Reclaiming Scripture

Table of Contents

Chapter 1

Reading the Bible

Through the Lens of Love

Why This Series Matters

For centuries, people have turned to the Bible for guidance, comfort, and hope. But for many LGBTQ+ individuals, Scripture has too often been a source of pain. A handful of verses—sometimes called the “clobber passages”—have been used to exclude and condemn, causing deep spiritual wounds and driving people away from the very God who created them in love.

This series matters because reclaiming Scripture means reclaiming it as a source of liberation, not oppression, of grace, not guilt. It’s about rediscovering the Bible as a wellspring of love that invites all people into community and belonging.

Many Christians today are reexamining traditional interpretations of sexuality and gender—not as a rejection of the Bible, but as a return to it. This movement is grounded in careful scholarship, pastoral concern, and a deep commitment to justice, mercy, and humility, as Micah 6:8 calls us to live. Rather than diminishing Scripture’s authority, this approach deepens it. It seeks to read the Bible faithfully—contextually, compassionately, and through the lens of Christ’s radical love.

Theologians like James Alison remind us that no interpretation of Scripture should ever produce outcomes that are “contrary to charity.” If a theological claim leads to shame, exclusion, or violence, then it cannot reflect the heart of God. That’s a foundational conviction of this series: the Spirit of Christ will never lead us to harm others in God’s name.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann adds that the Bible is not a flat text where every verse carries equal weight. Instead, it contains many voices—some of which reflect the cultural limitations of their time. Our role as interpreters is not to pretend all verses are timeless, but to discern their meaning through the overarching message of God's love, justice, and mercy. "The gospel is not to be confused with or identified with the Bible," Brueggemann writes. Rather, it is the lens through which we understand the Bible itself.

This lens is essential in conversations about LGBTQ+ inclusion. For too long, the Church has used a small number of verses—often without historical or cultural context—to marginalize LGBTQ+ people. By lifting those verses out of their original setting and treating them as universal condemnations, we've distorted their meaning and caused profound harm.

But when we zoom out to see the broader arc of Scripture—from Genesis to Revelation—we encounter a story of widening welcome. The early purity laws gave way to the prophets' calls for justice. Jesus challenged religious exclusion with an ethic of love and inclusion. The early Church broke barriers of ethnicity, gender, and class. This trajectory is not toward rigidity but toward radical hospitality. The Spirit is always expanding the circle.

Some fear that affirming LGBTQ+ people means watering down Scripture. In truth, it demands a deeper engagement—studying original languages, exploring cultural context, and reading each verse through the lens of the gospel. This is not less faithful; it is more. We ask not just, "What does this verse say?" but "How does this verse reflect the heart of Christ?"

And this isn't new. The Church has always revisited Scripture in light of new insight. We no longer use the Bible to justify slavery, bar remarried people from communion, or silence all women in church. These changes happened not because we abandoned Scripture, but because we read it more carefully, with compassion and wisdom.

The same shift is happening now. When LGBTQ+ people are condemned using isolated verses, we must ask, “What is the fruit of this interpretation?” Jesus said we will know truth by its fruit (Matt. 7:16). The fruit of exclusion has been shame, depression, and even suicide. By contrast, when churches affirm LGBTQ+ people, the fruit is healing, joy, and renewed faith. That’s the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23). It matters.

This series is not about discarding the Bible. It’s about reclaiming it as the sacred text it truly is—a living word that leads us deeper into relationship with God and one another. We will examine the most frequently misused passages with care, but we will also highlight the many Scriptures that speak clearly of love, justice, and belonging. We will see how Jesus placed people before rules, welcomed the outsider, and dismantled systems of religious control.

Ultimately, this series matters because LGBTQ+ people matter. Their lives are sacred. Their gifts are needed. And the Church has a responsibility to do better. Jesus commanded us to love one another—not conditionally, not partially, but fully.

So let us open our hearts and our Bibles with fresh eyes. Let us listen anew to the Spirit, who is still speaking—not through fear, but through love. Let us reclaim Scripture—not for exclusion, but for grace, for truth, and for the world God so loves.

Justice: A Call for Fairness and Dignity

“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”
—Micah 6:8 (NRSV)

Justice is not an optional add-on to the gospel—it is its beating heart. When Scripture speaks of justice, it doesn’t mean punishment or legal retribution. It means setting things right. It means creating a world where dignity isn’t reserved for the powerful and belonging isn’t rationed out by gatekeepers. Biblical justice calls us to defend the

vulnerable, lift the oppressed, and reshape our communities around fairness and compassion.

To pursue justice is to embody God's own character. It's about doing more than feeling empathy—it's about transforming that empathy into action. Feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, protecting the vulnerable—these are not side projects. They are central to a life of faith.

Justice also asks how we read Scripture. Do our interpretations reflect a God of compassion, or do they reinforce systems of exclusion? Are we applying the Bible in ways that restore dignity—or in ways that diminish it? These questions are urgent, especially in light of the verses historically used to condemn LGBTQ+ people.

Let's begin with Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13—verses often quoted as blanket prohibitions against same-sex relationships. Taken at face value, they appear severe. But justice requires context. These verses belong to the Holiness Code, a set of ritual purity laws designed to distinguish ancient Israel from surrounding nations. The focus was not universal morality but religious identity and cultural separation.

The word translated as "abomination" (*to'evah*) didn't imply inherent wickedness. It referred to practices deemed ritually out of bounds for that specific community—many of which we no longer follow today. Shellfish, blended fabrics, and remarriage after divorce were all labeled *to'evah*, yet most Christians have moved past enforcing those rules. Why, then, isolate this one verse to condemn LGBTQ+ people? Selective literalism is not justice—it is discrimination disguised as faithfulness.

True justice insists on consistent interpretation. If we discard the broader Holiness Code as culturally bound, then we must also question why Leviticus 18:22 is treated differently. As scholar Karen Armstrong points out, everyone reads the Bible selectively. The task is not to pretend otherwise—it's to choose readings that align with the gospel of love and liberation.

Justice also means naming misuse. When verses are lifted from their context and turned into weapons, the Bible is distorted. That's what's happened with Genesis 19, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. For centuries, it's been cited as evidence against homosexuality. But a closer reading reveals a very different story.

Genesis 19 describes an attempted act of sexual violence—an attempted gang rape by a mob seeking to degrade strangers in their midst. This is about power, cruelty, and inhospitality—not love or mutuality. Ezekiel 16:49 makes it plain: Sodom's sin was arrogance and failure to care for the poor, not same-sex love. To use this story against LGBTQ+ people is to misread the Bible and to perpetuate harm. That is not justice.

We must also wrestle with Romans 1:26–27, where Paul speaks of "unnatural relations." This passage has often been used to indict all same-sex relationships, but Paul's focus is idolatry and excess—not orientation or covenantal love. As scholar Beverly Gaventa notes, Paul is building a rhetorical argument meant to indict everyone—so he can then pivot in Romans 2 and say, "You have no excuse when you judge others."

Paul wasn't talking about loving LGBTQ+ partnerships. He was addressing exploitative sexual practices common in Roman society—like pederasty and temple prostitution. He had no framework for modern understandings of sexual orientation or identity. To read Romans 1 as a sweeping condemnation of all LGBTQ+ people is not only unjust—it misses Paul's actual point: that all fall short, and all are in need of grace.

When we apply Scripture with justice, we ask: What kind of relationships are these verses describing? Are they abusive or loving? Coerced or mutual? We also ask: What has been the fruit of our interpretation? Because Jesus said you will know a tree by its fruit (Matthew 7:16).

And here is the hard truth: the fruit of exclusion has been despair, depression, and even death. LGBTQ+ youth suffer disproportionately from mental health crises. Many have been rejected by their families, their churches, their communities. This isn't theoretical harm—it's real, and it's deadly.

By contrast, affirming theology produces different fruit. In affirming churches, LGBTQ+ people report feeling seen, healed, and reconnected to God. Their faith deepens. Their gifts flourish. Families are mended. That's the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23). And that is what justice looks like.

Justice means naming the harm and choosing a better path. It means listening to the voices of LGBTQ+ Christians—those who have stayed in the Church, sometimes at great personal cost—and honoring their witness. It means shifting from legalism to love, from exclusion to embrace.

This is not about "changing the Bible." It's about reading it more faithfully. The early Church had to make similar decisions. In Acts 15, the apostles chose not to impose the full weight of the Mosaic law on Gentile converts. Why? Because the Spirit was already moving among them. The same is happening today. LGBTQ+ people are already bearing witness to the presence of God in their lives. And if the Spirit is present, who are we to stand in the way?

Injustice has been done in the name of Scripture. But Scripture itself offers a better way. Over and over, it calls us to defend the outcast, protect the vulnerable, and restore what's been broken. That call has never been more urgent.

Justice is not a trend. It is the gospel lived out in public. It's what love looks like when it walks into the room. It's how we tell the world that all people—regardless of gender identity or orientation—bear the image of God.

So let us reclaim the Bible not as a tool of exclusion, but as a story of sacred belonging. Let us interpret with integrity. Let us act with courage. And let us do justice, because justice is what the Lord requires.

Mercy: The Kindness and Welcome Modeled by Jesus

Mercy is not an afterthought in Christian faith—it is the heartbeat of God's character. When Micah 6:8 calls us to "love mercy," it's not asking for passive compassion. It's

calling us to lead with tenderness, to shape our theology and our relationships through kindness. Nowhere is this clearer than in the life of Jesus.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus consistently steps across lines others refused to cross. He touches the untouchable, welcomes the outsider, and refuses to participate in public shaming. He breaks religious taboos not to disregard holiness, but to reveal a deeper holiness—one rooted in healing, inclusion, and restoration. If we are to follow him, especially in how we treat LGBTQ+ people, mercy must come first.

Mercy doesn't ignore sin—it restores dignity. It protects. It honors. It refuses to let people be defined by their lowest moments or by labels placed on them by others. That's why Jesus doesn't condemn the woman caught in adultery (John 8). Instead, he shields her from the crowd and says, "Neither do I condemn you." This isn't permissiveness—it's powerful grace. It's a declaration that her life is more than a moral failure.

Jesus' mercy was practical. He stopped to help bleeding bodies and broken spirits. In Mark 5, a woman suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years dares to touch the edge of his robe. Her condition made her ritually unclean—untouchable. But Jesus not only heals her; he calls her "Daughter." He restores her to community and gives her a new name, not rooted in illness, but in belonging. This is the kind of mercy the Church is called to offer, especially to those who've been told they are "unclean."

We see this again in John 4, where Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at a well. She is marginalized three times over—by gender, ethnicity, and reputation. Yet Jesus sees her. He honors her questions. He offers her living water. And she becomes the first evangelist in John's Gospel. Mercy does not withhold truth—but it delivers it through love, not condemnation.

There is also a moment of profound recognition in Matthew 19:12, where Jesus speaks of "eunuchs who were born that way." Some scholars believe this could include people we would now understand as intersex or gender-nonconforming. Jesus not only acknowledges them—he affirms them. "Let anyone accept this who can," he says. For

LGBTQ+ Christians, this is a sacred moment: Jesus naming and honoring those who don't fit neatly into the world's categories.

Jesus also encounters a Roman centurion in Matthew 8 who asks him to heal his beloved servant. Some scholars believe this servant may have been more than a servant—possibly a same-sex partner, given cultural clues and the Greek wording. Regardless, Jesus responds with compassion and praise: "I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith." He doesn't interrogate the relationship—he honors the faith. That is mercy in action.

The pattern is clear: Jesus always sides with the marginalized over the gatekeepers. He prioritizes presence over purity, and love over legalism. He doesn't wait for people to be "fixed" before offering fellowship. He meets them as they are—and in that encounter, transformation begins. That's the kind of welcome LGBTQ+ people deserve from the Church—not just tolerance, but embrace.

Mercy also shows up in Jesus' parables. In the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10), the religious elite pass by the wounded man. It is the Samaritan—the outsider—who stops, who binds wounds, who pays the cost of care. Jesus ends the story with a command: "Go and do likewise." The Church must ask: are we walking by the wounds of LGBTQ+ people? Or are we crossing the road to offer compassion?

In the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15), mercy runs to meet the returning child. The father doesn't demand explanations or repentance speeches. He throws open his arms, covers him in love, and throws a feast. That is what LGBTQ+ people should find when they come home to faith—a celebration, not suspicion. A robe, not rejection.

Mercy also critiques harmful religion. In Matthew 23, Jesus calls out religious leaders who "tie up heavy burdens" but won't lift a finger to help. When churches teach LGBTQ+ people that their identity is inherently sinful, they place unbearable burdens on people's shoulders—burdens Jesus never intended. Mercy lifts those burdens. It sets people free.

We must also reexamine texts often used to harm. In 1 Corinthians 6:9–10, Paul lists behaviors that bar people from God's kingdom, including "malakoi" and "arsenokoitai"—terms often mistranslated as "homosexuals." But deeper study shows these Greek words are ambiguous and culturally specific.

Malakoi literally means "soft." In Paul's context, it could refer to a wide range of things: effeminacy, lack of self-control, or social weakness—not necessarily sexuality. Arsenokoitai, even more obscure, appears to be a word Paul coined, likely pulling from Levitical language. Scholars widely debate its meaning. It could refer to exploitative sex, temple prostitution, or economic abuse. What it does not clearly reference is consensual, loving same-sex relationships.

New Testament scholar Dale Martin puts it plainly: "We simply do not know what arsenokoitai meant." Using this word to condemn LGBTQ+ people today is not faithful interpretation—it's an irresponsible one.

What we do know is that mercy demands humility in the face of linguistic uncertainty. We cannot build doctrines of exclusion on words whose meanings are debated by the best biblical scholars. Instead, we must return to the bigger question: does this interpretation lead to love? Does it reflect the mercy of Christ?

The answer, in many cases, is no. Traditional readings have inflicted profound harm. LGBTQ+ Christians have been shamed, excluded, and told to deny their identities in order to be accepted. That is not the gospel. That is trauma cloaked in theology.

But mercy offers a better way. It tells LGBTQ+ people: You are not a problem to be solved. You are a beloved image-bearer of God. You are welcome at the table—not in spite of who you are, but because of it.

And mercy is not just for the marginalized—it's for the Church. When LGBTQ+ people are included, the whole body of Christ is enriched. Their presence reveals new dimensions of grace, creativity, and spiritual depth. Their stories challenge us to grow, to listen, to love more deeply.

“I desire mercy, not sacrifice,” Jesus said (Matthew 9:13). That wasn’t a throwaway line. It was the lens through which he interpreted Scripture. And it must be ours, too.

To practice mercy is to move theology from the page to the heart. It’s to turn doctrine into discipleship. And it’s how the Church becomes what it was always meant to be: a sanctuary of healing, belonging, and transformation.

Walking Humbly with God: Remaining Open to New Understandings

“To walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8) is one of the most sacred and demanding invitations in Scripture. Humility in faith doesn’t mean insecurity or hesitation—it means being teachable. It means recognizing that we don’t have all the answers and that some of what we’ve inherited, even with good intentions, may need to be reexamined in light of new understanding and deeper love.

In the context of LGBTQ+ inclusion, humility requires us to listen—carefully and courageously. To the Spirit. To the text. And especially to the people whose lives are most impacted by how Scripture is interpreted. It means asking not just “What have we been taught?” but “What might we have missed?”

Scripture is full of moments where faithful people are surprised by God. In Acts 10, Peter receives a vision that shatters his categories of clean and unclean. He resists at first—quoting Scripture to defend his assumptions. But then he sees the Holy Spirit poured out on Gentiles, people he believed were outside the covenant. In that moment, Peter humbles himself. He doesn’t double down. He allows his theology to grow.

“Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” he asks. This is humility in action: letting the Spirit override tradition. Trusting that God’s grace is bigger than our rules.

This same story plays out today. Many LGBTQ+ Christians bear the unmistakable fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness. They live lives of faith, serve their

communities, raise families, and follow Jesus. If we see the Spirit moving, how can we deny them full participation in the Church?

Walking humbly also means acknowledging that the Bible was written in particular cultural and historical contexts. Paul, for instance, did not have a concept of sexual orientation as we understand it today. His references to same-sex behavior likely addressed specific practices in his time—such as exploitative sex, temple rituals, or power imbalances—not committed, mutual same-sex relationships.

This doesn't make Paul irrelevant. It makes him human. Recognizing this doesn't weaken Scripture—it honors the way God speaks through human voices in real history. To walk humbly is to say: God was present then, and God is still speaking now.

Humility also asks us to look at the Church's past honestly. At times, Scripture was used to defend slavery, subjugate women, justify colonization, and oppose interracial marriage. But over time, through prayer, study, and listening to the Spirit, the Church grew. Not by discarding the Bible, but by reading it again—more carefully, more contextually, more lovingly.

The same kind of growth is happening now around sexuality and gender. This is not a departure from faith. It is the fruit of faith.

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral—a method developed in the Methodist tradition—offers a helpful model. It invites us to interpret Scripture through the lenses of tradition, reason, and experience. Scripture remains central, but it is illuminated by the wisdom of the Church, the clarity of sound thinking, and the witness of real lives.

Experience matters. The lives of LGBTQ+ Christians are not outside the conversation—they are essential to it. These are not strangers to the faith. They are pastors, parents, artists, teachers, and disciples. Their testimonies, their courage, and their resilience reveal how the Spirit continues to work in and through them. To ignore their voices is to ignore the living witness of the Body of Christ.

In Matthew 7, Jesus says we will know people by their fruits. So what is the fruit of exclusion? Shame. Depression. Fear. Abandonment. And too often, tragedy. But what is the fruit of inclusion? Healing. Joy. Restoration. Deeper faith. These are not coincidences—they are the Spirit's signature.

There's also the matter of Jesus' silence. He never once speaks against same-sex relationships. He had strong words for injustice, for hypocrisy, for religious abuse—but not for LGBTQ+ people. That silence is not accidental. If this were truly a core concern, we'd expect Jesus to address it. Instead, he centers love. Again and again.

In Matthew 23, Jesus warns against obsessing over minor laws while neglecting "the weightier matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faith." Walking humbly means admitting that we may have elevated the wrong priorities. It means re-centering our faith on what matters most.

Some argue that affirming LGBTQ+ people is just giving in to culture. But that misunderstands the nature of Christian growth. The early Church was profoundly countercultural—welcoming Gentiles, rejecting violence, empowering women. Today's affirming movement is not about pleasing the world. It's about living the gospel more fully.

