



# SESSION TWO: OUR COMMUNITY

**Hymn:** Lutheran Book of Worship # 369 “The Church’s One Foundation”

**Scripture Reading:** Ephesians 2:19–22

**Prayer:** We thank and praise you, gracious God, for the salvation and the community that is ours through the merits of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Give us the guidance of your Spirit as we gather around your Word that we may understand and teach it truly and faithfully, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Another way to speak of our unity in Christ through baptism is to use the language of the Apostles’ Creed where we confess that we believe in the “holy catholic church, the **communion of saints.**” This confession reminds us that we are not only a community in one particular congregation or in the ELCA but also in communion with the saints, the redeemed, throughout time and space. Once again, it is God who comes to us and by grace makes us who we are.

The previous session focused on experience and the interpretation of scripture and noted the important role the Holy Spirit plays in discerning a correct interpretation. The Holy Spirit clarifies the meaning of biblical texts through dialogue in the church—the communion of saints. In this session we will look at the scripture passages most often involved in discussions of same-sex intercourse. Each passage is briefly summarized and followed by common interpretations and their implications for this study.

## THE CREATION ACCOUNTS

The creation accounts in Genesis 1–2 describe God’s creation of a good world—a universe filled with a marvelous diversity of creatures great and small. Sexuality is one dimension of God’s wise and wonderful world. These texts tend to assume matters of human sexuality rather than dwell on the details. God created male and female, blessed them, and commanded them to “be fruitful and multiply” (1:28; a blessing and command also given to the animals, Genesis 1:22). Genesis 2:24 says, “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.” The words, “one flesh,” do not merely focus on sexual relations; they speak more broadly of the unity of man and woman as a fundamental and enduring unit of humankind. Jesus will use that understanding of this text as a basis for his response to a question about divorce (Matthew 19:1–9; Mark 10:2–9).

### Interpretation

*The creation accounts take for granted that sexual relations will be between a man and a woman. The creation stories assume that the male and the female, who complement each other biologically and in other ways, are God’s only given structure for human sexual relationships.*

### **Implications**

Because of this straightforward point, some interpreters understand these creation texts to put an end to the conversation about any positive understanding of homosexual practice. Other interpreters, however, claim that the creation accounts in themselves are not the only factor in creation that needs to be considered in thinking through this issue. Some point out that part of God’s intent in the creation is to provide for companionship, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner” (Genesis 2:18). While the partnership portrayed in Genesis 2 is a heterosexual one, the basic need for companionship reflected here is one that seems relevant to the lives of gay and lesbian people as well.

## Interpretation

The following two points are usually made together and may be agreed to by people holding different views on homosexuality:

1. *God's creation is not presented as a finished product, but leaves room for further creative developments.* God evaluates the created world as "good," not perfect, or never in need of change or development. God has not created a static and mechanistic world. There are many consistencies over time (day and night, heat and cold), but God has created a world with a certain openness with respect to its future. Such an understanding correlates well with the actual history of a developing natural order across the centuries, including the emergence of new viruses, insects, animals, mountain ranges, and river valleys. God's created order is not fixed in stone; it is still in the process of becoming.
2. *God involves created beings in the ongoing process of the creation.* In Genesis 1:11–12, God speaks with the earth and involves it in further creative activity. Later God commands human beings to subdue the earth (Genesis 1:28), to bring order out of continuing disorder in this good but not perfect world, and in Genesis 2:18–25, God evaluates the creation as not yet good. God then involves the man in discerning what is still needed. The decisions of the man, against the animals and then for the woman, have shaped the future of the creation in a decisive way. Human beings continue to be involved in the processes of discernment that shape the development of creation in numerous ways, both positive and negative.

## Implications

Many interpreters stress the fact that, given irregularities in natural processes and the presence of sin and its wide-ranging ill effects, developments in creation have not always been good. Thus, other types of sexual relationships that may develop over time are "unnatural," against the will of God in creation, the result of the fall into sin, and a threat to God's established order for male and female.

