



# Are We Asking the Right Questions about Homosexuality?

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For over 30 years the issue of homosexuality has vexed the General Conferences of the United Methodist Church. Yes, every General Conference since 1972 has voted to re-affirm our denomination's stance that "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching" and, yes, those votes have been strong ones. However, any objective observer of the United Methodist Church would agree that our denomination is still struggling with this issue. The issue of homosexuality keeps coming to the forefront of General Conference, it keeps distracting us from our primary mission of "making disciples of Jesus Christ," and it keeps fermenting division, anger, and distrust among faithful United Methodist Christians who disagree on this issue. It is unlikely that the General Conference of 2004 will offer any new legislative answers to this issue.

Could it be that we are asking the wrong questions, and that is why we are unable to find an answer that resolves this issue for our church? We keep turning to medical science to help with this issue, but science continues to be divided on the causes of homoerotic attraction. Even if science is ever able to answer—once and for all—what "causes" homoerotic attraction, that will never provide the Christian answer about how one should deal with this attraction.

We also keep turning to Scripture to find answers, but most of our questions about homosexuality and Scripture have to do with the "rules" and moral prohibitions in Scripture. There are honest differences of opinion among United Methodist Christians about the interpretation of these passages in Scripture. Does the "holiness code" for Temple

key role of leadership to ask the right questions, whether or not one has all of the answers.

### ACTS 15

A helpful and relevant passage of Scripture is the story in Acts 15 about how the early church dealt with the controversial issue of the Gentiles. There

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may be no division in our modern society (including racial divisions, or divisions between heterosexuals and homosexuals) that is as wide as was the division between Jews and Gentiles in the first century. The early church was confronted with the issue of dealing with Gentiles who were becoming believers and followers of Christ.

Should they be forced to become Jews first, before they could be accepted as Christians?

The early church convened a council (somewhat like a General Conference) to discuss the issue. The question that they asked, however, focused upon the power of the Holy Spirit. Acts 15 states that Paul and Barnabas reported "what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles" and "how God first visited the Gentiles." From these responses of Paul and Barnabas, it is clear that the early church leaders asked them a question which must have been something like, "Is God at work among the Gentiles?" The early church did not focus

priests in Leviticus really apply to everyone today? Do Paul's words in Romans refer only to pederasty (the sexual abuse of boys by men which was common in Roman society)? Why is Jesus apparently "silent" on this issue in the Gospels?

Could it be that we will never find the best answers of Scripture to the issue of homosexuality because we are not yet asking questions of the most relevant passages of Scripture? I don't know, but I am willing to put forth some questions from a different biblical text that may help to enlighten the current debate in the United Methodist Church. I offer these questions because I believe it is a

upon definitions of what it means to be a Gentile, nor upon discussions about the authenticity and validity of Gentiles. No, their focus was upon the action of God, not the qualifications of those who were recipients of God's grace.

Would not those "Acts 15" type of questions change the nature of our own United Methodist discussion of homosexuality? Perhaps we would start asking questions like, "Is there evidence that God is at work in the homosexual community?" or "Do we know of homosexual persons who are professing their faith in Christ and seeking to become followers of Christ's ways?" Surely those kinds of questions would lead to a more helpful discussion than our current debates about biology, psychology, genetics, and sexual orientation.

Acts 15 goes on to report that once the early church leaders were convinced that God was including Gentiles into God's mercy, then those same leaders had a more difficult discussion about what "requirements" they should place upon Gentiles who were believers in Christ. The decision was made not to require that they become Jews or that they fulfill the entire law of Moses (which the Jewish followers of Jesus present admitted they themselves had been unable to fulfill.) A decision was made "to lay upon [them] no greater burden than necessary" (Acts 15:28). A rather short list of requirements was drawn up, including that these Gentile believers "should abstain from meat offered to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity" (Acts 15:29). These parting words were offered, "If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well" (Acts 15:29).