And humility must also shape how we treat those who disagree. There are people who hold traditional views out of sincere devotion. Humility means we do not shame or silence them. Instead, we listen, share, and invite conversation. Change born from love, not triumph.

Affirming Christians, too, must remain humble—open to growth, correction, and deeper learning. The goal is not to win arguments. It is to love well. To discern faithfully. To follow Christ together.

In Acts 8, an Ethiopian eunuch—a sexual and gender minority by ancient standards—reads Isaiah but doesn't understand. God sends Philip, not to condemn or control, but to

walk alongside and interpret. After hearing the good news of Jesus, the eunuch asks, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” And the answer is clear: Nothing.

That question echoes in every generation. “What is to prevent me?” The humble Church answers: Nothing. You are welcome. You are worthy. You are already God’s beloved.

Humility calls us to ask: Who are we still excluding? And why? Who is bearing the fruit of faith, even when the Church tells them they don’t belong?

Jesus said, “You nullify the word of God by your tradition” (Mark 7:13). When tradition excludes, we must let it go. Not to discard our faith—but to deepen it.

To walk humbly with God is to let go of certainty when it no longer serves love. It is to let Scripture surprise us. It is to admit, “We used to think this—but now, through grace, we see more clearly.”

And that is the path of transformation.

As we continue this journey, we are not losing our faith. We are reclaiming it. We are learning again what it means to be the Church. And we are discovering that when we walk humbly with God, we do not walk alone—we walk with the Spirit, with one another, and with Christ, who still leads the way.

Jesus’ Example: Love First

If there is one truth that radiates through every story in the Gospels, it is this: Jesus led with love. Not abstract love. Not conditional love. But real, courageous, disruptive love. Love that crossed boundaries, overturned traditions, and put people before rules. Jesus didn’t just teach love—he embodied it. And for those of us seeking to follow him today, especially in conversations about LGBTQ+ inclusion, that love is not optional. It’s the starting point.

In John 13:35, Jesus tells his disciples, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Not by doctrinal correctness. Not by moral

superiority. But by love. That's the measuring stick. If our theology leads us to reject or condemn people—especially those already pushed to the margins—then our theology has failed that test.

Love was the foundation of Jesus' ministry. He didn't avoid the outcasts; he sought them out. He dined with tax collectors, touched lepers, spoke with women others dismissed, and invited sinners into friendship. His love dismantled religious hierarchies and declared that no one is too far gone, too different, or too broken to be embraced.

One of the most powerful examples is his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4). She was an ethnic outsider, a woman with a complicated past, and a religious "other." And yet, Jesus chooses her to receive one of the most direct revelations of who he is. She becomes the first evangelist in John's Gospel—not because she was perfect, but because Jesus saw her as worthy. Love first.

Or consider the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19), a tax collector and social outcast. Jesus doesn't lecture him. He invites himself to Zacchaeus' home for dinner. That act of unexpected welcome leads to transformation—not because of pressure, but because love opened the door.

In John 8, the religious leaders bring a woman caught in adultery before Jesus. They demand judgment. Jesus responds with silence, then a challenge: "Let the one without sin cast the first stone." One by one, they leave. And then Jesus speaks words the Church must remember: "Neither do I condemn you." He doesn't deny her worth. He doesn't reduce her to her mistake. He leads with grace. That's what love does.

Jesus also broke the Sabbath laws to heal. He said clearly: the law is meant to serve people, not the other way around (Mark 2:27). So when interpretations of Scripture are used to hurt people, love gives us permission—no, the obligation—to rethink those interpretations. Love isn't a loophole. It's the lens.

Too often, the Church has responded to LGBTQ+ people not with Jesus' radical hospitality, but with suspicion, silence, or outright rejection. Love first challenges that. It

asks: What would Jesus do if a gay teen walked into our church? What would he say to a transgender parent? Would he demand they explain themselves, or would he invite them to the table?

Jesus' parables reinforce this. In the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10), the religious insiders pass by the man left beaten on the road. It's the Samaritan—culturally and theologically suspect—who stops to help. Jesus tells us to be like him. Love doesn't ask who is "in" or "out." It asks, "Who needs care?"

And in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15), the father runs to welcome his returning child with open arms—no conditions, no tests. Just love. The older brother, representing religious resentment, refuses to celebrate. But the father insists: "We had to rejoice." Why? Because love always rejoices when someone comes home.

This is the heart of Jesus' ministry. He prioritized the hurting over the rulebook, the outcast over the institution. His harshest critiques were for religious leaders who enforced purity codes without compassion.

In Matthew 23, he calls them out for obsessing over minor laws while neglecting "the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faith." That critique still echoes. When the Church focuses on rigid doctrine and forgets love, we resemble the very leaders Jesus challenged.

Some argue that to love LGBTQ+ people fully is to ignore morality. But Jesus redefined morality around love. Holiness wasn't about ritual purity—it was about wholeness, healing, and right relationship. His kind of holiness restored dignity rather than stripped it away.

And when Jesus did challenge people, it was always within relationship. He didn't condemn from afar—he came close, listened, and loved. His love had boundaries, yes—but they were always in service of grace, not exclusion.

That's the model we're given.

When LGBTQ+ people are affirmed in the Church, the fruit is unmistakable. People who had been rejected return with renewed hope. Families are healed. Gifts flourish. Faith deepens. Joy emerges. These are the fruits Jesus told us to look for (Matthew 7:16). And if inclusion bears this kind of fruit, how can we say it is anything but holy?

Jesus never built walls. He built tables. And he invites us to do the same. Not because it's easy. But because it's faithful.

To follow Jesus is to lead with love—not rules, not fear, not tradition. Love that listens. Love that includes. Love that says, “You are God’s beloved,” before asking anything else.

This isn’t just an idea—it’s a mandate. And it’s the only way forward if we want our churches to look like Christ.

So let us be known not for who we exclude, but for how we love. Let us be a Church where LGBTQ+ people hear not condemnation, but blessing. Let us remember that the deepest truth of Scripture is not a list of rules—it’s the story of a love that refuses to let anyone go. Because love first is not just Jesus’ way. It is the gospel itself.

Challenge: Open Hearts and Open Bibles

After exploring justice, mercy, humility, and the love of Jesus, we come to a moment of holy invitation—a challenge that speaks directly to us as individuals and as a Church. It is both deeply personal and powerfully communal. Will we open our hearts? And will we open our Bibles with fresh eyes and deeper courage?

This challenge is not about rejecting Scripture. It’s about returning to it more honestly, more lovingly, and more fully aware of how the Spirit continues to speak. For many, affirming LGBTQ+ inclusion feels like a break from the Bible. But in truth, it often marks the beginning of a more faithful relationship with it.

Consider the story in Acts 10. Peter, a devout follower of Jewish law, has a vision that completely disrupts his understanding of purity. A sheet filled with animals considered

“unclean” descends from heaven, and God commands him to eat. Peter protests, citing Scripture. But the divine reply is clear: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

Shortly after, Peter meets Cornelius—a Gentile, someone considered outside of God’s covenant. Yet Peter sees the Spirit fall upon Cornelius and his household just as it had fallen on Jewish believers. Confronted with God’s unmistakable presence, Peter surrenders his assumptions. “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people?” he asks.

That is the moment we are in today. The Spirit is falling on LGBTQ+ people—calling them, equipping them, blessing them. The challenge before us is the same: Will we recognize the work of God in people we were once taught to exclude?

To open our hearts means softening our defenses. It means letting go of fear, shame, and inherited assumptions. It means moving beyond the need to be right, and entering instead into the sacred space of listening—especially to the voices that have long been silenced. LGBTQ+ Christians carry stories of resilience, faith, and divine encounter. When we listen, we are changed.

To open our Bibles means refusing to treat it as a static rulebook. The Bible is not a frozen document—it is a living text, shaped by real people in real history, bearing witness to an unfolding relationship between God and humanity. When we open it with curiosity instead of control, compassion instead of condemnation, we begin to see things we hadn’t seen before.

Yes, there are passages that have been used to exclude. But when read in context—with attention to language, culture, and genre—these texts often say something far different than we were told. Romans 1, for instance, is not a blanket condemnation of LGBTQ+ people. It’s a critique of idolatry, excess, and exploitative practices. Paul was not writing about loving, covenantal same-sex relationships. He likely didn’t even have a concept of sexual orientation as we do today.

Leviticus 18:22 is another commonly quoted verse. But its context is ancient purity laws designed for a specific people in a specific time. Christians no longer follow most of the Holiness Code—rules about clothing, food, or farming. Why isolate one verse to justify exclusion?

Opening our Bibles means being honest about what's in the text—and just as honest about how we've misused it. It means recognizing that Scripture has always pointed toward love, liberation, and expanding inclusion. From Genesis to Revelation, God is moving people out of exclusion and into belonging.

Walter Brueggemann reminds us that the Bible is "multi-voiced." It contains tension, diversity, and development. That's not a flaw—it's an invitation to discernment. Our task is not to flatten Scripture into rigid rules, but to listen for the heartbeat of God pulsing through its pages. That heartbeat is always love.

So what does it really mean to open our hearts and our Bibles?

It means asking better questions:

- Does this interpretation bear good fruit?
- Does it reflect the love of Christ?
- Does it liberate or condemn?
- Is it consistent with the Spirit we see in Jesus—who welcomed the outsider, who protected the vulnerable, who crossed every line drawn by religion?

It means recognizing that theological change is not faithlessness—it's faithfulness. Abraham left his homeland. Peter broke dietary laws. The early Church welcomed Gentiles. Change has always been part of the story. The question is not whether we will change—but whether we will change in the direction of love.

This challenge is not just for individuals. It's for institutions. Churches must ask: Will we become places of refuge and celebration for LGBTQ+ people? Or will we cling to

silence and exclusion? Seminaries, denominations, publishers—will they create space for new voices? Or will they protect old boundaries out of fear?

Affirming Christians also face a challenge. Can we remain humble in our advocacy? Can we speak truth in love, and resist the urge to return harm with harm? If we truly believe in grace, then we must extend it—even to those who have yet to see what we now see.

And for those who are still wrestling—still unsure, still searching—this challenge is not meant to shame. It's an invitation. An invitation to be brave enough to say, "Maybe God is showing me something new." That's not weakness. That's the beginning of transformation.

Isaiah 43:19 says, "Behold, I am doing a new thing… do you not perceive it?" The new thing God is doing is not apart from Scripture—it's flowing out of its deepest truth. It's not contrary to the gospel—it's the gospel made visible.

To open our hearts and Bibles is to step into that newness. To trust that the Spirit is still speaking. To follow Jesus not only in belief, but in how we treat the people he loves.

We may not have all the answers. But we have this calling: to love. And that love invites us to keep growing.

May our hearts be open. May our Bibles be open.
And may the Church become a place where no one is turned away, where every story is honored, and where love always has the final word.

Conclusion: Radical Love and Inclusion

As we arrive at the conclusion of this journey, we return once more to the call that has guided us all along—the ancient and enduring wisdom of Micah 6:8: *Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly with your God.*

These are not vague ideals or abstract virtues. They are a blueprint for faithful living. They are the lens through which we read Scripture, engage theology, and shape the Church. And when we follow them honestly, they lead us unmistakably to one truth: full inclusion of LGBTQ+ people is not a departure from the gospel—it is its fulfillment.

Radical love is not new. It's been at the center of God's story from the beginning. From the wilderness of Exodus to the ministry of Jesus, from the prophets' cries for justice to the Spirit's movement in Acts, God has always been in the business of expanding the circle. Of welcoming those once excluded. Of healing what others declared unclean.

Inclusion is not about adjusting the gospel to fit a modern moment. It's about returning to the gospel's most urgent promise: *God's love is for everyone.* Every race, every gender, every orientation. Every story.

This series has examined the texts most often used to exclude—those sometimes called the "clobber passages." And we've seen that when these texts are read carefully, in context, and through the lens of Jesus, their meaning shifts. Misinterpretations fall away. And in their place, we begin to recover Scripture as a source of healing—not harm.

Leviticus, often cited to condemn, was never about universal moral codes. It was a set of ritual laws for an ancient people, shaped by their time and culture. Jesus moved beyond those laws again and again to welcome those they excluded.

Genesis 19, the story of Sodom, is not a judgment against homosexuality—it is a story of violence, arrogance, and inhospitality. Ezekiel makes that clear. To use this story to shame LGBTQ+ people is a profound distortion of its message.

Romans 1 is not a manifesto against same-sex love. It is a critique of idolatry and excess, set in a world where exploitative sex was common. Paul's point was not to single out LGBTQ+ people but to emphasize our shared need for grace. And Romans 2 reminds us that judging others leads us into hypocrisy.

The words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, found in 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1, are notoriously unclear. Scholars still debate their meanings. What we do know is that they were likely addressing exploitation, not love. Yet these verses have been used to inflict devastating harm. That is not faithful interpretation. That is theological malpractice.

But more powerful than any single passage is the witness of Jesus himself.

Jesus didn't avoid the outcasts. He called them by name. He didn't enforce purity codes. He broke them to offer healing. He didn't demand conformity before offering love. He led with love, always.

That love has a shape. It looks like a father running to embrace his prodigal child. It looks like a Samaritan crossing the road to bind a stranger's wounds. It looks like Jesus dining with sinners, touching lepers, blessing children, and honoring women. It looks like a Savior who, at every turn, chose compassion over control.

To include LGBTQ+ people fully in the life of the Church is not a compromise—it's discipleship. It is faithfulness to the One who gave his life for love.

Inclusion doesn't mean anything goes. It means everything must flow through love. It means we hold one another accountable not with shame, but with grace. It means we build a Church that doesn't just tolerate, but celebrates the full diversity of God's creation.

This is already happening.

In churches that bless same-sex marriages.
In youth groups where queer teens feel seen.
In pulpits where LGBTQ+ pastors proclaim the Word.
In sanctuaries where trans people are affirmed in name and identity.
In communities where healing replaces shame, and hope rises from hurt.

This is not fantasy—it is faith in action. It is what happens when love is taken seriously.

And it's not just about LGBTQ+ people. When inclusion is practiced, the entire Church is transformed. We all become freer, more honest, more compassionate. The gospel becomes visible again—not as doctrine alone, but as a living, breathing expression of Christ's body in the world.

We affirm what Paul wrote in Galatians 3:28:
In Christ, there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female—for you are all one in Christ Jesus.
We affirm that "all" includes all gender identities, all sexual orientations, all expressions of humanity. There are no exceptions to God's love.

We affirm that the law hangs on love—love for God and love for neighbor (Matthew 22:37–40). Every commandment, every verse, must be measured against that standard.

We affirm that the Spirit is still speaking—through Scripture, through lived experience, through the courageous witness of LGBTQ+ people, and through the undeniable fruit of love.

This work is not done. The Church still has far to go. But every step toward love is a step closer to Jesus.

So let us be clear. Let us be bold. Let us be faithful.

We declare:
You are beloved.
You are welcome.
You are needed.

This is our prayer. This is our proclamation. This is our promise.

Let this be the Church that loves like Jesus.
Let this be the generation that opens the doors wide.
Let this be the moment we reclaim Scripture, not as a fence, but as a feast.
A place where all are fed. All are seen. And all are home.

CHAPTER 2

Reinterpreting Sin of Sodom

Introduction: More Than Meets the Eye

Genesis 19 is one of the most misunderstood—and misused—stories in the Bible. For many LGBTQ+ individuals, it has been weaponized as a divine indictment of who they are. But when we look carefully, what we find is not a condemnation of love or identity, but a sobering critique of violence, inhospitality, and dehumanization.

The word “sodomy” has come to represent shame and rejection, but this association distorts the deeper biblical message. With the help of modern biblical scholarship, linguistic studies, and cultural context, we begin to see the story anew. Genesis 19 isn't about consensual same-sex relationships—it’s about the abuse of power, the rejection of the outsider, and the failure of a community to uphold the sacred duty of hospitality.

This chapter explores what that duty meant in the ancient Near East, how the biblical authors interpreted the sin of Sodom, and how Jesus reframed the story entirely. As we trace the legacy of this text through Scripture and tradition, we will also name the damage done by misinterpretation. At the heart of the story is a divine concern for justice, mercy, and human dignity—not a blanket condemnation of LGBTQ+ lives.

When read faithfully, Genesis 19 invites us not into judgment, but into repentance: to turn from fear and exclusion, and toward a love that protects, welcomes, and restores.

Hospitality in the Ancient World: A Sacred Duty

In the ancient Near East, hospitality was far more than politeness it was a sacred obligation. In a landscape where survival often depended on the generosity of strangers, welcoming the traveler was a core moral and spiritual expectation. To fail in hospitality wasn’t just rude; it was a serious violation of honor and justice.

Genesis 19 opens with two divine messengers arriving in Sodom at night. Lot, Abraham's nephew, meets them at the city gate and insists they stay at his home, where he prepares a meal and offers protection. This moment parallels Genesis 18, where Abraham hosts the same visitors with warmth and care. In both stories, the act of hospitality is depicted as righteousness.

But then something deeply disturbing happens. A mob of men "young and old, the whole population"—surrounds Lot's home, demanding to "know" his guests. The Hebrew word used here, *yada*, can mean "to know," but in this context clearly refers to sexual violence. What they seek is not intimacy it is assault. Their intent is domination, humiliation, and dehumanization.

Lot's response is troubling. In an effort to protect his guests, he offers his daughters instead. This appalling offer reveals how deeply patriarchal and broken the surrounding culture was. While it may reflect the extreme weight placed on protecting male guests, it does not make Lot a hero. Rather, it shows how distorted a society can become when compassion is subordinated to rigid codes of honor and power.

This story doesn't endorse the behavior—it exposes it.. It doesn't celebrate Lot's choice; it uses it to reveal how deeply compromised everyone in this setting has become. Even well-meaning actions are corrupted when justice and mercy are replaced by fear, hierarchy, and cultural norms that sacrifice the vulnerable.

The men of Sodom were not motivated by love or attraction, and their actions have nothing to do with anyone's sexual identity. What they seek is not connection, but conquest. This is what makes Sodom's sin so severe: a total inversion of the sacred duty to welcome, protect, and honor the stranger. The city's moral collapse is not rooted in who people loved it is revealed in how they treated the outsider.

