria work for United Methodists in the United States. The third task, theoretical in nature, explores the direction this debate may take in the future based on sociological and historical approaches to the study of religion, and suggests the possibility that the United Methodist Church may change course and affirm gays and lesbian persons in the future in light of cultural and sociological developments within the American context.

Methodology and Bias

Methodologically, in addition to scholarly works on the subject this study has taken into consideration books, journal articles, magazine articles, blogs, and other websites maintained and produced by United Methodists. I have also engaged in personal conversations with United Methodist people, both clergy and laity, ranging from youth to senior adults, listening carefully to divergent viewpoints on the topic of homosexuality. Many of my interactions have come with members of the Kansas East Conference of the United Methodist Church, though my discussions have not been limited to these individuals only. In addition to reading and personal interviews, during the spring of 2008 I travelled to Fort Worth, Texas to observe the 2008 General Conference of The United Methodist Church. I was not able to stay at General Conference for the duration of the event, but due to the availability of live-viewing of the proceedings of the general sessions via the Internet, I was able to continue observation remotely, listening in on discourse relating specifically to the question of homosexuality, viewing reactions from those in

attendance, and witnessing acts of protest after the current language was retained by a marginal vote.

During my research I have also come into contact with other United Methodist leaders within the denomination, most of whom are in their twenties and thirties. I have exchanged correspondence on this question with some of these leaders, and have found the conversation enlightening. Correspondence has revealed that among younger generations there is a great deal of concern on this particular moral question.

In addition to the sources cited above, this study is autoethnographic in nature, as I am a member of a United Methodist Church. I would be remiss not to disclose this fact at the outset of this study. In considering the data, it has been difficult, if not impossible, to remain detached from the implications of either conservative-traditionalist or liberal-progressive arguments. However, my own convictions represent a theological concern and as this is a thesis in the academic study of religion, not theology, I have endeavored to be even-handed in mapping the territory of liberal-progressive and conservative-traditionalist viewpoints on homosexuality within United Methodism. It is not the goal of this study to argue for or against either position, but rather to delineate clearly the divisions that exist in this debate. After establishing where the differences lie, I will then present philosophical and sociological factors within the United Methodist Church and the culture surrounding the church in the United States that, arguing against Amanda Udis-Kessler, lend themselves to the possibility that United Methodists will change their official teaching on homosexuality.¹⁸ Udis-Kessler's research into The United

¹⁸ Ibid. Udis-Kessler concludes that United Methodist doctrinal teaching on homosexuality is unlikely to change due to United Methodism's close historical alignment with prevailing attitudes on social ethics within The United States, including sexuality. Udis-Kessler argues that a shift in perspective will rely on factors external to United Methodist discourse, and is pessimistic concerning the probability that mainstream U.S. culture would become more accepting of gays and lesbians. I argue that such a rescripting is possible.

Methodist Church's debate of homosexuality is important, yet failed to provide an adequate account of the internal workings of United Methodist ethical deliberation. This study seeks to address this deficiency, and demonstrate why an account of United Methodist ethical reflection is critical for assessing the potential for change concerning United Methodist teaching on homosexuality.

In this study of United Methodist religious ethics, I have also relied on the work of Jonathan Z. Smith. Smith, in his essay "Map is Not Territory"(1978), has provided a helpful framework for understanding the ways in which religion attributes meaning to the world. In the concluding chapter, attention will be given to Smith and the impact his work may have on United Methodist ethics. Utilizing Smith's essay as a framework for an existential map model, this study has value for religious studies by providing an approach to understanding how selected religious actors make ethical decisions. This approach also has practical utility for The United Methodist Church, as it is a comparative study of the views expressed in Sample and DeLong (2000) and Dunnam and Malony (2003), and thus voices and critiques the two differing primary sources for United Methodist reflection on homosexuality within a single resource.

Limitations

In the concluding chapter of this study, the theories of religion that are applied to this debate are, on the whole, outside of normative United Methodist discourse. There is also a limitation on the current data regarding what constitutes the United Methodist "position" or "positions" on homosexuality specifically, and, more broadly, on human sexuality. The conservative and liberal positions, as outlined in this study, rely primarily on the well-written essays composed by prominent spokespersons for either camp. Though this fact initially might

be regarded as a pitfall, my research has revealed that the essays cited to support either the conservative or liberal position are utilized in United Methodist seminary education as well as by pastors seeking to articulate their position.

Key Terminology and Influential Caucuses

Any study of religion that examines a contentious moral issue such as homosexuality is wrought with difficulty. The arguments can have personal implications, and they can be emotionally charged. Thomas Schmidt, a Christian scholar and theologian, does well to remind his readers that when discussing homosexuality we are not only dealing with an issue but with people.¹⁹ This results in anguish for both conservatives and liberals. Those who wish to see The United Methodist Church change their teaching on homosexuality express the pain felt by gays and lesbians who believe they are marginalized and excluded from congregational life on the basis of an inherent aspect of their identity. Others who believe that church teachings prohibitive of homosexual relationships are correct express reservations in stating their opinion for fear of being labeled intolerant, exclusive, hateful, or bigoted. Those who are more bold in naming homosexuality as immoral present themselves often, though not always, as lacking compassion, understanding, and love toward those they exhort, and thus create environments that are hostile and intolerant toward persons who experience same-gender sexual desire. Civil, reasoned debate of the available evidence is rare, if it may be found at all. In addition, it is often the case that the voices of those with the most at stake--gays and lesbians themselves--are marginalized or excluded.

¹⁹ Thomas Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow? Compassion & Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press: 1995), 11-13.

With these difficulties in view, additional framework must be put in place. A handful of key terms need to be unpacked and constituencies identified before proceeding. First, I will offer definitions of homosexuality, sexuality, and the terms “liberal-progressives” and “conservative-traditionalist.” Then, I will identify and describe United Methodist caucuses that have lobbied either for the retention or change of the language in the *Discipline* on homosexuality.

Terms

How does one define homosexuality, and what terminology should be used to refer to persons who have a sexual orientation toward those of the same gender? In an effort to represent United Methodist persons on either side of this debate with fairness, this study will utilize the terms *gay*, *lesbian*, and *homosexual* interchangeably throughout to refer to those who experience same-gender desire or who are partnered with those of their same gender. On the liberal end, gay and lesbian are accepted identity markers, whereas for conservative the preferable term is “homosexual.” I acknowledge that each term can evoke differing assumptions regarding the nature and causation of sexual orientation, the constitution of sexual identity, and the morality of same gender sexual relationships.

Though the terms gay, lesbian, and homosexual are all used to refer generally to the same human phenomenon, this study acknowledges that multifarious expressions of same-gendered relationships do exist historically and culturally. Stated differently, these terms do not necessarily refer to one, singular definition of how same-gender attraction is understood or embodied by those within a particular cultural, geographical, historical, or social location. Within this study, I am hesitant to fully assume the “social constructivist” view of sexuality, in which all aspects of human sexuality, as they are understood, are simply a product of a particular

culture or period of history. Yet, neither am I willing to concede an “essentialist” position that asserts “homosexuality” has some aspect at its core that transcends the aeons, providing a hard and fast definition of what “homosexuality” might be.²⁰

In the *Book of Discipline* as well as in essays addressing homosexuality, United Methodists employ the term “homosexual” to refer to persons who possess a sexual orientation that yields attraction to those of a same or like gender. “Homosexuality” refers to the human phenomenon wherein persons of a same or like gender choose to express their sexual desires through physical, bodily, sexual actions. This latter categorization is expressed within *The Book of Discipline* by the phrase, “the practice of homosexuality.”²¹ United Methodists employ this distinction in the attempt to separate the moral agent from specific moral actions, therefore creating space for a “homosexual” to remain in good standing with The United Methodist Church by refraining from “homosexuality.”²² Such a distinction has proved problematic for United Methodists, particularly in light of the fact that this categorization creates a new class of moral agent who is required to bear a different type of moral responsibility within the community. Yet, despite these difficulties, in order to present the arguments made by United Methodists in a manner that accurately reflects United Methodist discourse as it now stands, I will employ the term homosexuality to refer to the actualization or the expressed desire for sexual coupling by persons of a same or like gender.

²⁰ To cite two extreme examples, I will neither assume the position of Michel Foucault nor of Pope John Paul II. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978) and John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006).

²¹ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*, ¶161G.

²² *Ibid.* This represents my reading of United Methodist doctrine.

A second crucial term, more broadly defined, is sexuality. What is it? How is it expressed? What are “virtuous” and “vicious” expressions of sexuality, and under what circumstances (with whom, at what time, in what place, in what type of relationship, and in what fashion) might sexuality be enacted or performed or assumed in a manner consistent with the good? The World Health Organization defines human sexuality as including, “sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices, roles and relationships.”²³ This definition reveals many of the complexities involved in this debate. Sexuality is not defined as a singular idea or entity, but is composed of a network of human experiences and relationships, and, therefore, this definition allows a great deal of variance within any discourse seeking to define, establish, restrict, or allow multitudinous forms of sexual expression. Therefore, United Methodists must grapple with both modern and historic understandings of sexuality and human wisdom on sexual practices in order to propose a timely sexual ethic.

Speaking specifically of The United Methodist Church and their *Book of Discipline*, sexuality is assumed to be a part of the natural order, and is described as “God’s good gift to all persons.”²⁴ The heterosexual union of a male and female, however, is given normative status for the expression of human sexuality. The key question in terms of this debate is this: How has this normativity been established? And, as an extension, “says who, and should our teaching concerning this ‘good gift’ be broadened to include gay and lesbian expressions of human

²³ World Health Organization, “Sexual and Reproductive Health,” <http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/gender/sexualhealth.html#2> (accessed February 12, 2009). At the time of access, the WHO described this statement as a “working definition.”

²⁴ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*, ¶161G.

sexuality?” In order to make this determination, United Methodists rely on the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, comprised of Scripture, reason, experience, and tradition. The Quadrilateral is given greater attention below.

Thirdly, in order to delineate between those who seek to retain and those who seek to change the current statements on homosexuality in *The Book of Discipline*, I have designated these opposing viewpoints as being advocated by “liberal-progressive” and “conservative-traditionalist” United Methodists. These categorical designations do create difficulties, as not all liberals and conservatives argue for their position in the same fashion, nor is it necessarily the case that those who hold either position on homosexuality align theologically and practically on other ethical matters, for example, on questions relating to war or abortion. However, the arguments for the liberal and conservative positions are clear and prevalent enough to constitute the analysis below. These designations are helpful in establishing an understanding of both the state of United Methodist ethical discourse on homosexuality in The United States and, more generally speaking, the procedure and methodology employed by United Methodists when engaging in the practice of ethical reflection.

Caucuses That Have Influenced The United Methodist Church

In addition to the broad terminology used above to designate those on either end of the United Methodist debate of homosexuality, an examination of the caucuses that support these viewpoints is illuminating. A careful review of United Methodist literature directly addressing homosexuality reveals a diversity of viewpoints on how best to respond to gay and lesbian persons, and many of these materials have been produced as part of a larger movement of United Methodists working together to establish a comprehensive vision for The United Methodist

Church. What follows are eight caucus groups (some specifically United Methodist, others that independently work across denominational lines) that have influenced the debate within The United Methodist Church. These caucuses organize protests, maintain voting records on various clergy delegates, produce informational pamphlets, videos, and other materials advocating their cause, and network together those of like mind in order to establish a solidified and united front that can strategically affect change. Each caucus is described briefly, and is additionally examined in the chapters that follows when direct action taken by an organization has served to strengthen or weaken either the conservative or liberal position.

Good News.²⁵ Good News is a United Methodist caucus with beginnings in 1967, established as a magazine that would highlight evangelical voices within Methodism. Good News has continued to play this role within The United Methodist Church, giving voice to those espousing conservative theology and casting a particular vision for renewal for the denomination. Since 1970, Good News has sponsored annual convocations during most summers for the purposes of fellowship, inspiration, and instruction.²⁶ At these meetings, the vision of Good News is reinforced, new initiatives are launched, and points of emphasis for the coming year are announced. Good News has been an opponent of theological pluralism, a proponent of mission work and evangelism, and a voice for reform within seminary institutions. Good News also has a long history of advocacy at Annual and General Conferences, organizing their members for votes, protests, and other demonstrations. Good News is opposed to changing statements in *The Book of Discipline* concerning homosexuality, believing current language best reflects biblical and historic Christian teaching.

²⁵ Good News Magazine, <http://goodnewsmag.org/about/> (accessed December 4, 2010).

²⁶ Udis-Kessler, 27-29.

Affirmation: United Methodists for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender

Concerns.²⁷ Established as the United Methodist Gay Caucus in 1975, Affirmation’s mission is to “radically [reclaim] the compassionate and transforming gospel of Jesus Christ by relentlessly pursuing full inclusion in the Church as we journey with the Spirit in creating God's beloved community.”²⁸ Affirmation is a non-profit organization that has a long history in The United Methodist debate of homosexuality, and has founded other organizations that have worked diligently for gay and lesbian recognition within the church. The two most notable organizations that have been founded by Affirmation are the Reconciling Ministries Network and the Covenant Relationships Network (CORNET), an organization that provides support and encouragement for those seeking “to continue the tradition of hosting worship services that celebrate and witness to same-gender covenant relationships.”²⁹ Affirmation keeps their members informed through an email newsletter, organizes protests and acts of civil disobedience in resistance to current United Methodist policy, and advocates at the local, regional, and denominational level for the recognition and welcome of gay and lesbian persons within The United Methodist Church.

UMAAction.³⁰ UMAAction is a branch of The Institute for Religion and Democracy, “an ecumenical alliance of U.S. Christians working to reform their churches' social witness, in accord with biblical and historic Christian teachings, and to contribute to the renewal of democratic society at home and abroad.”³¹ According to their website, UMAAction, “defends

²⁷ Affirmation: United Methodists for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, & Transgender Concerns, <http://www.umaffirm.org/> (accessed December 4, 2010).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ “A Brief History of Affirmation,” <http://www.umaffirm.org/afhistory.html> (accessed January 26, 2011).

³⁰ The Institute on Religion and Democracy, <http://www.theird.org/Page.aspx?pid=230> (accessed December 4, 2010).

³¹ Ibid.

traditional Christian beliefs and practices in the spirit of the father of Methodism, John Wesley,” and “goes to church agency meetings, studies church publications, and interviews church officials,” reporting those findings to their network.³² This caucus aligns with the values of conservative-traditionalist United Methodists.

Reconciling Ministries Network.³³ As mentioned above, the Reconciling Ministries Network of The United Methodist Church was begun by Affirmation as a means of systemic change within the denomination toward the full acceptance and inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons. RMN was officially begun in 1983, following the introduction of an idea for developing a program in which local churches will declare their support for the concerns of lesbians and gay men at a business meeting of Affirmation in September of 1982.³⁴ At the conclusion of 2007, the RNM reported involvement from 233 congregations, 29 campus ministries, and 49 other communities. To provide some perspective, in 2005 The United Methodist Church reported 34,000 congregations within the denomination. Though relatively small in number, the RMN has a very visible and vocal presence at Annual and General Conferences of The United Methodist Church, has worked diligently for change within the denomination through creative protests, written publications that offer different ways of understanding biblical passages classically understood to refer to homosexuality, and other forms of advocacy. During my visit to General Conference in 2008, rainbow colored stoles, pins, and banners made those affiliated with Affirmation or RMN easy to identify.

³² Ibid.

³³ Reconciling Ministries Network, <http://www.rmnetwork.org/> (accessed December 4, 2010).

³⁴ Ibid.

The Confessing Movement Within The United Methodist Church.³⁵ The Confessing movement began in 1994, calling pastors, laity, bishops, and professors of denominational seminaries to “the renewal and reform of The United Methodist Church.”³⁶ This organization seeks to establish the renewal of Methodism through a unified confession of Jesus as “Son, Savior, and Lord,” warning that the most pressing alternative runs the danger of “challeng[ing] the primacy of Scripture and justify[ing] the acceptance of beliefs incompatible with our Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith.”³⁷ The Confessing Movement does not identify the debate of homosexuality as a central concern for their agenda, but has been vocal in supporting the current teachings of The United Methodist Church in this regard.

Soulforce.³⁸ Soulforce is an organization that “works to end the religious and political oppression of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning people” through nonviolent direct action.³⁹ Begun in 1998 by Mel White and his partner, Gary Nixon, this organization is not specifically United Methodist, but has supported and been present alongside those seeking to change The United Methodist stance on homosexuality. Mel White and members of Soulforce were present at the 2000 General Conference, held in Cleveland, Ohio, staging protests that gained a great deal of media attention. Soulforce is guided by the principles developed by Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Ghandi, and is deeply convinced that any Christian group that does not acknowledge homosexuality as a variation of God’s design for

³⁵ Confessing Movement Within the United Methodist Church, <http://www.confessingumc.org/> (accessed December 4, 2010).

³⁶ “We Confess Jesus Christ: The Son, the Savior, the Lord,” http://confessingumc.org/confessional_statement/ (accessed January 26, 2011).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Soulforce, <http://www.soulforce.org/> (accessed December 4, 2010).

³⁹ Ibid.

human sexuality, and therefore accepting of gay and lesbian persons, is guilty of poor biblical hermeneutics and an irrational marginalization and exclusion of homosexual persons.

Transforming Congregations.⁴⁰ Begun in 1988 as a venture of the Evangelical Renewal Fellowship of the California-Nevada Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church, Transforming Congregations stated mission is to “[Equip] the Church to model and minister sanctified sexuality.”⁴¹ Those who envisioned and began Transforming Congregations believed that “homophobic (fearful, hateful and rejecting) and accommodationist (uncritically accepting and affirming) responses were both contrary to Scripture, [and] sought instead a compassionate approach that would offer the hope of transformational healing to those struggling with unwanted same-sex attraction and behavior.”⁴² Though began specifically as a United Methodist ministry, Transforming Congregations is now a partner of Exodus International, and is no longer an official ministry of The United Methodist Church.

Methodist Federation for Social Action.⁴³ The Methodist Federation for Social Action “mobilizes clergy and laity within The United Methodist Church to take action on issues of peace, poverty and people’s rights within the church, the nation and the world.” MFSA is an independent organization that works primarily through The United Methodist Church, and expends energy addressing a broad number of issues. They have been publicly opposed to the language in *The Book of Discipline* on homosexuality since 1976.

⁴⁰ Transforming Congregations, <http://www.transcong.org/> (accessed December 4, 2010).

⁴¹ Transforming Congregations, “Who We Are: Our Purpose,” <http://www.transcong.org/1purpose.htm> (accessed January 26, 2011).

⁴² Transforming Congregations, “Who We Are: Our History,” <http://www.transcong.org/1history.htm> (accessed January 26, 2011).

⁴³ Methodist Federation for Social Action, <http://www.mfsaweb.org/> (accessed December 4, 2010).

United Methodist Polity, History, and Criteria for Ethical Reflection

As noted above, The United Methodist Church adopted their official statement on homosexuality in the year 1972. The initial statement, including the declaration that homosexuality is “incompatible with Christian teaching,” has been challenged at each subsequent General Conference. Since adoption, this statement has since been supplemented by other declarations barring gay marriage or ceremonies of blessing, prohibition of funding to “gay” organizations or projects supportive of homosexual practices, restrictions on the ministry of “self-avowed, practicing” homosexuals, and restrictions on the ordination of gay and lesbian persons.

The General Conference is an assembly of lay and clergy delegates held once every four years, and “has full legislative powers over all matters distinctively connectional.” The *Discipline* states further, “No person, no paper, no organization has the authority to speak officially for the United Methodist Church, this right having been reserved exclusively to the General Conference under the constitution.” Amendments to the *Discipline* made at each General Conference are binding for all in The United Methodist Church, and every four years the General Conference becomes the grounds for discussing homosexuality.

In addition to discussions that have taken place at each General Conference during the delegations of The General Board of Church and Society and on the General Conference floor, in 1988 and in 2008 The United Methodist Church appointed a commission to study matters related to homosexuality. In 1992 a study of homosexuality was submitted to the General Conference and received by the conference delegates, but the study’s recommendation that church teaching should be changed to reflect that United Methodists were “not of one mind on this issue” was

rejected. The results of the study commissioned in 2008 will be presented at the 2012 General Conference.

Each time United Methodists have come together to discuss homosexuality or any other ethical issue, they are guided by four normative sources. Procedure for discerning ethical and hermeneutical questions is outlined in *The Book of Discipline*. These sources are: (1) Scripture; (2) tradition; (3) experience; and (4) reason. Each of these four sources are intended to work in conjunction in the formulation of the theology and the ethical pronouncements of the Church. United Methodists do not regard each of these four sources as equally weighted and maintain a heightened emphasis on the Bible as “a source of our faith and as the basic criterion by which the truth and fidelity of any interpretation of faith is measured.”⁴⁴ However, the manner in which Scripture holds primacy is unclear, for any reading of the Bible will rely on tradition, reason, and experience. The *Discipline* states:

In theological reflection, the resources of tradition, experience, and reason are integral to our study of Scripture without displacing Scripture’s primacy for faith and practice. These four sources--each making distinctive contributions, yet all finally working together--guide our witness as United Methodists for a vital and appropriate Christian witness.⁴⁵

United Methodists trace the emphasis on these four sources to their heritage in the life and witness of John Wesley. According to the *Discipline*, “Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason.”⁴⁶ Over time, these four sources have been designated as the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral.”

⁴⁴ *The United Methodist Book of Discipline* (Nashville, Tennessee: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), 79.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

The interrelationship between the four components of the Quadrilateral comprise the theological task of the United Methodist Church. The “Theological Task” is described as “critical and constructive,” “individual and communal,” “contextual and incarnational,” and, finally, “essentially practical,” and is intended to “identify the needs both of individuals and society and to address those needs out of the resources of the Christian faith in a way that is clear, convincing, and effective.”⁴⁷

This study will consider each component of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral in turn, presenting arguments on homosexuality presented by conservative-traditionalists and liberal-progressives. Using homosexuality as a test case, variations in United Methodist moral reasoning are demonstrated. Each chapter reveals different approaches to the criteria and the outworking of the church’s theological task.

Concluding Remarks

As United Methodism has developed in The United States difficulties have arisen concerning reflection on human sexuality. These challenges have emerged amidst the changing cultural, religious, and political landscapes of the U.S. Joel James Shuman states that the current confusion surrounding homosexuality is symptomatic of a deeper confusion which exists in American Christian communities on the broader question of human sexuality. Shuman writes:

I believe that any faithful contemporary response to the ‘homosexuality question’ must begin with the confession that most of us who are Christians living in North Atlantic cultures do not fully know what to think or even where to begin thinking about the matter. This is not because those of us who are confused have no moral convictions, or because we do not trust the authority of Scripture or tradition, or even because we live as members of a community that includes faithful gay and lesbian Christians, but because we look around and see that we wander in what I have heard one of the editors of this

⁴⁷ Ibid., 75.

volume refer to as a trackless, 'sexual wilderness.' Contemporary North Atlantic Christians cannot say anything interesting about homosexuality because they can no longer say anything interesting about sexuality at all. For reasons too numerous and complex to name here, many Christians have lost track of the meaning and significance of our bodies as God's good creatures. And because they do not understand that their bodies matter to God, or how they matter, their bodily existence--especially their existence as sexual bodies--is set adrift on the turbulent seas of the 'wider' culture they inhabit.⁴⁸

According to Shuman, Christians lack the resources to adequately address any questions on sexuality, not just questions on homosexuality. Yet even if this is the case, this does not stop The United Methodist Church from trying.