If we in the United Methodist Church today were to ask the questions of Acts 15, and if we were to determine that God is indeed at work among homosexuals, what sort of "short list" would we determine is necessary for them? A parallel list today might be: "Try to live in the heterosexual world, but if you cannot, then at least keep yourself chaste and faithful to one person. Do not engage in bisexuality, or in promiscuity, or in the promotion of a gay lifestyle to those who are still trying to find their own sexuality. Join those of us in the heterosexual community in confessing that we are all broken, we are all fallible, and we are all incomplete in our ability to fulfill God's intentions for our lives."

Such a list, of course, might not be fully acceptable to either "party" or "wing" of our United Methodist Church. Those who advocate the full acceptance of homosexu-

ality might be distressed by our new focus upon God's grace rather than upon anyone's "rights" or lifestyle. Those who have been opposed to all forms of homosexual behavior might be distressed to consider that a chaste, faithful, monogamous homosexual relationship could be considered acceptable—even though total honesty would force us to admit that chastity, faithfulness, and monogamy are standards which many heterosexuals often fail to maintain.

This text raises other questions for us to consider:

1. Is it possible that we could move from being divided on the issue of homosexuality to being united in an emphasis upon faithfulness in all of our relationships? The Hebrew word *hesed* reminds us that our faithfulness in our relationships is based upon God's ultimate covenant faithfulness to us. Acts 15 and other relevant passages of Scripture call us to focus upon God's faithful covenant and the subsequent call for faithfulness in our own covenants.

2. Could some humility on this issue allow us a time for reflection, prayer, and seeking God's guidance? Could we change our focus as a denomination from arguments about issues like homosexuality, toward a renewed emphasis upon our primary mission of making disciples? Perhaps turning to Acts 15 can help us move in that direction by asking the questions about how the Spirit is working to extend the Kingdom of God.

3. Could we rewrite those contentious passages in our Social Principles in a way that more accurately defines the current reality in our church? Perhaps we need to adopt a new Paragraph 65G, which, while maintaining our current prohibitions against the ordination and appointment of self-avowed, practicing homosexuals, would read something like this:

### Human Sexuality

*We regard human sexuality as a good gift from God. Like any good gift, it must be cherished, and so we reject any misuse of sexuality (such as abuse, rape, pederasty, bestiality, promiscuity, violence, etc). We understand that the normative biblical model for human sexuality is a monogamous, committed relationship between a man and a woman in marriage, even as we confess how often that standard has not been maintained in society or in the church.*

*The issue of homosexuality has become a struggle for our United Methodist Church. Current medical and scientific evidence are divided on many of the causes and issues of homosexual orientation. Likewise, current biblical scholarship has raised questions about some of the traditional interpretations of the few texts in the Bible that address the issues of homosexual behavior. Because of our long-term Christian tradition and understanding of biblical teachings, we are reluctant to approve of any form of homosexual behavior. But we also know from the history of the church, that God can show us new paths to walk.*

*Therefore we commit ourselves as a General Conference to a time of Christian conferencing, which will include quiet, prayer, Bible study, and listening to one another and to God. During this time of respite we will avoid any new legislative actions around the subject of homosexuality until we have received new clarity on this issue. In the meantime we urge all persons who believe that they are homosexuals to prayerfully seek spiritual guidance and counseling to determine if they might yet be able to live in a heterosexual lifestyle. Beyond that, we hold all homosexual relationships to the same biblical standards of monogamy, love, and commitment to which we hold all heterosexual relationships.*

Is this possible new Paragraph 65G the answer to our United Methodist quandary over the issue of homosexuality? I don't know, but I do believe that we need to ask the right questions—questions which focus upon a passage like Acts 15, where the emphasis is not upon our various political agendas, but upon God's activity in our midst. I believe it is possible that God wants us to learn a lesson from our current debate over homosexuality; a lesson about God's faithfulness and God's demand for us to be faithful to one another. □



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