Other interpreters honor the male-female relationship as fundamental to God's purposes in creation, but they interpret the creation accounts as open to other possibilities regarding the nature of human relationships. For example, single people are not foreseen in the creation accounts, but we do not consider them "unnatural" human beings because of that. Likewise we do not regard married couples without children as "unnatural." And so a simple appeal to the creation texts cannot determine that which is "unnatural." It may be that changing sexual orientations are a part of the ongoing creative process and we will need to study them carefully to discern whether they have an appropriate place within God's good creation.

**Question:** The creation stories present the male-female relationship as "foundational." Re-read Genesis 1–2 and discuss whether other relationships might also be allowed. On what basis would you decide if a relationship was right, moral, or allowed?

👉 Remember to record your responses.

## SPECIFIC PASSAGES REGARDING SAME-SEX INTERCOURSE

The following biblical passages are usually understood to speak directly to the issue of same-sex intercourse. This section of the study includes brief accounts of the different ways in which they have been interpreted. Principles of interpretation introduced in Session One will be evident in the discussion of these texts. The background paper on biblical interpretation provides a fuller discussion.

Then God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good.

—Genesis 1:11–12  
(See also Genesis 1:20 and 24.)

### **Genesis 19:1–11 and Judges 19:16–30**

These two stories are similar accounts of attempted homosexual rape. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 has been the focus for discussion, not least because the cities are destroyed and the Bible often mentions that fact. The stage is set by the visit to Sodom of two angels, disguised as men (Genesis 19:1, 5, 10), to whom Lot offers hospitality. But all the men of Sodom surround the house and demand that Lot make the angels/men available for rape (Genesis 19:4–5; similarly, Judges 19:22). Aware of his responsibility as host, Lot offers his virgin daughters in place of the angels, thinking that the men of Sodom might be satisfied with heterosexual rape. (A similar offer in Judges 19 is reluctantly accepted and a woman is raped and later killed.) But before anything can happen to Lot’s visitors or his daughters, the men of Sodom are struck with blindness and the city is shortly destroyed.

#### **Interpretations**

For many interpreters of the Bible, these stories have traditionally counted as a witness to Israel’s condemnation of homosexual conduct, especially between males. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah has been thought to be specific evidence of God’s anger at such behavior. Moreover, the mention of the destruction of these cities in Jude 7 is specifically linked to “sexual immorality” and “unnatural lust.”

For some interpreters, homosexual rape does not make consensual homosexual conduct wrong any more than heterosexual rape makes heterosexual sex wrong. Since every male in Sodom (19:4) threatened to rape the angels/men, these would-be rapists would have to have been mostly heterosexual men. Their motive was to demonstrate who was in charge, a motive shared by other rapists. These interpreters also use the principle of Scripture interprets Scripture when they point out that while there are more than twenty-five biblical references to Sodom, only Jude 7 explicitly mentions that Sodom’s problem was sexual in nature (and, in view of Jude 6, the issue seems to be intercourse with angels). The sins of Sodom are most explicit in Ezekiel 16:49: pride, excess of food, prosperous ease, and not aiding the poor and needy—sins often ignored in this conversation. In addition, Jesus uses the Genesis 19 passage to condemn inhospitality (Matthew 10:14–15), not same-sex conduct.

### **Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13**

The laws regarding homosexual practice are part of an extensive list of laws regarding sexuality (Leviticus 18:1–30) and associated penalties (Leviticus 20:1–26). This section of Leviticus is especially concerned with Israel’s life of holiness (see 19:2), that is, lives pleasing to God and set apart from their neighbor’s practices (Leviticus 18:1–5; 20:23).

#### **Interpretations**

In the interests of the good order of the human community, Christian communities through the centuries have affirmed the continuing applicability of the law regarding male same-sex intercourse (Leviticus 18:22). The Leviticus text (vv. 22–30) repeatedly calls such intercourse an “abomination,” that is, a detestable practice. The condemnation of male same-sex intercourse is supported by other biblical texts such as Romans 1:18–32. While the creation stories are not specifically referred to in Leviticus, concern for preserving God’s male-female design for creation may lie behind this view that male same-sex intercourse is a detestable practice.