The Real Sin of Sodom: Violence and Xenophobia

To fully understand Genesis 19, we must be clear: this story isn't about sexuality—it's about using violence to shame and overpower. In the ancient world, sexual violence—

especially against outsiders—was often used to degrade, assert dominance, and erase dignity. The mob's intent is to publicly humiliate these visitors as a show of force.

Their hostility is aimed not only at the strangers but also at Lot himself for extending them protection. When Lot tries to intervene, calling their actions "wicked," the crowd turns on him, saying, "This man came here as an alien, and now he's trying to judge us!" "Their resentment reveals the deeper issue: xenophobia, a fear or hatred of outsiders and those who are different. The crime in Genesis 19 is not about love, but about hostility toward the stranger and violent rejection of anyone who dares to stand with the vulnerable."

This story is about societal rot, about a city so corrupted by arrogance and violence that it targets the very people it is meant to protect. It is a story of a mob so consumed by fear and power that it lashes out at anything unfamiliar or undefended. When every man in a city joins in this violent act, it signals not a deviant sexuality but a community-wide moral collapse.

What happens here is an act of brutality—not a reflection of any consensual or loving same-sex relationship. The mob's actions reflect the very opposite of love. The emphasis on "all the men of the city" participating only underscores the absurdity of interpreting this text as a commentary on sexual orientation. No one seriously argues that Sodom was populated by 100% gay men. What we see instead is a story of mob violence, the breakdown of hospitality, and the scapegoating of strangers.

This is why Sodom becomes a biblical symbol—not for homosexuality, but for cruelty, arrogance, and failure to show mercy. The sin of Sodom is not who people were attracted to; it is how they treated the most vulnerable. When hospitality is replaced by hostility, and protection is replaced by predation, justice cries out.

This lens changes everything. It moves the story away from condemnation and toward a prophetic critique. Sodom is not a text to be used against LGBTQ+ people it is a warning to all communities: when we dehumanize the stranger, when we close our hearts to compassion, we mirror the very brokenness God seeks to heal.

Ezekiel's Interpretation: The Prophetic Voice of Justice

The clearest interpretation of Sodom's sin does not come from Genesis it comes from the prophet Ezekiel. In Ezekiel 16:49, the verdict is direct and unmistakable:
"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."

Not a word is mentioned about sexual behavior. Instead, Ezekiel paints a picture of a community consumed by arrogance, abundance, and apathy—a society that hoarded resources while ignoring the suffering around it. This prophetic diagnosis is both a correction and a challenge. It shifts the focus away from what has too often been weaponized and places it squarely where it belongs: on justice, compassion, and the ethical treatment of others.

The next verse (Ezekiel 16:50) adds that they were "haughty" and did "detestable things," but these charges remain grounded in a broader social critique. What made Sodom detestable wasn't romantic or sexual love—it was systemic cruelty and disregard for the vulnerable.

This interpretation wasn't unique to Ezekiel. It became the standard lens in many Jewish writings from the Second Temple period. Texts like Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach emphasize Sodom's inhospitality and hatred of the poor. Wisdom 19:13–17 says they "refused hospitality to strangers," reinforcing the theme that Sodom's guilt was rooted in societal injustice, not sexual orientation.

Even later rabbinic traditions continued this emphasis. Midrashic accounts tell of a girl who was executed in Sodom for giving bread to a poor man a tale meant to illustrate just how brutal and codified their inhospitality had become. These stories, though not part of the biblical canon, reflect a rich and consistent ethical tradition: Sodom's failure was not about who people loved it was about who they failed to love.

Early Christian writers, too, followed this thread. Gregory the Great and others listed Sodom's sins as pride, gluttony, and neglect of the poor mirroring Ezekiel. It wasn't until

centuries later, shaped by Greco-Roman views of morality and Christian asceticism, that interpretations began shifting toward sexual deviance, particularly as a means of controlling marginalized groups.

Modern scholarship has brought us full circle. Today, across denominations and disciplines, scholars overwhelmingly agree: Ezekiel 16:49 is the interpretive key to understanding Sodom. The biblical sin of Sodom was social, not sexual. It was about how a community used its power and privilege and whom it chose to ignore.

For the Church today, Ezekiel's words offer a sobering mirror. If we are arrogant in our theology, comfortable in our privilege, and indifferent to the cries of the oppressed, we are closer to Sodom than we think. But if we hear the prophet's call to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, and seek justice we participate in the healing work God has always intended.

Let Ezekiel's voice be a guidepost: not toward condemnation, but toward compassion. Not toward exclusion, but toward inclusion. For in lifting the lowly and defending the vulnerable, we honor the heart of Scripture and reflect the love of Christ.

Jesus and the Apostles: A Consistent Thread

When Jesus refers to Sodom in the Gospels, he does not use the story to condemn sexual minorities. Instead, he invokes it as a warning about inhospitality and spiritual arrogance. His words align with the prophetic tradition that emphasizes justice, humility, and compassion—not condemnation based on identity.

In Matthew 10:14–15 and Luke 10:10–12, Jesus sends his disciples out to preach and instructs them to rely on the hospitality of others. If a town refuses to welcome them, he says, "it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town." This comparison is not about sexual behavior but about rejecting messengers of peace. Jesus is warning that refusing to receive the stranger among you is a grave error one on par with the worst failures in biblical memory.

Jesus reinforces this message in Matthew 11:23–24, when he critiques cities like Chorazin and Bethsaida for their hardness of heart: "If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day." Again, Sodom symbolizes spiritual resistance, not sexual identity. The issue is refusal to respond to divine presence and revelation.

These teachings are a continuation of the themes found in Ezekiel 16:49—arrogance, excess, and apathy toward the vulnerable. The sins of Sodom, as Jesus sees them, are communal pride and a lack of hospitality to God's work through others. He never uses Sodom as a symbol of same-sex relationships. He uses it to critique self-righteousness, exclusion, and the refusal to extend welcome.

In the Epistles, the references to Sodom follow this same trajectory. Jude 1:7 mentions Sodom's pursuit of "strange flesh," a phrase often misunderstood. Given that the visitors in Genesis 19 were divine beings, many scholars believe this is a reference to the unnaturalness of attempting to violate angelic visitors—not a commentary on human same-sex relationships. This interpretation aligns with 2 Peter 2:6–10, which critiques Sodom's "lawless deeds" and overall corruption, not specific identities.

Even in Hebrews 13:2, the echo of the Sodom story is clear: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so, some have entertained angels without knowing it." This is a direct allusion to the Genesis story, but the moral drawn is not about sex. It is about kindness, hospitality, and openness to divine encounters.

Taken together, these New Testament references form a consistent thread. They remind us that what grieves God is not who people love, but how people treat one another—especially the stranger, the outsider, the messenger of good news. Jesus and the apostles invite us to live lives marked by welcome, not walls.

In a world where LGBTQ+ people are often treated as spiritual outsiders, the message of Jesus is revolutionary: judgment is reserved for those who exclude, not for those who seek belonging. The sin of Sodom, in Jesus' teaching, is not same-sex love—it is the failure to love at all.

Narrative Parallels: Two Cities, One Atrocity

The disturbing parallels between Genesis 19 (Sodom) and Judges 19 (Gibeah) are striking—and deeply revealing. Both stories feature vulnerable travelers, a host offering protection, and a violent mob threatening sexual assault. But while Genesis 19 has been frequently weaponized in modern theological debates, especially to condemn LGBTQ+ people, Judges 19 has largely been ignored. This imbalance in interpretation speaks volumes about cultural bias, not biblical intent.

In Genesis 19, two divine messengers arrive in Sodom. Lot welcomes them into his home, reflecting the sacred Near Eastern obligation of hospitality. But that night, a mob surrounds his house, demanding that he surrender his guests to be sexually violated. Lot pleads with them and, in a horrifying gesture shaped by patriarchal norms, offers his daughters instead. While this act shocks modern readers—as it should—it must be understood in its ancient cultural context: a tragic expression of a warped honor code that valued male guests over even one's own family.

Judges 19 tells a chillingly similar tale. A Levite and his concubine seek shelter in Gibeah, an Israelite city from the tribe of Benjamin. An older man offers them refuge. But soon after, men from the town demand the Levite be handed over to them for sexual assault. Instead, the concubine is pushed outside. She is raped throughout the night and left for dead. By morning, her lifeless body lies at the doorstep.

The structural symmetry between the stories is undeniable:

- Travelers arrive in an unfamiliar city.
- A righteous host offers protection.
- A mob forms, demanding sexual violation.
- A substitute is offered.
- A victim is brutally harmed.

Yet despite these chilling echoes, only Genesis 19 has been repeatedly cited in public theology, often inaccurately, as evidence of divine condemnation of same-sex

relationships. Judges 19, with nearly identical content and a heterosexual victim, is almost never invoked in such arguments. This silence reveals a selective moral lens—one that distorts the message of both texts.

The reality is this: neither story is about sexual orientation. They are about power, domination, and the collapse of moral responsibility within a community. In both cities, the mobs seek not intimacy, but humiliation and violence. The gender of the victim is irrelevant to the deeper moral failure on display.

These stories do not serve as warnings about who one loves. They are dire indictments of what happens when a society turns inward, abandons the vulnerable, and perverts sacred obligations, like hospitality, into instruments of abuse.

By placing Genesis 19 and Judges 19 side by side, a more honest and sobering truth emerges. These are not stories about sexual sin. They are stories about communal depravity and the dangers of a society that refuses to protect the most vulnerable. Any theology that weaponizes Genesis 19 while ignoring Judges 19 not only misreads the Bible it betrays it.

Why It Matters: Israel's Mirror and the Moral Message

Why did the writer of Judges craft a story so strikingly similar to Genesis 19?

Many scholars believe this was a deliberate theological move. The narrative echoes are not coincidence—they are critique. The sin once associated with the wicked outsiders of Sodom has now become the sin of God's own covenant people. In other words, Israel, during the time of the judges, had become morally indistinguishable from the nations it once denounced.

This reframing has profound implications. If the purpose of Judges 19 is to draw a parallel to Sodom not to reinforce condemnation of sexual orientation, but to highlight societal collapse then our interpretation of Genesis 19 must shift accordingly. The connection between the two stories compels us to ask: what is the real sin being exposed?

The answer is not about sex it's about the violent abandonment of hospitality, compassion, and justice. Both narratives show communities willing to dehumanize strangers and sacrifice the vulnerable. The pattern of moral failure runs deep, and it is shared by outsiders and insiders alike.

The takeaway is clear: these are not stories aimed at judging personal identity. They are searing critiques of communities that lose their ethical compass and abandon the sacred responsibility to protect others—especially the most vulnerable among them.

A Word to the Church

Reducing these stories to mere sex acts strips them of their true moral gravity. Genesis 19 and Judges 19 are not tales of sexual misconduct—they are indictments of societal collapse. These texts confront us with hard questions: How do we treat the outsider? How do we protect the vulnerable? And how quickly can pride, fear, and apathy become cruelty?

For today's church, the message is urgent. We are called to be communities that welcome—not wound. We must reject the misuse of Scripture as a tool of exclusion and reclaim its prophetic call to justice, mercy, and truth. These stories reveal that God's concern lies not in controlling identities, but in protecting dignity—especially the dignity of those whom society has pushed to the margins.

To follow the teachings of Jesus is to stand with the vulnerable, to extend radical hospitality, and to resist every system that devalues human worth. That is the gospel these stories are telling if only we are willing to listen.

Conclusion: Contemporary Perspectives and Responsible Interpretation

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah has long stood at the crossroads of controversy and misinterpretation. For generations, Genesis 19 has been weaponized against LGBTQ+ individuals, often stripped of its cultural, historical, and theological depth. But the deeper we dig into the text—with the tools of scholarship, compassion, and humility—the more we uncover a story not about orientation, but about justice.

When we examine the full sweep of Scripture from the prophetic rebuke of Ezekiel to Jesus' teachings on hospitality and judgment it becomes clear that the sin of Sodom was not about same-sex love. It was about violence, arrogance, cruelty, and the failure to care for the vulnerable. It was about power exploited, strangers rejected, and compassion withheld.

Modern biblical scholarship overwhelmingly affirms this reading. Across denominational and academic lines, experts recognize that Genesis 19 describes an attempted act of sexual violence—rooted in dominance and humiliation—not consensual intimacy. The passage has been misused, and the consequences have been devastating. LGBTQ+ people have been alienated, silenced, and shamed under the weight of a misread story.

But this is not where the story has to end.

Reclaiming Genesis 19 is not merely an academic task it is a spiritual imperative. It is about reorienting the Church toward its true mission: to love God by loving our neighbors—especially the ones the world casts aside. It means refusing to read ancient texts through the lens of modern prejudice. It means returning to the heart of the Gospel: justice for the poor, welcome for the stranger, and mercy for the brokenhearted.

To be faithful interpreters of Scripture today is to be courageous enough to change. Not to abandon tradition, but to deepen it to refine it through the lens of Christ's radical love. This is the movement from prooftext to prophetic text, from weapon to wellspring.

This journey of reclamation must be bold and practical. Our sermons must shift. Our study groups must question long-held assumptions. Our seminaries must teach context and compassion in equal measure. And our churches must not only welcome LGBTQ+ people—they must affirm and celebrate them as vital, Spirit-gifted members of the body of Christ.

This is not a question of whether the Bible can support inclusion. It already does. The real question is whether the Church will choose to listen—deeply, honestly, humbly—to the Spirit speaking through Scripture, history, and the lives of queer Christians today.

Genesis 19, rightly understood, becomes a powerful moral mirror. It challenges any community that hoards its privilege, that closes its doors, that neglects the needs of the vulnerable. It calls us not to fear difference, but to fear injustice. Not to police identity, but to protect dignity.

In the spirit of Micah 6:8, let us ask again: What does the Lord require of us?

To do justice not selective justice, but full justice.
To love mercy not with conditions, but with open arms.
And to walk humbly not with rigid certainty, but with the courage to learn and change.

This is the Gospel. This is the heart of Scripture. This is the path forward.

May we walk it together with courage, with grace, and with love that leaves no one behind.

CHAPTER 3

Re-examining Leviticus 18:22: Context, Language, and Interpretation

Introduction

Leviticus 18:22 is often cited as a clear biblical rejection of homosexuality: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.” But modern scholars argue this verse has been misunderstood. Rather than speaking to today’s loving, consensual same-sex relationships, it addresses ritual and cultural concerns unique to ancient Israel.

This chapter takes a fresh look at the verse—exploring its original Hebrew wording, the surrounding holiness laws, and how same-sex acts were understood in the ancient world. We’ll also examine how Jesus and the early church redefined purity and inclusion under the New Covenant. When seen in full context, Leviticus 18:22 appears to condemn specific cultic or abusive practices—not the committed LGBTQ+ relationships we know today.

Leviticus and the Holiness Code in Context

Leviticus 18:22 is part of a larger set of laws known as the Holiness Code (chapters 17–26), which guided ancient Israel on how to live as a people set apart for God. These laws weren’t meant as universal moral rules—they were shaped by the cultural and religious concerns of that time, especially Israel’s need to distinguish itself from surrounding nations like Egypt and Canaan.

Biblical scholar Steve Harper reminds us that every law in this section was tied to its time and place. Many of these laws, such as bans on mixed fabrics or menstruation-related restrictions, are no longer followed today, even by the most devout. The early church made it clear in Acts 15 that these purity codes were not binding on Christians.

That matters: Leviticus 18:22 lives within a framework that most Christians now treat as culturally specific and not timeless.

When we look at the surrounding verses—rules about menstruation, child sacrifice, and bestiality—we see a shared concern for purity and separation from pagan rituals. The use of the word “abomination” here signals something ritually offensive, often tied to idolatry. This suggests that Leviticus 18:22 isn’t a universal judgment against same-sex love—it’s a warning to ancient Israel not to take part in foreign religious practices that violated their covenant identity.

Hebrew Language and Meaning of Leviticus 18:22

The Hebrew text of Leviticus 18:22 reads:
“Ve’et zakhar lo tishkav mishkevei ishah; to’evah hi.”
A literal translation: *“Do not lie with a male as with the lyings of a woman; it is an abomination.”*

Let’s break down two key phrases: **mishkevei ishah** and **to’evah**.

“As with a woman” – *mishkevei ishah*

The phrase *mishkevei ishah* refers to the sexual act of lying with a woman. In this context, it tells men not to treat other men sexually in the same way they would treat a woman. Scholars note that this idiom often appears in laws about illicit heterosexual unions, especially incest.

Some scholars, like Jacob Milgrom, suggest that this wording might even hint at male-male incest within family circles. Others interpret it more broadly, but most agree: the phrase is about a specific sexual act—anal sex between men—seen in that society as violating male roles. The text assumes a cultural view in which the active partner is dominant, and the passive one is “like a woman”—a role that carried shame in the patriarchal world of ancient Israel.

Crucially, the verse says nothing about female same-sex relationships or loving partnerships. It targets a particular act that was seen as reversing gender roles, not modern concepts of same-sex identity or love.

“Abomination” – *to’evah*

The Hebrew word *to’evah* (often translated “abomination”) doesn’t mean something is universally evil. It refers to something culturally or ritually offensive—often tied to idolatry or crossing sacred boundaries.

In Scripture, *to’evah* is commonly used for idol worship and unclean practices. For instance, animal sacrifices offensive to Egyptians are called *to’evah* (Exod. 8:26), as is eating with Hebrews (Gen. 43:32). This shows how the term reflects cultural taboos more than timeless moral truths.

So, in Leviticus 18:22, calling the act *to’evah* likely means it was considered unclean by Israel’s standards—possibly because it resembled the religious practices of neighboring cultures. Scholar Stephen Patterson notes that *to’evah* was “often used in contexts where religious offense is involved,” reinforcing the idea that the verse targets ritual behavior, not romantic orientation.

In short, the language of Leviticus 18:22 focuses on a culturally taboo act that disrupted gender roles and possibly linked to pagan religious practices. It does not speak to mutual, loving same-sex relationships as we understand them today. The wording points us to ancient boundaries—not modern identities.

Same-Sex Acts in Neighboring Ancient Near Eastern Cultures

To understand Leviticus 18:22, we need to look at how same-sex acts were understood in the cultures surrounding ancient Israel. These weren't seen through the lens of love or identity, but power, domination, and ritual.

In the Ancient Near East, male-male sex was often about status and control. One man asserting power by treating another as "the woman" in sex wasn't seen as romance—it was humiliation. It showed dominance, especially in war, slavery, or social hierarchy. A man who was penetrated was seen as dishonored, and if both men were social equals, the act was deeply shameful for the passive partner.