In the chapters that follow, The United Methodist Church's discourse on homosexuality is explored using the framework of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. By following this blueprint, points of clarity and confusion come to light. Articulations of ethical understanding of liberal-progressives and conservative-traditionalists are given their due, and the argumentation and philosophical framework are evaluated and critiqued, where appropriate. The result is a thorough understanding of how different groups of United Methodists reason ethically, whether they are liberal or conservative in conviction, and brief glimpses of how the present state of discourse might progress in the years to come. In the concluding chapter, implications for further study and possible developments for this debate are presented. Ultimately, this study provides one account of the ethical landscape within The United Methodist Church. This account includes an articulation of how United Methodists utilize their theological method in making ethical pronouncements, as well as how United Methodists might develop their discourse on homosexuality in the future.

⁴⁸ Joel James Shuman, "Eating Together: Friendship and Homosexuality" in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 402-403.

CHAPTER TWO

SCRIPTURE

The United Methodist Church recognizes the sixty-six books of the Protestant Christian Bible as “a place of primary authority” for the communal task of discerning and presenting the Christian faith to the world.¹ The exact nature of the Bible’s authority, however, is a point of contention among United Methodists, as The United Methodist Church has struggled to establish a consistent hermeneutical method for reading the Bible. In 1998 The United Methodist Church assigned The General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns to the task of creating space for conversation between leaders within the church who were both “liberal” and “conservative” to address the divide within Methodism over controversial social issues, among them homosexuality. In the document produced from this dialogue, “In Search of Unity,” the 23 leaders who participated in this effort named the debate of homosexuality as illustrative of deeper struggles within United Methodism, identifying the divergence on the authority of Scripture and divine revelation as the root of division among “conservative” and “liberal” United Methodists.² Homosexuality is strongly debated within The United Methodist Church, but buried beneath this divide is a difference in conviction on how the Bible should be read and interpreted within the religious community.³

¹ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*, ¶104, Section 4, 77.

² “In Search of Unity Document,” <http://www.umaffirm.org/cornet/unity.html> (accessed January 29, 2011).

³ Elizabeth Moreau, “The Real Disagreement” in *Staying the Course: Supporting the Church’s Position on Homosexuality*, ed. Maxie Dunnam and H. Newton Maloney (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 97-103.

To better understand the current difficulties The United Methodist Church faces in their approach to Scripture, it is helpful to consider how the denomination was formed. In 1968, two separate Wesleyan bodies joined together to form The United Methodist Church. In accord with the Plan of Union between The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren Church, *The Articles of Religion* of The Methodist Church and *The Confession of Faith* of The Evangelical United Brethren Church were both included in the United Methodist Church *Discipline*. These two documents are distinct, yet similar. In 1972, a section entitled, “Our Theological Task,” was added to the *Discipline* to accomplish two primary aims. First, the small differences existing between the *Articles* of The Methodist Church and the *Confession* of The Evangelical United Brethren Church would be reconciled with one another in order to bring clarity and unity to the doctrinal standards of The United Methodist Church. Second, the “Theological Task” was intended to open new frontiers for development in interfaith dialogue and intra-religious pluralism. This second development laid the groundwork for differences to arise on a multiplicity of subjects, among them homosexuality.

Despite the disagreements which exist within The United Methodist Church on how the Bible should be read and interpreted, some agreement does exist regarding the role Scripture plays in United Methodist moral reasoning. United Methodists recognize that John Wesley regarded the Bible as the highest and final authority in all doctrinal matters.⁴ Scott Jones has helpfully explained Wesley’s understanding of the Bible’s authority. In his examination of Wesley’s writings, Jones has found Wesley relied upon “Scripture alone...yet never alone” in his theological reflection.⁵ Jones notes that Wesley’s famous declaration of allegiance to the Bible,

⁴ *Book of Discipline*, 51.

⁵ Scott J. Jones, *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 127.

which includes the statement “Let me be *homo unius libri*,” is followed closely by a quotation from the Greek classic *The Iliad* by Homer.⁶ Elsewhere Wesley exhorted fellow clergymen to be well versed in the most recent findings of philosophy, the sciences, and mathematics and affirmed that worthwhile knowledge was to be found in places other than the Bible.⁷ According to Jones, while Wesley was unabashed in his love and admiration for the Christian Scriptures and heavily reliant upon all contained therein for his pronouncements, Wesley nevertheless consulted a number of sources in deriving his understanding of the world.

As evidenced in the “Theological Task” of the *Discipline*, the UMC continues to hold an approach to Scripture similar to that of Wesley. The *Discipline* states that the Bible is “the source of all that is ‘necessary’ and ‘sufficient’ unto salvation (Articles of Religion) and ‘is to be received through the Holy Spirit as the true rule and guide for faith and practice’ (Confession of Faith).”⁸ United Methodists “properly read Scripture within the believing community, informed by the tradition of that community” and “interpret individual texts in light of their place in the Bible as a whole.” United Methodists rely on “scholarly inquiry and personal insight,” taking into account the “original context and intention” of particular texts. According to the “Theological Task,” a proper United Methodist reading of Scripture is never a static process. Rather, it is dynamic, and “always involve[s] tradition, experience, and reason.”⁹

In the United Methodist debate on homosexuality, differences in the interpretation of Scripture are evident. Liberal-progressives focus the discussion on five primary texts (Genesis

⁶ Ibid., 127-128.

⁷ John Wesley, “An Address to Clergy” in *The Works of John Wesley: Volume X: Letters, Essays, Dialogs, Addresses* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1979), 480-500.

⁸ *Book of Discipline*, 78.

⁹ Ibid., 79.

19:1-29, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, and 1 Timothy 1:10) which allude to or directly mention “homosexuality” and determine that those texts do not adequately address contemporary understandings of human sexuality, and, thus, are not applicable as such to current constructions of homosexuality. Conservative-traditionalists focus on these same texts, but expand their list to include two other biblical passages, Jude 7 and 2 Peter 2:6-7. Further, conservative-traditionalists emphasize the presence of an overarching narrative within Scripture that exclusively affirms sexual relationships between men and women.

This chapter examines biblical passages relevant to the UMC debate of homosexuality, describing how liberal-progressives and conservative-traditionalists interpret these texts. This investigation proceeds by clearly identifying five passages of Scripture and two overarching themes (covenant/creation model and inclusive hospitality) discussed at length by those on both sides of this debate. This chapter then concludes with an evaluation of each side of the debate, noting important insights presented by liberal-progressives and conservative-traditionalists.

Relevant Biblical Passages¹⁰

As stated above, United Methodists believe that the Bible is an authoritative source for the theological and moral reflection of the church.¹¹ In addressing homosexuality, liberal-progressive and conservative-traditionalist United Methodists have used the Bible to argue for

¹⁰ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from the *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Though there is no official version of the Bible prescribed for use within local congregations of The United Methodist Church, *The United Methodist Hymnal* and *The United Methodist Book of Worship* make use of the NRSV.

¹¹ Scott J. Jones notes, however, that knowledge of the Bible within the local church is severely lacking. Jones adds, “It is a common recognition in the seminary context that a majority of entering students lack even a minimal foundation of biblical knowledge, and this lack is not a new or recent problem.” Scott J. Jones, “The Rule of Scripture” in *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation*, ed. W. Stephen Gunter (Nashville: Abingdon Press: 1997), 39-40.

their position. This investigation focuses on Genesis 19:1-29, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, 1 Timothy 1:10, and Romans 1:26-27 as the five most critical passages of Scripture for this debate. After examining these passages, this study discusses two important thematic arguments employed by United Methodists. Liberal-progressives stress a biblical emphasis on inclusive hospitality, while conservative-traditionalists stress a creation/covenant holiness model which they argue is interwoven throughout the Old and New Testaments.

Genesis 19:1-29

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah, found in Genesis 19:1-29, is cited in the debate of homosexuality. In this narrative, angelic visitors arrive in the city of Sodom and are received by a man named Lot, a nephew of the patriarch Abraham. In Genesis 18 the reader is informed that these angelic visitors have come to Sodom following a visit with Abraham, where they revealed their intentions to him to pronounce and deliver God's judgment upon the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. Upon hearing this, Abraham pleads with the Lord to relent from destroying the city, bargaining that the city should be spared if "only ten righteous" are found therein.¹² As the angelic visitors enter the city gates, the reader anticipates the impending doom and destruction of the city, though not without some suspense.¹³

Lot, upon meeting the angelic visitors at the city gate late in the night, dissuades the visitors from spending the evening sleeping in the city square, and urges them to come with him into his home. After Lot had prepared a meal for the visitors, men from the city arrive at Lot's door and demand to meet the strangers. Different Bible translations present the request found in verse 5 in various ways. The King James Version, New Revised Standard Version, and English

¹² Gen. 18:32 NRSV.

¹³ Gen. 18:33.

Standard Version translations state that the request is to “know” the men, while the New International Version and Today’s New International Version state that the request is so that the men of the town might “have sex with” these visitors.¹⁴

Lot attempts to intervene, and even offers his virgin daughters to the men of the town as a substitute. The men of the town refuse Lot’s concession, and press toward the door to take the visitors by force. The angelic visitors then strike the men with blindness, warn Lot to flee the city along with his family, and pronounce that the fate of Sodom has been sealed. At sunrise of the following morning, the cities of both Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed.

The Genesis 19 narrative, along with a similar narrative found in Judges 19, has been interpreted by some Christian scholars as a negative assessment of homosexual behavior.¹⁵ These texts have been used to denounce same-gender sexual relationships and have also been employed at times to demonize homosexual persons. In his book *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology*, Mark Jordan chronicles how this narrative gave birth to the term “sodomite,” and how this terminology has been used to categorize homosexual persons as evil.¹⁶

If for no other reason than to dispel certain myths associated with this text, both conservative-traditionalists and liberal-progressives regard this text as important for their discussion. The two most prominent scholarly voices within United Methodist discourse, Victor Paul Furnish and Richard B. Hays, both argue that this narrative has no relevance whatsoever for

¹⁴ Gen. 19:5 KJV, NRSV, ESV, NIV, TNIV.

¹⁵ For a conservative example of this perspective, see Stanley J. Grenz, *Welcoming But Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 36. Also, Eugene Rogers, *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way Into the Triune God* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 23-28; 57-61. Rogers helpfully summarizes the “traditional” position, which he labels the “standard account,” while offering a challenge to this view.

¹⁶ Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

the modern debate of homosexuality. Furnish argues that the account of Sodom and Gomorrah portrays an incidence of attempted homosexual gang-rape, and thus has no bearing on loving, committed, and consensual sexual relationships between persons of the same gender.¹⁷ Richard B. Hays states this story is “irrelevant to the topic” and that “there is nothing in this passage pertinent to a judgment about the morality of consensual homosexual intercourse.”¹⁸ In support of his position, Hays cites Ezekiel 16:49 as the clearest statement of the sin of Sodom, which says, “This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.”¹⁹ Hays acknowledges that the reference to Sodom and sexual immorality found in Jude 7 may suggest otherwise, though he finds such arguments unconvincing.²⁰ The narrative of Sodom and Gomorrah unequivocally condemns acts of homosexual gang-rape, not consensual homosexual relationships.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

In Leviticus chapters 17-26 are two verses of Scripture traditionally understood to refer to a sexual act between two males.²¹ Leviticus 18:22 reads, “You shall not lie with a male as one

¹⁷ Victor Paul Furnish, “What Does the Bible Say about Homosexuality?” in *Caught in the Crossfire: Helping Christians Debate Homosexuality*, ed. Sally B. Geis and Donald E. Messer (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 60.

¹⁸ Richard B. Hays, “The Biblical Witness Concerning Homosexuality” in *Staying the Course: Supporting the Church’s Position on Homosexuality*, ed. Maxie Dunnam and H. Newton Maloney (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 65-66.

¹⁹ Ezek. 16:49 NRSV.

²⁰ Hays, “The Biblical Witness Concerning Homosexuality” in *Staying the Course: Supporting the Church’s Position on Homosexuality*, ed. Maxie Dunnam and H. Newton Maloney (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 66.

²¹ In my estimation, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are not central to The United Methodist Church’s debate of homosexuality. In my experience, many of the arguments made against homosexuality from these two verses of Scripture are more common at the popular level. Scholarly treatment of these verses is undertaken to dismiss these popular arguments; not to serve as a foundation for argument. United Methodist pastors and scholars prefer to invest their energy in the exposition of New Testament passages, foremost Romans 1:26-27.

lies with a woman; it is an abomination.”²² Leviticus 20:13 is similar, yet expands to include a proscription for punishment by death, stating, “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.”²³ These verses have been employed by conservative-traditionalists to reinforce their position, though not without critique by liberal-progressives.²⁴

Through a close historical examination of these texts, liberal progressives have found that these two verses have no bearing on consensual, loving same-gender sexual relationships, and in fact, those who wrote these texts had no conception of the possibility of such relationships. Rather, according to liberal-progressives, it is more probable that the biblical authors had in mind ritual purity, or were arguing against various forms of idolatry which required sexual acts with temple prostitutes.²⁵ These arguments open the possibility for full acceptance of sexual minorities in to the Christian community, particularly gay males.²⁶ According to this interpretive possibility, two men can have a sexual relationships that is not “detestable” or an “abomination” due to the fact that these texts do not apply to the type of homosexual relationships being considered in this debate. The proscription to kill males who engage in sexual acts is also

²² Lev. 18:22.

²³ Lev. 20:13.

²⁴ For examples supporting the conservative-traditionalist position, see Thomas Schmidt, *Straight & Narrow? Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 89-93. See also Stanley J. Grenz, *Welcoming But Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Know Press, 1998), 40-47. For examples supporting the liberal-progressive position, see John J. McNeil, *The Church and the Homosexual*. 4th ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 55-60, or William J. Countryman, *Dirt Sex, and Greed: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today*. Revised Edition. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 23-26.

²⁵ Furnish, 36-37. According to Furnish, these texts are not providing a *moral* prohibition on such acts, but are providing *ritual* guidelines. The concern is cleanliness, not morality. In addition, see McNeil, 57.

²⁶ See Victor Paul Furnish, “‘The Loyal Opposition’ and Scripture” in *The Loyal Opposition: Struggling with the Church on Homosexuality*, ed. Tex Sample and Amy E. DeLong (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 37 and Roy I. Sano, “Unity With Integrity in God’s Mission” in *The Loyal Opposition: Struggling with the Church on Homosexuality*, ed. Tex Sample and Amy E. DeLong (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 43-48.

dismissed, as liberal-progressives argue that in the Christian community these commandments are no longer applicable. Liberal-progressives are also certain to note that many of the other proscriptions found within the Holiness Code, such as the command to not wear a garment made of mixed fibers, do not apply to the Christian community, and thus strengthen their argument that these texts are not normative for Christians today.²⁷

Conservative-traditionalists have maintained that there is an enduring principle present within these two verses, arguing that the negative assessment of a sexual act between two males is significant for this moral debate. Where liberal-progressives might regard these prescriptions as having been superseded for Christians under the terms of the New Covenant, conservative-traditionalists are quick to point out that other aspects of the Holiness Code have been maintained, such as the prohibition of incest.²⁸ Conservative-traditionalists also make the important point that the Holiness Code makes no distinction between moral law and ritual law. While conservative-traditionalists argue that these verses of Scripture might lend some support to the assertion that homosexual relationships are not to be permitted, they concede that the debate cannot be settled here. The most pivotal evidence for conservative-traditionalists is found in the New Testament, for it is there that the early Christian community provides insight into how these Old Testament passages are to be read in light of their beliefs about Jesus.²⁹

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Hays, 66.

²⁹ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 382.

1 Corinthians 6:9-10.

As this study considers the evidence found in the New Testament, it is important to note that the New Testament says very little about homosexuality as it is referred to today. Gay and lesbian relationships were not a primary concern of the New Testament writers. Jesus says nothing on the subject of homosexuality in the Gospels. His strongest words that may be considered relevant to this debate refer to the marriage relationship between a man and a woman and include a strong rebuke of divorce and adultery. The scant references to same-gender sexual relationships reveal that this question was not pressing during the period of time when the New Testament documents were written. The lack of a comprehensive sexual ethic has been problematic for some interpreters and the few references to sexual matters has led some to conclude that determining appropriate sexual behavior is in the hands of the contemporary individual and his or her respective religious communities.³⁰

Among the few texts that are considered relevant to the debate of homosexuality, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 (NRSV) states, “Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers--none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.”³¹ The Greek term *malakoi*, translated “male prostitutes,” and *arsenkoitai*,

³⁰ For example, see Walter Wink, “Homosexuality and the Bible” in *Homosexuality in Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches*, ed. Walter Wink (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 44-48. For a statement regarding sexual ethics and the demands of the gospel, see Victor Paul Furnish, “‘The Loyal Opposition’ and Scripture” in *The Loyal Opposition: Struggling with the Church on Homosexuality*, ed. Tex Sample and Amy E. DeLong (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 40-41.

³¹ 1 Cor. 6:9-10.

translated “sodomites,” are critical terms for this debate.³² Conservative-traditionalists and liberal-progressives are divided concerning the meaning of these terms. Roy I. Sano downplays the importance of 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:10 due to the translation difficulties these terms present.³³ John Boswell makes a similar case in his book, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*.³⁴ Richard B. Hays concedes that the latter term, *arsenkoitai*, “is not found in any extant Greek text earlier than 1 Corinthians” and that “[s]ome scholars have suggested that its meaning is uncertain.”³⁵

The terms *malakoi* and *arsenkoitai* are important to the United Methodist debate of homosexuality, despite the lack of consensus on their meaning. Hays, and others who hold the conservative-traditionalist position, understand the term *malakoi* to be a commonly used derogatory term referring to the passive partner in homosexual activity. *Arsenkoitai*, as noted above, is more unclear. Relying on Robin Scroggs’ assertion that *arsenkoitai* is a translation of the Hebrew *mishkav zakur* (“lying with a male”) that is subsequently translated in the Septuagint Greek as *meta arsenos koitēn gynaikos*, Hays asserts the thesis that Paul likely coined the word in connection to Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. Hays concludes:

Paul’s use of the term [*arsenkoitai*] presupposes and reaffirms the holiness code’s condemnation of homosexual acts. This is not a controversial point in Paul’s argument; the letter gives no evidence that anyone at Corinth was arguing for the acceptance of

³² See John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 106-107, 335-353. Boswell’s Appendix I provides an extensive discussion of these terms. These terms are also addressed by Hays in “The Biblical Witness Concerning Homosexuality” in *Staying the Course: Supporting the Church’s Position on Homosexuality*, ed. Maxie Dunnam and H. Newton Maloney (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 67-68.

³³ Roy I. Sano, “Unity With Integrity in God’s Mission” in *The Loyal Opposition: Struggling with the Church on Homosexuality*, ed. Tex Sample and Amy E. DeLong (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 43-53.

³⁴ John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

³⁵ Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 382.

same-sex erotic activity. Paul simply assumes that his readers will share his conviction that those who indulge in homosexual activity are “wrongdoers” (*adikoi*, literally, “unrighteous”), along with the other sorts of offenders in his list.³⁶

Hays, and other conservative-traditionalists, believe that this reference in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 is an instance where a portion of the Old Testament is affirmed and adopted as normative for the New Testament community.

As stated above, liberal-progressives have found these arguments unconvincing. The lack of certainty in meaning for both terms is deemed problematic, as is Hays’s reliance on an understanding of the passages in Leviticus which liberal-progressives reject.³⁷ L. William Countryman, who is not a United Methodist but whose research supports the liberal-progressive position, has observed that the history of translation of the term *malakoi* has not always referred to homosexuality.³⁸ He states the term roughly means “soft” and observes that the King James Version of the Bible translated the word as “effeminate.”³⁹ He also observes that the original version of the Revised Standard Version was the first to couple *malakoi* with *arsenkoitai* and thus translate them together as “homosexuals” and in the second edition, “sexual perverts.”⁴⁰ Countryman does so to demonstrate that the history of translation does color the meaning of these terms and creates certain biases. Countryman gives further analysis to the argument of Scroggs and contrasts his findings with those of Boswell. Though he does not deny the potential validity of Scroggs’ hypothesis, Countryman finds Boswell’s translation of *arsenkoitai* and

³⁶ Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 382.

³⁷ Sano, 53. Sano states, “It will become less important to debate [1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Tim. 1:10] if the line of reflection offered here on the passages from Leviticus are cogent.”

³⁸ L. William Countryman *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today: Revised Edition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2007), 116-118.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

malakoi as “male prostitutes” and “masturbators” more true to the grammatical rules of ancient Greek.⁴¹ Countryman ultimately sides with Boswell, believing that Boswell’s assertion that the meaning of these terms is at best uncertain is simpler and more cogent than the hypothesis of Scroggs.⁴²

1 Timothy 1:9-11

1 Timothy 1:10 is also relevant to the debate, but the arguments surrounding this verse have been presented above, and therefore the treatment given here is brief. 1 Timothy 1:19-11 (NRSV) reads, “This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites [*arsenkoitai*], slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.”⁴³

The critical term, once again, is *arsenkoitai*. To what, exactly, does it refer? Hays and other conservative-traditionalists argue that the meaning is clear, and that the term is a Pauline coinage derived from the Greek Septuagint that refers to portions of the Holiness Code prohibiting sexual activity between two males. Liberal-progressives are not as certain. William Countryman notes that the Scroggs hypothesis is complicated by the appearance of *arsenkoitai* unaccompanied by the term *malakoi* in 1 Timothy 1:10. Scroggs argues that the two terms are complementary to one another, referring to the active and passive partners in same-sex

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² See John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 106-107. See also Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 106-108.

⁴³ 1 Tim. 1:9-11.

intercourse. Why, then, do these terms not appear in conjunction in 1 Timothy 1:10?

Countryman concludes that the author's failure in 1 Timothy to mention *malakoi* along with *arsenkoitai* is problematic for the Scroggs hypothesis and that the absence of *malakoi* clouds the exact meaning of both terms. Therefore, according to Countryman, no certain conclusions may be drawn from this passage, nor from 1 Corinthians 6:9-10.

Romans 1:26-27

Romans 1:26-27 is the pivotal text in the Christian debate of homosexuality. This text includes the only explicit reference in the Bible to what appears to be sexual acts between women. These verses also employ the categories of "natural" and "unnatural" intercourse, the exact nature of which is a central point of difference in the exegetical debate of this text. These two verses state (NRSV), "For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error."⁴⁴

Liberal-progressives present a number of exegetical possibilities for this text in support of their position, among them: 1) Paul's instructions here are not moral commandments; rather they are illustrative of a greater theme that all of humankind has fallen short of God's glory; 2) Paul's categories of "natural" and "unnatural" are inadequate in light of scientific findings on human sexual orientation; 3) Paul is referring to the heterosexual who "goes beyond his own sexual appetites in order to indulge in new sexual pleasures;" and 4) Paul is not referring to loving, consensual same-sex partnerships, but is addressing pederasty or forms of Gentile idolatry that

⁴⁴ Rom. 1:26-27.

included the practice of temple prostitution.⁴⁵ In addition, Victor Paul Furnish has argued that this text contains nothing distinctively Christian but is rather a reflection of Hellenistic-Jewish values and, therefore, due to the ancient presuppositions embedded in Paul's writings, this text is not determinative for a Christian sexual ethic.⁴⁶ Liberal-progressives maintain that the homosexual behavior being addressed in Romans 1 is too narrow to be applied to modern understandings of human sexuality which include the possibility of loving, committed sexual relationships between persons of the same gender.⁴⁷ Because this text does not address the modern situation, a proper understanding of homosexuality must be drawn from grander biblical themes such as inclusion, hospitality, and grace.