More recently, some interpreters have asked whether the law in Leviticus 18:22 is as straightforward as it appears to be. All other sexuality laws in Leviticus 18 deal with behaviors on the part of heterosexuals. Is that not also the case in 18:22? Consensual homosexual relationships do not appear to be in view, they argue.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

—Leviticus 18:22

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.

—Leviticus 20:13

word “abomination” covers a wide range of human behaviors, including intercourse during a woman’s menstrual period (Leviticus 18:19, 30; Ezekiel 22:10), remarriage after divorce (Deuteronomy 24:4), and cross-dressing (Deuteronomy 22:5).

**Question:** Is every law in Leviticus 18:19–23 equally applicable to Christians today? Why or why not? On what basis do you decide?

👉 Remember to record your responses.

### **The Purpose of Law Then and Now**

God gives the law “that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you are to possess” (Deuteronomy 5:33); this divine purpose is echoed in Leviticus 18:5. In other words, God’s laws are grace-filled, manifesting a basic concern for the life, health, and good order of the community. Put negatively, they are concerned to shelter the community from disease, instability, violence, and premature death. The sexuality laws in Leviticus participate in this divine purpose.

**Question:** In what ways do each of the sexuality laws contribute to the good ends for the community? Christians often disagree in the way they respond to this question, but most agree that the concerns that generated the law in the first place continue to be important. Those concerns, most would agree, have to do with the life and health of our communities and not individual rights.

👉 Remember to record your responses.

All interpreters understand that some Old Testament laws have been set aside for Christians. This is the case especially when the New Testament itself makes such a claim (e.g., the food laws; see Mark 7; Acts 10), but the Old Testament already shows the way (cf. Deuteronomy 23:1–8 with Isaiah 56:1–8<sup>+</sup>). Moreover, widespread agreement exists regarding the obsolescence of many laws to which the New Testament does not speak (e.g., laws regarding agriculture and clothing, e.g., Leviticus 19:19), and even some to which it does (e.g., remarriage of divorced people, Mark 10:11–12). Regarding the sexuality laws, most agree that the laws regarding intercourse during a woman’s menstrual period (Leviticus 18:19) and capital punishment for homosexual behavior (20:13) no longer apply. However, interpreters agree that most sexuality laws continue to be applicable to Christians, including those regarding incest, adultery, and bestiality. Because these behaviors, unlike some of the others named, adversely affect good order in the life of the community, they cannot be set aside.

### **Interpretations**

For some interpreters, the law stated in Leviticus 18:22 continues to be applicable because setting it aside would adversely affect the institution of marriage, a cornerstone of our society, and undermine the heterosexual plan of God’s good order of creation.

For other interpreters, setting the law aside would nurture responsible sexuality and faithful relationships in the homosexual community, thus contributing to the sexual stability of our society and to its health.

### **Questions:**

1. Beginning with trying to understand God’s purpose in giving a law, what criteria should we use to determine whether a specific law continues to apply to Christians today?
2. What action on the part of this church would best contribute to the life, health, and sexual stability of our communities?

👉 Remember to record your responses.

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites...

—1 Corinthians 6:9

... fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching...

—1 Timothy 1:10

## **1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10**

In these two passages some form of male same-sex conduct is condemned along with other sinful activities.

### **Interpretations**

The precise meaning of the two Greek words in 1 Corinthians 6:9 (translated in the NRSV as “male prostitutes” and “sodomites”), one of which also occurs in 1 Timothy 1:10, has been disputed by Bible scholars. The terms have been variously translated. See the discussion of this text in the background paper by Hultgren and Taylor. (Distributed with this booklet and available on-line at [www.elca.org/faithfuljourney](http://www.elca.org/faithfuljourney))

Clearly, the two words refer to some form of male same-sex behavior that is regarded as sinful. The nature of that activity is not clear. Could it refer to the sort of same-sex relationships between men and boys that was characteristic of the surrounding Greek culture? Possibly, but not necessarily. Do the passages condemn all expressions of same-sex conduct without exception? Some say, yes. Others say that the uncertainties of the word meanings make this sweeping a censure risky. Still others say that, despite the alleged uncertainties of translation, the combination of these passages with others that reject same-sex intercourse guarantees that they are part of a clear and larger picture of biblical disapproval.