In some cases, sexual exploitation was common—such as masters using male servants when women were unavailable. Ancient texts like the *Epic of Gilgamesh* show this behavior not as affection, but as tyranny and abuse of power. Cultures varied, but most agreed: a free man shouldn't "take the woman's role."

Religious rituals also played a role. Some fertility cults included same-sex acts as part of temple worship. Male priests called *qedeshim* were believed to act as sacred vessels in Canaanite religion, possibly engaging in sex with worshipers to please the gods. These ritual acts were condemned by Israel's prophets as *to'evah*—abominations.

That context matters. Leviticus 18:22 wasn't addressing loving relationships between equals. It was reacting to cultic sex rituals, power-based exploitation, and behaviors that violated the purity and social order of Israelite society.

As scholar Stephen Patterson puts it, "Male-male sex in the Ancient Near East does not mean 'I love you.' It means 'I own you.'" That's what Leviticus was written to push back against—not the kind of consensual, mutual love we understand today.

Gender Roles and Honor-Shame Dynamics in a Patriarchal Society

n ancient Israel—and much of the surrounding world—honor was everything, especially for men. A man's status was tied to his role as dominant, masculine, and in control.

Women, on the other hand, were expected to be submissive and secondary. In this framework, the worst thing a man could be was "like a woman"—to be passive, especially in a sexual act, was seen as deeply shameful.

This explains why male same-sex acts were viewed with such disdain. The problem wasn't the idea of same-sex love (which they didn't have a category for); the issue was the perceived violation of gender roles. If a man was treated like a woman during sex, it disrupted the social order. It was a symbolic loss of honor—not just for the individual, but for the family and community. That's why the Hebrew Bible doesn't address female same-sex acts the same way: two women being together didn't threaten the male-dominated structure.

This honor-shame system shaped many of the purity laws in Leviticus. Rules against incest, adultery, bestiality, and male-male sex all served to protect the patriarchal family structure and keep men's honor intact. But that worldview doesn't align with our values today. We no longer see a man being "like a woman" as shameful—nor do we believe that gender roles define someone's worth.

So if the cultural logic behind the prohibition in Leviticus no longer holds, we must ask: does the rule still apply the same way? Or was it a product of a very different time and worldview?

Let me know if you'd like a version tailored for slides, a youth group, or a discussion guide.

Selective Application: Leviticus 18:22 and Other Ritual Laws

Selective Reading: Why Just This Verse?

Many Christians quote Leviticus 18:22 to condemn homosexuality—but ignore the rest of the rules in that same chapter. That's a problem. If we treat this verse as a timeless moral command, shouldn't we follow the others too?

Leviticus 18 sits in the Holiness Code (chapters 17–26), a group of laws that include rules we clearly no longer follow:

- **Leviticus 19:19** bans wearing clothes made of mixed fabrics.
- **Leviticus 19:27–28** forbids haircuts and tattoos.
- **Leviticus 18:19** says not to have sex during menstruation.
- **Leviticus 11** outlaws pork and shellfish.

Almost no Christians today live by these rules, and most would say they were specific to ancient Israel's ritual purity system. Yet somehow, Leviticus 18:22 is treated differently.

Why is that?

Some argue that it's a "moral law," not a "ceremonial one." But the Bible itself never makes that distinction. All the laws in Leviticus are presented together. We've simply chosen to keep some and drop others based on what we culturally find relevant.

What about the New Testament? Jesus and Paul clearly moved away from Levitical law. The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) released Gentile believers from most of it. Paul writes that Christians are not judged by food laws or ritual observance (Colossians 2:16). Even Jesus declared all foods clean (Mark 7:19).

So if we're going to say Leviticus 18:22 still applies, we need a better reason than "because it's in the Bible." We must ask: is it reflected in Jesus' teachings? Is it grounded in timeless morality—or tied to a specific culture's purity code?

When we dig into the context, it becomes clear: this verse was likely about ritual purity and cultural separation, not a blanket condemnation of loving same-sex relationships. It's time to stop cherry-picking Leviticus and start reading it in context.

New Covenant Perspectives: Jesus, Peter's Vision, and the Question of Inclusion

Christian understanding of Old Testament laws like Leviticus 18:22 must ultimately be filtered through the lens of Jesus Christ and the New Covenant. The New Testament

provides guidance on how Christians relate to the Torah's laws and demonstrates a trajectory toward inclusion and grace that differs from the exclusionary purity system of ancient Israel. In this section, we examine how Jesus' teachings and the early church's experiences, especially Peter's vision in Acts 10, shed light on the inclusion of those once considered "unclean" or outside the covenant. We also consider how these principles might apply analogously to LGBTQ individuals, even though the New Testament writers did not directly address that question in contemporary terms.

Jesus and the Old Law

Jesus honored the Hebrew Scriptures—but He didn't treat all laws the same. Instead of rigid rule-following, He taught a deeper moral vision. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus expanded commands like "don't murder" into "don't hate," and "don't commit adultery" into "don't lust." He cared more about the heart than the letter of the law.

When it came to ritual laws—like food restrictions or purity rules—Jesus often broke with tradition. He healed people on the Sabbath, touched lepers (which should've made Him "unclean"), and told His followers that it's not food that defiles us, but the evil that comes from within (Mark 7). In doing so, He redefined holiness as love and integrity, not legal purity.

Jesus never mentions same-sex relationships. But He repeatedly welcomed the marginalized—those labeled "unclean" by religious law: tax collectors, Gentiles, Samaritans. He healed, affirmed, and dined with them. He said the greatest commandments are love for God and neighbor (Matt 22:36–40), and warned against using Scripture to justify harm.

So before using Leviticus to condemn LGBTQ+ people, we must ask: does it reflect love? Does it align with Jesus' radical welcome and grace? If not, we're missing the point. Jesus came not to reinforce exclusion, but to open the doors wide.

Peter's Vision – "Call No One Unclean"

In Acts 10, Peter receives a vision that forever changed the early church's understanding of purity and inclusion. A sheet filled with animals—some considered unclean by Jewish law—descends from heaven, and a voice tells Peter, "Kill and eat." Peter resists, saying he's never eaten anything impure. But the voice replies, "What God has made clean, you must not call unclean."

At first, Peter is confused—but then he's invited to visit Cornelius, a Gentile. And it clicks. Peter tells the crowd, "God has shown me I should not call anyone unclean." The Holy Spirit falls on these Gentiles, and they're baptized—proving that God was welcoming outsiders.

This moment marked a major shift. The old purity codes, like those in Leviticus, were no longer barriers to God's love. Inclusion, not exclusion, became the new covenant standard. The message is clear: God purifies hearts, not rituals. No one is off-limits to grace.

This principle has broader implications. If God welcomed Gentiles once considered "unclean," could that extend to others historically excluded—like LGBTQ people? The Bible even includes an Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8) who, despite being barred by the old law, is joyfully welcomed into the church. The Spirit's presence—not conformity to old purity laws—is now the sign of belonging.

Many modern Christians now ask: If LGBTQ believers show the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, faithfulness—can we really say they're "unclean"? Peter's vision teaches us to rethink exclusion. If God is including those we once labeled outsiders, we must not stand in the way. Love fulfills the law—and love never rejects.

Conclusion: From Law to Love

For many, Leviticus 18:22 has long been used as a wall of exclusion. But when we look more deeply—through the lens of history, language, and context—we discover something profoundly liberating. This verse wasn't written to condemn the loving,

committed same-sex relationships we know today. Instead, it was addressing ancient practices tied to patriarchy, idolatry, and ritual purity—things far removed from modern expressions of LGBTQ+ love and identity.

The laws in Leviticus formed part of a system that helped ancient Israel stay distinct from neighboring cultures. But the New Testament tells a different story. Jesus shattered barriers of purity, reaching out to the excluded, healing the “unclean,” and replacing legalism with compassion. The early church followed this path, welcoming those once cast out—not because they had conformed to old purity codes, but because God had made them clean through love and faith.

As followers of Jesus, we are not called to cling to selective verses out of context. We are called to the law of love. And love—real love—does not exclude. It embraces. It heals. It restores. That’s the spirit of the gospel.

So what do we do with Leviticus 18:22 today? We read it with care. We honor its history without using it to harm. We listen for its underlying call—to avoid injustice, exploitation, and harm—and we hold onto the greater commandment: Love your neighbor as yourself.

This is not a dismissal of Scripture. It’s a deeper faithfulness to its purpose.

Let us be a church that sets down stones of judgment and picks up the work of healing. Let us welcome all whom God is already calling beloved. And let us trust that grace is not the enemy of truth—it is its most powerful expression.

In Christ, all walls come down. And that includes the ones we’ve built with misunderstood verses. There is room in God’s family for all. Yes, **all**.

CHAPTER 4

Re-reading Matthew 19:4–6 – Toward an Inclusive Understanding

Introduction:

Matthew 19:4–6 is often quoted in debates about gender and marriage: “He answered, ‘Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning “made them male and female,” and said, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh”?’” Many traditionalists cite these words as proof that God recognizes only a male-female gender binary and exclusively heterosexual marriage. In a church context, however, this passage invites a deeper dive. What was Jesus really saying, and to whom? A careful examination reveals that Jesus was responding to a specific question about divorce, not delivering a universal lecture on gender identity or sexual orientation. In fact, a closer look at the historical, linguistic, and cultural context of Matthew 19:4–6, alongside insights from Genesis and biology, challenges rigid interpretations. Jesus’ own words a few verses later about eunuchs (Matthew 19:12) signal an awareness of diversity beyond a simple binary. The goal of this deep dive is to untangle Jesus’ teaching from later misuse, showing that the passage, read in context, supports an inclusive vision. We will explore historical context, original language, and cultural background, and incorporate medical knowledge about intersex people to demonstrate that strict binary readings are neither faithful to Scripture nor to God’s creation. Throughout, we draw on biblical scholarship – voices like Bart Ehrman, James Brownson, Susannah Cornwall, Dale Martin, and others – to build a well-sourced, accessible understanding. In the end, we will see how Matthew 19:4–6 can be reclaimed as part of a life-giving, theologically grounded affirmation of LGBTQ+ people, rather than a “clobber passage” against them.

Jesus and the Old Law

Jesus honored the Hebrew Scriptures, but He also reinterpreted them through the lens of love, mercy, and deeper moral insight. In the Sermon on the Mount, He taught that righteousness wasn't about strict rule-keeping, but about the heart—anger, lust, and hate were just as serious as outward sins.

When it came to purity laws, Jesus took a radically inclusive approach. He touched lepers, healed on the Sabbath, and even declared that what defiles a person comes from within, not from what they eat. In doing so, He set aside dietary and ritual laws—declaring all foods clean (Mark 7:19)—and showed that holiness was no longer about external rules.

Jesus never mentioned same-sex relationships, but He consistently included those society cast out. He welcomed tax collectors, praised Gentiles, and offered dignity to Samaritans and sinners. At the heart of His message was love: love God, and love your neighbor (Matthew 22:37–40).

So when we consider any verse—especially one like Leviticus 18:22—we must ask: does our interpretation reflect the love, mercy, and justice Jesus taught? If it leads to harm or exclusion, we may need to rethink it.

Peter's Vision in Acts 10 – "Call No One Unclean"

In Acts 10, Peter has a vision of a sheet filled with animals deemed "unclean" under Jewish law. A voice tells him, "Kill and eat." Peter protests, but the voice responds, "What God has made clean, don't call unclean." Soon after, Peter meets a Gentile named Cornelius, and it clicks: the vision wasn't just about food—it was about people. "God has shown me," Peter says, "that I should not call anyone unclean."

This moment was huge. The early church realized God's grace wasn't just for a few—it was for everyone, even those once seen as outsiders. The purity boundaries of Leviticus were being redefined by the Spirit of inclusion.

Later in Acts 8, we see a eunuch—someone excluded by Old Testament law—welcomed and baptized. This was a sign that the old categories of “clean” and “unclean” were being erased by grace.

So today, many ask: if God could welcome Gentiles and eunuchs once barred by the law, might LGBTQ+ people also be embraced by the same Spirit? Many see the fruits of the Spirit in their lives—faith, love, kindness—and believe the answer is yes.

Jesus’ Use of Genesis – Addressing Divorce, Not Gender Rules

In Matthew 19, Jesus quotes Genesis to respond to a question about divorce—not to define gender or marriage rules. He says God created marriage as a lifelong union and challenges men’s casual use of divorce, which often left women abandoned and shamed.

Jesus wasn’t laying down a theology of gender or condemning same-sex relationships. He was pushing back against injustice and calling for faithfulness in marriage. When He says “male and female” and “the two become one flesh,” He’s describing partnership and unity—not setting legal gender boundaries.

Biblical scholar James Brownson explains that “one flesh” means forming a new kinship bond—a family rooted in commitment. It’s about loyalty, not gender complementarity. Scripture never says marriage is only valid between opposite-sex couples. In fact, Jesus never mentioned same-sex relationships at all.

So, using this passage to exclude LGBTQ+ people misses the point. The real focus is on covenant love, not gender roles. As scholar Dale Martin says, biblical rules must be read in context. When LGBTQ+ couples commit to love and faithfulness, they reflect the very ideals Jesus was upholding.

“Male and Female” – Celebrating Unity, Not Excluding Diversity

When Jesus says, “God made them male and female,” he’s quoting Genesis 1:27. But this isn’t a biology lesson—it’s a poetic way of saying all people are made in God’s

image. In a world where women were often undervalued, this verse affirms that both men and women reflect God's likeness equally.

Unfortunately, some have used this verse to exclude people who don't fit neatly into male or female boxes. But even ancient Jewish thinkers acknowledged that not everyone fits that mold. And today we know of intersex people—those born with biological traits of both sexes. These aren't "mistakes"—they're part of God's diverse creation.

Jesus' reference to Genesis wasn't meant to enforce a strict gender rule. He was reminding people that marriage should be rooted in love and mutual respect. His focus was unity, not exclusion. If anything, this verse pushes us toward inclusion, affirming that every human—regardless of sex, gender, or identity—bears the image of God.

When Jesus adds, "A man shall leave his parents and be joined to his wife," he's not making a comment about gender roles. He's highlighting the seriousness of commitment in relationships. It's about loyalty, not limiting who can form a family.

In short, "male and female he created them" is about honoring shared humanity—not rejecting those who are different. It's a call to unity and love, not a weapon against LGBTQ+ people.

It's helpful to remember that Genesis uses other binaries in a similarly poetic way – and those binaries don't negate the spectrum in between. "God made day and night", Genesis says, yet we know dawn and dusk exist in between; day and night are endpoints of a gradation. In the same passage, God separates "the land from the waters," yet between land and sea we have marshes, estuaries, beaches – spaces that are neither purely land nor purely sea. Likewise, stating that God created male and female is no more a denial of intermediate or blended sexual characteristics than talking about day and night denies the existence of sunrise or twilight. As author Keith Giles explains, "'Male and female' is no more binary than saying God created 'day and night.' We know that the day can be sunrise, noon, sunset, or anything in between… So, day and night are no more binary than male and female." In other words, the biblical

language in Genesis encompasses a range by naming extremes. The text was never meant to be a biology lesson or a restrictive legal code; it's a theological poem celebrating that humankind in all its fullness comes from God.

"Eunuchs… Who Were Born That Way": Jesus Acknowledges Gender Diversity (Matthew 19:12)

In Matthew 19:12, Jesus says something surprising: "There are eunuchs who were born that way, eunuchs made that way by others, and eunuchs who choose that path for the sake of God's kingdom." This statement comes just after a discussion about marriage and divorce. When the disciples suggest it's better not to marry at all, Jesus responds by naming three kinds of people who don't marry—and in doing so, he affirms that not everyone fits the traditional mold.

In ancient times, the word "eunuch" covered more than just castrated men. It referred to anyone who didn't marry or didn't follow expected male sexual roles. When Jesus mentions those "born that way," many scholars believe he's referring to people who, by nature, don't fit into heterosexual marriage—perhaps what we would now describe as gay, intersex, or asexual. He doesn't judge them. He simply acknowledges they exist.

The second group—those made eunuchs by others—refers to people altered by human actions, often servants or officials in royal courts. These people were often excluded in religious circles, yet Jesus names them without condemnation. In Acts 8, one such eunuch—an Ethiopian—becomes the first non-Jewish convert to Christianity. He's baptized and embraced, showing that gender or sexual difference does not disqualify someone from faith.

The third group—those who choose not to marry for spiritual reasons—are honored by Jesus for their devotion. He's clear: this path isn't for everyone, but for those who are called to it, it's valid and valuable.

This verse is powerful because it shows Jesus making space for those who don't fit the typical pattern of marriage or gender roles. He sees their lives as legitimate, even sacred. If Jesus himself affirmed people who don't follow the traditional path, how can we do any less?

Eunuchs, Intersex People, and the Bible's Inclusive View

Jesus' mention of "born eunuchs" closely aligns with what we now call intersex people—those born with physical traits that don't fit typical definitions of male or female. Medical science recognizes many forms of this diversity, and it's far more common than most people realize. These individuals have always been part of humanity, even if misunderstood or hidden.

In the ancient world, people who didn't develop typical male traits were often simply called eunuchs. Jewish and Greco-Roman writers noted this. So when Jesus refers to people "born that way," he's drawing on known categories of gender variance. He offers no judgment—just acknowledgment and acceptance.

Today, many affirming theologians see parallels between "born eunuchs" and both intersex and transgender people. While the terms are different, the core idea is similar: not everyone fits cleanly into a binary. Jesus' words create room for this diversity. He doesn't demand conformity. Instead, he says, "Let anyone accept this who can," inviting us to embrace a more expansive view of humanity.

Importantly, the Bible never calls being a eunuch sinful. Laws that excluded eunuchs from temple worship were about ritual purity, not morality—and even those were overturned by prophets like Isaiah, who envisioned eunuchs fully welcomed in God's family (Isaiah 56). The early church followed that vision, as seen in Acts 8.

In sum, Jesus names and affirms those who don't marry, who live outside the expected norms. His vision of the kingdom includes people the world often sidelines. That's why Matthew 19:12 is a vital text for LGBTQ+ and nonbinary inclusion today. Jesus saw them. He included them. So should we.