Conservative-traditionalists do not find these arguments tenable. They argue that Paul's meaning in this text is plain: "Traditionalists see in these verses a clear New Testament confirmation and expansion to females of the prohibition of male-to-male intercourse articulated in the Holiness Code."⁴⁸ Richard Hays, however, notes that this text is not intended to specifically outline a Christian sexual ethic. Rather, the condemnation of homosexuality found in Romans 1:26-27 is but one small piece of a larger theological presentation, namely, Paul's

⁴⁵ Furnish, *The Loyal Opposition*, 37-39. McNeill, 55. See also L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, & Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today: Revised Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 108-116. According to Countryman, this text does not incorporate Paul's vocabulary of sin which he employs elsewhere, and can better be understood as an extension of a Pauline concern against uncleanness and for purity.

⁴⁶ Victor Paul Furnish, "The Bible and Homosexuality: Reading the Texts in Context" in *Homosexuality in the Church*, ed Jeffery S. Siker (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 28. Furnish states, "...it is apparent from both the wording and the content of Paul's remark in Romans that he shared the common Hellenistic-Jewish view of 'homosexuality.' There is nothing distinctively Pauline, or even Christian, about the remark. Philo himself could have written it--and so could any number of pagan moralists, given just a few changes."

⁴⁷ For a challenge to this conclusion, see Mark D. Smith, "Ancient Bisexuality and the Interpretation of Romans 1:26-27," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 64, Issue 2 (Summer, 1996): 223-256.

⁴⁸ Grenz, 48.

“*diagnosis* of the disordered human condition.”⁴⁹ Hays states that homosexuality is employed by Paul as “a particularly graphic image of the way in which human fallenness distorts God’s created order.” Hays does not want to overstress Paul’s usage of homosexuality as an example, however, and states, “Homosexual acts are not...specially reprehensible sins...no worse than covetousness or gossip or disrespect for parents.”⁵⁰ According to Hays and others who hold the conservative-traditionalist position, Paul’s statements found in Romans 1:26-27 prohibit all forms of same-gender sexual activity, and thus find the arguments of liberal-progressives stated above as mistaken in their attempt to limit the scope of the text to pederasty, idolatry, or cases where heterosexuals might go against “nature” and engage in sexual acts with persons of their own gender.⁵¹

Relevant Biblical Themes

Individual texts are important for The United Methodist Church debate of homosexuality, but they have not proven sufficient to settle the differences present within the denomination. In light of this, alternative solutions have been sought. Among John Wesley’s rules for the interpretation of Scripture was the recommendation that Scripture should interpret Scripture. This principle has broadened the possibilities for the number of texts considered for this debate. As a result of this approach, liberal-progressives and conservative-traditionalists have sought

⁴⁹ Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 387-388.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 388.

⁵¹ For a summation of the refutations offered by conservative-traditionalists to liberal-progressives, see Charles L. Bartow, “Speaking the Text and Preaching the Gospel” in *Homosexuality and Christian Community*, ed. Choon-Leong Seow (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 93. Bartow’s essay was written for the debate of homosexuality in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

relevant themes found in Scripture to strengthen their arguments. Two of these themes are briefly considered here: creation and covenant, and inclusive hospitality.

Creation and Covenant

Conservative-traditionalists stress a particularly nuanced understanding of the biblical themes of creation and covenant to support their position. To establish their argument, conservative-traditionalists rely on Genesis 1:27-28, Genesis 2:18, and Genesis 2:23-24 to argue that sex is intended for the marriage relationship of one man and one woman. Conservative-traditionalists further stress that this teaching is bolstered by the words of Jesus found in Matthew 19:3-8 and Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. According to this position, God created humankind male and female, and created the covenant relationship of marriage for companionship, sexual love, cooperative stewardship of the earth, and the command to procreate.

In addition, it is argued that the exclusivity of sexual relationships is limited to male and female intercourse because of the complementarity of male and female genitalia. Conservative-traditionalists maintain that the penis and vagina are not only complementary to one another for the purpose of reproduction, but also serve a spiritual function. Through sexual intercourse, each partner is exposed to the mystery of the other's gender as they become "one flesh." Maxie Dunnam, an advocate of the conservative-traditionalist position, states:

The marriage of one man and one woman in an everlasting covenant is not an incidental human notion; it is a creational reality. It is abundantly clear that sexual intercourse is to be reserved for that relationship of marriage. Christian Scripture consistently condemns all other forms of intercourse: fornication, adultery, incest, and bestiality. Along with that, homosexuality is always condemned as being outside God's creative order--and incompatible with God's intention for us, his children. When the Bible addresses same-sex intercourse, it is always clear, unambiguous, unequivocally, and unanimously negative. But again, the discussion and debate is best served by focusing on the larger issue of revelation and God's created order. When we reflect on the biblical

witness, especially the creation narratives and Jesus' teaching on marriage, it is clear that God's will is heterosexual marriage--one man and one woman in a lifelong monogamous relationship.⁵²

Liberal-progressives would be quick to critique many of the assertions made by Dunnam, including the clarity in which certain biblical texts address homosexuality, the universality of a singular sexual ethic present in the Bible, and the rejection of the possibility that same-gender sexual desires may be a God-given, natural aspect of the created order. Despite these critiques, the theme of creation and covenant as it is presented here has a firm grip on the reasoning of conservative-traditionalists.

Inclusive Hospitality

Liberal-progressives choose to piece together a different theme found in the Scripture to support their position. By focusing on the ministry of Jesus and other passages of Scripture that teach kindness toward the stranger, liberal-progressives stress the importance of radical, inclusive hospitality found throughout the Bible. Centering this claim in Christian conviction, Victor Paul Furnish states, "the one unchanging and absolute norm of Christian faith and witness [is] the boundless grace of God as that is disclosed and confirmed in the gospel of Christ."⁵³ In circumstances where the Christian community is in relationship with gay and lesbian persons, it is argued that the gospel demands that love and welcome be extended to those persons. Liberal-progressives stress that Jesus modeled this in his ministry by sharing table fellowship with sinners, religious and cultural outsiders, prostitutes, tax-collectors, those with diseases, and the despised. Donald Messer strongly states:

⁵² Maxie Dunnam, "The Creation Covenant Design for Marriage and Sexuality" in *Staying the Course*, ed. Maxie D. Dunnam and H. Newton Malony (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 114.

⁵³ Victor Paul Furnish, "The Loyal Opposition and Scripture" in *The Loyal Opposition*, 41.

A faith that denies a person's sexual identity, and labels even the most positive expressions of that identity as a sin, cannot really be loving. The parents, pastor, and congregation demonstrate the scriptural teaching that inhospitality represents a most grievous sin worthy of condemnation.⁵⁴

Mel White goes so far as to say that Christians who refuse to include gay and lesbian persons within Christian fellowship are the "true Sodomites" based on his belief that the sin of Sodom was not homosexuality, but inhospitality.⁵⁵ Liberal-progressives ask, "If Jesus was radically inclusive to those on the margins of his society, should not our response be the same toward gay and lesbians persons, who are commonly abused, cast down, marginalized, and despised?"

Liberal-progressives further emphasize narratives such as Acts 10:1-48 to support their position. In this narrative, Cornelius, a Gentile Roman Centurion, is welcomed in the family of God by divine grace. Peter shares the good news with him following a vision in which a sheet drops from heaven containing animals deemed unclean in the Old Testament. After being commanded to take and eat, Peter refuses, only to be told by God to refrain from calling anything unclean which God has made clean.⁵⁶ In this narrative, liberal-progressives assert that the church should respond to homosexual persons in the same way Peter responded to Cornelius. The church should extend radical welcome to persons who previously had been considered beyond God's grace.

⁵⁴ Donald Messer, "Weaving a Theology of Homosexuality" in *Caught in the Crossfire: Helping Christians Debate Homosexuality*, ed. Sally B. Geis and Donald E. Messer (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 169.

⁵⁵ Mel White, *Stranger at the Gate: To Be Gay and Christian in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 39.

⁵⁶ Acts 10:1-48.

Concluding Remarks

How can it be that committed United Methodist Christians can read the same Bible and come to such vastly different conclusions on what the text says with regard to homosexuality? This question is not easy to answer. For many Christians, United Methodist or otherwise, the challenge does not lie within the text alone. Rather, the challenge rests in reading those texts while in relationships with people. Donald Messer and Sally Geiss observe that relationships with persons who are gay and lesbian have transformative power and may allow for new possibilities to emerge in the debate of biblical authority.⁵⁷ Joel James Shuman has admitted that he “has been graced repeatedly by the presence of gay and lesbian Christians” but “[being] unable to fully reconcile my experience in the parish with all that I believe about what it means to be a Christian...I have often remained silent [on homosexuality].”⁵⁸ David McCarthy Matzko has illustrated well that the presence of faithful, same-gendered couples create difficulty for any plain reading of the Bible, and as such regards such unions as anomalies which challenge traditional interpretations of the relevant passages of Scripture discussed above.⁵⁹ Bernadette Brooten has argued that, “Paul’s condemnation of homoeroticism, particularly female homoeroticism, reflects and helps maintain a gender asymmetry based on female subordination.” As a result, she “hope[s] that churches today, being apprised of the history...presented, will no

⁵⁷ Sally B. Geiss and Donald Messer, “Introduction: Can We Disagree in Love” in *Caught in the Crossfire: Helping Christians Debate Homosexuality*, ed. Sally B. Geis and Donald E. Messer (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 18.

⁵⁸ Joel James Shuman, “Eating Together: Friendship and Homosexuality” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

⁵⁹ David McCarthy Matzko, “Homosexuality and the Practices of Marriage,” *Modern Theology* 13:3 (July 1997).

longer teach Rom. 1:26f as authoritative.”⁶⁰ According to her analysis, the patriarchalism inherent in texts such as Romans 1 should result in rejection for modern audiences. William J. Abraham, a United Methodist who supports the conservative-traditionalist position, asserts that if The United Methodist Church were to “abandon its current teaching on homosexual behavior, it would cease to be a body of congregations where the pure Word of God is preached and thus would undermine its own most important ecclesiological insight.”⁶¹ Abraham’s statement agrees with the convictions of Christian scholars Gilbert Meilaender⁶² and Wolfhart Pannenburg.⁶³ There is a clear division among United Methodist and other Christian commentators that will likely not be bridged through further investigation of the texts.

Though Scripture is regarded as primary among United Methodists, the *Discipline* is clear that Scripture cannot be read apart from tradition, experience, and reason. Scripture is but one component in The United Methodist mechanism of moral reasoning. The Bible is an important source for the construction of right expressions of human sexuality, but the burden of interpretation rests with local United Methodist communities comprised of persons with real sexual desires who must interpret these texts and put them into practice. When interpretations of Scripture disagree and a normative construction is needed, the question becomes, “What has the tradition said over time concerning this matter?” It is to that question this study now turns.

⁶⁰ Bernadette Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 302.

⁶¹ William J. Abraham, “The Church’s Teaching on Sexuality” in *Staying the Course: Supporting the Church’s Position on Homosexuality* ed. Maxie Dunnam and H. Newton Malony (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 30.

⁶² Gilbert Meilaender, “The First of Institutions,” *Pro Ecclesia* Vol. 6 Issue 4 (1997): 444-455.

⁶³ “Revelation and Homosexual Experience: What Wolfhart Pannenburg says about this debate in the church,” *Christianity Today*, 40, November 11, 1996, 37.

CHAPTER THREE

TRADITION

The United Methodist Church has been influenced by multiple streams of the Christian faith. The Methodist movement began under the leadership of John Wesley in the 18th century as an outgrowth of the Church of England. Wesley's preaching and ministry built upon and challenged certain aspects of his Anglican heritage, and while his intent was never to begin a new denomination, Wesley's vast writings and innovative methodology resulted in the birth of a number of ecclesial bodies who claim his influence as foundational for their heritage.¹

Throughout his works John Wesley cites a number of theological influences who informed his thought and ministry. Wesley drew from a broad range of sources, including, "the Patristic writings, the ecumenical creeds, the teachings of the Reformers, and the literature of contemporary spirituality."² Wesley was influenced by his heritage in the Church of England, his encounter with the Moravians on a voyage across the Atlantic Sea, his formation as a scholar and thinker during his time as a student at Oxford, his ministerial experience as a missionary clergyman to America, and the tenets of Enlightenment rationalism. Through his study Wesley

¹ For accounts of the Methodist movement, see Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), and Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press: 1974).

² *Book of Discipline*, 77.

was drawn to primitive forms of Christianity and constructed an idealized version of the faith, arguing that nascent Christianity contained the purest expressions of the Christian tradition.³

Since the time the Methodist movement began, Wesleyans have developed distinct traditions based on their unique ecclesial experiences. They have been influenced by new theological trends and ongoing participation in ecumenical dialogue, and have changed, in some sense, throughout their history. The “tradition” is varied, and while it might be claimed that there are certain essentials which, through time, have defined Methodism, there are more “traditions” than there is a “tradition.” Depending on setting and circumstances, different aspects of Christian tradition have come to the fore, and as cultural contexts have evolved and changed, means of expression and embodied faith have adapted and evolved. Though the sermons and writings of John Wesley are considered authoritative for The United Methodist Church, there are aspects of Wesley’s theology that have been deemphasized or dismissed. Methodists recognize their diversity of thought and expression, but stress unity based on consensus obtained through the process of conferencing.⁴ Even when a consensus is established, divisions do remain regarding how to interpret, determine, and establish a definitive form of the tradition, but nevertheless, a defined set of “essentials” and commitment to the overall structure of Methodism bind those who disagree with one another. Matters of United Methodist doctrine and polity are determined by a vote, and because votes are seldom unanimous, there will usually be a dissenting minority.

³ Ted A. Campbell, “The Interpretive Role of Tradition” in *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation*, ed. W. Stephen Gunter (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 70.

⁴ Henry H. Knight III and Don E. Saliers, *The Conversation Matters: Why United Methodists Should Talk With One Another* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 81. Knight and Saliers explain the benefits of conferencing, saying, “It allows the consideration of many perspectives, and can more easily avoid polarization. It aims at consensus more than a majority vote. But even if no consensus develops, it enables the participants to think through their viewpoints (and their passionate convictions) in an atmosphere that encourages openness and growth.”

United Methodists have sought to apply their tradition to the moral question at hand, asking, “What does the tradition say regarding homosexuality?”, and have subsequently experienced the type of division described above. The tradition may have a number of things to say to this question, but United Methodists will seek to funnel those answers toward a single, univocal pronouncement.⁵ Because this is the case, there have been “winners” and “losers” in this debate. Simply because the denomination as a whole has decided by vote on a particular ethical matter does not necessarily result in those holding a dissenting view automatically “converting” to the viewpoint of the majority.

In the United Methodist debate of homosexuality tradition is important, but the crux of the grander argument does not rest on this facet of the Quadrilateral. Tradition is a component of each respective argument, but it is not a major battleground for debate. Conservative-traditionalists have asserted that the weight of the Christian tradition rests on their side, and some liberal-progressives have conceded that this is true, though not without some qualifications.⁶ Even so, liberal-progressives have frequently, consistently, and loudly noted that The United Methodist Church has changed on the ordination of women, divorce, and slavery. They see the debate concerning homosexuality as another occasion where The United Methodist Church should change its teaching based on a reevaluation of available evidence. Particular attention has

⁵ Over the last 20 years there have been proposals at General Conference to amend the Social Principles to reflect that United Methodists are “not of one mind” on homosexuality. These attempts have not succeeded.

⁶ Tex Sample, “Should Gays and Lesbians Be Ordained” in *Caught in the Crossfire: Helping Christians Debate Homosexuality*, ed. Sally Geis and Donald Messer (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 125. Sample states, “But what about tradition? There is no question that the weight of tradition has been opposed to same-sex practices. Exceptions to this can be found; nevertheless, the dominant picture is negative. What is also clear is how much this negative judgment is shaped by a misunderstanding of the teaching of Scripture and by these same limited views of the ancient world.”

been given by liberal-progressives to scientific knowledge that commentators and theologians speaking within the tradition did not, nor could not have possessed.⁷

At this stage in United Methodist history, conservative-traditionalists and liberal-progressives face a choice between retaining the overall negative judgment on homosexuality within the history of the Christian tradition or creating a new tradition based on a reevaluation of the evidence presented by Scripture, reason, and experience. It is invariably true that United Methodists, or those of any tradition, must choose those aspects of their tradition to maintain, recover, or leave behind in light of the unique challenges of their generation, as well as the degree to which those arguments within the inherited tradition present a compelling warrant for preservation in spite of contemporary internal and external challenges. For liberal-progressives, the justice of God demands no less than a change to the *Discipline*. For conservative-traditionalists, the future coherence and faithful witness of The United Methodist Church hinges on defending the teaching which has been passed along to them. The matter is that simple and that complex.

This chapter examines conservative-traditionalist and liberal-progressive evaluations of tradition. Conservative-traditionalists argue that the tradition, on the whole, has rendered a negative assessment of homosexuality, and the United Methodist teaching prohibiting gay and lesbian relationships should therefore be retained. Liberal-progressives stress periods of history when the Christian tradition has been more tolerant of homosexuality, or focus on events in the tradition that demonstrate how the church has changed for the better, arguing that the debate of homosexuality presents another occasion where the church can alter its teaching to the benefit of

⁷ Scientific evidence is discussed in chapter five.

the world. Following the examination of the clear differences that exist between liberal-progressive and conservative-traditionalist approaches to tradition, this chapter concludes with remarks on the role of tradition in United Methodist moral and ethical reasoning.

Conservative-Traditionalist Perspectives on Tradition

Conservative-traditionalists are clear in stating that the weight of the Christian tradition has handed down a negative assessment of homosexual practice. Citing the patristics, John Calvin, Martin Luther, Karl Barth, and other theologians, conservative-traditionalists argue that the Christian tradition is supportive of their position and that this evidence should not be ignored or glossed over.⁸ For liberal-progressives, this amounts to a significant challenge. Religious traditions pass along their collective wisdom (in the form of narratives, hagiographies, sayings, rituals and practices, etc.) to successive generations. Thus, the past is important. On occasions when the tradition is challenged, it is often the case that an extensive debate is required to sort out what elements of the tradition need preservation and what elements can be renegotiated in light of changing cultural and historical circumstances. A battle ensues between the old and the new.

This section engages two aspects of the conservative-traditionalist usage of tradition in this moral debate. First, conservative-traditionalist use of church history will be examined. Secondly, the dialectic between church traditions and surrounding cultural traditions will be explored.

⁸ Richard C. Looney, "Should Gays and Lesbians Be Ordained?" in *Caught in the Crossfire: Helping Christians Debate Homosexuality*, ed. Sally Geis and Donald Messer (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 111.

Church History and Homosexuality

Conservative-traditionalists have asserted that concerning the question of homosexuality, the bulk of the Christian tradition is on their side. Within the survey of United Methodist literature, this assumption often goes unquestioned, and therefore has resulted in a minimal focus within the arguments of either conservative-traditionalists or liberal-progressives. As noted above with regard to tradition, the history of church teaching on homosexuality is simply not a major battleground for United Methodists, for the conclusions to be found there are assumed. Much more attention is given to Scripture, experience, and reason, particularly certain aspects of science.

Within conservative-traditionalist literature, however, there is one notable exception. Thomas Oden, in an essay entitled “The Classic Christian Exegesis on Romans 1:22-28,” details how early Christian sources regarded “homosexuality,” and concludes that the judgment there is negative. Oden’s primary research focus is the teachings of the earliest Christian leaders (who, liberal-progressives would note, are predominantly male) “to which Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants of all sorts, including Charismatics and Pentecostals, can appeal.” Oden is concerned with “classic orthodoxy.” His own journey as a scholar, theologian, and Christian thinker is significant, as he considers himself one who, after espousing the tenets of theological liberalism for many years, has shifted in a substantially different direction based on his reading of these ancient texts. He has now resolved to teach only that which is ancient.⁹

⁹ Thomas C. Oden, “The Classic Christian Exegesis on Romans 1:22-28” in *Staying the Course: Supporting the Church’s Position on Homosexuality*, ed. Maxie Dunnam and H. Newton Maloney (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 85-96. See Oden’s account of the development of his historical method in Thomas C. Oden, *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy: Signs of New Life in Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 82-96.

Quoting commentary on Romans 1 from Ambrosiaster, Pelagius, Augustine, Origen, Chrysostom, Cyprian, and others, Oden concludes that “classical Christian consensus” on homosexuality is:

[It] does not yield the pleasure expected. It dishonors the body. It increases alienation between male and female. It is a voluntary activity.¹⁰

Oden further argues that, according to the classical writings in view, homosexuality is, at bottom, the result of idolatry, not lust.¹¹

Oden’s conclusions are what is vital here, and it would be superfluous to reproduce the totality of his argument. It is simply one example of how the tradition of the church is understood by conservative-traditionalists when applied to the question of homosexuality. To many people, Oden’s summary of the church Fathers will appear harsh, likely leading some to conclude that if this is the overwhelming consensus of the Patristics on such key texts as Romans 1, that is all the more reason to move beyond such interpretations to a more compassionate reading of the Bible. Can it truly be the case that all same-gender sexual acts dishonor the body, divide communion between male and female, demean sexuality, and fail to deliver “expected” pleasure? Liberal-progressives could certainly produce a number of accounts of gay and lesbian persons who would deny these judgments on the basis of their personal experience, arguing that such accounts could represent a counter-narrative within the tradition.

Nevertheless, the weight of such writings is difficult to overcome, with their influence having formed and shaped not only the Christian tradition, but also the surrounding cultural norms within which the Christian faith has become embedded. Amanda Udis-Kessler observes

¹⁰ Thomas Oden, “The Classic Christian Exegesis on Romans 1:22-28” in *Staying the Course: Supporting the Church’s Position on Homosexuality*, ed. Maxie Dunnam and H. Newton Malony (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 86.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

well that the privileging of heterosexuality within any culture yields a “mechanism of social inequality” known as “moral alchemy,” wherein the same behaviors are evaluated differently depending on the individual’s location as part of “in” or “out” group. For example, for heterosexuals, relationships are “about love,” whereas for homosexuals, relationships are “about sex.” If a gay or lesbian person is visibly affectionate with their partner, they are “flaunting it,” whereas if a heterosexual couple exhibits the same behavior, they are “demonstrating love.” Udis-Kessler also observes that within United Methodist deliberations on homosexuality an “ick factor” is present among those who are more conservative, an attitude present within Oden’s summary of these Patristic commentators.¹²

All of this is not to say that conservative-traditionalists such as Oden have failed to capture the essence of the tradition of Christianity regarding homosexuality correctly, but it should be noted how such readings can result in deeply-seated and covertly hidden prejudices toward gay and lesbian people. Such readings produce fear, and, by identifying the etiology of same-gender sexual relationships in the practice of idolatry, dangerously raise sexual orientation, desire, and practices to a level by which a person becomes exclusively defined, and, thus, labels such persons as a threat to orthodoxy and the state of holiness of a particular community. Consequently, conservative-traditionalists may not only use church tradition to bolster their claim that homosexual practice is unacceptable based on inherited moral standards, but may also

¹² Udis-Kessler, 107-108. Udis-Kessler observes, “When a woman at the Transforming Congregations press conference says, ‘We have a friend’s son who’s a *homo*,’ the loathing and disgust is obvious in her voice, as is the devaluation of the friend’s son in question. When an African delegate calls ‘the problem’ something that is ‘yucky,’ the ick factor is clearly at play. When an African bishop calls ‘homosexuality’ not merely unbiblical but ‘indecent,’ something abhorred by nature and not even easily mentioned among unbelievers, something more than reliance on the handful of biblical ‘clobber passages’ is going on. Ick factor moments contribute to the inclusionist sense of injustice, and bolster conservatives and evangelicals in their attempts to hold the line on homosexuality.”

use such traditions to justify themselves in exclusionary practices that result in exiling the very people whom Jesus might command them to embrace.