**Question:** What principles of biblical interpretation would help you to determine the importance of these passages for the issues of blessing same-sex unions and the ordination, consecration, and commissioning of people in committed same-sex relationships?

📌 Remember to record your responses.

## **Romans 1:18–32**

In Romans 1:18–32 Paul speaks of God’s judgment of the Gentiles. These people should have known God from the realities of creation and given honor and gratitude to God (Romans 1:19–22). They turned to the worship of idols instead (1:23, 25, and 28). Therefore, God “gave them up” (1:24, 26, and 28) to judgment. This divine action is referred to as the wrath of God in 1:18. This divine judgment included a long list of twenty-three behaviors of “impurity...degrading passions...a debased mind and things that should not be done” (1:24, 26–27, and 28–31), and which have taken control of their lives.

### **Interpretations**

Almost all students of the Bible agree that this passage is the most important of all for the Bible’s assessment of homosexuality. First of all, this is the only place where both gay and lesbian sexual conduct is mentioned (1:26–27). Secondly, because Paul decries same-sex intercourse as one manifestation of sinful behavior—sexual and otherwise—among the many that display the fruits of idolatry, we see homosexual conduct placed in a clear theological context of universal human sinfulness and need for God’s redemption that goes back to Adam (Romans 5:12–19).

Some interpreters would emphasize that Paul’s description of same-sex intercourse as exchanging “natural intercourse for unnatural,” seems to indicate an appeal to God’s intention that the norm for sexuality in creation is heterosexual. What is “natural” is God’s will for what the creation ought to be. The idea some have had that Paul is condemning only certain forms of same-sex behaviors because they are promiscuous or exploitative is questioned because the basis for condemnation is that the acts are unnatural. His appeal to what is “natural” versus what is “unnatural” expresses his conviction that all have a basic knowledge of divine will in creation. To this some

would add that Paul is also drawing on his familiarity with the Hebrew Scriptures by reflecting Leviticus 18 in his prohibition of same-sex acts.

Other interpreters contend that “natural” refers to what is conventional rather than to the structure of creation. The Greek word for natural is not a synonym for creation. This would open the door to the suggestion that Paul’s evaluation of such behavior was reflective of his cultural context and not the timeless design of God’s creation. Furthermore, some would argue, Paul’s idea of “exchanging” natural for unnatural relations conveys the notion that same-sex conduct is a willful act, like the other sins listed, and not the expression of a given orientation.

Finally, some interpreters would add that Paul’s strategy in this whole section is to make the point that all, even the Jews, are sinners and without excuse. His real concern is not to focus on the evil of same-sex activity. Rather, Paul is showing the world’s need for grace (law) and leading up to the proclamation of justification by grace for Christ’s sake through faith in Romans 3:24–26 (gospel).

**Question:** Consider Romans 1:26–27 in the context of 1:24–32. Make a list of the sins that Paul enumerates. Are they all of equal seriousness? Why or why not?

👉 Remember to record your responses.

### Conclusions

Despite some differences of opinion on the precise message of some of these texts, there is general agreement that the Bible has nothing positive to say about same-sex intercourse. For some homosexual people among us this negative biblical evaluation of their sexuality has been a source of pain and sometimes an incentive to seek help in changing their sexual orientation.

For other homosexual people among us their experience of themselves does not seem to correspond with what the Bible calls an abomination. They appeal to the experience of their own sexuality as natural for them and to their devotion to Christ and commitment to a faithful and loving union. Others looking at the Bible are persuaded by this appeal.

### Questions:

1. What surprised you in this session of the study?
2. In your view, is disagreement about the blessing of same-sex unions a disagreement over the interpretation of biblical passages and their application, or a disagreement over the authority of the Bible? What does the character of the disagreement mean for how the church should deal with this controversy?

👉 Remember to record your responses.

**Closing Prayer:** Creator God, we praise you for the wonder of your creation and for its blessings of intimacy and companionship that are a part of our life together. Show us the way and give us the grace to order our sexual lives in accordance with your will, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.