Biological and Medical Insights: Challenging the Binary with God's Creation

Modern science makes one thing clear: the idea that everyone is strictly male or female doesn't match reality. Intersex people—those born with a mix of male and female traits—are living proof. Their existence isn't rare or new; it's a natural part of God's creation. There are many types of intersex conditions involving chromosomes, hormones, or anatomy, and they show that biology is far more diverse than two simple categories.

For example, someone might have XY chromosomes but develop a female body due to hormone insensitivity, or someone with XX chromosomes might develop male traits because of adrenal differences. These aren't medical errors—they're variations of human development. And they remind us that Genesis's "male and female" is a poetic summary, not a rigid blueprint.

If we believe all people are created in God's image, then intersex people are not exceptions—they are reflections of that divine creativity. Psalm 139 says we are "fearfully and wonderfully made," and that includes those who don't fit binary expectations. God didn't make mistakes. Our theology simply needs to catch up to what creation already shows.

Studies suggest up to 1.7% of people have intersex traits—about as common as red hair. That's not a fringe group; it's part of humanity. When the church insists on only two valid sexes or genders, we risk erasing real people God made with care. Instead, we are invited to broaden our understanding and embrace a fuller vision of God's image in the world.

Progressive theologians like Susannah Cornwall and Megan DeFranza call this "holy trouble"—the discomfort that challenges old norms and leads to deeper love. Rather than force people into binary boxes, we're called to expand our view of what it means to be human. Intersex children, for example, shouldn't face surgery to "fix" what isn't broken. They are already whole.

In short, science confirms what faith should have taught us all along: creation is beautifully complex. Binary categories are human-made shortcuts. God's creation, and God's image in each of us, is a glorious spectrum. Genesis 1:27 isn't a restriction—it's a celebration. Every body, every person, is a reflection of God's boundless imagination.

Toward a Theologically Grounded, Inclusive Alternative

If we move past harmful interpretations of Matthew 19, we can ask a better question: What does a Christ-centered, inclusive theology of gender and marriage look like?

It starts with love—Jesus' core message. He broke barriers to welcome the excluded, healed those deemed unclean, and uplifted people whom society cast aside. When he said "Love your neighbor as yourself," he didn't list exceptions. That same love must include our LGBTQ+ neighbors—fully, joyfully, and without conditions.

Genesis says all people are made in God's image. That includes those who are nonbinary, transgender, or intersex. Throughout Scripture, God is described with both masculine and feminine traits—nurturing like a mother, fierce like a father. God is bigger than our categories, and so are the people made in God's image.

Paul echoes this in Galatians 3:28: "There is no longer male and female… you are all one in Christ." This doesn't erase who we are, but reminds us our worth isn't tied to gender or orientation. The early church lived this truth by welcoming eunuchs, empowering women, and expanding family beyond bloodlines.

Biblical marriage, at its heart, is about covenant—faithful love, mutual care, and lifelong commitment. Many same-sex couples embody these values beautifully. Excluding them doesn't protect marriage; it diminishes it. Love like theirs deserves blessing, not condemnation.

Jesus also redefined family—not by biology, but by love. In Isaiah 56, God promises a place for eunuchs, saying they'll be given a name better than sons or daughters. That's the kind of radical inclusion the church is called to mirror today.

When we see God’s Spirit at work in LGBTQ+ believers—through their faith, their service, their resilience—we must respond as Peter did in Acts 10: “Who was I to stand in God’s way?” Their gifts don’t just belong in the church; they make the church whole.

In the end, any theology that harms, excludes, or shames is not the Gospel. As Augustine said, if an interpretation doesn’t lead to love of God and neighbor, it must be wrong.

LGBTQ+ inclusion isn’t bending Scripture—it’s living it more faithfully. It’s welcoming with the wide-open arms of Christ, and proclaiming: “You belong here. You are God’s beloved.”

Conclusion

As we bring this chapter to a close, we return to Matthew 19:4–6—not as a passage of exclusion, but as a reminder of God’s desire for faithful, enduring love. Jesus wasn’t laying down rules to restrict who could marry. He was challenging a culture that treated relationships as disposable, calling his followers to value commitment and care. When we read his words in full context, they do not condemn LGBTQ+ people—they lift up the beauty of covenant, of two lives becoming one in mutual love and trust.

We’ve explored how Jesus’ teachings, when paired with his later affirmation of eunuchs, actually open the door to a broader understanding of human diversity. “Male and female he created them” is not a limit, but a celebration of life’s richness—a poetic beginning that does not erase the wide array of identities God’s creation continues to reveal. Scripture has never required us to flatten that diversity into a binary. In fact, from Genesis to Isaiah to the Gospels, we see evidence that God embraces those who don’t fit neat categories, calling them beloved and worthy.

Through thoughtful study, voices like Bart Ehrman, James Brownson, Susannah Cornwall, and Dale Martin have helped us peel back centuries of misinterpretation. Their scholarship doesn’t tear down Scripture—it helps us see it more clearly. Together, they point us toward a deeply rooted truth: the heart of Jesus' message is radical love,

not rigid conformity. We are not asked to reject LGBTQ+ people to be faithful to Jesus. Quite the opposite—we are invited to love more fully, just as he did.

This has practical meaning for the church today. Pastors can preach Matthew 19 without fear, assuring their congregations that this text is not about gatekeeping gender or marriage, but about honoring lasting love. Parents can find peace knowing that their transgender child is not outside God's design. Couples can enter into sacred covenant knowing that their love reflects the very faithfulness Jesus lifted up. And those who have been hurt by the misuse of this passage may finally hear what Jesus truly meant: that love, not exclusion, is at the center of God's heart.

Of course, one chapter can't answer every question. But it can lay a foundation—a place to begin healing, learning, and growing together. As in the early church, where assumptions were challenged and new understandings emerged through the Spirit's leading, we too are invited into a holy process of reformation. The Spirit still moves. The church can still grow. Our theology must be shaped not only by the texts we inherit, but by the living witness of those in our communities who bear God's image in every beautiful form.

Jesus said, "By this everyone will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." That is the standard. Not who marries whom. Not who fits neatly into old boxes. But who loves, and how we love. That is how we reflect the Gospel.

We can say with full confidence: the Bible does not forbid same-sex marriages or erase gender diversity. It celebrates covenant. It honors love. It urges us toward justice and mercy. That is not a compromise of our faith—it is its fulfillment.

May our churches be spaces where a transgender teen hears they are wonderfully made. Where a gay couple is blessed at the altar with the same joy and reverence as any other. Where all people hear the call to faithful love, and find the support to live into it. May we be known not for who we keep out, but for how wide we open our arms.

As we go forward, let us follow the example of Christ, who again and again chose inclusion, healing, and welcome. Let us live what we have learned. For the sake of our LGBTQ+ siblings, for the future of the church, and for the glory of the God whose love knows no bounds.

Amen. And amen.

CHAPTER 5

Romans 1:26–27 Revisited: Idolatry, “Nature,” and Same-Sex Relationships

Introduction

Ever had someone throw a Bible verse at you like a rock? Romans 1:26–27 is one of those verses that’s often used to hurt LGBTQ+ people—but what if we’ve been reading it all wrong?

This passage from the Apostle Paul talks about people turning away from God and doing things that feel “unnatural.” At first glance, it can sound like he’s condemning all same-sex relationships. But when we slow down, take a breath, and really look at what Paul was talking about, a different picture comes into view.

The Bigger Picture

Paul wasn’t writing about loving, committed LGBTQ+ relationships like many people have today. He was talking about something very different—people caught up in wild, out-of-control behavior that came from worshipping idols. Back in Paul’s world, some religious groups had sex rituals that were manipulative, abusive, or even violent. That’s what Paul was upset about.

He wasn’t thinking about two women building a life together, or two men raising kids, or someone finding peace in their identity. Those kinds of relationships didn’t even exist in Paul’s world in the way we know them today. They didn’t have words like “gay” or “lesbian” or “trans.” There was no idea of sexual orientation at all.

So when Paul says people “exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones,” he’s not talking about who someone loves. He’s talking about how people, in the middle of all kinds of idolatry and chaos, started using sex to control, exploit, or shame others.

What Does “Unnatural” Even Mean?

That word “unnatural” has been misunderstood a lot. In Paul’s time, “unnatural” didn’t mean “bad” the way we think of it today. It meant “unusual” or “against custom.”

For example, Paul also says it’s “unnatural” for men to have long hair (1 Corinthians 11:14). But we know that’s a cultural thing—not a sin. So we have to be careful not to take his words out of context and turn them into universal rules, especially when they end up hurting people.

The Real Point Paul Was Making

Paul’s goal in Romans 1 wasn’t to give a list of who’s “in” and who’s “out.” He was setting up a bigger point: that everyone, no matter who they are, falls short of perfection—and everyone needs God’s grace.

In fact, if you keep reading into Romans 2, Paul turns to his audience and says: “You who pass judgment on others? You’re doing the same things.” It’s like Paul is saying, “Don’t get cocky. You’re not better than anyone else.”

So What Does This Mean for Us Today?

If Paul didn’t know about LGBTQ+ people as we understand them, and if he wasn’t writing about healthy, loving relationships—then using Romans 1 to shame or reject queer people today just doesn’t hold up.

Instead of using Scripture as a weapon, let’s use it the way it was meant to be used: to draw us closer to God, to one another, and to deeper compassion.

Bottom Line

Romans 1:26–27 isn’t a slam dunk against LGBTQ+ people. It’s a warning about losing our way, turning from love, and misusing others. When read in context, it points us not to judgment, but to grace—and to the truth that every one of us is welcome at God’s table.

I. Romans 1:26–27 in Context – Idolatry and Moral Corruption

What Paul Was Really Saying in Romans 1

Ever been in a conversation where someone brings up Romans 1 like it ends all discussion? Let's slow down and really look at what Paul was trying to say—and who he was talking to.

It's Not About One Group—It's About All of Us

In Romans 1, Paul isn't trying to write a rulebook about sex. He's telling a story—a story about what happens when people turn away from God. That's his real concern.

Here's how the story goes:

1. People saw the beauty and power of God in the world around them.
2. But they chose to ignore it and started chasing after other things—idols, power, wealth, and selfish desires.
3. So God "let them go their own way." That's what the phrase "God gave them over" means.
4. As a result, people started acting out in ways that hurt themselves and others—greed, violence, lies, and yes, even some same-sex behaviors that were known for being abusive or out of control.
5. But Paul wasn't pointing fingers. He was setting up a much bigger message: "We all need God's grace."

Same-Sex Acts Weren't the Main Point

The part about same-sex acts comes in verses 26–27. But those verses are just one example in a longer list. Paul also talks about envy, arrogance, lying, gossip, and even kids disobeying their parents. All of these behaviors are described as things that happen when people lose their moral compass.

Paul's point wasn't, "Let me tell you the worst sins." His point was, "Look how far off track we can get when we live without God." The real message isn't about same-sex

attraction at all—it's about what happens to any of us when love gets replaced by selfishness.

What Does "Against Nature" Mean?

Paul uses the phrase "against nature" (or "unnatural"), and people often think that means "sinful." But in Paul's time, it didn't mean that.

In fact, in another part of Romans (chapter 11), Paul uses the same phrase to talk about something good—how God brings people who weren't part of Israel into the family of faith. It just meant something unexpected or outside the norm.

So when Paul talks about people "exchanging natural relations," he's not giving a biology lesson. He's using it as a metaphor to show how people exchanged God's truth for lies—and their relationships fell apart as a result.

Why This Matters for LGBTQ+ People Today

Here's the hard truth: when Paul wrote this, he wasn't thinking about LGBTQ+ people as we know them today. He didn't have a concept of orientation. He wasn't imagining people in loving, healthy, same-sex relationships.

In the Roman world, a lot of same-sex acts were about power and domination—like older men using younger boys, or sex acts tied to pagan temples. That's probably what Paul had in mind. And those are things we can all agree are wrong.

But that's not the same as two adults in a loving, committed relationship built on trust and mutual respect. Paul never talked about that, because it wasn't part of his world.

Don't Stop Reading at Chapter 1

Here's the twist. Just when you think Paul is listing all the "bad things other people do," he flips the script in the next chapter.

Romans 2 begins: “You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else.” In other words, “Don’t get too comfortable. This isn’t just about them—it’s about you, too.”

Paul wants everyone to realize we’re all in need of grace. No one gets to stand on a pedestal and point fingers. That’s the heart of his message. And it leads to one of the most famous lines in the Bible: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

II. The Meaning of “Unnatural” (Para Phusin) – Nuance in Language and Nature

What Does “Against Nature” Really Mean?

You’ve probably heard someone say, “The Bible says being gay is unnatural.” But what if that word doesn’t mean what people think it means?

Paul’s Words, Paul’s World

In Romans 1:26–27, Paul talks about people doing things “against nature.” That phrase has caused a lot of pain. But here’s the thing: when Paul used the words “against nature” (in Greek, *para phusin*), he didn’t mean “evil” or “gross” the way we might hear it today. Back then, it meant something more like “not the usual way” or “different from what’s expected.”

In fact, Paul uses the same phrase later in Romans 11:24 to describe something *good*—how God brought people from outside Israel into the family of God. So clearly, “against nature” doesn’t always mean something bad.

What Did “Nature” Mean Back Then?

To Paul and his readers, “nature” wasn’t about biology or DNA. It was about social customs—what was considered normal at the time.

In the Greco-Roman world, everyone assumed heterosexuality was the standard for all people. There wasn't even a word for "gay" or "straight." People believed that if someone had same-sex desires, they must be acting out of lust, rebellion, or confusion. They didn't know anything about orientation the way we understand it today.

So when Paul talks about people "exchanging natural relations for unnatural ones," he's describing what his culture thought was weird or improper—not making a forever judgment about sexuality.

Cultural Assumptions About Gender Roles

Back then, same-sex acts—especially between men—were often about power. A man who was seen as "passive" in sex was treated like he'd lost his social status. It wasn't about love or relationship—it was about control, dominance, and shame. That's the world Paul was writing in.

So when he described these acts as "unnatural," he was using language his readers would recognize. But that doesn't mean it translates perfectly into our world today. It certainly doesn't describe the loving, equal relationships that many LGBTQ+ people have.

What We Know Today

We now understand that same-sex orientation is natural for millions of people. It's not something people choose. It's not about rebellion. It's not a phase. It's just how some people are made.

For many LGBTQ+ Christians, coming out is a spiritual journey—one of truth-telling, courage, and deep faith. Trying to live as someone they're not would actually go *against* their nature.

In fact, pressuring someone to pretend to be straight or to get married to someone they don't love is the real problem. That's the thing that causes pain, confusion, and spiritual harm.

Paul Wasn't Talking About Loving Relationships

Paul wasn't imagining two women building a life together. He wasn't picturing two men in a faithful, Christ-centered marriage. Those kinds of relationships just didn't exist in his world.

Instead, Paul was talking about a society spinning out of control—people giving up on God and treating each other like objects. That's what worried him. Not love, but exploitation. Not relationships, but chaos.

What Should the Church Do Today?

Let's be honest—this word "unnatural" has been used to shame people for simply being who they are. But that's not how Scripture is meant to be used.

Paul's bigger message in Romans 1 wasn't about sexuality. It was about what happens when people forget how to love God and each other. His goal wasn't to create a list of "bad people," but to show that *everyone* needs grace.

So how should we measure someone's faithfulness today? By the fruits of the Spirit. Is the relationship marked by love, joy, kindness, and faithfulness? Then it's good. As Paul wrote later, "Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law" (Romans 13:10).

Bottom Line

If someone is living with honesty, kindness, and love—they're not "unnatural." They're living the life God gave them.

So let's stop using Paul's words to build walls. Let's use them the way he meant them—to lead people toward grace, community, and love.

III. Paul's World Lacked a Concept of Sexual Orientation – Focus on Excess & Exploitation

One of the most crucial—and most misunderstood—aspects of Romans 1:26–27 is that Paul was not speaking about sexual orientation in the way we understand it today. The idea of people possessing a stable, innate identity as "heterosexual" or "homosexual" simply didn't exist in the first-century world. Instead, sexuality was described in terms of behaviors and social hierarchies. What mattered was not who a person was attracted to, but what they did, how often, and in what social context.

In Greco-Roman culture, sexual norms were deeply shaped by power dynamics. Men were generally expected to take the dominant role in both public life and in sex. Acceptable sexual behavior was based on class and status: free men could have sexual relations with women, boys, and enslaved people, as long as they maintained the "active" role. Meanwhile, being in the "passive" position, especially for another free male—was seen as shameful and feminizing. This was not a system based on mutual consent or romantic love; it was based on dominance, honor, and control. Relationships that involved coercion, pederasty (adult males with adolescent boys), and temple prostitution were commonplace and often exploitative.

It is within this world that Paul writes. And Paul's critique in Romans 1 is not rooted in a condemnation of loving same-sex relationships—he wouldn't have had a framework for that. Rather, Paul condemns behaviors that were perceived as excessive, indulgent, and degrading. As Dale Martin explains, Paul's world had no concept of "homosexual" or "heterosexual" people. Sexuality was understood in terms of actions, not orientation. Similarly, Richard Hays notes that Paul's outrage is not about identity or even love—it's about social and moral disorder. In this view, same-sex behavior was simply one vivid symptom of a larger societal decay caused by idolatry and the loss of self-control.

Paul's description in Romans 1:27 "consumed with passion," "committing shameless acts" evokes images of frenzied, compulsive behavior. These phrases reflect an ancient worldview in which lust was seen as a fire that could destroy reason and virtue. His

reference to people “exchanging” what is natural for what is “unnatural” suggests a rejection of expected norms, not a reflection on innate identity. In fact, Paul seems to assume that everyone is naturally heterosexual and that same-sex behavior arises from excessive desire. The idea that some people might be naturally, faithfully attracted to others of the same sex would likely have been unimaginable to him.

This context matters deeply. When we read Paul’s words today without acknowledging the cultural and historical differences, we risk profoundly misapplying them. The term “homosexual”—first coined in the 19th century—would be entirely foreign to Paul. He did not condemn people for who they are; he condemned certain behaviors that, in his world, represented a rejection of God’s created order and a descent into moral chaos.

Sadly, this passage has often been weaponized to shame and exclude LGBTQ+ individuals, despite the vast differences between Paul’s context and modern understandings of love, partnership, and orientation. When Paul spoke of sexual excess and idolatry, he was calling out exploitative behavior and spiritual alienation—not the kind of faithful, covenantal relationships that many LGBTQ+ people build today. Interpreting this passage with care means resisting the urge to make ancient categories do modern harm.