Which Tradition? Ecclesia and Culture

Within this discussion of Christian tradition, it is not only a matter of what the Christian tradition has rendered as a definitive judgment on homosexuality, or how tradition is supposed to function within the deliberations of the religious community, but it is also a matter of how the tradition is embodied in dialectic tension with a surrounding culture. While it may be extremely difficult to differentiate between the church and “the world” (for the church, as part of a surrounding social order, is embedded within a geographical, historical, and cultural context), nevertheless such distinctions do factor in to the United Methodist debate of homosexuality. Conservative-traditionalists have made this point consistently, questioning the degree to which this battle is constitutive of a much-needed theological and doctrinal revision, or simply the outgrowth of a compulsion to accommodate to the surrounding secular culture. If this is the case, it is not a matter of politics interfering with religion, but a matter of the church adopting one form of politics over another, for the church, by its very nature, constitutes a unique politics. Therefore, ecclesial identity is at stake.

D. Stephen Long argues that the church’s current battle over homosexuality is more a matter of cultural and ideological captivity to the tenets of individualism, liberalism, and political democracy, more so than a fight over matters of theology and ecclesiology. Long states:

...although this seems to me to be obvious, recent Church conversations on questions of sexuality have made little to no mention of the social and political contexts that influence all forms of exchange at present. In fact, many of the arguments for gay and lesbian unions assume the normativity of those forms of exchange and invite the Church to

become more accommodated to them, thereby subordinating the Church's theological tradition to that particular tradition of thought and practice known as "liberalism."¹³

To clarify, Long does not here refer to "liberalism" as opposed to "conservatism," or use this reference to invoke a stereotypical difference between Democrats and Republicans in American political discourse. "Liberalism," as employed in Long's essay, refers to a tradition of political philosophy wherein individuals are regarded as free, equal, and possessing the capacity and privilege to conceive of and pursue their own conception of the good. Long believes that such a tradition impinges the capacity of the church to exercise formal discipline, privileging "individual possession over any communal ownership." When individual possession is granted such status to, "property, rights, knowledge, or sexual orientation," these possessions are transformed into private commodities over which a broader community or moral tradition cannot lay claim or authority.¹⁴

Long's analysis proceeds by examining three primary institutions wherein the ideals of liberalism are espoused: the market, democratic government, and the university. Long claims that "the tradition of liberalism has informed the contemporary ecclesiology of United Methodism through its dogmatic commitment to an 'inclusivist' Church,"¹⁵ and has been actualized in large part due to the influence of these formational cultural institutions.

First, Long examines the important philosophical views of Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, and Friedrich Hayek, describing how these thinkers revolutionized human societies by presenting an ideology that grants individuals "the liberty to define her or his own ends without

¹³ D. Stephen Long, "Ecclesial Disobedience or Ecclesial Subordination to Liberal Institutions?" in *Staying the Course: Supporting the Church's Position on Homosexuality*, ed. Maxie Dunnam and H. Newton Malony (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 41-42.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

interference from the government or the church,” thus creating conditions wherein “No common end to economic life should be set forth, and no common ‘end’ to the religious or moral life should be established either.”¹⁶ People are free to do whatsoever they choose. Any unifying moral, political, or religious vision for what it might mean to be a good society, according to Long, is regarded as a “totalitarianism,” and therefore is rejected. Long states, “The individual freedom liberalism secures requires the vanquishing of all who would find solace in the practices of a common life.”¹⁷ According to Long, liberalism, in reducing morality and theology to commodity exchanges, undermines the fundamental nature of the church as a body of believers working towards a common end that they do not choose or discern themselves, but rather receive, adopt, and pursue underneath the oversight of communal discipline.

Next, Long examines the influence of liberalism on the practices of the university. Long continues to look at Adam’s Smith’s conception of liberty, while noting how this idea was developed later by John Stuart Mill, particularly on the topic of education. Long notes that in some ways Mill’s application of this idea in the field of education has been for the good, however, “from his tenacious adherence to liberty as the principle upon which all exchanges take place...he also argued that not only ‘fornication’ and ‘gambling’ but also ‘pimping’ and ‘keeping a gambling house,’ could be tolerated.”¹⁸ Mill “noted that neither should society proscribe for individuals even on these disputed issues, nor should powerful persons be permitted to entice persons into such activities.”¹⁹ According to Mill, individuals must be given the freedom to

¹⁶ Ibid., 43.

¹⁷ Ibid., 44.

¹⁸ Ibid., 45.

¹⁹ Ibid., 45.

frequent or to avoid any establishment by their own volition, uncoerced, and must be persuaded that any exchange is exclusively for their own personal benefit.

So, what do liberal practices have to do with the practices of the university? Long explains:

Once exchanges are based on this underlying principle of liberty, self-interest contradicts itself. It must, at the same time, be and not be the basis for exchange. All communal arrangements must now appear (albeit illusory) as neutral mechanisms, whereby those who exercise them do so without interest. But that, of course, only creates suspicion. In fact, the suspicion against any communal forms of life now becomes the only legitimate form of communal life. This form of exchange has tremendous influence on current university life. The university is viewed as a ‘neutral’ broker of knowledge where individuals come to a marketplace of ideas and are presented with a cafeteria-style approach to ‘truths,’ from which they can each choose for themselves. Interference from institutions like the church, synagogue, or mosque cannot be granted a place within universities as they are presently constituted, except on the margins of their life. For these other institutions assume knowledge of truth that is not a function of individual preference.²⁰

According to Long’s description, the university, in a similar fashion to the market, undercuts any claim a community may have on the life of the individual by presenting ideas as private goods that then serve as values or preferences rather than truths. When this type of exchange takes hold within the *ecclesia*, communal discipline becomes difficult.

Finally, Long examines political exchanges within the liberal tradition and their affects on the discourse of The United Methodist Church. Long turns first to the opening lines of the United States Declaration of Independence, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they endowed by their Creator...” noting that “Each individual is endowed with a ‘possession’ that must be protected, and it alone can be the basis for political society.”²¹ Long then chronicles how this idea has been interpreted by intellectuals in regard to religion.

²⁰ Ibid., 45-46.

²¹ Ibid., 46.

His argument pivots on a selection from James Madison’s “Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments,” from which Long concludes, “Madison does not argue that religion *should* not be a communal enterprise, by which we learn obedience to a common life; he argues religion *cannot* be this. It is not possible based upon the principles of individual liberty he has inherited.”²² And thus, Long’s familiar refrain is heard once again: political liberalism provides an account of the individual that encourages a form of exchange that undermines tradition and communal discipline.

With these three cultural forces in view, Long then presents the state of the question and the implications he sees for The United Methodist Church and their debate of homosexuality.

Summarizing the present state of discourse, Long writes:

The dominant argument opposing the United Methodist disciplinary statements against the union of gay and lesbian persons fits well the tradition of liberalism that defines nearly every cultural exchange at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This argument assumes that the Creator has endowed each individual with a certain orientation that should be protected by right and kept free from encroachment by communal interests. The only moral question is if individual’s choices are authentic expressions of that underlying possession or orientation.²³

Thus:

It is not then surprising that the only remaining question is if we ‘choose’ to live authentically with our individual orientation. That the Church might determine some forms of orientation are incompatible with its common life and others or not is now a priori viewed as oppressive. Like the forms of liberal exchange that dominate the market, the university, and government, sexual exchange is first a question of individual possession that cannot be discerned through a quest for a common life. The only task of the Church is to help people choose to live authentically with their orientation.²⁴

²² Ibid., 47.

²³ Ibid., 49.

²⁴ Ibid., 50.

The leavening effect of political liberalism, according to Long, is that United Methodism's primary commitment has become being an "inclusivist" church.²⁵ While such a vision may sound compelling, particularly when it holds such values as being non-judgmental, open, and tolerant, Long points out the difficulties such a vision holds, in that it becomes exclusionary, including only those "who are committed to a vision of the church as 'open' and 'inclusive.'"²⁶ If a someone within the denomination believes that United Methodism's primary commitment is not inclusivity, but rather to holiness striving for perfection:

...this ecclesiology cannot, ipso facto, be 'included' once we begin with the notions of the church as 'open' and 'inclusive'; for the latter, in keeping with the liberal tradition, refuses to exercise discernment on what is keeping with our common life, except for that act of discernment that categorically states we must not judge about common ends.²⁷

Long identifies "inclusivists" and "common life sanctificationists" as representing "two different visions of communal life." The weakness of the inclusivist vision, according to Long, is that it is unable to identify the ways in which it is exclusionary and judgmental, is constantly at war with its own past, and lacks internal systems of accountability that allow for the development of a clear and consistent vision for communal life.²⁸

The devastating effects of liberalism over traditional religious or sectarian communities as portrayed by Long has been critiqued, most notably by Jeffery Stout in *Democracy and*

²⁵ Ibid., 52.

²⁶ Ibid., 52-53.

²⁷ Ibid., 53.

²⁸ Ibid., 54.

*Tradition.*²⁹ Stout's critique does not negate Long's call to "discern the times" within which The United Methodist Church currently exists, nor does it discredit the value of analyzing the way in which The United Methodist Church's cultural situation influences and frames doctrinal disputes and policy debates. It does, however, serve to remind conservative-traditionalists like Long that the church, though it strives to remain distinct from "the world" is embedded within "the world." It may be the case that such embeddedness serves in some instances to be detrimental, perhaps even in ways Long has described. However, it may also be the case that elements of the culture within which the church finds itself embedded result in its betterment. For example, in the case of liberalism, perhaps United Methodists have become more cognizant of the value of the individual, particularly when that person is LGBTQ, and rather than quickly expelling such persons, some United Methodists work instead for creative solutions that enable their inclusion.

Liberal-Progressive Perspectives on Tradition

Liberal-progressives approach the history of the Christian faith differently from conservative-traditionalists, emphasizing ways the tradition has changed based on its historical and cultural location, and note how in many cases these changes have allowed the faith to mature, blossom, and flourish in new and surprising ways. Homosexuality, according to liberal-progressives, presents an occasion for the tradition to be reevaluated, for judgments rendered in the past by the Bible and preeminent theologians grounded upon different (and perhaps limited)

²⁹ Jeffery Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 140-161. Stout does not directly engage Long, but rather concerns himself with the theological ethics of Stanley Hauerwas. Long and Hauerwas employ similar critiques against the tradition of political liberalism and the implications for ecclesiology. Stout, in describing Hauerwas's critique of political liberalism as detrimental for traditions, counters by saying, "Commitment to democracy does not entail the rejection of tradition. It requires *jointly* taking responsibility for the criticism and renewal of tradition and for the justice of our social and political arrangements"(emphasis his). Therefore, it appears Stout would argue, democratic forms of religion do not undermine tradition, but open up the type of creative space needed for the reexamination and rebirth of tradition.

datum may not capture the full measure of wisdom needed for Christian faith to flourish today. Liberal-progressives argue that negative judgments on homosexuality should be jettisoned not simply because they have become passé, but rather believe that a change in position is needed so that Methodism, and subsequently all of Christendom, might see the realization of the highest Christian ideals--unconditional love of neighbor, realization of the beloved community, and reconciliation for all peoples.

This section will examine two strains within the liberal-progressive approach to tradition. First, a liberal-progressive understanding of how the Christian tradition shapes and informs contemporary Christian sexual ethics is examined. Second, a liberal-progressive understanding of the overall adaptability of the Christian tradition is presented.

How Does the Tradition Shape Christian Sexual Ethics?

United Methodists do appeal to *sola Scriptura* as a basis for authority, and while Wesley oftentimes appealed to the Christian tradition (most notably the earliest epoch of Christianity), he did so without uniformity. Tradition, for Wesley, would often come in the form of either relying on the writings of the Patristics while in debate, or appealing to the early formation of Anglicanism in an effort to fuel renewal within the church of his birth.³⁰ Wesley never employed a uniform approach to the Christian tradition, nor proposed a rule for its proper use, depending more so on Scripture as the primary basis for establishing Christian doctrine.

In a surprising way that will be demonstrated presently, a finely nuanced usage of *sola Scriptura* by some liberal-progressives narrows the scope of the tradition to be considered as authoritative for the debate of homosexuality. Turning first toward the Bible, liberal-

³⁰ Ted A. Campbell, "The Interpretative Role of Tradition" in *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation*, ed. W. Stephen Gunter (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), 63-75.

progressives often note the plurality of expressions of sexual norms found therein, whether it be polygamy (always a man having married multiple women), the usage of concubines or slaves for the bearing of children, or singleness and celibacy. Depending on the era and cultural situation of the ancient Hebrew people and the early Christ-followers, norms varied. This line of argument has had implications for this debate, and is exemplified by two prominent scholars, Walter Wink and Victor Paul Furnish.

Walter Wink, a United Methodist biblical scholar and theologian, finds no uniform set of norms for human sexual behavior within the Bible, choosing rather to appeal to universal principles he finds throughout the pages of Scripture. Wink relies on those elements of the biblical story that seem undeniably clear, rather than bogging down in passages mired in controversy and obscurity, such as those traditionally examined in the debate of homosexuality.

Wink states:

The crux of the matter, it seems to me, is simply that the Bible has no sexual ethic. Instead, it exhibits a variety of sexual mores, some of which changed over the thousand year span of biblical history. Mores are unreflective customs accepted by a given community. Many of the practices the Bible prohibits, we allow, and many that it allows, we prohibit. The Bible knows only a love ethic, which is constantly being brought to bear on whatever sexual mores are dominant in any given country, or culture, or period.³¹

Wink concedes that his case is not beyond critique, but nonetheless believes that his argument possesses enough warrant to be taken seriously by those in the Christian community who are engaged in this debate.

Victor Paul Furnish agrees with Walter Wink in arguing that a consistent ethic on human sexuality does not exist within the Bible. In the absence of a biblical “tradition” to which any

³¹ Walter Wink, *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 44.

subsequent tradition might be traced, Furnish offers an alternative approach to how sexual ethics should be approached by Christians in any age. Furnish declares:

what the church teaches always stands under the judgment of the gospel, and has to be constantly reconceived and reformulated to take account of ever new realities, deeper insights, and an enlarging vision. Like God's grace, God's claim is boundless because it embraces our *lives*, whole and entire, that they may be defined and shaped by God's grace and ever newly expressive of it. So when it comes to sexual conduct, or anything else, the appropriate question is not, "What is compatible with Christian teaching?" The appropriate question is always and repeatedly, "How can the grace of God disclosed in Christ, out of which we live, be *lived out* most fully and appropriately in this place and under these circumstances?"³²

Furnish further states, "Scripture does not and...cannot be expected to offer timeless statements about God's will."³³ The Methodist community therefore carries the burden of discerning the direction God would have them to go. According to Furnish, because the Bible does not contain any clear or decisive word on sexual ethics that would necessarily preclude gay or lesbian relationships, full inclusion is a live option for Untied Methodists.

Following this logic carefully, it is evident how liberal-progressives invoke *sola Scriptura* to undercut the bulk of church tradition. In the same way that all biblical presentation of human sexual expression are culturally conditioned, so too are all presentations of sexuality within church tradition held captive to their respective cultures. Consequently, according to liberal-progressive Methodists, the task of the church becomes the discernment of God's will through sensitivity to the leading of the Spirit of God. This discernment is undertaken in dialogue with contemporary scientific and cultural understandings of sexuality and is also guided by the biblical principles of love, grace, and responsibility.

³² Furnish, *The Loyal Opposition*, 41.

³³ *Ibid.*

The assertion by liberal-progressives that the Bible lacks a unified vision concerning appropriate expressions of human sexuality has been contested. Such an approach seems to assume that the tradition itself must constantly be reborn, rather than received, and that wisdom concerning sexual matters is to be maintained only in its universalized expressions (love, mutuality, respect, consent, pleasure, etc.), rather than in particulars (agents, gender, acts, *telos*, etc.). Such an assumption is difficult to navigate. The Christian tradition exhibits both continuity and diversity, whereby adherents allow for maintaining some elements of the social order wherein the faith has become embedded, while transforming other aspects of the surrounding social order according to primary doctrinal commitments.

The Tradition of Change Within the Tradition

Liberal-progressives argue that the tradition of Christianity is invariably flexible. Depending on the needs and challenges faced by those within the Christian community, adaptations can be made to the tradition in order to best move forward in light of new insights or communal experience. In liberal-progressive reflections on tradition, it is commonly observed that the church has changed their approach to divorce, slavery, or women in ordained ministry. The hope for change on homosexuality has been explicitly stated, and is viewed by liberal-progressives as another instance where the church can repent, reformulate their doctrine, and move forward as a community more closely aligned with the demands of their central message, the Christian gospel of grace.

Dwight W. Vogel provides one account of how liberal-progressive United Methodists have regarded tradition when considering homosexuality. He states:

Tradition refers not to the traditions which churches, or even *the* church, has, but with the dominant thrust of the church's teaching. The church does not always understand what is central and what is tangential at any given time. There have been periods when the church has thought that the view that the earth revolved around the sun was heresy, or that there was an implicit approval of slavery within the Tradition. [...]

We are called upon to discern (with the help of the Holy Spirit) what is central to the Tradition of the church and what is culturally conditioned baggage, which we have confused with the Tradition. I find in baptism and the celebration of the Lord's Supper the affirmations by the church of the worth of all God's children and the call to love and justice inherent in them. I am called to help the church come to see that its Tradition has to do with covenant and commitment and love and compassion, much more to whether the partner who is God's gift to me is male or female.³⁴

Vogel affirms that the church possesses a tradition reaching across time that contains within it the resources to welcome and affirm LGBTQ persons. He refers to covenant, commitment, love, and compassion as those enduring values that transcend the particularities of sexual orientation, and understands his ministry as the outflow of those primary emphases of the Christian tradition.

Vogel does not wish to deny the authority of the tradition, but seeks within that tradition those emphases found across the breadth of the church's history. He is seeking to capture the universals, and in doing so, finds himself in conflict with the *Discipline* of the UMC. He states:

The position I am taking is an attempt to articulate and incarnate in action [the *Discipline's* commitment to civil rights for all persons, the sacred and equal value of heterosexual and homosexual persons, and the commitment to be in ministry with all persons]. However, the [*Discipline* also] reads: 'Although we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching, we affirm God's grace is available to all.' Does this mean that if I take the tradition of my denomination seriously, I must accept this sentence as well?³⁵

³⁴ Dwight W. Vogel, "Homosexuality and the Church: Evangelical Commitment and Prophetic Responsibility" in *The Loyal Opposition: Struggling with the Church on Homosexuality*, ed. Tex Sample and Amy DeLong (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 61.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

Vogel clearly answers this question negatively, believing that a commitment to the tradition of the United Methodist Church allows for clergy to analyze, critique, and change the *Discipline* when appropriate.

A complementary example provided by Christine Gudorf is illustrative. Though Gudorf is not a United Methodist, her analysis of a contemporary situation faced by Christians today helpfully raises the question of how modern social dynamics affect mental health and creates an occasion where approval of homosexual relationships could enhance overall human flourishing. Gudorf writes:

Postmodern culture is structured in ways that more or less limit intimacy to sexual relationships, especially for males. Persons who forego sexual relationships are more often emotionally isolated, with unmet interpersonal needs for disclosure, acceptance, nurturance, and intimacy. In other cultures and in past periods, men and women have met their intimacy needs through lifelong social relationships with extended family and neighbors, primarily through same-sex friendships. The different occupations, interests, and roles of men and women in the past usually prevented marital relationships from becoming the primary, much less the sole, source of intimacy...[T]he anonymous urban, highly mobile society of postmodernity has left persons primarily reliant on sexual partners for the satisfaction of virtually all interpersonal needs. Celibates are, therefore, seriously disadvantaged. This disadvantage is even greater for males than for females, since males are even more likely than females to depend solely on sexual partners for intimacy. Thus the cost of discovering one's homosexual orientation, like the cost of clerical celibacy, has gone up tremendously in the Christian churches in the past century.³⁶

Gudorf's commentary may be regarded by conservative-traditionalists as alarming for modern society and the vitality of the church, rather than as a justification for same-gender sexual relationships, but the underlying thrust of her description of modern society and a potential alleviation of a societal deficiency is not lost. Gudorf's proposal represents one way that the

³⁶ Christine Gudorf, "The Bible and Science on Homosexuality" in *Homosexuality, Science, and the "Plain Sense" of Scripture*, ed. David L. Balch (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 138-9.

Christian tradition might be altered to create space for homosexual persons to meet their need for intimacy in committed, loving relationships.³⁷

Liberal-progressives within The United Methodist Church believe that examples of gay and lesbian persons within their midst who exhibit Christian virtue provide satisfactory warrant for the church to reevaluate the tradition of their denomination and the church catholic. This states the case positively, acknowledging that there may be many gay and lesbian persons, some of whom may be in long-standing, committed, monogamous relationships, who have been an immense blessing to the church. Considered differently, and a bit more soberingly, liberal-progressives have noted how current prohibitions within the *Discipline* on homosexuality have led the destruction of human life, whether indirectly or directly through social pressure that has given rise to either individual gay and lesbian self-hatred or through congregational bigotry or homophobia. Testimonies of gay and lesbian persons, who have often been sons and daughters of church members, have given The United Methodist Church an occasion for pause when they have had to consider the impact their current teaching on sexuality has upon their coreligionists. More attention will be given to the liberal-progressive argument for a change in tradition in the section dedicated to the United Methodist use of reason below, but for now it will suffice to conclude that the tradition, while important for liberal-progressives, does not have the final word.

³⁷ While I concede that Gudorf's proposal does offer one possible solution, it could be argued that the Christian tradition possesses internal resources that present an alternative, and perhaps better, solution, such as the formation of a community that offers the space for the type of intimacy Gudorf describes as being so woefully lacking in our modern world. There are other remedies to loneliness than sex, such as a well developed account of same-gender, nonsexual friendships.

Concluding Remarks

Within this chapter it has been stressed that tradition does not weigh heavily in this debate. Other considerations are far more important. Nonetheless, there are fascinating logical and rhetorical strategies used by both liberal-progressives and conservative-traditionalists that rely on tradition in important ways, with the end being either the preservation of tradition or the alteration of tradition concerning same-gender sexual relationships.

Due to the influence of theologians writing from a liberation perspective, it is also fascinating to observe that The United Methodist Church *Discipline* plainly states that one aspect of their theological task is to listen to and carefully consider the religious experience of those who have been marginalized. The *Discipline* states:

We are now challenged by traditions from around the world that accent dimensions of Christian understanding that grow out of the sufferings and victories of the downtrodden. These traditions help us rediscover the biblical witness to God's special commitment to the poor, the disabled, the imprisoned, the oppressed, the outcast. In these persons we encounter the living presence of Jesus Christ.³⁸

Gays and lesbians, as well as bisexual and transgendered persons who classify themselves as UM clearly fall within this category. In informal interviews I have conducted with United Methodist leaders, it has been noted by persons who are inclusive of gays and lesbians that either a change in understanding or a solidification of their conviction for inclusion were precipitated by face-to-face encounters with such persons. Personal experience with gay and lesbian persons caused a reconsideration of the inherited tradition. These experiences presented a challenge to tradition. Therefore, the mode in which personal experience has fostered The United Methodist Church's debate of homosexuality will now be examined.

³⁸ *Book of Discipline*, 80.

CHAPTER FOUR

EXPERIENCE

The Methodist movement has been widely known for an emphasis on personal religious experience. John Wesley's account of his heart being "strangely warmed" that is recorded in his *Journals* has been a hallmark in the formation of Methodist identity.¹ *The United Methodist Book of Discipline* states, "In our theological task, we follow Wesley's practice of examining experience, both individual and corporate, for confirmations of the realities of God attested in Scripture."² The *Discipline* is candid regarding the difficulties some experiences can present for United Methodists, saying, "Some facets of experience tax our theological understanding...As a source for theological reflection, experience, like tradition, is richly varied."³ For example, experience has caused United Methodists to reconsider their convictions in the past on the issues of slavery and the ordination of women.

More so than any other facet of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, experience has pushed the debate of homosexuality to the fore. Gays, lesbians, and their allies have raised important questions regarding traditional interpretations of the Bible that label homosexuality as sinful. The *Discipline* states, "We interpret experience in the light of scriptural norms, just as our experience informs our reading of the biblical message...Scripture remains central in our efforts

¹ John Wesley, *Works, Volume 1* 3rd Edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1979), 103.

² *Book of Discipline*, 81.

³ *Ibid.*, 82.

to be faithful in making our Christian witness.”⁴ Liberal-progressives have called into question readings of the Bible used to exclude gay and lesbian persons from the life of the church.

Alternative readings of central texts have been necessary, as well as emphasis upon other themes of Scripture such as hospitality, love, and God’s favor toward the oppressed.

This chapter will focus on three themes of experience evident within United Methodism. First, this study examines stories of liberal-progressive persons that advocate change to United Methodist teaching on homosexuality. Second, this study examines the stories of “ex-gay” persons who are supporters of the conservative-traditionalist position. Third, this study considers the story of a leading United Methodist pastor, Reverend Adam Hamilton. Over the course of his ministry Hamilton has experienced shifts in his viewpoint on homosexuality. Each of these accounts highlight different ways personal experience has informed and shaped the theology of United Methodist people. Lastly, this chapter concludes by reflecting on the crucial details of each account, emphasizing the strengths and weaknesses of each theme.

Lesbian and Gay United Methodists: Stories of Liberal-Progressives Hoping for Change

“Experience” is the criterion for moral reasoning within the Wesleyan Quadrilateral most likely to spur new direction within the tradition. This study now considers two stories of United Methodist persons who are liberal-progressive and believe the *Discipline* should be changed based on their personal experience. In this section the stories of Jeanne Audrey Powers (a lesbian woman) and Julian Rush (a gay man) are used as illustrations of how UMC teaching on homosexuality may be challenged through personal experience.

⁴ Ibid.

Jeanne Audrey Powers

In July of 1995 Jeanne Audrey Powers preached a sermon at the Convocation of the Reconciling Congregations Program entitled “Bound for the Promised Land.” In that sermon Powers made a strong, public declaration that she was a lesbian. At the time she delivered her sermon she had served as a staff person within one of the national United Methodist agencies for twenty two years, and had been an ordained member of the Minnesota Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church for thirty-seven years. Powers “was widely known and respected throughout the denomination” for her work and intended to use the political capital she had gained to resist “false teaching that has contributed to heresy and homophobia within the Church itself.”⁵ She served as Associate General Secretary of the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns from 1972 until her retirement in 1996.⁶

Powers had carefully considered the timing and delivery of her sermon, and intended for her words to have a wide reaching impact on both the United Methodist Church and conversations taking place on homosexuality in broader society. Powers compiled a media packet which included her sermon, a personal statement providing her reasons for her decision to “come out” in this way, and a biographical statement detailing the various positions she had held in United Methodist leadership. She sent this material in advance to thirty secular and twenty five religious magazines and journals throughout the country.⁷

⁵ Jeanne Audrey Powers, “‘The Journey’: A Sermon” in *The Loyal Opposition: Struggling with the Church on Homosexuality*, ed. Tex Sample and Amy DeLong (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 109-110.

⁶ “Jeanne Audrey Powers Award for Ecumenicism,” <http://mnumc.org/Powers.PDF> (accessed December 4, 2010).

⁷ Powers, 110.

Powers's sermon was intended to accomplish two primary goals. First, she "wanted to show that gay and lesbian clergy (and laypeople, of course) could--and do--have a record of faithful discipleship and Christian commitment, and that that self-understanding was not a detriment to their witness or to their service of the church."⁸ Second, she "saw it as developing 'cognitive dissonance' among persons who held a conservative perspective on homosexuality... 'giving a personal face' to people previously seen in a 'category,' [she] hoped that more open, realistic, and progressive understanding might result."⁹ Powers's sermon forced The United Methodist Church to speak of homosexuality in concrete terms.

Powers begins her sermon with three themes: (1) journey, (2) subversion, and (3) resistance to unjust authority. Powers then addresses church teaching on homosexuality, stating, "As long as the phrases 'homosexuality and the Christian faith are incompatible,' and 'celibacy in singleness' continue to stand in our *Discipline*, no matter how these phrases are introduced or framed, our Church is on record as perpetuating heterosexism in its life and homophobia in its teaching."¹⁰ Drawing parallels to the way German Nazis systematically sought to destroy the Jewish people, she outlines the choices presented daily to both straight and gay persons. Those engaged in the homosexuality debate may either be: (1) bystanders; (2) perpetrators; (3) righteous Gentiles; and (4) rescuers.¹¹ Powers then details the imperative that her listeners have to subversively resist the current teachings of the United Methodist Church. She provides space within her sermon for the congregation to name those persons who have left The United

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 113.

¹¹ Ibid., 114-5.

Methodist Church for leadership positions within other denominations such as the United Church of Christ, naming these persons as “the great company of witnesses” who now join in “the Walk” toward a different future in which the *Discipline* is changed in ways that affirm and support gay and lesbian persons, clergy and parishioner alike.¹²

At the climactic moment of her sermon, Powers declares, “there are times when an action is necessary as a political act. And it is that choice I make today. I am one to tell you that a lesbian clergywoman can serve 37 years in this conference and in The United Methodist Church--faithfully, I believe. I have been a lesbian all my life.”¹³ Powers then goes on to tell of her experience of coming to grips with her sexuality and her theology as a seminary student, personal details concerning her partnership with another woman that ended after seventeen years, and the encouragement which has come from persons close to her that either knew or assumed she was a lesbian throughout her years of service to the church. Powers also shares her reasons for withdrawing her name from consideration in the episcopal election of 1976, as she “did not want--as the first woman bishop, and for the sake of the Church--to have my life under a magnifying glass.”¹⁴ Powers’s sermon concludes with a confident assertion that the church is always renewing itself, and as such she will continue to “swim against the stream” and resist church prohibitions of homosexuality.¹⁵

¹² Ibid., 117.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 118.

¹⁵ Ibid., 119.

Julian Rush

Julian Rush is a man who was raised, ordained, and eventually driven out from church leadership after identifying his sexual orientation as gay. Rush begins his story with the words, “I was born gay, I’m quite sure of that,” and continues by chronicling some of the earliest moments during his upbringing in Mississippi where he discerned a difference between himself and other males.¹⁶ Rush tells of his earliest sexual encounter with another young male who was slightly older than him. This relationship ended when this young man moved elsewhere during Rush’s junior year of high school. Shortly following the end of this relationship Rush became involved with his Methodist Church youth group, joined the church, and was elected president of his Methodist Youth Fellowship.¹⁷

Rush went on to have a very successful career as a student. He was elected class favorite during his twelfth grade year of high school. At Meridian Junior College he was elected class favorite two years in a row, then moved on to Millsaps College. While at Millsaps he was selected Pledge Trainer of his fraternity, then President his senior year.¹⁸ During this time Rush became more deeply involved with Methodist youth work at the state level. He held three different offices, including state Methodist Youth President. During his time as President he was able to “write skits, song, plays and a plethora of programs.”¹⁹

After college Rush sought further training in ministry from Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University, where he earned a Master of Sacred Theology degree. After

¹⁶ Lee Hart Merrick, *Julian Rush--Facing the Music: A Gay Methodist Minister’s Story as told to Lee Hart Merrick* (San Jose, California: Writer’s Club Press, 2001), 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

seminary Rush began a career in youth ministry, obtained an additional master's degree from the University of Denver School of Drama, composed and directed a number of successful musicals and plays, and eventually married and had two children. Rush was recognized as a leader with creative gifts for ministry.

Rush's story reaches a critical point following his decision to join First United Methodist Church in Boulder, Colorado as the Education Minister.²⁰ It was here that Rush began to struggle deeply with his sexual orientation. He sought therapy, recognized the degree of strain which existed within his marriage. He believed the hardships in his marriage were likely caused by the deeply repressed feelings of same-sex attraction that he had buried in efforts to live a "straight" life.²¹ Rush eventually decided to separate from his wife and live on his own. What followed was work with a therapist named Anne Schaefer. After working with Schaefer, Rush describes the progression that took place as he reevaluated past life experiences in light of the possibility that he was indeed gay. Rush describes the moment he determined he was gay, saying:

Once I had worked my way through the initial shock, I was filled with an energizing excitement, a liberation in having the door open for the first time. When I arrived home from counseling with Anne that day, I started crying. I wept almost uncontrollably for three hours. It was the first time I had cried in at least ten years, and undoubtedly the first time I had cried that fully and completely since I was a child. I had come to terms with being gay, and surprisingly, the experience wasn't devastating at all, but rather a releasing, cleansing resurrection. I was like a person who had been expecting to die from a terminal illness, only to discover that no illness existed.²²

Rush's understanding reflects a kind of religious experience, and marked a point of transition for Rush.

²⁰ Ibid., 22.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 26.

Following this newfound self-understanding, Rush began to make new choices. Rush began to volunteer with the Gay and Lesbian Community Center in Denver. He also began to reveal his sexual orientation to his family and close friends. Later, he would reveal his sexual orientation to the church staff, including the senior pastor. Following the revelation of his sexual orientation, a number of events unfolded that resulted in Rush being removed from leadership.²³

Rush chronicles the many painful moments which followed his “coming out” to the church. The Bishop and Cabinet of the Rocky Mountain United Methodist Conference became involved, as members of First United Methodist Church Boulder were deeply divided regarding Rush. Rush’s senior pastor was caught in the middle, with persons solidly for or against Rush’s removal lobbying for support.²⁴ Eventually Rush would face an all church meeting that would decide his fate. Bishop Melvin E. Wheatley was present and supportive of Rush, as he had a history of advocacy for gay and lesbian rights.²⁵ Despite the support of Bishop Wheatley, close friends who had volunteered and worked closely with Rush, and support from youth he had led, Rush was removed from leadership on October 31, 1981.

After his removal from leadership at First United Methodist Church of Boulder, Rush experienced the hardship of being unemployed with few prospects for the future. According to his account, his sexual orientation was the sole determining factor in his removal from leadership at First United Methodist Church Boulder. He was in need of another appointment in order to continue his work in the United Methodist Church. On November 20, 1981, Bishop Wheatley updated the Rocky Mountain Conference by letter on Julian Rush and his appointment, notifying

²³ Ibid., 35-36.

²⁴ Ibid., 43.

²⁵ Ibid., 47.

the conference that Rush would be appointed to St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Denver as Minister of Community Concerns.²⁶ In that letter Bishop Wheatley also articulated his own reflections pertaining to homosexuality. Wheatley endorsed Rush and chose to challenge the United Methodist Church prophetically. He states:

Homosexuality quite like heterosexuality is neither a virtue nor an accomplishment. Homosexual orientation is a mysterious gift of God's grace communicated through an exceedingly complex set of chemical, biological, chromosomal, hormonal, environmental, developmental factors totally outside my homosexual friend's control. Their homosexuality is a gift, neither a virtue nor a sin. What they do with their homosexuality, however, is definitely their personal, moral and spiritual responsibility. Their behavior as homosexuals may be very sinful--brutal, exploitive, selfish, promiscuous, superficial. Their behavior as homosexuals, on the other hand, may be beautiful--tender, considerate, loyal, other-centered, profound.²⁷

Wheatley's letter intensified an ongoing debate within the United Methodist Church. He had sided with Rush and other gay and lesbian persons seeking a place within the United Methodist Church.

Rush experienced fallout from Bishop Wheatley's strong stand in his favor, bringing both setbacks and opportunities. Rush knew that his opportunities would now be limited in ministry. His name became widely known, and there were only a few churches who would support him in ministry. The United Methodist denomination responded by incorporating language prohibiting "self-avowed, practicing homosexuals" from serving in ordained ministry at the following General Conference, putting Rush's part-time appointment at St. Paul's in jeopardy.

Rush concludes with his experiences of meeting a man named Larry, whom he had a committed relationship with for many years. Rush moved to Kansas for a time but found that his prospects for church leadership were extremely limited. He returned to Colorado where he could

²⁶ Ibid., 58-59.

²⁷ Ibid., 58.

serve in some type of ministry. Rush was appointed by the Rocky Mountain Conference of the United Methodist Church to the Colorado AIDS Project, where he served as Executive Director for eighteen years, eventually rejoined the First United Methodist Church of Boulder in 1999, as that congregation had designated themselves a “Reconciling Congregation” in 1997.

Throughout Rush’s story he continues to utilize his gifts for ministry, exert leadership, and express loyalty to The United Methodist Church. Rush is candid concerning his frustrations and his deep desire to see the church understand and accept him as a gay male. Despite the degree of hardship Rush experienced, his clarity of call and his love for The United Methodist Church allowed him to endure and remain within the church while hoping for a different future.

“Ex-Gays” and the Conservative-Traditionalist Position

Conservative-Traditionalists also provide examples of personal experience in their defense of current statements within the *Discipline*. The stories of Jim Gentile (an “ex-gay”) and Susan McDonald (an “ex-lesbian”) provide a different perspective than those of liberal-progressives. However contested these stories might be, they are nevertheless considered by United Methodists in moral decision making on homosexuality.

Jim Gentile

Jim Gentile is a United Methodist from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania who served as the executive director of Transforming Congregations. Transforming Congregations’ website states that they support of the current language on homosexuality within the *Discipline* and tells the

story of their beginning as a response to the debate of homosexuality debate within The United Methodist Church.²⁸

Gentile identifies as a former homosexual and has been a leading voice in opposition of liberal-progressive proposals to change the *Discipline*. Gentile's parents divorced when he was six years old, which began a period of instability in his life that included several school changes. After his mother remarried he continued to see his father on weekends and during summer vacation. At eight years old, Gentile discovered "a large supply of pornography" at his father's house, and from that moment forth developed compulsive desires for both sexual fantasy and masturbation, which he states "would enslave me well into my adult years." He also tells of being ridiculed as a young boy. He was labeled a "fag," "homo," "queer," and "pansy" by his classmates and "began to believe what they said." Gentile states, "Silent confusion fueled my need and set me up for the sexual abuse ahead."²⁹

During his high school years Gentile was invited to attend a Bible study by a classmate and experienced an accepting community that helped him heal. The man who led the Bible study belonged to a small United Methodist Church, and Gentile was supported and encouraged by this man and his wife who he said, "knew little about homosexuality [but] lots about love." Gentile also notes that his United Methodist pastor and his family supported and encouraged him during the difficult years of his adolescence. Despite this network of support, Gentile continued to struggle with homosexuality following his conversion to Christianity. He began to seek ways to become free of his same-sex desires, and became involved with Exodus International. He

²⁸ Transforming Congregations, "Who We Are: Our History," <http://www.transcong.org/1history.htm> (accessed December 4, 2010).

²⁹ James R. Hill, "Change is Possible: Stories of Ex-Homosexuals" in *Staying the Course: Supporting the Church's Position on Homosexuality*, ed. Maxie Dunnam and H. Newton Malony (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 182-184.

“attended every conference [he] could find on this subject and experienced healing at the deepest levels.” Gentile later married and fathered three sons.

Gentile’s journey in coming to understand, live, and express his sexuality provides insight into the complexity of this debate. Gentile clearly could not reconcile his same-sex attraction with his Christian faith, while persons such as Jeanne Audrey Powers and Julian Rush were able to embrace both Christianity and homosexuality as part of their identity. Gentile asserts overcoming homosexual desire takes “hard work,” but he believes gay and lesbian persons can experience freedom from same-sex desire and live in fruitful relationships with other-gendered persons.³⁰

Susan McDonald

By her own account, Susan McDonald “lived as a lesbian for nearly ten years.”³¹ McDonald served as a Lay Representative to the California-Pacific Annual Conference and served as a certified lay-speaker in her local church. The Cal-Pac Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church is supportive of gay and lesbian persons, and leadership within that annual conference has advocated change to the *Discipline*. McDonald is a dissenting voice within her annual conference, and has spoken harshly toward bishops and others church leaders regarding how the church should respond to homosexuality.

McDonald tells her story of directly confronting the Bishop of her Annual Conference as someone who “lived as a lesbian” but had been “free” of that life for twenty years. McDonald

³⁰ Denny Sampson and Eric Resnick, “Panel Says Methodist Gay Position Should Not Change,” <http://www.gaypeopleschronicle.com/stories/00May12.htm> (accessed December 4, 2010).

³¹ Susan McDonald, “Lesbian No More” in *Staying the Course: Supporting the Church’s Position on Homosexuality*, ed. Maxie Dunnam and H. Newton Malony (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 171.

was offended by the expressed assumption that lesbian people could “not change,” as she believed her own experience demonstrated otherwise. McDonald came to this conclusion based on her personal experience, but had supplemented these convictions through study of the Bible and church tradition. McDonald believed her story was important because there are “those of us who have left the lifestyle...behind [and] are unwilling to stand and confess it.”³²

Susan McDonald stated she was convinced a “gay agenda” was operative within the United Methodist Church that is shrinking back from “biblical” Christianity. Her story confirms she is firmly committed to the current teaching in the *Discipline*. McDonald’s movement from being a married mother of one, to a divorcee designating herself as a lesbian, to again returning to a heterosexual marriage is evidence for her that people can choose to be or not to be gay or lesbian.

McDonald’s testimony, printed in *Staying the Course*, raises as many questions as it provides answers. On the one hand, it is a perfect example of the type of transformation those holding the conservative-traditionalist position find exemplary. On the other hand, liberal-progressives could question the degree McDonald may suffer from internalized homophobia. They might argue that McDonald’s account fails to fully represent the complex nature of human sexuality, and the ambiguities that may exist within her own person between desires for those of same as well as opposite gender. Based on personal experience, McDonald makes the strong claim that homosexuality is a choice. However, some scientific studies suggest that the matter is not that simple.

³² Ibid., 172.

In the case of Gentile and McDonald, neither person is able to reconcile their Christian identity with an understanding of their own sexual experience. But their stories do represent typical accounts of those claiming it is possible to experience a shift of self-understanding from homosexual to heterosexual, and stories like theirs are often cited by conservatives. While liberal-progressives cast doubt on these stories for various reasons, they are nonetheless taken into account in United Methodist ethical discourse concerning homosexuality.

Pastoral Theology: Adam Hamilton and Homosexuality

Adam Hamilton is the senior pastor of The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, centrally located in Leawood, Kansas. The Church of the Resurrection is among the largest local congregations in The United Methodist Church, and Hamilton is a leading voice in the denomination. He has been at the center of efforts to bring about revitalization and renewal to a declining denomination,³³ and has been regarded as one of the most influential pastoral leaders in the United States. Hamilton began Church of the Resurrection in 1990 at age 26, and has led the congregation from its infancy to a membership of over 12,000 adult members and an average weekly worship attendance of approximately 7,500 persons in 2008.³⁴

During his 18 years of pastoral ministry Hamilton has addressed homosexuality on a number of occasions. Hamilton has shown that he is not afraid of “hot-button” issues and has preached a number of sermons addressing controversial topics. Hamilton understands the role the church plays in shaping public discourse. Homosexuality has been addressed during sermons

³³ Robin Russell, “Giving Back: Big Churches Pledge Revitalization Help,” <http://www.umportal.org/article.asp?id=4118> (accessed December 4, 2010).

³⁴ “About Our Senior Pastor,” <http://www.cor.org/about-resurrection/sr-pastor-adam-hamilton/> (accessed December 4, 2010).

series entitled “Christianity and Controversial Issues of Our Time” and, most recently, “When Christians Get it Wrong.”³⁵ In his book *Confronting the Controversies*, Hamilton reports that on the weekend he addressed homosexuality as part of the “Christianity and Controversial Issues” series, worship attendance surpassed 6,000 people.

Hamilton has also preached on homosexuality during those times the denomination’s stance on this issue will be discussed by news and media outlets, such as during or slightly prior to gatherings of the General Conference. Hamilton addressed homosexuality leading up to the 2004 United Methodist General Conference in order to prepare the congregation for the swell of headlines and news stories covering the church’s debate. The two part sermon series, entitled “The Most Controversial Issues,” placed homosexuality alongside abortion as the most difficult issues Christians face today.³⁶ In the weeks leading up to his 2004 sermon addressing homosexuality, Hamilton solicited feedback from the members of his congregation and received over one hundred letters and emails from persons who are gay and lesbian, family members of gay and lesbian persons, and persons who had considered themselves gay or lesbian at one time but no longer used those terms in reference to their own sexuality. As a result of these personal testimonies Hamilton’s thoughts on this issue began to shift from a conservative theological outlook to a more moderate or liberal theological position. The stories of people in his congregation--some of whom he had baptized--led him to reevaluate many of the arguments put forward in this debate.

³⁵ Adam Hamilton, “In Dealing With Homosexuals,” <http://www.cor.org/worship-sermons/sermon-archives/show/sermons/When-Dealing-with-Sinners-Anti-Homosexual-Judgemental/> (accessed December 4, 2010).

³⁶ Adam Hamilton, “Homosexuality,” April 25, 2004, <http://www.cor.org/worship-sermons/sermon-archives/show/sermons/When-Dealing-with-Sinners-Anti-Homosexual-Judgemental/> (accessed December 4, 2010).

In his 2008 book *Seeing Grey in a World of Black and White* Hamilton includes the text of his 2004 sermon. He notes that in the twelve months after he preached this sermon hundreds of people left the church, largely in response to shifts they perceived in Hamilton's theology and his failure to "hold the line" on homosexuality.³⁷ Hamilton also notes, however, that in that same twelve month period over 1,000 new persons joined the church.³⁸

In *Seeing Grey* Hamilton contextualizes his 2004 sermon by telling a story. Hamilton was chosen as a reserve delegate to General Conference held in Cleveland, Ohio in the year 2000. At that time The United Methodist Church was heavily strained by the division among leaders on homosexuality, and a split had been discussed.³⁹ Hamilton describes anti-gay protestors outside the Cleveland Convention Center, including Fred Phelps of the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas. He then describes the debate and discussion which took place among delegates prior to their vote on maintaining or amending the various statements in the *Book of Discipline* referring directly to homosexuality. Persons hoping for change filed onto the floor where the delegates sat. Hamilton watched this take place as a reserve delegate, seated in the balcony. Seated nearby was a woman who became visibly shaken and distraught as the church debated and voted on the *Discipline's* statements on homosexuality. As the woman became more and more upset she moved toward the balcony, hanging approximately 25 feet above the Conference Center floor. After voting on the measures which would "exclude her from full participation in the church," the woman appeared poised to leap.⁴⁰ Hamilton jumped

³⁷ Adam Hamilton, *Seeing Grey in a World of Black and White : Thoughts on Religion, Morality, and Politics*(Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 167.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 168.