Paul’s overarching moral concern was not about gender combinations—it was about whether a relationship upheld dignity, mutuality, and self-control. When read with historical clarity and pastoral compassion, Romans 1 becomes less about condemnation and more about caution: a call to reject the misuse of power and to honor one another in love. This reading invites the church to move beyond fear and judgment, and toward a deeper ethic rooted in justice, humility, and grace.

IV. Conclusion – Reading Romans 1:26–27 with Wisdom and Grace

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Core Findings

Romans 1:26–27 has long been used as a weapon against LGBTQ+ people, but careful interpretation tells a different story. When placed in context, Paul's words reflect a critique of idolatrous excess and social disorder—not a condemnation of loving, same-sex relationships. His language about "unnatural" acts must be understood within the worldview of his time, which viewed behavior through the lens of honor, shame, and power—not innate identity. Paul did not have a concept of sexual orientation, and he was not evaluating relationships grounded in mutual care and covenantal love. Instead, his critique targets the unrestrained lust, exploitation, and dehumanization he associated with Gentile culture, particularly in religious and social systems rooted in idolatry.

As scholars like Dale Martin and Richard Hays have observed, Paul's focus in this passage is not sexual ethics in the abstract but the broader moral decay he believed resulted from rejecting the worship of God. The acts described were part of a larger tapestry of social disorder and spiritual estrangement—not a commentary on modern queer identity or relationships marked by fidelity, love, and devotion.

Pastoral Implications

Misreading this passage has caused profound harm. It has been used to shame, exclude, and marginalize LGBTQ+ individuals who long to live lives of faith and integrity. But Paul's intention was not to create a hierarchy of sins or a tool for judgment. Romans 1 leads into Romans 2 and 3—chapters that emphasize that *all* fall short, that *none* are righteous, and that salvation is available to *all* through God's grace.

The church is called not to cling to weaponized interpretations but to extend the welcome of Christ. Romans 15:7 exhorts: "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God." This welcome is not conditional on

orientation or conformity to cultural expectations, but on the universal truth that we are all in need of grace, and all invited to respond to God's love.

When the church assesses relationships, the true test is not gender pairing—it is the fruit of the relationship. Does it embody love, patience, kindness, fidelity, and mutual respect? Is it rooted in a commitment to God and one another? These are the qualities that reflect God's intent for human partnership, regardless of sexual orientation. As Galatians 3:28 reminds us, in Christ there is "neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female"—and we might faithfully add, *gay nor straight—for all are one in Christ Jesus*.

A Call to Radical Love

In our present moment, the church has an opportunity to choose grace over judgment, healing over harm. Romans 1:26–27, when read with historical care and theological integrity, does not stand in the way of affirming LGBTQ+ Christians. On the contrary, it can remind us of Paul's larger vision: a community where idolatry, exploitation, and domination give way to mutual love, transformed hearts, and radical hospitality.

If we are to err, let us err on the side of love. As Paul later writes in Romans 13:10, "Love is the fulfillment of the law." That is the lens through which all Scripture, including Romans 1, must ultimately be read.

CHAPTER 6

Malakoi and Arsenokoitai:

Reinterpreting 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 & 1 Timothy 1:9–10

Introduction

“For many LGBTQ+ individuals, the message they’ve heard from the church is simple: *‘You won’t inherit God’s kingdom.’* These verses have become spiritual weapons, inflicting deep wounds.”
— Adapted from Matthew Vines

Few biblical passages have caused more harm to LGBTQ+ people than Paul’s vice lists in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 and 1 Timothy 1:9–10. Often cited as definitive condemnations of “homosexuals,” these verses have been used to exclude gay and lesbian individuals from Christian community, reinforcing shame, fear, and spiritual rejection. In many church settings, the argument sounds unequivocal: “The Bible clearly says that homosexuals will not inherit the kingdom of God.” But such certainty rests not on the Greek text itself, but on modern English translations—and cultural assumptions—that deserve a closer, more careful examination.

This chapter invites readers into that deeper examination. At the heart of the controversy are two Greek words: malakoi and arsenokoitai. These terms have been translated in wildly different ways—“effeminate,” “male prostitutes,” “abusers of themselves,” or “men who have sex with men.” But what did they actually mean to Paul and his audience in the ancient world? And do they have anything to say about the loving, mutual, adult same-sex relationships we see today?

Drawing on insights from historians, linguists, and theologians—including Dale Martin, Bart Ehrman, and scholars like John Boswell, Robin Scroggs, and Matthew Vines—this chapter explores the cultural, sexual, and theological landscape in which Paul wrote.

We will consider not only the biblical language but also the broader Greco-Roman context, where norms around gender, status, and sexuality were strikingly different from our own.

Our aim is clear: to show that these passages, when read in context and with care, do not condemn LGBTQ+ people or their relationships. Rather, Paul's concern lies with exploitation, excess, and moral decay—not with faithful, covenantal love. By recovering the original meaning and intent of these texts, we can help the church read Scripture in a way that honors truth, reflects Christ's love, and restores dignity to those who have been marginalized.

This chapter is both scholarly and pastoral. It seeks not only to interpret ancient texts but also to heal the wounds they've inflicted when misread. In doing so, we move one step closer to a church that embraces all God's children—just as they are.

The Passages and Their Translations

The Passages and Their Translations

1 Corinthians 6:9–10 & 1 Timothy 1:9–10

Two of the most commonly cited New Testament texts in debates about LGBTQ+ inclusion appear in Paul's vice lists: 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 and 1 Timothy 1:9–10. These passages are often used to argue that Scripture clearly condemns homosexuality. But a closer look at the original Greek terms—malakoi and arsenokoitai—reveals ambiguity, complexity, and a long history of shifting translations.

Let's examine the key verses in a widely used modern translation:

1 Corinthians 6:9–10 (NRSV):
"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."

1 Timothy 1:9–10 (NRSV):
“[The law is laid down] for the lawless and disobedient… for fornicators, *sodomites*, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching.”

In both cases, the contested terms are malakoi (in 1 Corinthians) and arsenokoitai (in both passages). Over the centuries, these words have been translated in vastly different ways—each shaped more by cultural assumptions than by linguistic certainty.

Key Takeaway

The diversity in how malakoi and arsenokoitai have been translated—across languages, centuries, and theological traditions—underscores that these terms are far from self-explanatory. There is no Greek word in these verses that unambiguously means “homosexual” as we understand it today. The presence of that word in some Bibles reflects interpretation, not original intent. We’ll dive into this further. That’s why it is crucial to understand what these words likely meant to Paul’s original audience—and why they cannot be used to condemn loving, consensual LGBTQ+ relationships today.

Linguistic Insights: What Do *Malakoi* and *Arsenokoitai* Mean?

Linguistic Insights: What Did Paul Really Mean?

1. Malakoi (μαλακοί): “Soft”

The Greek word *malakoi* literally means “soft.” In ancient culture, it wasn’t a reference to sexual orientation—it was a critique of perceived moral weakness, especially in men who didn’t live up to the cultural ideal of masculinity.

In Greco-Roman society, masculinity meant control, restraint, and dominance. A man labeled *malakos* might be considered too indulgent, too concerned with appearance, or too emotionally sensitive. In sexual contexts, *malakoi* was sometimes used for men who

took the passive role in male-male intercourse—something considered shameful in that patriarchal culture.

When the King James Bible translated *malakoi* as “effeminate,” it wasn’t referencing LGBTQ+ identity but rather reflecting this ancient bias against anything seen as “unmanly.” Other early translations (like Tyndale’s “weaklings”) similarly equated softness with lack of virtue.

In context, Paul’s use of *malakoi* most likely referred to morally undisciplined behavior or men exploited in pederastic or prostituted roles, not people in loving, consensual relationships. It’s a stretch—and a distortion—to equate this with modern same-sex partnerships built on commitment and care.

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2. Arsenokoitai (ἀρσενοκοῖται): “Male-Bedders”

This rare Greek term likely originated with Paul himself. It combines *arsēn* (“male”) and *koitē* (“bed”)—a phrase that appears in the Greek translation of Leviticus 18:22 to describe “a man lying with another man.”

But root words only get us so far. Just as a “butterfly” isn’t a fly made of butter, *arsenokoitai* cannot be defined solely by its parts. We need to look at how the term was used—and what it meant to early readers.

Historical evidence tells us this word carried strong associations with exploitation:

- Early Christian texts pair *arsenokoitai* with crimes like theft and violence, not just sexual sin.
- The Sibylline Oracles (a Jewish-Greek prophetic text) list arsenokoitai alongside economic injustices, suggesting a broader meaning of sexual or financial abuse.
- 📖 Lost in Translation: Until the 1980s, many German Bibles translated *arsenokoitai* as *Knabenschänder*—“boy molesters.” That’s a far cry from today’s

> “homosexual” and highlights how the term was long understood as a reference to exploitative relationships, not consensual ones.

Scholarly Insight: New Testament professor Dale Martin emphasizes that *arsenokoitai* likely referred to people who abused their power sexually—not those in mutual, loving LGBTQ+ partnerships. Similarly, Bart Ehrman notes that no one can say with certainty what *arsenokoitai* meant, but it certainly didn’t reflect a concept of orientation.

Ancient Sexuality and Social Context

Ancient Sexuality and Social Context

To understand Paul’s intent, we must step into the worldview of the ancient Mediterranean world—a society shaped by hierarchy, power, and rigid gender roles, not by ideas of sexual orientation or mutual love.

1. Sex as Power, Not Partnership

In Paul’s time, sex was about status and dominance—not emotional intimacy or identity. Freeborn men were expected to take the active role in all sexual encounters. They could have sex with women, male slaves, or boys—as long as they remained the dominant partner. The passive role, especially for men, was considered shameful, associated with femininity and weakness.

This is where the word *malakoi* comes in. It literally means “soft” and was often used as an insult for men who lacked self-control, indulged in luxury, or allowed themselves to be sexually passive. In short, it critiqued social failure, not same-sex attraction.

2. Exploitation, Not Equality

The most common same-sex acts in the ancient world weren’t between consenting adults in loving relationships. They were about exploitation and power imbalances:

- Pederasty: Adult men engaged in sexual relationships with adolescent boys. This was socially tolerated in Greek culture but condemned by Jewish and Roman moralists as abusive and predatory.
- Prostitution: Many young men—often slaves or the poor—were trafficked for sex. These encounters reflected coercion, not consent.

Early Christian writings support this concern. The *Didache* (c. 100 CE), one of the earliest Christian manuals, explicitly forbids “corrupting boys”—a reference to these exploitative relationships, not loving partnerships.

3. Behavior, Not Identity

Crucially, ancient societies did not think in terms of “gay” or “straight.” They had no concept of sexual orientation. Same-sex acts were seen as behaviors—often excessive, shameful, or unnatural—not as expressions of someone’s core identity.

A man might sleep with male partners and still be considered heterosexual—as long as he played the active role. Sexual activity was judged by social roles, not gender or attraction.

Why This Matters Today

Paul’s world was deeply different from ours. His critiques of *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* addressed exploitative acts—like pederasty and prostitution—not consensual, covenantal relationships between LGBTQ+ people.

Understanding this frees us from the harmful misapplication of Paul’s words. These verses were never meant to condemn love, especially not relationships rooted in equality, consent, and faithfulness.

For the church today, the call is clear:
Affirm love. Reject exploitation. Welcome all who seek to live in Christ-like, committed relationships—gay or straight.

🕊️ Pastoral Reflection

These ancient words challenge us—not to condemn people for who they love, but to reject systems of exploitation, abuse, and dehumanization. For modern LGBTQ+ Christians, the message is clear:

God does not shame you for being who you are. The moral issue isn't gender or orientation—it's whether a relationship honors the dignity and consent of all involved. The church is called to discern the difference between ancient cultural shame and the holy call to mutual respect.

A Timeline of Interpretation and Translation

A Timeline of Interpretation and Translation

To understand how verses like 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 and 1 Timothy 1:9–10 came to be wielded against LGBTQ+ people, we must look at how key terms—*malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*—have been translated over time. The history is not straightforward. It's a winding path shaped by cultural assumptions, theological priorities, and social anxieties. In fact, the term "homosexual" did not appear in any Bible translation until the mid-20th century—nearly 1,900 years after Paul's letters were written. That fact alone should give us pause.

The terms *malakoi* (meaning "soft") and *arsenokoitai* (a compound likely meaning "men who bed males") appear together in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and *arsenokoitai* alone in 1 Timothy 1:10. But what did they mean to Paul's audience—and how did their interpretation change over the centuries?

We begin by tracing that history.

Key Moments in Translation History

Era	Translation Choices	Implications
1st–3rd Century	*Malakoi* seen as “morally weak”; *arsenokoitai* linked to abusive acts like pederasty.	Early Christians condemned exploitation—not loving relationships. The Didache forbids “corrupting boys.”
4th Century	Latin Vulgate: *molles* (“soft”); *masculorum concubitores* (“men who lie with males”).	Continued association with sexual misuse, not identity. Focus stayed on behavior, not orientation.
Middle Ages	“Sodomy” used broadly for any non-procreative sex.	Moral panic blurred distinctions between consent, coercion, heterosexual, and same-sex acts.
1380 (Wycliffe)	“Lechers abhomynable against kynde.”	Reflected belief that sex “against nature” (non-procreative) was sinful, without focus on consent.
1611 (KJV)	*Malakoi* → “effeminate”; *arsenokoitai* → “abusers of themselves with mankind.”	“Effeminate” implied moral weakness; “abusers” denoted misconduct—not orientation.
1830–1890	German/Nordic Bibles: *arsenokoitai* → “Knabenschänder” (“boy abuser”).	Pointed clearly to pederasty, not same-sex love. These translations reflect exploitation, not identity.
1946 (RSV)	First use of the word “homosexual.”	A turning point. A modern identity label was projected onto ancient terms—shifting the theological landscape.
1989 (NRSV)	Returned to “male prostitutes” and “sodomites.”	Acknowledged complexity. Rejected the oversimplified “homosexual” translation.

This timeline makes one thing unmistakably clear: what many modern Christians believe to be a timeless condemnation of “homosexuals” is, in fact, a relatively recent interpretive development. Early translators did not equate Paul’s language with what we now call “gay identity.” Instead, their focus was on behaviors considered dishonorable

or exploitative—especially those that involved pederasty (adult men abusing boys), male prostitution, or domination and excess.

The early church did not single out same-sex love as its target. For example, the Didache, one of the earliest Christian teaching documents (c. 100 CE), explicitly condemned “corrupting boys,” a direct reference to sexual exploitation. Similarly, Latin church fathers used words like *concubitores masculorum*—not to shame same-sex attraction, but to call out abusive sexual practices between men and boys. In many ways, the moral concern of early Christian texts was closer to our modern critique of abuse and coercion than to blanket condemnation of LGBTQ+ people.

By the Middle Ages, however, this nuance began to erode. The category of “sodomy” expanded to include all non-procreative sexual activity, blurring the lines between rape, consensual same-sex acts, and even heterosexual practices like oral sex or contraception. Moral panic, rather than careful exegesis, drove much of the rhetoric. As a result, the specific words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* were often overshadowed by a broader cultural fear of sexual “perversion.”

It wasn’t until 1380, in John Wycliffe’s English Bible, that we begin to see these terms rendered in a way familiar to medieval readers: “lechers abhomynable against kynde,” or in modern terms, lustful men who acted “against nature.” Here again, the emphasis was on unnatural behavior—not same-sex orientation, which wasn’t a known category.

Fast forward to 1611, when the King James Version offered the now-famous translation: “effeminate” and “abusers of themselves with mankind.” In its time, “effeminate” didn’t necessarily refer to someone with a feminine demeanor. It was a moral accusation—used to shame men for weakness, self-indulgence, or failure to embody masculine restraint. The phrase “abusers of themselves with mankind” continued the tradition of ambiguity, focusing on morally charged behavior without clarity about its form.

Meanwhile, across Europe in the 19th century, German and Nordic Bibles consistently translated *arsenokoitai* as “Knabenschänder”—literally, “boy abuser” or “child molester.” This stark phrasing tells us that many translators believed Paul was referring not to gay

men in loving relationships, but to those who preyed on the vulnerable. This interpretation remained standard until the mid-20th century.

Then came 1946, when the Revised Standard Version introduced the term "homosexual" into the biblical text for the first time. It was a seismic shift. By applying a modern psychological and cultural label to an ancient and ambiguous Greek word, the translators unintentionally changed the theological conversation. From that point on, many Christians believed the Bible directly and universally condemned people with same-sex orientation—not just certain exploitative behaviors.

Later revisions, like the 1989 New Revised Standard Version, would course-correct by returning to "male prostitutes" and "sodomites." Yet the damage was done. For many churches, the word "homosexual" had become canonized—treated as if it had always been in Scripture.

But the truth is, it was never there to begin with.

Today, leading scholars across theological spectrums caution against simplistic translations. Lexicons like BDAG (the Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich Greek-English dictionary) acknowledge that *arsenokoitai* is a rare term with unclear meaning, possibly linked to exploitation rather than consensual same-sex relationships. Dale Martin, Bart Ehrman, and others point out that wherever the term appears outside of Scripture, it's associated with power abuse or economic injustice, not identity or orientation.

A recent documentary, *1946: The Mistranslation That Shifted a Culture*, chronicles this turning point, showing how the inclusion of "homosexual" in modern translations fueled decades of harmful theology. It serves as a powerful reminder that mistranslations don't just affect doctrine—they shape lives.

Why These Verses Do Not Condemn Loving LGBTQ+ Relationships

For many LGBTQ+ people, passages like 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 and 1 Timothy 1:9–10 have long been a source of fear, exclusion, and misunderstanding. Weaponized by some churches, these verses are used to claim that same-sex relationships are

inherently sinful—that those who love someone of the same gender are barred from God's kingdom. But is that really what Paul was saying?

A careful, historically grounded reading reveals something very different. These verses, when properly understood in their original context, do not speak to the kind of loving, committed relationships that many LGBTQ+ people cherish today. Rather, Paul was addressing exploitative behaviors—marked by domination, abuse, and lust—not mutual, covenantal love.

The Bible's Core Ethic: Love Over Exploitation

Throughout Scripture, the consistent thread is not condemnation of difference, but protection from harm. When Paul warns against certain sexual behaviors, his concern is not with orientation—it's with the violation of love. He condemns acts rooted in coercion, objectification, and injustice. What he critiques are relationships of use, not relationships of mutual giving.