³⁹ Robert Lear, "United Methodists Wrap Up 2000 General Conference," <http://gc2000.org/gc2000news/stories/gc081.htm> (accessed December 4, 2010).

⁴⁰ Hamilton, 166.

from his seat, along with another man, and pulled the woman back into their arms the moment she began to jump. Hamilton concludes the story, saying, “The entire incident took place in a matter of seconds, but the impact upon me, and others at the conference, still lingers.”⁴¹

Hamilton then proceeds with the content of his 2004 sermon. He names the relevant biblical passages, the pertinent statements in the *Book of Discipline*, and makes plain the central theological arguments of liberal-progressives and conservative-traditionalists. He then moves from the broader debate consuming Methodism to the particulars of his congregation, quoting details from stories he received from persons directly affected. Hamilton then asks, “Where do we go from here?” In response, he suggests one potential avenue for his readers to follow. First, Hamilton laments the sheer magnitude and confusion which this debate presents. He has found compelling intellectual arguments made by persons on either side of the debate, yet he is emotionally affected by accounts of gay and lesbians persons and their families within his ministry. Hamilton acknowledges that he does not fully understand how to answer the questions raised by homosexuality. By doing so Hamilton interjects humility into a difficult debate. Second, Hamilton exhorts his congregation to be a people of faith, hope, and love. Despite the deep differences of opinion which may exist within the denomination and his congregation, Hamilton believes that an ethic of love will prevail if placed at the center. The chapter concludes with a brief postscript outlining changes in his perspective. The changes in his perspective found in *Seeing Grey* were included in his 2009 sermon “In Dealing With Homosexuals,” delivered February 1, 2009.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Hamilton's presentation includes arguments from both sides of the debate. He listens carefully to those in his denomination who are liberal-progressive and conservative-traditionalist, refusing to demonize persons engaging the issue. He clearly states the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual struggles he has experienced in attempting to provide a clear word for his congregation. He also includes the testimonies of gay and lesbian persons in his presentation, whose voices are at times absent from conservative-traditionalist discussions of homosexuality. Hamilton adds another layer of complexity to the debate by including those who had at one time considered themselves gay or lesbian but no longer apply that description to themselves.

In *Seeing Grey*, Hamilton concludes by introducing a third way United Methodists might regard homosexuality. Hamilton's proposal is elaborated in his February 1, 2009 sermon, "In Dealing With Homosexuals." Hamilton is clearly tired of the emotional rhetoric found on both sides of this debate, and desires for United Methodists, and all Christians in general, to move on to other matters. However, he acknowledges that this discussion will continue, and in an effort to move the discussion forward Hamilton proposes another option. Hamilton states:

This is how I have resolved this issue (for now). First, I think in terms used by Leslie Weatherhead in his excellent little book *The Will of God*, where he spoke of God's ideal will, and God's circumstantial will. I believe heterosexual marriage between two people who love each other sacrificially and help each other grow in Christ is God's ideal will. Having counseled hundreds of couples, I know that God's ideal will is not always realized, even in the context of heterosexual marriage. Weatherhead notes that there are circumstances in which God's ideal will is not accomplished, and in those circumstances, God has a will for our lives, a kind of "Plan B." Homosexuality would seem to be one of those "circumstances" that calls for God's "Plan B."⁴²

He adds to this proposal by providing a case study involving his two daughters. Hamilton imagines a situation where one of his daughters were a lesbian. He asks, "How would I respond

⁴² Ibid., 186.

to her? I would love her. I would want her to be welcome in my church. Would I welcome her if she wanted to bring her partner to church? Would I be able to love the person she loved?"

Hamilton then concludes, "I think I would."⁴³

Hamilton's proposal stems partly in his conviction that the church will change its views on homosexuality in the coming years, and, in fact, Hamilton believes that such a move will be imperative for the church to effectively reach persons in the next generation.⁴⁴ Hamilton admits that he still has "a lot of unresolved questions about homosexuality," but a close reading of his writing and sermons reveal that he seems certain on a number of matters relevant to the United Methodist debate of homosexuality.⁴⁵ Hamilton has determined that homosexuality is an orientation which persons do not choose, that "ex-gay" therapy in some cases does more harm than good, that the church will be more inclusive of gay and lesbian persons in the future (in part due to cultural pressure in the United States), and that all same-gender sexual relationships are not necessarily sinful. Hamilton's pastoral theology is an example of one minister seeking a third way in this ethical debate.

⁴³ Ibid., 187.

⁴⁴ Shane Raynor, "An Interview with Adam Hamilton," <http://www.faithexperience.com/2010/03/an-interview-with-adam-hamilton/> (accessed December 4, 2010). Hamilton states, "I think it will be increasingly difficult to be a vocal proponent of the current UM position on homosexuality and effectively reach the next generation, or to effectively reach gays and lesbians. I think one might hold the current UM stance and not address the issue and reach them. One might, for the next five years (ten years in the south) articulate our current position with great compassion, and still reach young adults, homosexuals and their friends, family and co-workers. But the world is changing and I think the church will see this issue differently in the future. I'm convinced that all of the evangelical churches will wrestle with this issue in ten to fifteen years or they will have lost a generation and will themselves begin a steady period of decline."

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Concluding Remarks

These United Methodist testimonies of personal experience do not show an agreement on the nature or cause of homosexuality, nor do they agree on the proper moral response of persons who are attracted to others of their own gender. Rush and Powers have successfully integrated homosexuality and Christian faith as constitutive of their identity, while Gentile and McDonald have found their homosexual desires incompatible with Christian teaching. As a large church pastor, Hamilton has had experience with a variety of persons who fall into either the liberal-progressive or conservative-traditionalist categories, and has sought to chart a middle way that can be inclusive of those on either side.

The accounts of McDonald and Gentile assume that sexuality is a bipolar arrangement. There is no ambiguity in their accounts. They believe that human beings are intended to be heterosexual, and any derivation from that pattern is morally wrong.

Rush and Powers provide detail in their accounts of coming to understand their sexuality and their faith. Each recognizes that they are taking a stand against current church teaching, but believe that the Christian tradition has the resources to change and become inclusive of gay and lesbian persons. Rush and Powers exhibited great gifts for leadership and ministry, yet both experienced difficulty within the church on account of their sexual orientation.

Hamilton's account, while noble in effort, raises more questions than it does provide answers for the debate of homosexuality. While seeking to find a way for people to coexist within the church, the scope of Hamilton's writings seems to assume that the final outcome of this debate is already determined. The United Methodist Church will eventually change their teaching, partly due to internal debate, but more likely due to changes taking place within the

culture of the United States. Pragmatism will demand that United Methodists change their *Discipline* in order that churches may gain a hearing with those in the United States. This proposal will receive considerable resistance from United Methodist leaders in Africa, who overwhelmingly oppose American efforts to change the *Discipline's* statements on homosexuality.

Experience will continue to be an important criterion for United Methodists in the future. The stories of gay and lesbian persons should continue to be heard and taken into account as United Methodists move forward. Yet, according to United Methodist hermeneutical norms, these stories of personal experience will continually be considered along with Scripture, reason, and tradition. The following chapter details how United Methodists think about these experiences in light of other sources, striving to provide a reasonable account of the Christian faith to those within and outside of the United Methodist Church.

CHAPTER FIVE

REASON

Reason is perhaps the most critical facet of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral for United Methodists. The Methodist movement arose during the 18th century, when the Enlightenment was penetrating and reshaping Christian thought. John Wesley, though he considered Scripture of prime importance, recognized the immense value of philosophy and the sciences, and stressed their worth to other clergy. In the spirit of Wesley, United Methodism continues to emphasize reason as a critical tool in discerning truthful doctrine and practice. The faculty of reason represents the fourth facet of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, and is critical for conservative-traditionalists and liberal-progressives in their arguments. The evidences considered and the conclusions reached in this debate, however, clearly differ.

The “Theological Task” within the *Discipline* names numerous roles of reason in discerning United Methodist doctrine and teaching. Reason is used:

- for the reading and interpretation of Scripture;
- to determine the clarity of the church’s witness;
- to ask questions of the faith;
- to seek an understanding of God’s action and will;
- to organize understandings of the faith in an internally coherent way;
- to test the congruence of the church’s witness with the Bible and the breadth of church tradition;
- and to relate the church’s witness to the full range of human knowledge, experience, and service.¹

¹ Summarized from the *Book of Discipline*, 82.

The United Methodist Church depends heavily on the faculty of reason. Like many other systems of belief, United Methodists seek to give an account of the world that makes sense to their adherents and those outside the church. Therefore, the *Discipline* states:

Since all truth is from God, efforts to discern the connections between revelation and reason, faith and science, grace and nature, are useful endeavors in developing credible and communicable doctrine. We seek nothing less than a total view of reality that is decisively informed by the promises and imperatives of the Christian gospel, though we know well that such an attempt will always be marred by the limits and distortions characteristic of human knowledge.²

The implications for this portion of the *Discipline* are clear. United Methodists consider a broad range of sources in forming official doctrine and teaching. They believe there is no conflict between faith and science, for “all truth is from God.” Therefore, when debating homosexuality, United Methodists must reasonably consider differing interpretations of the Bible while also weighing discoveries in other fields of human knowledge, and when doing so United Methodists must attempt to reconcile any perceived discrepancies between the two. In proposing a “total view of reality,” United Methodists must address human sexuality and present an ethic for individuals and for the church as a whole.

This chapter examines how United Methodists use reason in their debate of homosexuality. Following the approach taken throughout this study, key arguments of one position are explored, followed by an examination of the opposing position. More than any of the other criteria employed by United Methodists to reach conclusions on ethics and morality, reason presents the most significant challenges. In using reason, United Methodists must come to conclusions about very complex ethical matters while accounting for an immense range of

² *Book of Discipline*, 82.

data. Scripture, tradition, and experience continue to play a role, but are put into dialogue with philosophy, sociological analysis, biology, psychology, and history.

The conservative-traditionalist and liberal-progressive positions share common important categorical areas of focus, such as anthropology, identity, truth, biblical authority, biological and psychological scientific findings, and accounts of institutional logic and hermeneutics. These categories are explored below, showing how conclusions are reached and noting where differences lie. This study demonstrates how each category is nuanced and given priority in relation to other categorical considerations, resulting in different conclusions. In this debate, it is not a matter of one position being logical, while the other is absurd. Rather, each position has its own form of moral reasoning, based on different prioritization and categorization of the relevant data, yielding different moral traditions within United Methodism. Due to the complexity of the divide, there is no simple solution. A revised biblical hermeneutic or a fresh consideration of the scientific data will not serve as a bridge to establish unity.

Reason and the Bible

In the United Methodist debate of homosexuality conservative-traditionalists have been mainly on the defense. The Bible, science, anthropology, epistemology, psychology, and the history of the development of doctrine have all been topics of heated conversation, and conservative-traditionalists have attempted to provide a reasonable account for how the church should respond to gay and lesbian persons. Considering the role of reason in the formation of United Methodist doctrine this is rightfully so, as such debate meets the criteria United Methodists have put forward for establishing and defending United Methodist teaching.

Conservative-traditionalists establish their position on homosexuality by first laying claim to the authority of the Bible and declaring that their viewpoint clearly and consistently aligns with the majority of historical Christian biblical interpretation. Secondly, attention is given to scientific studies of homosexuality. Conservative-traditionalists offer alternative interpretations of the relevant scientific studies, stressing either that the conclusions offered by liberal-progressives overreach beyond what the data permits, or contend that the studies themselves possess methodological biases or flaws that lessen the force of liberal-progressive attempts to settle the moral question.

Conservative Traditionalists: Divine Revelation and the Bible

In a dialogue sponsored by the United Methodist General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, a group of 23 United Methodist leaders representing diverse theological positions found that the “moral and theological commitments about sexuality, like many issues that divide us, are linked to deeper convictions about the warrant for Christian moral behavior. They involve the issue of the authority of scripture and divine revelation.”³ Lying beneath the surface debate of homosexuality, therefore, is a debate of biblical authority.

For conservative-traditionalists, no one has made this more clear than Professor William Abraham, Albert Cook Outler Professor of Wesley Studies at Perkins School of Theology, SMU. Abraham acknowledges similarities between United Methodists on either side of this debate, among them that whether conservative or liberal, all agree that Scripture must be consulted and regarded with “utmost seriousness.” Sharing Scripture as a common ground, however, does not allow United Methodists to settle the matter. Appeals to *sola Scriptura* lead opponents within the

³ “In Search of Unity,” <http://www.umaffirm.org/cornet/unity.html> (accessed December 4, 2010).

debate to invoke allegiance to this or that biblical scholar who affirms their position, leading either party to then fall back on their respective arguments from science or experience, and finally bringing all parties to the point where one viewpoint may appear as valid as the other. According to Abraham, appeals to the “plain sense” of Scripture will not suffice. Neither will appeals to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. Something more, says Abraham, is required.

Even though United Methodists of either conviction in this debate share a commitment to Scripture, Abraham clearly points out that conservatives and liberals differ on the morality of homosexual practice, sociological expectations (such as a form of marriage for persons of the same-gender), and boundaries within the church, e.g., whether the church can encompass those holding differences of conviction on the morality of homosexual practice. But, according to Abraham, this does not exhaust how and why United Methodists remain divided. Most importantly, Abraham argues that conservatives and liberals “differ on what warrants to deploy in arguments related to morality and ecclesiology. Put grandly, [United Methodists] differ in the epistemology of theology.”⁴

By appealing to epistemology, Abraham shifts the grounds of the debate. In his essay he chronicles how conservatives and liberals have presented their case using the Bible and the Quadrilateral, showing how such approaches have consistently failed. At this point, it has commonly been presupposed that there is no hope for a resolution. Therefore, United Methodists have proposed that both sides should concede that the chasm between them is fixed, agree to coexist within the same denomination, and allow for a plurality of opinion and practice.⁵

⁴ William Abraham, “The Church’s Teaching on Sexuality: A Defense of The United Methodist Church’s Discipline on Homosexuality” in *Staying the Course: Supporting the Church’s Position on Homosexuality*, ed. Maxie Dunnam and H. Newton Malony (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 21.

⁵ This solution has been presented most often in the proposal that the *Book of Discipline* should be amended to reflect that United Methodists are not of one mind concerning homosexuality.

Abraham cannot accept this proposal, stating, “What is at stake in the debate...is not just what happens in the bedroom, but a whole vision of human existence under God.”⁶ This assertion is consistent with the quotation from the *Discipline* above, in that United Methodists wish to use reason to propose a “total view of reality.”⁷ Abraham elucidates his point, saying, “What we need to note is that this vision is in a real sense deeply rooted in Scripture, it is not merely read off Scripture or deductively proved from Scripture. In a certain sense, like the great doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation, this vision is not worked out apart from Scripture, yet is above and beyond Scripture.”⁸

Abraham recognizes that the appeal to Scripture is critical not because Scripture is an end in itself, but rather that it points United Methodists to a reality beyond the “simple application of some ancient text.” Abraham states:

The enduring strength of drawing on Scripture in the Christian church is that it is essentially an appeal to special revelation. In insisting on the cruciality of Scripture, what folk are groping for is this: We only partially know who we are, what our nature is, and how we are to live, by appeal to reason and experience. Reason and experience, though important and even indispensable, are insufficient and inadequate. We depend substantially and nontrivially on divine revelation. So what conservatives are really getting at is that it is through divine revelation that we know our true nature as God intended it to be.⁹

Abraham, in moving the grounds of debate from Scripture to special revelation, has presented a significant challenge to liberal-progressives. Revelation, according to Abraham, is a “threshold” concept, “It is like crossing through a doorway into a whole new world that is not available to us

⁶ Abraham, 22.

⁷ *Book of Discipline*, 82.

⁸ Abraham, 22.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

until we get inside it and begin to explore it for ourselves.” Once crossed, this formulation of the doctrine of revelation puts liberal-progressives in a difficult position.

William Abraham presents the strongest conservative-traditionalist argument concerning divine revelation and the Bible. Abraham’s position is cogently argued and, if his terms are accepted, accomplishes the aim of recasting the debate. But in doing so, Abraham appears to elevate current United Methodist teachings on human sexuality as dogma, leaving those who do not agree with the *Discipline* outside the bounds of orthodoxy. This, in fact, may be his intent. Cast in this light, liberal-progressives are either unwilling to concede that special, divine revelation can be known, are unable to grasp a sophisticated and unified vision of the teachings of the Bible, or are out of tune with the Holy Spirit.¹⁰ Therefore, Abraham’s argument plays more like a volley of cannon fire than a peace accord, leaving those engaged in conflict with a choice:

Either there is or there is not a revelation. Either one has or has not gotten hold of it. Once these issues are decided, one has crossed the threshold; and the call to treat the putative revelation as knowledge, to obey it, to be tenacious in holding to it, and to die for it kicks in immediately. We are no longer living in the cozy, comfortably middle-class world of the academy. We are dealing with the Word of God.¹¹

Abraham knows that his argument presents a clear line in the sand on foundational components of United Methodist doctrine. His case is presented with “tenacity and urgency,” “tenacious because the position [conservatives] hold is not just a matter of human judgment or opinion...urgent because [conservatives] believe that the rejection of divine revelation involves the unraveling of the fabric of faith and the radical undermining of the canonical commitments of The United Methodist Church.”¹²

¹⁰ Ibid., 24-26.

¹¹ Ibid., 25.

¹² Ibid., 29.

Such rhetoric illuminates why the stakes in this debate are so incredibly high. Changing the *Discipline's* statement on homosexuality, according to Abraham, amounts to an abandonment of special revelation and a failure to proclaim “the pure Word of God,” and such a shift equals a departure from the United Methodist Church’s “most important ecclesiological insight.”¹³ Cast in these terms, holding fast to divine revelation is not only a matter of upholding current United Methodist teaching on sexuality, it is also the most critical facet of a healthy and vibrant church. Without it, the church slides into oblivion. Thus, conservative-traditionalist insistence on revelation as inclusive of, but standing above Scripture, has bearing not only on the issue of homosexuality, but on the totality of Christian practice for the United Methodist Church.

Prima facie, this presentation of divine revelation and the Bible seems to amount to nothing more than a power play. But as Amanda Udis-Kessler has observed, “The struggle among Christians over homosexuality can be understood as a struggle about power, but it is also a struggle over meaning: the meaning of tradition, of the Bible, of community, of self, of sexuality.”¹⁴ Abraham’s argument, which does logically achieve a position of power for conservative-traditionalists, is about more than simply winning. As Udis-Kessler has observed, it is about meaning, and because it is about meaning, it is likely that United Methodists will continue to be divided on the issue of homosexual practice.

Liberal-Progressives: Human Agency and the Reading of Sacred Texts

Liberal-progressives see the full inclusion and acceptance of gay and lesbian persons as a matter of justice, and believe there is sufficient biblical, theological, scientific, and rational

¹³ Ibid., 30.

¹⁴ Udis-Kessler, 42.

justification for the United Methodist Church to support a change to their current position forbidding the “practice of homosexuality.” Noting the ordination of women and the changes in moral conviction over the past century and a half on the question of slavery, liberal-progressives believe that a precedent has been set within the United Methodist Church for changing their doctrinal position on matters that have a long, unchallenged history within the Christian tradition. Liberal-progressives make their case recognizing that not all change has been self-evident or uncontested, but understand that public debate will be part of the process. Liberal-progressives trust that ultimately reason will side with their particular conception of truth and justice, leading to a more compassionate future that better fulfills the United Methodist Church’s calling as a Christian body. With regard to the matter at hand, they believe this is another controversial subject where a move toward acceptance of gays and lesbians and a reconsideration of Christian sexual norms has sufficient warrant, and argue that this change in doctrinal teaching will lead the church to further realize the vision of the Kingdom of God seen in the life and ministry of Jesus.¹⁵

This section explores two primary components of the liberal-progressive approach to reason: biblical hermeneutics and the relationship between science and anthropology. Comparisons are made between the liberal and conservative approaches to the Bible. The examination below will demonstrate that liberal-progressives and conservative-traditionalists attempts to integrate findings in the sciences with sound biblical interpretation present challenges for United Methodists.

¹⁵ For example, Amy DeLong, “One of These Days,” in *The Loyal Opposition: Struggling with the Church on Homosexuality*, ed. Tex Sample and Amy DeLong (Nashville: Abingdon Press: 2000). On page 30, DeLong states, “The inclusion of gays and lesbians into the full covenantal life of the Church is not a peripheral issue. It is not a diversion from the real needs of the Church. It is at the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

United Methodists in this debate acknowledge that they are bound to consult the Bible, and all consider the Christian scriptures as deeply and profoundly relevant for lived expressions of Christian faith. There are clear differences between how liberals and conservatives regard the Bible, and the distinctions must be carefully nuanced. Liberal-progressive United Methodists regard the Bible highly, as do their conservative-traditionalist counterparts. The difference, therefore, does not amount to one particular strain within United Methodism paying more or less heed to the words of Scripture, but lies rather along epistemological and hermeneutical lines.

For liberal-progressives, the debate of homosexuality raises broader questions concerning sexuality in general, and what the Bible may have to say about this modern category. In antiquity, there were various views of sex and different varieties of sexual practice, but the way those categories were constructed differs from the way sexuality is understood today. Phyllis Bird describes the problem faced by modern interpreters, stating:

...sexuality as we understand it today is not addressed in the Bible. It is a modern concept. The Bible treats sexuality only in limited forms of actualization. We can learn a great deal from the experience of Israel and the church in their attempts to comprehend and control sex as a divine endowment and as a human capacity subject to the distorting and alienating power of sin. But we cannot get a ready-made sexual ethic or even an adequate foundation for it from the Bible. The terms of Israel's culturally shaped understanding will not satisfy our present need. In this field we must look to the ongoing revelation of science and of newly emerging voices of experience. That is to follow the pattern exhibited in the Bible itself.¹⁶

In many ways this argument has been illuminated in the chapters dedicated to Scripture and Tradition. Liberal-progressives maintain that the Bible contains numerous misogynous and patriarchal assertions that cannot be overcome apart from an approach to the text that allows for open and ongoing ethical reflection marked by innovation and adaptation to shifting cultural and

¹⁶ Phyllis Bird, "The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation," in *Homosexuality, Science, and the "Plain Sense" of Scripture*, ed. David L. Balch (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 168.

societal norms. This means that the community of faith must always be open to a fresh word that may divert from tradition in the particulars but better realize certain universals within the Christian tradition. A number of scholars and pastors have sought to articulate how liberal-progressives might lead the United Methodist Church to achieve these higher ideals with regard to their gay and lesbian coreligionists and neighbors.

As examined above in the chapter on Scripture, Victor Paul Furnish exemplifies the way liberal-progressives have approached scripture within the United Methodist Church, stressing that the Bible has been entrusted to human interpretive communities that must apply the text in accordance with the demands of the gospel.¹⁷ But Furnish is not alone. Among others, Roy I. Sano outlines for liberal-progressives how the Bible serves the Christian community in a way that could be open, inclusive, and accepting of gays and lesbians.¹⁸

Sano carefully considers the biblical data, and raises a number of important questions for formulating sexual ethics. Sano's discussion moves between a number of passages of Scripture and ranges across a number of issues relevant to this debate. For the purposes of this study, however, three critical points are to be considered. Concerning sexuality, Sano contends that: (1) homosexuality as an "order" within creation is not necessarily a possibility excluded by the biblical text, (2) ethnicity and gender differences are parallel examples to sexuality that can challenge and helpfully reformulate the boundaries of the church, and (3) common salvation in Christ results in both inclusion and holiness of unexpected people groups.

¹⁷ Furnish, *The Loyal Opposition*, 33. Furnish states, "the claim that the Bible spells out God's will once and for all contradicts Scripture itself, which attests that because God's claim is as boundless as God's grace, it can never be reduced to a static set of rules, laws, or teachings." While Furnish asserts that theology should not be reductionistic, it could be argued that Christianity itself does contain certain teachings that are common across various bodies and denominations of those calling themselves Christian.

¹⁸ Roy I. Sano, "Unity With Integrity in God's Mission" in *The Loyal Opposition: Struggling With the Church on Homosexuality*, ed. Tex Sample and Amy DeLong (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 43-56.

First, Sano notes that a number of conservatives approaching the question of homosexuality from a natural law perspective argue that heterosexuality and the binary opposition of male/female gender are the “default” settings of the natural world--these categories are set within the created order and declared “good.” Sano agrees that Genesis 1 and 2 could be read this way, but declares that nowhere does the text exclude other possibilities for sexuality and gender. He states, “Goodness in one ordering of creation...does not exclude goodness in another ordering,”¹⁹ and thus he creates space for the possibility that other sexual orientations or gender identities (such as intersex or transgendered persons) are an equally valid, though not explicitly named, variation that has been placed within the world.

Secondly, Sano turns to the categories of ethnicity and gender. Sano gives attention to places in the biblical narrative where ethnic divisions were deemed problematic for God’s people, such as when the Jewish people had intermarried with people of other ethnic tribes during and after the Babylonian exile (Neh. 13:27-31; Ezra 10:10-43), and lays those texts alongside other passages of the Bible where the Jewish people “felt God nudging them to be more open, hospitable, and gracious toward foreigners,” such as in the book of Ruth. Turning to the New Testament, Sano notes how Jesus was inclusive of non-Jews, and reached out to Samaritans, an ethnic minority whose religious practices differed from his own. Jesus’s attitude toward women is also deemed significant. In addition, Sano points to the book of Acts, citing the example of the inclusion of a eunuch as an occasion where someone’s sexual identity did not prevent him from becoming a follower of Jesus and receiving the Spirit of God. Sano asserts, “The biblical analogy of ethnic and gender differences suggests we at least keep open the

¹⁹ Ibid., 44-45.

possibility that homosexuality is part of God's created order."²⁰ If this is the case, Sano argues that gays and lesbians should be accepted according to the same pattern found in the Bible concerning women and other ethnic groups.

Lastly, Sano argues that salvation given in Jesus Christ does not exclude gays and lesbians, and the Spirit is not given on the basis of sexual orientation, therefore opening up the possibility of sanctification and holiness for all people. Sano states, "The Holy Spirit mediates the graces for the moral life and the gifts for ministries in God's mission. They basically apply equally to all of us regardless of our sexual orientation."²¹ Just as Gentiles received the Spirit of God in the book of Acts, thus creating a debate within the church over the degree to which these persons should be included in the life and ministry of the church, so too, according to Sano, should the church regard gays and lesbians in our churches today.

Through and through, scholars such as Sano and Furnish make their best attempt to honor the Bible. They use the Wesleyan principle of allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture. They clearly state their hermeneutical principles, and are consistent in the application of their method. Their writings carefully articulate the approach to Scripture assumed by other liberal-progressives when making their case for the inclusion of gays and lesbians and the revision of the *Discipline*.

Sano and Furnish attempt to redirect the focus of those debating homosexuality away from a few passages of Scripture and toward larger themes, such as hospitality or wisdom. They also question the interpretive grid that creates the current difficulties for gays and lesbians within United Methodism. Sano and Furnish attempt to produce an acceptable hermeneutical method

²⁰ Ibid., 46.

²¹ Ibid., 51.

that allows for a more inclusive posture towards gays and lesbians within the United Methodist Church, and do so by largely relying on the text of Scripture itself.

However, as stated by William Abraham, appeals to Scripture have not led to a consensus, and even if one finds the liberal-progressive approach more liberating and compelling, it could be argued that there is no more reason for choosing that system over Abraham's category of revelation. It is also possible that the approach outlined by Furnish and Sano could lead United Methodists a number of different ways, wherein the dictates of culture or an over-reliance on an ethics of authenticity could unintentionally result in syncretism.²² In the face of such challenges, United Methodists are led to ask certain questions, among them:

- How can United Methodists be a people who undertake “the *never-ending* task of discerning what it means to be faithful within the varied and ever-changing circumstances of their life in the world,” while also remaining faithful to particular commands found in the Bible?²³
- Are there essentials within Christianity that are unchanging, and, if so, what are they?
- What philosophical and theological hermeneutics and epistemology are to be employed by United Methodists in formulating an ethic that best reflects the Christian tradition?

Conservative-traditionalists and liberal-progressives will have different answers to these questions. These questions unmask that a certain theological grid, along with a myriad of philosophical and cultural assumptions, are implicit in any reading of the Bible, and should allow dialogue partners to unveil and explore the presuppositions that ultimately inform and guide the interpretation of the Bible.

²² Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992).

²³ Furnish, 33. The obvious response is, “Which commands?” and “Why those commands and not these others?” Those are legitimate questions.

Scientific Evidence and Christian Anthropology ²⁴

Over the past several decades, scientific researchers have produced several studies on homosexuality, and their findings have suggested that the etiology of same-gender sexual attraction is not exclusively caused by environmental/social factors or simple human choice. Biology is a strong, if not determining, factor. Though many of these studies have not been widely replicated, the findings suggest that homosexual orientation is inherent in a small but significant percentage of persons. It is precisely these findings that have contributed to the rift that exists between liberal and conservative United Methodists. Liberals suggest that the inherent presence of same-gender sexual orientation is evidence of a previously unrealized diversity within God's creation, and urge the church to tolerate, accept, and bless gay and lesbian partnerships. Conservatives argue that such an orientation, while unfortunate, does not signify homosexual partnerships are God's ideal will for human relationships, and therefore same-gender sexual desire should not be actualized within the context of a gay or lesbian sexual relationship. Thus, based on certain presuppositions and beliefs, the scientific data available on homosexual orientation is interpreted differently among United Methodists.

While some critics might state otherwise, conservative-traditionalists do not ignore the findings of science. It may be that they consider the data differently, interpret it through a different lens, and reach different conclusions, but they do not put the scientific evidence aside. Conservative-traditionalists understand that they must weigh the data and assess the implications for United Methodist ethics. To fail to do so would be an obvious neglect of the *Discipline* and

²⁴ For a monograph dedicated to this subject, see Alice Ogden Bellis and Terry L. Hufford, *Science, Scripture, and Homosexuality* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2002). This book follows a procedure that is typical of the liberal-progressive approach to science and the ethical questions raised by homosexuality.

its admonition to take all such evidence into account so that United Methodist doctrine encompasses a total view of reality. Taking the scientific evidence into account is not without difficulty, as the new data yields new ways of addressing the moral question. Whereas prior to the rise of modern science homosexual behavior might be forbidden on the basis of an appeal to the Bible, now data on human sexuality must be taken back to the Bible. The result of this new incorporation of scientific data with the discipline of biblical interpretation is the emergence of a more complex moral argument.

For liberal-progressives, modern science has provided reasons for a reconsideration of Christian anthropology, the category of sin, and the way human sexuality is understood in relationship to both. The conflict between science and religion has no doubt been overstated at times, but there has been tension nonetheless, and the history of science and biblical interpretation provides a number of examples where the established churches faced internal and external controversies in light of scientific innovations, most famously with the claims of Galileo and Darwin. These findings in the sciences provoked a reconsideration of Christian doctrine or have led to allegorical readings of Scripture. This section briefly references the scientific studies of homosexuality mentioned above, noting how liberal-progressives have regarded these studies within their appeals for a revision of the existing *Discipline*. This section also explores how liberal-progressives choose to apply science to ethics.

The same biological and psychological evidence is examined by both liberals and conservatives. The difference lies in how that data is interpreted. Liberal-progressives believe that the various scientific studies demonstrate that same-gender sexual orientation is rooted in biology and should lead gay and lesbians persons to regard their orientation as a gift.

Theologically speaking, the gift of same-gender orientation has been given by the Creator, who, it is argued, has placed a diversity of sexual orientations within the world. Heterosexuality, no more than homosexuality, bisexuality, or any other orientation that is identified, should be privileged, but all orientations should be accepted and affirmed. Sexual conduct, then, should be an authentic expression of a person's identity, and should be undertaken as an expression of each individual's unique personhood. The scientific studies of homosexuality, taken comprehensively, are interpreted by liberal-progressives as definitive for the acceptance of gays and lesbians within the life of the United Methodist Church. Once gay and lesbian persons are affirmed, their feelings can be discussed openly, a sexual ethic for heterosexuals and homosexuals can be taught, and all persons can be instructed on how to best express their sexuality responsibly.

This section addresses the scientific studies most frequently engaged by conservative-traditionalists, how those studies are applied, and the limitations conservative-traditionalist place on these scientific findings with regard to United Methodist ethical reflection.

The Scientific Evidence

Homosexuality has been a subject of scientific study over the past century, in part due to the rise of modern psychology and shifts in sexual norms in Western society. Of great significance for these scientific studies has been the removal of homosexuality from the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1974, a move which pushed a number of leaders within mainline Christian denominations to advocate for a reconsideration of the biblical evidence in light of contemporary understandings of human sexuality. Also of note has been the establishment of distinct gay and lesbian identities that have emerged from the studies of psychiatrists, psychologists, biologists, and social

scientists, and also from the lived experiences of gays and lesbians themselves. These developments, and others, have required conservative-traditionalists to respond to arguments that assert homosexuality is not an occurrence of someone *merely choosing* to be in a sexual relationship with a person of the same gender. The inherent bodily desire of gay and lesbian persons to experience sexual union with those of their same gender has challenged conservative-traditionalist understandings of what constitutes “natural” human sexual relationships, where heterosexual unions have been the assumed, privileged norm. Liberal-progressives have argued that the findings of modern science allow for new readings of Scripture and the re-scripting of sexual norms within the Christian community. Conservatives have had to respond to this challenge by facing the scientific studies, questioning the findings, and providing alternative interpretations of the data.

Foremost among the data that conservative-traditionalists engage in this debate are the findings of Alfred Kinsey concerning homosexuality. Beginning with his 1948 publication of *Sexual Behavior and the Human Male*, followed shortly thereafter in 1953 with *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, Kinsey has exerted a significant impact on how sex and sexuality are understood by scientists. Of greatest relevance for this study, Kinsey’s report estimating that 10% of males and 5% of females are homosexual for at least three years of their lives has had immense implications in this debate.²⁵ Those numbers have been widely quoted since their publication, and much critical attention has been given to the results in large part due to perceived bias regarding the sample population. Following his death, the Kinsey Institute for Sex, Gender, and Reproduction at the University of Indiana has continued his work, and the

²⁵ Alfred Kinsey, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders Co, 1948) and Alfred Kinsey, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia: Saunders, 1953).

scientific work of scholars within the Kinsey Institute has continued to be very important for the modern field of sexology.

The Kinsey studies have been used by liberals both inside and outside religious traditions to argue that if a homosexual orientation is so widespread among the population, it is too common to be considered a deviation from an established norm. It is a variation of human sexuality, not a perversion. Conservative-traditionalists have responded to these arguments by first questioning Kinsey's sample selection and methodology. Secondly, they have also offered a more recent study adjusted for methodological bias that concludes the gay and lesbian population is closer to 4 to 5 percent of males and less than 1 percent of the female population.²⁶ Conservative-traditionalists have also strongly argued that regardless of the percentage of the population that has a homosexual orientation, such evidence does not demand that homosexual practice be deemed morally acceptable by the United Methodist Church.

Following engagement with the Kinsey studies, conservative traditionalists then turn their attention to four other types of studies: (1) twin studies, (2) hormonal studies, (3) brain studies, (4) psychological studies, and (5) social-scientific studies of the mental and physical health of homosexuals. The twin, hormonal, and brain studies have all suggested that homosexual orientation may have a biological origin, whereas the psychological and social-scientific studies focus more on environmental factors. Twin studies, which do show a higher correlation of homosexuality among monozygotic (identical) twins, do seem to suggest that homosexuality does have a strong biological component. However, the correlation between monozygotic twins is not 100% homosexual, and because monozygotic twins share identical genetic material, these

²⁶ Neil Whitehead and Briar Whitehead, *My Genes Made Me Do It! A Scientific Look at Sexual Orientation* (Lafayette, La.: Huntington House Publishers, 1999).

studies have not decisively proven the existence of a “gay gene.” Hormonal studies, which suggest that a same-gender sexual orientation has arisen from “traumas, chemical ingesting, and/or hormonal imbalances may have occurred at specific prenatal periods,” have been cited as well to demonstrate same-gender sexual orientation is biological in origin and present at the earliest stages of human development.²⁷

A study that found differences between the brain structure and brain cell distribution of homosexual and heterosexual men has also been important for United Methodists. This study has been critiqued by conservative-traditionalists for two primary reasons. First, sexual orientation was assumed to be the only defining difference between those examined, and considering the fact that the men autopsied were already deceased, other lifestyle factors that could have influenced brain structure are unknown. Second, conservatives have questioned whether these studies definitively show that “correlation means causation.” Differences in brain structure could be due to behavioral, rather than biological origins.

Psychological studies, which focus primarily on whether or not sexual orientation is a fixed or changeable aspect of human personality, have also played a key role in the discussion of homosexuality, as well as if “reparative” therapy for homosexual persons is an ethical practice. Many have argued that such therapy is ineffective and psychologically damaging to the patient. Numerous studies have sought to expose and discredit the “ex-gay” movement, though there is one recent study that has sought to show that change is possible for some persons who are highly motivated and willing to commit themselves to a lengthy process. Studies focusing on reparative or change therapy for homosexuals have been few, with the most prominent critique of such

²⁷ H. Newton Malony, “Homosexuality in the Postmodern World” in *Staying the Course: Supporting the Church’s Position on Homosexuality*, ed. Maxie Dunnam and H. Newton Malony (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 127.

studies being that there have been no consistent, longitudinal studies that have tracked a significant sample population.

Conservative-traditionalists argue that the changes made by the American Psychological Association to the DSM in 1974 were motivated by political rather than scientific reasons. They also note that the chair of the nomenclature committee at that time, Dr. Robert Spitzer, reported in 2001 that 65% of 200 “ex-gay” persons he surveyed reported healthy heterosexual functioning, with many of those persons crediting their change to religious motivation.²⁸ Spitzer’s study, which has been criticized, nonetheless has been cited by conservative-traditionalists as evidence that perhaps change is possible, despite the fact that the current orthodoxy within the field of psychology is that sexual orientation is a fixed characteristic of the human person that should be accepted and integrated into the individual’s identity for optimal mental health.²⁹

Finally, sociological studies of the homosexual population have been undertaken to assess the effects of same-gender sexual relationships on mental and physical health. A survey of the scientific literature concerning same-gender sexual relationships reveals that some researchers have concluded that homoerotic activity can have a detrimental effect on human health, and these studies are referenced by conservative-traditionalists to bolster their argument against changing the *Discipline*. Trends within some social-scientific studies are leveraged in order to demonstrate that the biblical perspective that prohibits same-gender sexual activity is congruent with the

²⁸ Robert Spitzer, “Can Some Gay Men and Lesbians Change Their Sexual Orientation? 200 Participants Reporting a Change From Homosexual to Heterosexual Orientation,” <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/14567650> (accessed December 4, 2010).

²⁹For the official position of the American Psychiatric Association on reparative therapy, see “Therapies Focused on Attempts to Change Sexual Orientation (Reparative or Conversion Therapies)--Position Statement,” <http://www.psych.org/Departments/EDU/Library/APAOfficialDocumentsandRelated/PositionStatements/200001.aspx> (accessed December 4, 2010).

findings of modern science. If same-gender sexual relationships can be detrimental to human health, it is argued, this supports biblical wisdom prohibiting such actions, and thus church teaching should be upheld for the benefit of gay and lesbian persons, regardless of the degree to which gay and lesbian relationships are found to be satisfying.

Among all the scientific studies of homosexuality, those social-scientific studies that portray homosexual persons very negatively are the most deeply disturbing. Liberal-progressives have responded to these studies by noting how a similar rhetorical strategy was employed in the past to discriminate against black and Jewish populations, and how in each case the misuse of science resulted in violence and oppression against these minority groups.³⁰ Liberal-progressives have also noted how these studies may reflect a sampling bias, in that these studies more likely focus on gay men who frequent gay bars and consume gay pornography, and are also neglectful of the high level of fidelity that is more typical of lesbian relationships. It has been argued that if these studies accurately reflect the level of promiscuity so common among the gay population, this could be seen as support for the institution of same-sex marriage. Making the practice of marriage available to gays and lesbians, it is argued, would help to

³⁰ Eugene Rogers, *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way Into the Triune God* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 39-40. In footnote 11, Rogers expands his claim that the arguments “made against blacks and gays are all too similar.”

stabilize same-gender sexual relationships and provide them with the measure of support and encouragement needed to cultivate and maintain fidelity within a committed partnership.³¹

Narrow Application and Control Beliefs: Science and United Methodist Ethics

Scientific findings on human sexuality do not, and indeed cannot, settle this debate.

While it would be convenient for either conservative-traditionalists or liberal-progressives to turn to science, using it to bludgeon their opponents with any sliver of scientific data as *the* definitive proof of the morality or immorality of homosexual behavior, no such move is possible. Once one leaves the realm of science and offers a moral pronouncement, one has entered into the realm of philosophy, and has thereby assumed an interpretive moral grid through which to view the relevant data. Science may be able to uncover biological and social factors relevant to the etiology of homosexuality; it may be able to demonstrate that homosexual persons can be mentally well adjusted, or suggest or deny that gay sex between males does harm to the body, but it cannot definitively say whether the presence of same-gender sexual orientation is a beneficial diversity for the fitness of the human species, or if gay and lesbian sexual partnerships can be considered a social good. Such determinations must be made within the context of a larger

³¹ A lesser cited critique of these reports is called the “ecologic fallacy,” commonly employed within the field of epidemiology to uncover hidden biases within scientific studies. In this particular case, it may be that the researchers’ focus on homosexuals as a group rather than as individuals fails to accurately reflect individual gay and lesbian experience. This critique was levied against Émile Durkheim’s 1897 study, *Lé Suicide*, which in one section concluded the rate of suicide was higher among Protestants than among those of other religions. Durkheim’s methodology, however, was flawed. Ranking thirteen Prussian provinces according to density of the Protestant population, Durkheim correlated the number of suicides taking place in each region and concluded that Protestants were eight times more likely to commit suicide than those of other religious traditions. However, his method failed to take into account the individual religious faith of those committing suicide, so that those of other religions could have been committing suicide at a higher rate within the regions dominated by Protestants due to their minority status. Adjusted for individuals, Durkheim’s data reflected that the rate of suicide was more akin to a 2 to 1 rate among Protestants. In the debate of homosexuality, it may be the case that the destructive behaviors identified may arise due to other factors, rather than due to the simple fact that the persons surveyed are gay or lesbian.

discourse. Arguments by conservatives and liberals acknowledge this, but far too often it is assumed, by default, that science has settled the matter one way or the other.

With this understanding of the import for science on ethical discourse in view, it can be seen that conservative-traditionalist treatments of the scientific data yield narrow applications for ethics. This is due, in part, to an understanding of original sin, and the application of this doctrine to science. According to the underlying logic, if human beings find themselves as part of a broken creation, wherein people are, by nature, rebels against the divine will, findings in science that indicate homosexuality may be innate will not be regarded as reflective of God's original intent for human beings. In other words, homosexual practice, designated as sinful behavior by the conservative-traditionalist understanding of Scripture, is not a manifestation of God's design, but is instead evidence of a fallen world. Underneath this rubric, same-gender desire is a tragic reality experienced by some members of humankind, and while scientific findings may reveal that homosexual orientation is not chosen, but is rather discovered, this data is not regarded as justification for gay and lesbian sexual partnerships. Homosexual persons are therefore forbidden, under the discipline of the church, from acting on their sexual desires, and are expected to live chaste in the same manner as heterosexual persons who are single.

The above claims concerning the nature of science does not devalue its contribution to ethical discourse, but rather puts it in context as one among many useful informants in making ethical and moral pronouncements. As seen above, the *Discipline* of the United Methodist Church confirms this stance toward the sciences, and while conservative-traditionalists clearly differ from how liberal-progressives will apply these findings, their choice to apply these findings in a narrow manner is congruent with both their theological understandings of human

anthropology, as well as the divine revelation of Scripture and the epistemological warrants for theology. Rather than undermining the theology of conservative-traditionalists, then, science has served to sharpen the arguments of those holding this position.

Concluding Remarks on United Methodist Approaches to Science

Many factors have contributed to mainline denominations in the United States undertaking investigations of human sexuality, among them findings in the biological and psychological sciences. These findings have, at the very least, called into question the inherited sexual norms that have been defined and shaped by the influence of cultural setting and accepted religious ethical norms. Liberal-progressives in the United Methodist Church tend to look to the sciences as definitive for the legitimization of homosexuality as a valid expression of human sexuality, believing that the given data reveals something previously unknown to the community of faith that significantly reshapes the existing hermeneutic for interpreting the biblical sources. Conservative-traditionalists, however, interpret the scientific data differently, and maintain that while these findings may reveal a deeper complexity than previously assumed concerning human sexuality, they refuse to grant that such findings demand a change in commitment to teaching singles to abstain from sexual activity, and for marriage between a man and a woman to be the sole arrangement wherein physical sexual expression has the blessing of the community.

The liberal-progressives' position on homosexuality is driven largely by their approach to reason, and is founded in a particular understanding of numerous scientific studies of sexuality. Biological and psychological studies of gay and lesbian sexual identity have had a major effect on how liberal-progressives read the Bible, understand the history of Christian theology, and prescribe ethical norms for the present. The personal testimonies of gays and lesbians who have

integrated their sexual identities with their religious identities has also further solidified the liberal-progressive conviction that same-gender sexual expression and Christian practice are not mutually exclusive--one can be a faithful gay or lesbian Christian.

Hermeneutics and United Methodist Discourse

For both liberals and conservatives, the history of hermeneutics presents a number of distinct problems, specifically the ordination and empowerment of women, and divorce. Conservatives must establish the reasons that have motivated these changes and demonstrate how those scenarios differ from the question of homosexuality. Liberals, on the other hand, must establish the reasons that motivated these changes and demonstrate how these scenarios align with the question of homosexuality. Then, liberal-progressives must make a compelling case that the same procedure should be followed by the United Methodist Church with regard to their doctrinal statements pertaining to gays and lesbians.

The Conservative Position: Hermeneutical Shifts³²

Conservative-traditionalists provided a distinct approach to hermeneutics in response to the findings of the sciences and alternative readings of the Bible. Liberal-progressives have pointed to the loosening of strictures on divorce, the empowering and ordination of women, and the repentance for supporting chattel slavery in the American South by the United Methodist Church as instances where the denomination has evaluated their teachings, found the prevailing opinions

³² Space does not permit a lengthy treatment of how these matters are discussed by United Methodists, so a summary of the responses must suffice. However, a book that does address these questions in a manner that supports the conservative-traditionalist position, though written from a non-Methodist perspective, is William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001). Webb argues for a trajectory hermeneutic, wherein as the biblical story unfolds, there appear to be prominent strands of the text that empower women and encourage the elimination of the practice of slavery, but concerning homosexuality the trajectory moves in the opposite direction, consistently denying the validity of same-gender sexual expression.

within the denomination to be in error, and changed course based on new insight. If the church has changed teachings on these matters, it is asked, why not also on the matter of homosexuality?