This is entirely in line with the ethic Jesus taught: *"Love your neighbor as yourself"* (Mark 12:31). Paul's letters echo this call again and again. When we interpret Scripture faithfully, we find that the Bible condemns exploitation in any form—whether heterosexual or same-sex. But it also upholds covenantal love, the kind that reflects God's fidelity.

As with other moral distinctions in Scripture—such as condemning adultery (a betrayal of covenant) while celebrating marriage (a fulfillment of it)—we are called to discern not just the action, but the intent and fruit of the relationship. Exploitation is wrong. Love is holy.

The Church's Moral Growth: Learning from History

History shows that the church has, over time, re-examined and revised its understanding of Scripture in light of new moral awareness. The Apostle Paul told slaves to obey their masters (Ephesians 6:5), and many Christians once used that to

defend slavery. But the Spirit led the church to a deeper truth: that slavery violates the dignity of every human being made in God's image.

The same process occurred with patriarchy. The Bible reflects a male-dominated world, where women's voices were often silenced. Yet many Christians now affirm gender equality in the home, the pulpit, and the workplace—not by rejecting Scripture, but by following its deeper ethic of justice and equality.

This is how the Spirit works: leading the church not away from the Bible, but more deeply into its heart. When we apply this same lens to LGBTQ+ inclusion, we find not a rejection of God's Word, but a faithful re-reading. One that lifts up Scripture's central themes—love, justice, and faithfulness—and applies them to the realities of today.

Beyond Harm to Healing

For too long, misinterpretations of these passages have inflicted spiritual trauma. LGBTQ+ Christians have been told they are unwelcome, unclean, or unloved by God—simply for who they are and whom they love. But when we look honestly at the text and its context, those messages fall apart.

What remains is the fruit. And as Paul reminds us in Galatians, the fruit of the Spirit—*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness*—is the true measure of a life lived in God. These fruits are evident in countless LGBTQ+ relationships marked by commitment, tenderness, and deep spiritual devotion.

We are not called to police gender or orientation. We are called to discern whether relationships reflect the self-giving love of Christ. And when they do—regardless of gender—we are called to bless them.

The Gospel Is Good News for All

To LGBTQ+ Christians reading this: Your capacity for love is not a sin. Your longing to give and receive love in a covenantal relationship is not contrary to God's will—it may very well be one of the holiest aspects of your life.

The gospel does not exclude you. It calls all of us to reject exploitation and embrace integrity. It invites us to discern love from lust, justice from harm. And it commands us, always, to err on the side of compassion.

“Test everything,” Paul writes. “Hold fast to what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

Let us do just that. Let us cling to love—the greatest of all virtues—and let it guide our theology, our communities, and our lives.

Conclusion: Love, Not Condemnation

At the heart of Paul’s message in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 and 1 Timothy 1:9–10 is not a condemnation of people based on their orientation, but a warning against behaviors rooted in exploitation, domination, and moral collapse. When we examine the key Greek terms—*malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*—within their historical and cultural context, a consistent picture emerges: Paul was speaking about abusive relationships, not loving ones.

The term *malakoi*, often translated as “effeminate” or “soft,” reflected ancient social contempt for those who deviated from dominant gender norms, particularly in ways that were associated with indulgence, passivity, or lack of self-control. It did not mean “gay men,” nor did it refer to loving relationships between adults of the same gender. It was a cultural judgment—one we no longer accept as morally sound.

The term *arsenokoitai*, on the other hand, is even more obscure. Though it appears to echo Leviticus, its actual usage in early Christian and Jewish literature suggests it referred to men who sexually exploited others—especially boys, slaves, or the vulnerable. For centuries, Bible translations rendered it as “boy abusers” or “molesters.” Only in the last century did the term “homosexual” enter English Bibles, beginning with the Revised Standard Version in 1946. That shift, driven by modern misunderstandings rather than ancient meanings, has led to decades of spiritual harm.

But Scripture itself offers us a different lens: one that prioritizes love over legalism, fidelity over fear, and fruit over formality.

The Fruit of the Spirit, Not the Weight of Mistranslation

In Galatians, Paul famously writes that the true markers of a Spirit-filled life are not rules about ritual purity or social roles, but the fruits of the Spirit: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control* (Galatians 5:22–23). These are the signs of a life aligned with God's purposes.

When LGBTQ+ people form relationships that bear this kind of fruit—marked by tenderness, commitment, and mutual self-giving—we are witnessing something holy. To condemn such relationships on the basis of a mistranslation is not only poor exegesis; it is deeply unjust.

As Jesus himself taught, "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit… thus you will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:18, 20). If a relationship reflects God's love, grace, and integrity, then that is the standard by which we must measure its worth—not ancient misunderstandings or modern fear.

A Call to the Church: From Harm to Healing

It is time for the church to lay down the weapons of mistranslation and misinterpretation. These verses were never meant to be used against people whose only "sin" is loving someone of the same gender in a committed, faithful way. When we use Scripture to exclude rather than to embrace, to shame rather than to sanctify, we betray the very gospel we claim to proclaim.

The early church knew what it meant to be misunderstood and marginalized. It welcomed those the world rejected. Paul himself, after listing a range of vices, reminded the Corinthian believers, "And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified…" (1 Corinthians 6:11). The point was transformation—not exclusion.

Today, LGBTQ+ believers are being sanctified and justified, too. Their stories, their relationships, and their faith journeys are part of the redemptive work of God in the

world. The church is called not to police identities but to recognize the Spirit wherever She moves—and She is moving among LGBTQ+ people.

Why This Matters

Throughout history, the church has grown in its understanding of Scripture and its application to new contexts. Christians once used the Bible to justify slavery, only later to discover that the deeper witness of Scripture called us to liberation. The same with patriarchy: though male dominance is assumed in parts of the Bible, the Spirit has led many churches to affirm gender equality based on the deeper truth of mutuality in Christ.

Now we face a similar moment of moral clarity. Just as we learned to condemn oppression rather than defend it, we must now learn to affirm love rather than fear it. The question is not whether same-sex relationships were part of Paul's world—they were not. The question is whether such relationships, as we know them today, reflect the gospel's values of love, justice, and faithfulness. And the answer is yes.

Let Love Be the Lens

To LGBTQ+ Christians: You are not condemned by these verses. Your love is not a deviation from Scripture's message—it may be one of its deepest fulfillments. The God who created you in love calls you to love in return, and there is nothing in these passages that should make you doubt your place in God's family.

To the Church: Let us stop reading ancient vice lists as modern exclusion lists. Let us start reading Scripture through the lens of Christ's love. Let us create spaces where LGBTQ+ people are not just tolerated but truly welcomed, celebrated, and affirmed.

Paul himself wrote, *"The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"* (Galatians 5:14)

Let that be the final word—not fear, not mistranslation, not centuries of confusion. But love. Always love.

CHAPTER 7

One Flesh, One Church

Re-reading Ephesians 5:31 with an Inclusive Lens

Introduction

“A man shall leave his father and mother… and the two shall become one flesh.”
For generations, this verse—Ephesians 5:31—has been treated as a formula for marriage: one-man, one-woman, clear roles, no exceptions. Many have heard it used as a kind of spiritual gatekeeper, used to bless some relationships while excluding others. But what if we've missed the point?

What if this verse isn’t a rulebook, but a metaphor? What if it doesn’t enforce gender roles, but invites all people into a deeper vision of love—a vision that mirrors the unity, sacrifice, and mutual devotion of Christ and the Church?

This chapter invites us to re-read Ephesians 5:31 not as a boundary line, but as a bridge. A poetic reflection of covenantal love—love that transcends anatomy and gender, and speaks instead to something sacred and transformative: two lives becoming one in mutual care.

Rather than enforcing hierarchy, Ephesians invites readers into a radically Christ-shaped way of relating—defined not by power but by self-giving love. When placed in its broader biblical and cultural context, this verse doesn’t exclude LGBTQ+ people. In fact, it opens the door wide.

We’ll explore how:

- “One flesh” reflects covenant, not physical complementarity.
- Biblical stories like Ruth and Naomi or David and Jonathan stretch our understanding of love and kinship.

- Christ's own teachings and example disrupt rigid categories and call us into deeper relationship.

This isn't about rewriting Scripture—it's about reclaiming its heart. When love is patient, kind, and faithful, it reflects the very love of Christ. That is the kind of love any couple—gay or straight—can live out.

Ephesians 5:31 in Context – Metaphor, Mystery, and Marriage

The phrase "the two shall become one flesh" is often treated as a rule, but it was written as a revelation. In Ephesians, the writer isn't laying down marriage laws—he's describing a mystery: how deep love mirrors divine unity.

Right after quoting Genesis, the writer says, "This is a profound mystery—but I'm talking about Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:32). This is key. The verse is symbolic, a poetic echo of Christ's love for humanity. The emphasis isn't on who marries whom, but on how that bond is shaped by self-giving, faithful love.

To fully understand this passage, we also have to recognize its cultural context. The letter to the Ephesians likely addressed early Christian communities navigating Roman household structures—systems where men ruled, and women, children, and slaves had few rights. Instead of endorsing these norms, the letter begins to reframe them. Wives and husbands are called to honor one another. Husbands are told to love like Christ—sacrificially, not selfishly. It's not a call to dominance, but a quiet undoing of hierarchy.

When we stop treating this text as a template and start reading it as metaphor, it becomes clear: the "one flesh" union is not about biology. It's about bond. It's about lives joined in love, trust, and mutual care. And that, by its very nature, is not limited by gender.

When Metaphor Becomes Weapon

Sadly, what was written as poetry has often been used as policy. Ephesians 5:31 has been wielded to exclude LGBTQ+ couples from marriage, from ministry, even from

belonging. It's been used to measure love by anatomy rather than character, to gatekeep grace, and to suggest that only certain kinds of couples are worthy of covenant.

But Scripture doesn't bless that kind of exclusion. When churches say to LGBTQ+ people, "Your love doesn't fit the model," they forget that Jesus didn't come to enforce models—He came to fulfill love.

When a same-sex couple builds a life of mutual sacrifice and joy, when they hold each other through pain and celebration, when they say, "Your people will be my people," they are living out the spirit of "one flesh." It is not gender that makes this bond sacred—it is the love that echoes Christ.

A Bigger Vision

Ephesians 5:31 doesn't say love is real because it's heterosexual. It says love is sacred when it becomes self-giving, when it mirrors Christ's love for the church. That kind of love is available to all who seek it.

The call to "one flesh" is not about gender—it's about grace.

So when LGBTQ+ couples love one another with faithfulness, tenderness, and deep commitment, they aren't stepping outside Scripture's vision—they're fulfilling it.

Key Takeaway:

"Becoming one flesh" is not about fulfilling a gender script. It's about covenant. About choosing love that is loyal, sacrificial, and sacred. And that kind of love knows no gender.

A Better Way: Love Over Labels

The early church wasn't unfamiliar with questions of inclusion. In Acts 15, church leaders debated whether Gentile believers needed to follow ancient Jewish laws to be fully part of the faith community. The answer? No. The Spirit had already embraced

them. That bold decision—rooted in grace, not gatekeeping—offers us a powerful model today.

Just as the first Christians chose not to burden new believers with cultural customs that no longer applied, we too are called to let go of outdated expectations. LGBTQ+ people should not be forced into rigid gender roles that don't reflect their lives or their callings.

As biblical scholar James Brownson notes, Ephesians 5 isn't about enforcing gender norms. It's about embodying Christ-like love—a love that nurtures, sacrifices, and builds up. That kind of love isn't based on anatomy; it's born of the Spirit.

And many same-sex couples live out this vision beautifully. They submit to one another in love, support each other through joy and struggle, and build homes marked by compassion, trust, and shared purpose.

The fruit of their love—patience, kindness, faithfulness, joy—is the same fruit Paul describes as the evidence of the Spirit's presence in Galatians 5. That fruit, not a formula, is what makes love holy.

Reclaiming the Metaphor

Ephesians 5:31 was never meant to be a litmus test for who is allowed to love or marry. It was written as a vision of unity—two people becoming one in devotion, mutuality, and grace. Yet over time, this beautiful metaphor has been weaponized. Instead of inspiring deeper connection, it has been used to draw lines that exclude LGBTQ+ people from sacred covenant and spiritual belonging.

But when we return to the verse's heart, we discover something liberating. "One flesh" isn't about fitting into traditional roles—it's about forming bonds rooted in Christ's love. The metaphor invites us into a kind of wholeness that transcends gender expectations. It's about two lives—regardless of gender—woven together by a sacred promise.

When two people love each other with the kind of humility, faithfulness, and sacrifice that mirrors Christ's love for the Church, they are living out what this passage was

always meant to express. And that reality is not reserved for heterosexual couples. It's open to all who choose to love with courage and care.

As Paul writes elsewhere, "There is no longer male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). In Christ, unity matters more than uniformity. Covenant matters more than conformity. Love matters most of all.

So let's reclaim this metaphor—not as a gate to keep people out, but as a bridge to bring people in. Let's honor the many forms love can take when it is rooted in the Spirit. Because at its best, "one flesh" isn't a boundary. It's an invitation.

Re-Reading Ephesians 5: Mutuality, Love, and Covenant Over Legalism

Ephesians 5 is often quoted as a blueprint for Christian marriage, but its message has too often been reduced to rigid gender roles: husbands lead, wives follow. A closer reading tells a different story—one not about hierarchy, but about love that mirrors Christ.

It all begins with verse 21: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." That single line reframes the entire passage. Submission here isn't about one person dominating another. It's about mutual care, humility, and sacrificial love—the kind of love Jesus lived.

Written in a time when Roman culture enforced strict household roles, the letter to the Ephesians gently pushes back. Husbands are told not to rule, but to love like Christ—who laid down his life. Wives are called to honor, not from fear, but as part of a relationship shaped by grace. This is not a command to uphold patriarchy—it's an invitation to live with compassion and shared responsibility.

And it applies to all couples, not just heterosexual ones. LGBTQ+ partners, often free from traditional role expectations, embody this mutuality with clarity and intention. Their relationships—built on equality, trust, and devotion—reflect the spirit of Ephesians 5 more than any gendered script ever could.

At its heart, this passage is not about who leads. It's about how we love.

Celebrating Diverse Biblical Models of Love and Family

The phrase "one flesh" has often been interpreted through the lens of gender complementarity—the idea that male and female bodies were designed to "fit" together in a divine blueprint for marriage. But the Bible uses the phrase in a very different way.

This wasn't a sexual relationship, but it was a relationship of profound love, chosen family, and shared life. That is what "one flesh" means: lives entwined in faithfulness and devotion, not restricted by gender.

We're often told the Bible only affirms one kind of relationship—one man, one woman, in traditional marriage. But Scripture paints a much more diverse and beautiful picture. Again and again, God blesses love that crosses boundaries, reshapes family, and defies social expectations.

Ruth and Naomi show us what chosen family looks like. After both are widowed, Ruth clings to Naomi with words that echo wedding vows: "Where you go, I will go." The Hebrew word used—*dabaq*—is the same used when Adam and Eve become "one flesh" in Genesis. Their bond isn't romantic, but it's deeply covenantal, a sacred model of loyalty and devotion.

David and Jonathan share a love that the Bible describes as "surpassing the love of women." They made vows to one another, risked their lives for each other, and wept in parting. Their story reminds us that sacred love can exist outside traditional categories and should be honored for its depth and faithfulness.

Jesus and the eunuchs in Matthew 19:12 offer one of the most inclusive moments in Scripture. Jesus names three kinds of eunuchs—some born that way, some made so, and some choosing celibacy. He affirms all three, welcoming people who didn't fit gender norms and giving them a place in God's kingdom.

The Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 was a sexual and gender minority, a foreigner, and a religious outsider. And yet, when he asks to be baptized, the answer is yes—no hesitation, no demands to change. His story tells us clearly: God's welcome knows no barriers.

These stories show us that God's blessing isn't reserved for those who follow cultural rules. It flows wherever there is faithfulness, courage, and love. The Bible's message is bigger than we've been told. It celebrates love that's just, loyal, and transformative—wherever it's found.

What These Stories Teach Us

The Bible does more than preserve tradition—it often disrupts it. From Ruth and Naomi's bond to the Ethiopian eunuch's baptism, Scripture honors love and faithfulness in unexpected places. These aren't just background stories; they reveal a central truth: God's family is bigger than biology or tradition.

God blesses relationships marked by covenant, not conformity. Whether it's Ruth's loyalty, Jonathan's sacrifice, or the eunuch's inclusion, what matters most is faithfulness and love. These stories don't follow the rules we're told define "biblical" family. They expand them.

For LGBTQ+ people, these examples offer healing and hope. They remind us that Scripture doesn't require us to fit into someone else's mold—it celebrates the people who, like so many today, build family through choice, not just circumstance.

And for the church, they offer a call: stop guarding the gate, and start widening the table. Because the real message of Scripture is this—wherever there is love, faithfulness, and justice, God is already there.

A Final Reflection

If God honored Ruth, Naomi, David, Jonathan, and the Ethiopian eunuch—how might we honor LGBTQ+ families today?

These sacred stories aren't side notes. They're centerpieces in the divine narrative of love. They invite us to expand our understanding of what "biblical" really means. To see holy love not just in the expected places, but in every life-giving relationship that reflects God's justice, mercy, and grace.

The call is simple—but transformative:
Celebrate chosen family.
Welcome the outsider.
Honor the love that binds souls, not just bodies.
Let the Bible's own stories guide us toward wider inclusion and deeper compassion.

Because in the end, the gospel isn't about limiting love. It's about expanding it.

Love, Faithfulness, and Justice: The Heart of Scripture's Sexual Ethic

When it comes to relationships, many churches focus on rules—who's allowed to love whom, what's permitted, what's condemned. But the heart of Scripture is not a checklist. It's a vision: a vision of love that protects, faithfulness that endures, and justice that lifts the vulnerable.

God's dream for human connection isn't about fitting into fixed gender roles. It's about relationships rooted in safety, mutual respect, and holy love.

Love That Restores

Biblical love—agape—isn't just a warm feeling. It's action. It shows up in Jesus' life over and over: love that touches the outcast, forgives the accused, and heals the broken. In John 8, Jesus meets a woman dragged before Him for adultery. The crowd wants punishment. Jesus gives her mercy. "Neither do I condemn you," He says. This is love that restores dignity instead of destroying it.