Conservative-traditionalists answer these challenges by carefully outlining how and why the question of homosexuality differs from the past debates of women in ministry and society, in addition to the divisions over slavery. Conservatives note that the assertion that they must support homosexual practice if they support women's ordination is denied. First, it is argued that women's ordination is not dependent on a simplistic understanding of Scripture, but is founded in an understanding of divine revelation, and therefore includes Scripture while standing above and beyond Scripture.³³ Secondly, conservatives argue that since no definitive blueprint for ministry arises directly from Scripture, no strictures exist concerning the gender of those to be ordained. While in the past certain restrictions on women in ministry may have been in place due to cultural factors, conservatives believe that there was no firm doctrinal or biblical standard that had to be changed, only societal norms. In this way, homosexuality differs from the case of women.

Concerning divorce, conservatives attempt to clarify church teaching, and concede that oftentimes they have not articulated church doctrine on divorce and remarriage lucidly. The teachings in the *Discipline* on divorce and remarriage are complex and carefully nuanced, instructing the church to extend understanding, compassion, and grace toward divorcees, and give authorization for clergy to preside in the event of remarriage, following a declaration of God's intention for marriage and space for repentance concerning past failure. Conservatives, when charged with inconsistency concerning divorce, acknowledge the problem, but believe that

³³ Abraham, 22.

a closer inspection of existing doctrine supports the church's approach to these matters without dismissing the biblical texts on marriage and divorce out of hand.³⁴

While it can be granted that Christianity has had a long history of standing in tension with the inherited practices of any given culture within which it is embedded, it is difficult to establish in every case exactly how, and to what degree, Christian doctrinal commitments have overcome prevailing norms within a culture or simply changed along with the culture within which Christianity became embedded. In the case of women in ministry, conservatives believe that the reasons for change in the church's teaching do not easily parallel with the challenges that have arisen in the debate of homosexuality. Conservative-traditionalists agree that the church's teaching on women has changed for the better. They admit that the nuanced teachings on divorce are oftentimes inadequately captured liturgically in the event of remarriage. But with regard to homosexuality, conservatives argue that the prohibitions on same-gender sexual experiences, openly gay and lesbian ministers, and same-sex marriages are grounded not simply in the invocation of a few isolated biblical texts, but are founded on themes present throughout the Bible.

The Liberal Position: The Working Out of the Gospel

As discussed above with regard to the conservative-traditionalist position, liberal-progressives turn to the history of Christian interpretation when debating homosexuality. The Methodist movement has faced other dilemmas in the past that have challenged the established hermeneutic of the church, at times requiring lengthy and spirited debate in order to settle divisive questions. The ordination of women and clarifications on divorce as instances where

³⁴ Ibid., 26-27.

prevailing United Methodist beliefs were questioned, examined, and re-articulated are seen by liberal-progressives as signs that change is indeed possible.

Liberal-progressives believe that the ordination and empowering of women within United Methodist leadership should not only be regarded as an instance of revised doctrine, but are moments wherein the denomination has heard and followed the leading of the Holy Spirit. Though related but much less discussed, liberals believe the same can be said with respect to slavery. The hermeneutic exemplified here understands revelation to be ongoing rather than confined to the past, and if it were not for this disposition the church would have not been able to overcome passages in Scripture that appear to be misogynistic and oppressive. At the 2000 General Conference of the United Methodist Church, Amanda Udis-Kessler recorded an observation of a delegate that supports this approach among United Methodists, stating:

An inclusionist says that while Scripture has primacy, God is not dead and God's revelations continue to this day. The Bible itself is a story of progress in understanding what God wants us to be. The greatest commandment, said Jesus, is to love God and one's neighbor as oneself, then all else follows. Scripture tells us, she says, that we are not to be conformed to the world, that we need to be a prophetic voice in some cases, speaking for God to the world.³⁵

In this hermeneutical approach, liberal-progressives undergird their contention that the United Methodist Church's prohibitions on homosexual behavior, ordination of gays and lesbians, and gay and lesbian unions are unjust and based on culturally bound biblical teaching that is no longer applicable to the practice of the United Methodist Church. The rule that is above all rules, as seen above, is the love of God and neighbor, and liberal-progressives believe that in this case other ethical criteria (namely, reason and experience) have provided the United Methodist Church with ample ground upon which to establish a radically loving and God honoring way of

³⁵ Udis-Kessler, 71.

living that affirms and accepts gay and lesbian relationships on equal footing with heterosexual relationships, welcomes gay and lesbian persons to the ranks of clergy (and acknowledges those already there), and opens the door for the practice of same-sex marriage. All of these changes, according to liberal-progressives, would mark a transition of the United Methodist Church to a place of greater faithfulness to the gospel, would strengthen their witness as a prophetic voice in the world, and would create space for evangelism to people currently experiencing exclusion from the church body. Liberal-progressives argue that this approach to hermeneutics, as was true concerning women and slavery, leads to greater compassion and inclusivity, and is therefore superior to the rule-based morality of conservative-traditionalists that remains ensconced in the past.

Conclusions

After extensively considering a broad range of literature written by Christians of both conservative-traditionalist and liberal-progressive convictions on the question of homosexuality, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that one faces nothing less than two irreconcilable and conflicting hermeneutical systems or world views. Both claim to hold Scripture in high esteem, yet reach very different conclusions. Both consider the same scientific evidence, but their conclusions on how to apply these findings to Christian sexual ethics are opposed. Both are well-versed in the history of interpretation on questions such as women in ministry and the practice of slavery, but both relate those developments differently to the question at hand. Liberal-progressives seem to favor the idea that a plurality of convictions can coexist within the same body on this moral question, and on countless other theological matters as well. Conservative-traditionalists contend for a unity of truth, and are unwilling to accept anything less

than a univocal pronouncement on human sexuality. Conservative-traditionalists understand homosexuality as a practice, while liberal-progressives understand any expression of sexuality as closely tied with the identity of the person, not as simply a volitional act that can be compartmentalized from the rest of one's humanity.

Clearly, reason has limits. Impeccable logic does not mean hearts will be changed. Historically United Methodism has emphasized feelings and emotion, and such appeals to the affections can entreat sentiment above reason. Thus, regardless of the strength of either the liberal or conservative argument concerning homosexuality, there will be persons within United Methodism who will gravitate toward one viewpoint or another based on sentiment. There will be sentiment, for example, attached to the Bible as the ultimate authority in all of life, not only in particulars but in its meta-narrative, a narrative that historically has been read as supporting the normalization and privileging of heterosexual relationships. On the other hand, there will also be sentiment for those who have friends, neighbors, family, and coreligionists who are LGBT, and following their interactions with these people find that more conservative readings of the Bible seem culturally constrained and no longer applicable. No matter how sound the case concerning "what the Bible says," experiential knowledge has led to alternative readings concerning what constitutes "biblical fact." The presuppositions, or control beliefs, from which a case for or against same-gender sexual acts is built determines where the logic ultimately leads.

It can be said that this division is a stalemate in the truest sense, and due to the well-developed logic of either position, unity and full-hearted agreement remains unlikely. In the next chapter, it is argued that the narrative character of Christian ethics does not necessitate that a continued stalemate is the only possible outcome. Christianity in general, and United

Methodism in particular, possesses within it the possibilities for an alternative future that transcends appeals to Scripture, tradition, and experience without abandoning the important and vital contributions each component adds to United Methodist ethics.

CHAPTER SIX

UNITED METHODIST “MAP MAKING” AND SEXUAL ETHICS

Rightly or wrongly, The United Methodist Church prohibits same-gender sexual relationships under their official teachings, even as gay and lesbian couples are in their midst. The reasons for this are diverse. Theological conservatives contend that the Methodist movement has produced a set of ethical criteria, an accompanying theology, and a biblical hermeneutic that results in the conclusion that sexual relationships of a certain kind (heterosexual) are permissible within the context of a certain relationship (marriage), and that all other sexual acts taking place outside the bounds of this norm are sinful, and, thus, prohibited. Even when considering “sexual orientation” as a factor, conservative Methodists do not see the expectation for those who are sexually attracted to persons of their same gender to abstain from sexual relations in a way that accords with said orientation as an exclusionary, hateful, bigoted, or backwards standard of behavior. Rather, they see it as an expression of a community functioning as a community, placing limits and boundaries upon its members wherein sexual expressions of love are constrained to the union of heterosexual marriage. Participation in the community is not negated by the presence of those who possess unfulfilled sexual desire, whether those persons are homosexual or heterosexual in orientation.

Liberal-progressives, on the other hand, stress a particular conception of “inclusivity,” and see the prohibitions placed on homosexual persons as categorically unfair. Liberals argue that biblical prohibitions on same-gender sexual relationships are outmoded, outdated, altogether

nonexistent, or that the Bible does not say anything that would be prohibitive of the kind of same-gender sexual partnerships shared by gays and lesbians today. With no concept of sexual orientation, and the limited worldview of the biblical writers, who saw religious observance and sexual relationships, in part, through the lens of ritual purity, liberals claim that the biblical writers could not have had the foresight to imagine that adults of the same gender could maintain mutual, consensual, loving sexual partnerships within the Christian community. In addition, scientific findings that suggest that sexual orientation is a genetically inherent component of a person's identity have yielded the theological conclusion that gays and lesbians are part of God's design, and therefore should be embraced, welcomed, and affirmed. Those unwilling to accept these conclusions are (sometimes) cast as homophobic, intolerant, and unfaithful to the full vision of the Christian gospel, either as the result of ignorance or willful neglect. The gospel, it is claimed, has within it the power to reconcile all people, including gays and straights, if only those who exclude homosexual persons will open their eyes, acknowledge their biases, repent, and emerge transformed. Oftentimes, the liberal critique of homophobic behavior and its power for destruction of individual lives is true, exposing elements of conservative rhetoric that creates a hostile environment for gay and lesbian people who participate in the Christian community.

Admittedly, these summations broadly describe each position. But each of these caricatures possess truth. Conservative-traditionalists do not see anything wrong with their position, nor do liberal-progressives. In both cases, conservatives and liberals have established the reasoning for their respective positions along different hermeneutical lines, with differently weighted evidence, and, often, different contextualized experiences. Each proposes their arguments based on common sources, yet each reaches vastly different conclusions.

This outcome is not surprising. Within Protestantism, it is common for ethical sources to be evaluated and weighted differently depending on the community, the context, and the historical circumstance. Different factors yield different conclusions, and these different conclusions emerge as moral traditions that are historically contingent and in constant need of maintenance and re-narration. Moral traditions, so defined, constitute an “ethical language” that is then prescriptive for the life of the community, providing a logic that can be applied to the challenges of daily life, enabling the moral agent to make decisions that align with the conception of the good that has been defined by the community in accordance with a particular moral vision.

As such, ethics is a discipline that depends on the past, and departures from the dominant historical narrative of “truth” are disconcerting, disorienting, and disrupting. United Methodists who espouse a liberal view of homosexuality have contested with “tradition,” broadly understood, and therefore any change to the inherited understanding of sexual ethics requires a different reading of texts, a different understanding of cultural, historical, and contextual circumstance, and a vision for a future that reasonably departs from the past. It means the unveiling of a new world, plausibility structure, or social imaginary for the community as a whole, and that world cannot be established without a significant degree of work, both at the level of discourse and at the level of practice.

However, the burden of proof does not rest solely with liberal-progressives. In the Methodist debate of sexuality the challenge resides with conservatives as well. Within a shifting American context, the narratives that have constituted understandings of sexuality have shifted significantly enough that it is not only liberals that are re-narrating sexual ethics, but

conservatives must do so well. The “taboo rules” that have prohibited homosexual relationships in the past have been challenged, particularly due to the alternative narratives provided by modern science. Thus, if conservatives do not recast and reshape the reasons these moral standards are in place, there is a possibility that these rules will appear nonsensical, and will subsequently be abandoned. Alasdair MacIntyre writes:

...taboo rules often and perhaps characteristically have a history which falls into two stages. In the first stage they are embedded in a context which confers intelligibility upon them....Deprive the taboo rules of their original context and they at once are apt to appear as a set of arbitrary prohibitions, as indeed they characteristically do appear when the initial context is lost, when those background beliefs in the light of which the taboo rules had originally been understood have not only been abandoned but forgotten.¹

Traditions, while relying on the past, must be constantly renewed. Liberals and conservatives must establish and reestablish the reasons for holding particular ethical norms. If at any point the preservation, maintaining, and re-narrating of such traditions is abandoned, those traditions will quickly fade away.

Evaluating the Discourse: Maps of Meaning and the Politics of Church

The United Methodist Church is navigating the ever present challenge of preserving, maintaining, and scripting standards of behavior for their members. There is no reason to believe that the divide among Methodists will disappear. As has been shown, United Methodists represent a variety of viewpoints. But for those representing the extremes, of foremost importance is the establishment or preservation of either position within *The Book of Discipline*, for codification within that document ensures institutional and judicial power that can be leveraged for the upholding of a position that either approves or disapproves of homosexuality as

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory--Second Edition* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 112.

a valid expression of human sexuality. The current struggle is not one of truth, but of power, and while this struggle does not abandon all prospects for the discovery and application of truth, the terms within which this debate have been navigated have insinuated that there will be “winners” and “losers.” Field studies, the rhetoric of opposing caucuses, and other records have revealed that this conflict has been pitted as a battle, and as such the story has been written as either a tragedy or a heroic tale, depending on ideological perspective.

In this final section, the different ethical languages that are representative of these opposing ideological perspectives which have been established by liberals and conservatives are analyzed in light of Jonathan Z. Smith’s work as a historian of religion. In his essay “Map is Not Territory,” Smith provided an insightful account of religion as a way of mapping the world. Religious rituals, beliefs, and practices are examined to reveal how these practices imbue meaning to individuals and to communities, enabling them to navigate life’s hardships and triumphs within the context of a “world” of prescribed meaning. As Smith has written, “What we study when we study religion is one mode of constructing a world of meaning, worlds within which men find themselves and in which they choose to dwell. What we study is the passion and drama of man discovering the truth of what it is to be human.”²

Yet in Smith’s research, he found discrepancies between the articulation and execution of beliefs and their accompanying rituals, evidencing a complexity that exists in the evaluation of all religious discourse. Oftentimes doctrinal pronouncements do not always tell us everything concerning a religious tradition, and inconsistencies between belief and practice can, at times, be an accepted and useful tension that is held between the ideal and the real. Using Smith’s

² Jonathan Z. Smith, “Map is Not Territory” in *Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 290-1.

terminology, it may be the case that in the United Methodist debate, it is neither the “locative” or the “utopian” map that best suits the life that United Methodists collectively celebrate. As Smith suggested in his article, it may be that another “map” is required; in this case one that better embraces the discrepancies that exist between United Methodist pronouncements on sexuality and the lived experience of United Methodists.³

In The United Methodist Church, liberals and conservatives are responsible for mapping the beliefs, rituals, and historic traditions of Christianity in a particular way that establishes and embeds their viewpoint on sexuality and its proper expression within the life of the religious body. Liberals and conservatives differ concerning exactly what constitutes “the lay of the land.” Extending Smith’s metaphor, the worlds of meaning that have been established by liberals and conservatives differ with regard to topography (how sources relate to one another in a determinative way for the establishment of a “landscape”), boundaries (how determinations are made concerning those “inside” and “outside” the community), and orientation (how the community navigates the topography and boundaries as a wayfaring people with a shared future and a hoped for destination). Smith writes, “What we study when we study religion is the variety of attempts to map, construct, and inhabit such positions of power through the use of myths, rituals, and experiences of transformation.”⁴

Members of The United Methodist Church do attempt to “map” their world, and they do so through the reading of a sacred text, the gathering together for communal worship, the

³ Smith, 309. Smith states, “The dimensions of incongruity which I have been describing in this paper, appear to belong to yet another map of the cosmos. These traditions are more closely akin to the joke in that they neither deny nor flee from disjunction, but allow the incongruous elements to stand. They suggest that symbolism, myth, ritual, repetition, transcendence are all incapable of overcoming disjunction. They seek, rather, to play between the incongruities and to provide an occasion for thought.

⁴ Smith, 291.

celebration of the sacraments of communion and baptism, and through the catechetical initiation of new members. Their “map” is embodied within their communal life, but is also codified in *The Book of Discipline*, the product of the United Methodist practice of “conferencing.” Along the way, there have been disagreements on many different matters, including how to appropriately “map” the mystery that is human sexuality, and the unique challenge that is presented by homosexuality.

There are United Methodists who wish to settle their differences on homosexuality amicably, yet, some conservatives and liberals regard one another not as friends who happen to disagree, but rather as individuals who hold such diametrically opposing views that there is difficulty even regarding one another as part of the same fellowship.⁵ There is a need for a different type of “map,” one in which the primary concerns are not those of winners or losers, but one which maps the territory in a way that is revelatory for the nature of sexuality and its place within Christian fellowship. The “map” must be something other than the locative or utopian maps which Smith describes in his essay, for United Methodists have no difficulty when it comes to either locating a self-understanding of sexuality or a determining a prescribed ideal for human sexuality amidst the chaotic and turbulent realities of life. Rather, there is a need for a “map” that acknowledges incongruity, making allowance for the occasion of homosexuality to bring to the fore a multiplicity of issues relating to sexuality and the human experience. The “map” must hold the tension between the ideal and the real. After describing several religious traditions

⁵ Knight and Saliers, 85. “Because theological dialogue requires proposing arguments and giving reasons for one’s passionate commitments or insights, speaking truthfully requires that we learn the difference between making an argument and being argumentative. In turn this asks that both the parties speaking and the parties listening not assume that a critique is always a matter of power or a matter of speaking against one’s own person. To argue against another’s ideas we think false or inadequate is not the same as arguing *ad hominem*, that is, attacking the person.”

wherein the myths and rituals observed do not exhaust all possible meaning within the universe, but rather hold tensions in their application, Smith states:

The dimensions of incongruity which I have been describing in this paper, appear to belong to yet another map of the cosmos. These traditions are more closely akin to the joke in that they neither deny nor flee from disjunction, but allow the incongruous elements to stand. They suggest that symbolism, myth, ritual, repetition, transcendence are all incapable of overcoming disjunction. They seek, rather, to play between the incongruities and to provide an occasion for thought.⁶

This is Smith's conception of what can be described as a "third map" of reality that differs from the locative and utopian maps.⁷ As "an occasion for thought," The United Methodist Church could explore a multitude of questions that lie beneath any pronouncement that could be made concerning sexuality, moving United Methodists beyond rule-based proscriptions and toward a contemplative posture regarding the use and expression of sexuality. Is sexuality solely intended to motivate human beings toward the end of procreation, or is it rather an element of existence that is to be exploited for personal pleasure, or both? In short, and to slightly adapt Wendell Berry, "what is sex for?"⁸

Oftentimes, the answers that are given to that question are simplistic, or the question itself is ignored altogether. But even if such questions are ignored, they do inevitably arise. On those occasions there is a demand for answers that reach beyond rule-based ethical prescriptions. In addition, they must not belie the complexity that is sexuality, a complexity that is often curiously denied within the Christian tradition.

⁶ Smith, 309.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Wendell Berry, *What are People For? Essays* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990).

As Stanley Hauerwas has observed, Christian discourse on sex is more muddled than Christians would like to admit.⁹ In other writings that address sexuality, Hauerwas has contended that in order to determine if same-gender sexual acts are illicit for those within the Christian community, an account of sexual virtue would be required.¹⁰ And if sexual virtue must be defined, so too must sexual viciousness be defined, including such ideas as “promiscuity.” An account of sexual virtue would then require a program, or a communitarian tradition, to be established that would define and maintain a conception of character that applies equally well to sexuality, and not only to other forms of social interaction. Formulating such an account would seemingly expose sex as often a very normal and mundane aspect of the lives of those who engage in such acts, suggesting that much more is being made of sex than is warranted. Or, it would reveal a *telos* that is definitive for humanity, allowing for a narration that would encapsulate sex and sexuality and allow for an understanding of sexual expression as a vehicle through which human beings could pursue an ultimate, collective good that is at the service of both the community and the individual moral agent.¹¹

⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, “Sex in Public: Toward a Christian Ethic of Sex” in *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 175-195.

¹⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, “Gay Friendship: A Thought Experiment in Catholic Moral Theology” in *Sanctify Them in Truth: Holiness Exemplified* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 105-121.

¹¹ For a poignant critique of Smith, see Tyler Roberts, “All Work and No Play: Chaos, Incongruity and *Différance* in The Study of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* Vol. 77, No. 1 (March 2009): 81-104. In this essay, Roberts notes that Smith reaches his conclusions by conceptualizing his approach to incongruity as an “exaggeration in the direction of truth” with regard to place. Roberts helpfully posits, “what might happen if we were to ‘exaggerate’ in a different direction, for instance, by pursuing...reflections on chaos and incongruity not as the social labor of reordering, but in terms of ‘frivolity,’ or the opening of existential possibility, or the incongruity of place and no-place”(95).

Conclusion

The United Methodist Church, in their debate of homosexuality, is representative of a fractured discourse. Their disparate maps, if placed together in an overlay, are incomprehensible. Each representation of the rituals, beliefs, and communal life represents worlds that share some symbols and forms of expressions, but ultimately constitute worlds that differ from one another.

After extensive analysis of perspectives on either side of this debate, I have reached the conclusion that little possibility exists for reasoned debate to achieve any form of middle way or shared consensus that will lead to an irenic future. United Methodism, as a Protestant church, possesses a tendency to locate and define itself in terms of “the other.” Wesley’s early followers may have seen themselves as true to the vision of Anglicanism, but defined themselves in large part by establishing an identity of being something that the Anglicanism of their day was not. Conservatives and liberals in the debate of homosexuality may have reached a symbiosis, wherein each needs the other in order to define their identity within the world.

Looking forward, it seems most likely that this debate will be settled by cultural, rather than theological concerns. There is a shift in mood, both in the halls of power and in much of youth culture, that homosexuality is acceptable, for the choice of two individuals of the same gender to engage in sexual acts, either for a moment of fleeting pleasure or within the context of a committed relationship, is seen as a private matter, having no bearing on public concerns. There is no political reason, therefore, to prohibit such actions, whether these persons are church members or not. There is no script in broader American culture or in The United Methodist Church whereby such prohibitions make sense. The narrative that has upheld the necessity of

“fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness” has disappeared, and so too will the notion of “taboo” as it relates to homosexuality.

With that being said, my task in this project has not been to propose a theology of sexuality, or a solution to the problem of Methodist discourse on human sexuality. My task has been to explore the way United Methodists approach the ethical task at this point in history yielding hints for future direction, not a final resolution. It was Jonathan Z. Smith who wrote, “The historian provides us with hints that remain too fragile to bear the burden of being solutions...a man of insights: not, preeminently, a man of vision.”¹² Therefore, I have used homosexuality to demonstrate how Methodists undertake this enterprise, and I have critiqued both views, whether liberal or conservative, through the disciplines of philosophy and social science. This has led me to conclude that neither position holds together more coherently than the other. Rather, I am convinced that each stands independent of the other, possessing its own internal logic, and operating from principles and assumptions that are exclusionary towards those differing in conviction. It appears unlikely that a broad consensus on homosexuality will be reached apart from a negotiation of, at the very least, United Methodist understandings of being and knowledge.

¹² Smith, 290.

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