That kind of love should guide our relationships too. Real love protects. It doesn't shame. It makes space for healing.

Faithfulness That Holds On

In Scripture, faithfulness isn't about perfection—it's about showing up. Ruth stayed with Naomi even when it meant losing everything. Jonathan risked his life for David, not out of obligation but deep loyalty. These are stories of covenant—of promises kept through storms.

We've reduced faithfulness to one rule: wait until marriage, then stay straight. But biblical faithfulness is broader. It's about walking alongside someone with courage, choosing them again and again, especially when it's hard. LGBTQ+ couples who do just that are living examples of covenant love.

Justice That Protects

Justice, in the Bible, isn't about punishment—it's about restoration. It's God siding with the vulnerable. We see it when Jesus flips tables in the temple to confront exploitation, and when He heals those pushed to the margins.

Sadly, churches have used "justice" as an excuse to shame LGBTQ+ people. But biblical justice calls us to protect the outcast—not become the ones casting stones.

Reframing the Narrative

Too often we hear myths like:

- "Biblical sexuality is just about denying pleasure."
  No—it's about protecting dignity and building love that lasts.
- "Justice means policing morality."
  No—it means confronting harm and standing with the wounded.

Consider Sarah and Emily, a couple together for 15 years, devoted to family, community, and faith. When they asked their church to bless their love, they were turned away. Not for lack of holiness—but because they didn't fit the mold. Yet their story speaks to what matters most: loyalty, compassion, joy, and mutual sacrifice.

The Bigger Picture

What if we measured relationships not by gender pairings, but by the fruit they bear?

- Do they foster love, joy, peace, patience, kindness?
- Do they protect, uplift, and endure?

That's the heart of Scripture's sexual ethic—not rigid rules, but love that heals, faithfulness that holds fast, and justice that makes room for all.

As Rev. Jacqui Lewis says, "The Bible isn't a rulebook—it's an invitation to love in a way that heals the world."

Let's follow that invitation. Let's build relationships—and churches—that reflect God's heart.

Conclusion: Affirming the Inclusive Mystery of the Gospel

The Heart of the Mystery: Love Over Labels

At the center of the Gospel is a mystery—not a puzzle to solve, but a divine truth to live into. Ephesians 5:31 speaks of two becoming one flesh, a bond of lifelong commitment. But the next verse reveals the deeper meaning: "This is a great mystery, and I am speaking about Christ and the church."

The point was never about enforcing gender roles or excluding anyone based on who they love. It was about revealing the kind of love that binds Christ to humanity: faithful, self-giving, and lasting. That love transcends gender. It breaks barriers. It reaches for the outcast, embraces the rejected, and welcomes all into sacred belonging.

The love we see in Christ is the same love that should shape our relationships and our churches. The measure isn't male and female—it's compassion and commitment. Not conformity, but covenant.

Why LGBTQ+ Inclusion Aligns with Scripture

- Historical context: Ancient marriage customs were shaped by culture and patriarchy—not divine command.
- Theological focus: Ephesians 5 isn't a manual for traditional marriage; it's a metaphor for Christ's sacrificial love.
- Scientific and social insight: God created a beautifully diverse human family. Gender and sexuality are not binary boxes but a spectrum of God's creativity.
- Biblical values: The real test of a relationship is the fruit it bears—love, faithfulness, justice—not whether it conforms to ancient social structures.

When we look at the broader message of Scripture, we see a God more concerned with how we love than with whom we love. The Bible doesn't celebrate rigid roles; it celebrates relationships rooted in mutual care, trust, and sacrifice

A Church Reimagined: From Exclusion to Celebration

Imagine a church where every couple—gay or straight—is celebrated for the love they share. Where families of all kinds are blessed, and leadership is based on calling, not conformity. Where LGBTQ+ people aren't just welcomed—they are empowered to teach, to serve, and to lead.

That church isn't a distant dream. It begins when we choose love over legalism, inclusion over ideology. The Gospel is not a gate—it's a door thrown wide open.

To live into this inclusive vision, the Church must:

- Celebrate sacred love in all its forms. Honor LGBTQ+ marriages and partnerships as reflections of Christ's love.
- Empower LGBTQ+ leadership. Don't just affirm people—equip and uplift them to teach, preach, and shape the church.
- Repair past harm. Publicly name the damage caused by exclusion, and offer real paths toward healing: listening circles, pology liturgies, and affirming ministry.

- Tell better stories. Preach love that includes, not fear that excludes. Share the stories of LGBTQ+ Christians as part of the church's living witness.

The Gospel calls us not to manage grace but to unleash it. The more we let go of outdated boundaries, the more clearly we reflect the heart of Christ.

A Call to Action: Blessing, Not Barriers

LGBTQ+ love can be a powerful reflection of God's grace—like light in darkness, or a whisper of hope in the noise of condemnation. These relationships, grounded in mutual devotion and integrity, are not problems to be solved. They are gifts to be received.

When we focus less on *who* people love and more on *how* they love—with patience, courage, kindness—we begin to see the image of God shining through. We move beyond fear. We move toward healing.

This is the Gospel's mystery made visible: the divine love that bridges every divide.

So let the Church be bold. Let it bless what is good. Let it become a sanctuary where all love rooted in justice and mercy is not only welcomed—but celebrated.

Final Word:

"There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female—for you are all one in Christ Jesus."
—Galatians 3:28

This is the vision. A tapestry of lives, woven together by love. One body. One Spirit. One Gospel—for all.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

Radical Love, Restorative Justice, and the Future of the Church

We have journeyed through ancient texts, cultural assumptions, mistranslations, and evolving theology. We have seen how Scripture, when read through the lenses of justice, mercy, and humility, becomes not a barrier to inclusion but a bridge toward beloved community. Now we reach a crossroads. What will the church become from here?

This chapter is not just the end of a biblical argument. It is the beginning of a new way of being church.

If the Spirit is indeed still speaking, as we claim in our progressive tradition, then we must listen with new ears. We must become what Scripture has always called us to be: a sanctuary for the outcast, a voice for the voiceless, and a people formed not around fear, but around love.

Radical love means more than tolerance. It is not simply allowing LGBTQ+ people to sit in our pews. It means celebrating them as reflections of God's image, inviting them into leadership, blessing their unions, and honoring their stories as sacred. It means naming harm when it has been done in God's name, repenting of it, and doing the hard work of rebuilding trust. Radical love is incarnational—it shows up in embodied welcome, in wedding officiations, in pastoral care during a crisis, and in the joyful laughter of queer youth finally finding a church where they belong.

Restorative justice asks us to look backward as well as forward. It acknowledges that the damage done by misreading Scripture has left scars—on bodies, on minds, and on souls. It challenges the church not only to affirm LGBTQ+ persons, but to make amends for the times it did not. That may look like public apologies, reparative liturgies, funding queer-led ministries, creating safe spaces for LGBTQ+ youth, or ordaining those once

cast out. Justice does not erase the past—it heals it by truth-telling, repair, and solidarity.

And the future of the church? It depends on whether we will choose fear or love. Fear will keep us chained to outdated dogmas and rigid binaries. Love will open the doors to new understandings, fresh outpourings of the Spirit, and a church that looks more like Jesus. A church that dares to say, “Here is water—what is to prevent us from baptizing these ones God has already blessed?”

We believe the church must move beyond gatekeeping into the bold work of gospel welcome. This is not theological compromise—it is theological faithfulness to the God who again and again breaks the mold, who chooses the unlikely, and who calls the church to follow the wild winds of Pentecost into new territory.

In truth, LGBTQ+ inclusion is not the church’s burden; it is its blessing. Queer Christians bring spiritual gifts, insights, and leadership that the body of Christ desperately needs. Their resilience, creativity, and deep hunger for authentic faith can reenergize congregations stuck in decline. Their testimonies of surviving rejection and still clinging to Jesus echo the gospel’s power. Their questions—about identity, love, family, and justice—can help all of us become more honest and more compassionate disciples.

And so, we arrive at a prophetic moment. Just as the early church once had to decide whether Gentiles could be fully welcomed without becoming Jewish (Acts 15), so now we must decide: Will we fully welcome LGBTQ+ Christians without requiring them to become straight, celibate, or silent? The Spirit’s answer then was unmistakable—"It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden them.” (Acts 15:28) Might that be our answer now?

This is the time for the church to embody the full vision of Micah 6:8: to act justly toward LGBTQ+ siblings by dismantling exclusionary systems; to love mercy by embracing those who have been harmed and rejected; and to walk humbly, knowing that our understanding is always growing, and the Spirit may still be unfolding truth in our midst.

Let us be the church that opens its arms rather than points fingers. Let us build altars of welcome, not walls of doctrine. Let us trust that love—real, Christlike, justice-seeking love—is not just compatible with Scripture, but the very fulfillment of it.

This is not the end. This is the beginning of a reformation born of grace. May we have the courage to live into it.

Embracing What Scripture Makes Possible

Scripture was never meant to be a fortress from which we hurl judgments; it is a wellspring from which living water flows. What we find when we approach it with the heart of Micah 6:8 is that its enduring call is not to exclusion but to transformation. We are transformed by how we see God. We are transformed by how we see each other. And perhaps most importantly, we are transformed by the love that will not let us go.

For too long, many have used the Bible as a barricade, mistaking its ancient cultural context for eternal moral absolutes. But when we reapproach Scripture with humility and curiosity, with both scholarship and spirit, something beautiful emerges. We discover that God's Word is not fragile or threatened by questions—it is resilient, alive, and still speaking. Its purpose is not to codify who's in and who's out, but to guide us toward lives of mercy, justice, and grace.

When LGBTQ+ people read Scripture, they often encounter a weapon formed against them. But what if the Bible, when interpreted rightly, becomes not a weapon but a mirror, reflecting the divine image they bear? What if it becomes a window into the God who is bigger than our binary categories and theological boxes? What if the Bible actually points us beyond the narrowness of human fear and into the wideness of God's mercy?

The Word becomes flesh again and again—embodied in lives of love, courage, and compassion. When queer Christians embrace the Bible not as an enemy but as a sacred inheritance, something powerful happens. The Scripture that once excluded becomes the soil in which their faith can flourish. Their very presence in the church

becomes a prophetic testimony: “I am still here. I still believe. I still bear the image of God.”

And when the broader church makes space to listen—truly listen—it begins to change as well. Congregations discover new ways to embody welcome. Old assumptions are replaced by new questions. Preaching shifts from pronouncements to conversations. Worship becomes more authentic, more human. Scripture, freed from misinterpretation, becomes not a tool of division but a language of healing.

This is not about rewriting Scripture; it is about reading it as it was meant to be read—with compassion, with historical insight, and with the humility to admit we haven’t always gotten it right. We honor the Bible not by freezing it in time, but by letting it breathe in every generation. The Spirit, after all, is not done illuminating its pages.

To reclaim Scripture in this way is to reclaim our inheritance as the people of God. We are not gatekeepers. We are midwives of new birth. We are called to foster communities where no one fears the Bible will be used against them. Where no child grows up thinking God has already written them out of the story. Where no parent prays their child would be “healed” from who they are.

This is the power of Scripture rightly interpreted—it liberates. It heals. It dares us to love more boldly, to welcome more radically, to speak with more honesty and humility. And in that love, the church can become what Jesus envisioned: a table with room for everyone, a house of prayer for all people, a light to the nations.

In doing so, we do not abandon the Bible. We reclaim it. We set it free from the chains of misinterpretation. And in doing so, we help set God’s people free too. That is the promise of embracing what Scripture makes possible—not merely tolerance or inclusion, but transformation. A church reborn. A faith renewed. A world reconciled through the wideness of God’s mercy and the depth of divine love.

Repentance, Repair, and the Path Forward

There is no healing without repentance. And for the church to move forward faithfully, it must repent—not in shame, but in courage. True repentance is not about wallowing in guilt; it is about telling the truth, naming the harm, and committing to a new way of being. The church must confess the harm done in Christ's name to LGBTQ+ children, teens, adults, and elders. It must mourn the suicides that might have been prevented, the families torn apart, the trauma etched into souls by doctrine dressed up as discipleship. It must lament the silences, the whispers, the exile of so many beautiful souls who dared to believe God loved them—and were told otherwise.

This is not performative apology. It is the soul-deep acknowledgment that for centuries, the body of Christ has wounded its own members. And that wounding often came from the pulpit, the Sunday school class, the denominational policy, the whispered prayer circles that saw orientation as a problem and gender diversity as rebellion. The path forward must begin not with defensiveness but with confession. A confession that we have called good evil and evil good; that we have protected tradition more fiercely than people; that we have upheld the letter of the law while breaking its spirit.

From that place of truth-telling begins the sacred work of repair.

Repair looks like affirming theology taught not as a side conversation, but as the heart of what the gospel proclaims: that every human being bears God's image and is worthy of love, dignity, and full participation in the body of Christ. Repair looks like LGBTQ+ people not merely tolerated in the pews but celebrated in the pulpit, not as exceptions but as exemplars of faith. It looks like sermons that speak directly to queer hope and queer struggle—not as footnotes, but as centerpieces.

Repair looks like baptism without condition, communion without judgment, marriage with joy, and ordination with dignity. It looks like pronouns respected, chosen names honored, and trans and nonbinary people embraced not in spite of their gender identity but as reflections of the divine mystery. It looks like worship that sings queer experience into the liturgy, liturgies that name queer saints, and rituals that bless families of all

shapes—including chosen families who have saved lives when biological ones have rejected.

Repair means reshaping our seminaries, our curricula, our confirmation classes. It means creating sacred spaces where LGBTQ+ youth never have to question whether they are loved by God. It means trauma-informed pastoral care, the dismantling of conversion therapy in all its forms, and spiritual leadership that reflects the full diversity of God's creation.

It also means telling the stories that were silenced. Queer Christians have kept the faith against all odds—sometimes clinging to Jesus with one hand while being pushed out of the church with the other. These testimonies must be centered. We must let queer joy, queer theology, and queer love reshape our understanding of what the body of Christ looks like when it is healed, whole, and honest.

Repair means more than tolerance. It means celebration. It means turning the tables of exclusion and setting a banquet in their place. It means the prodigal child being not just welcomed but given the robe, the ring, and the party they deserve. It means queer love held up as holy. It means not just accepting difference but learning from it—allowing the church to be stretched, reshaped, and reborn.

The question before us is not just whether LGBTQ+ people are welcome in the church. That bar is too low. The real question is whether the church is ready to be transformed by their presence—by their theology, their lived experience, their resilience, their prophetic witness. Are we ready to learn what love looks like from those who have had to fight for it in the face of rejection? Are we willing to be led by those who were once pushed to the margins?

The gospel has always moved from the margins to the center. Jesus himself was born in a backwater town, dined with outsiders, and built his movement on the backs of the misunderstood and mistreated. To follow him now means following the Spirit as it leads through queer prophets, queer pastors, queer theologians, and queer disciples. It means allowing ourselves to be changed.

This is the path forward: repentance that is real, repair that is embodied, and a church that is finally ready to walk humbly, love mercy, and do justice—not only for LGBTQ+ people but with them, alongside them, because of them.

The Prophetic Moment

We are living in a Kairos moment—a Spirit-breathed time of reckoning, reformation, and renewal. Like the prophets before us, we are being called to speak uncomfortable truths with bold compassion. And like the early church, we stand on the precipice of radical inclusion, facing the choice of whether to cling to a past shaped by fear, or to follow the winds of the Spirit into a future shaped by love.

This is not the first time the church has found itself here. In Acts 15, the early apostles faced their own crisis of inclusion: Should Gentile believers be forced to follow Jewish law, including circumcision, dietary restrictions, and purity codes, in order to be counted among God's people? The answer, after prayerful discernment and brave testimony, was no. “We should not make it difficult,” Peter said, “for those who are turning to God.” And that moment changed everything.

Today, we are experiencing our own Acts 15 moment. Will we declare that LGBTQ+ believers must bear the yoke of heteronormative tradition—of celibacy not freely chosen, of exclusion from leadership, of being told they can be welcomed but never fully embraced? Or will we, like Peter, recognize the movement of the Spirit and ask: “Who are we to hinder God?”

Let us be honest: the church has hindered God for too long. It has hindered God by shrinking the vision of the gospel into a set of purity codes and gender roles. It has hindered God by holding tradition above transformation, and fear above faith. But this moment—this Kairos moment—is an invitation to step across the threshold into something braver, more faithful, and more true.

The arc of the gospel bends toward inclusion, healing, and justice. But that arc does not bend on its own. It bends when we bend it—with our decisions, our convictions, our

theology, our courage, and our refusal to settle for half-truths in the name of orthodoxy. We are the ones who shape this era of the church. The Spirit may lead, but we must follow—and following means risk.

The church now stands at a threshold. Behind us is comfort, familiarity, and the illusion of certainty—a world where some felt righteous because others were cast aside. Ahead of us lies the radiant, messy, Spirit-led future of communion without condition. A future where queer kids grow up knowing they are beloved by God and celebrated by their church. A future where parents no longer fear that their child's coming out will mean leaving the pews. A future where LGBTQ+ pastors preach without hiding, marry without shame, and serve without limits.

The call is not to uniformity, but to communion. Not to control, but to compassion. Not to tradition for its own sake, but to transformation rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is not about being politically correct. It is about being prophetically faithful. It is about bearing witness to the God revealed in Jesus—who broke rules to heal, who crossed lines to bless, who shattered norms to liberate, and who never mistook the letter of the law for the heart of God.

To follow Jesus is to move toward the margins. It is to touch the untouchable. It is to speak with the shamed. It is to call the outcast by name and say, "You are beloved. You are worthy. You are mine." If the church is to be the Body of Christ, it must do the same. No longer as gatekeepers of purity, but as hosts at the banquet of grace. No longer as judges at the temple door, but as midwives of resurrection.

This is our prophetic moment. We can resist it. Or we can rise to meet it—with courage, with compassion, and with the fierce conviction that love is our deepest calling and our highest law.

Let us not be remembered as the generation who stood at the threshold and chose fear. Let us be the ones who opened the doors, tore down the barriers, and said with our lives what Peter once dared to say with his voice: "Who are we to hinder God?"

A Benediction for the Road Ahead

To every LGBTQ+ person who has sat in pews silently wondering if the Bible holds a place for you—this is your answer: Yes. A thousand times yes. Not in spite of Scripture, but because of it. Because the arc of God's story has always bent toward the outsider, the misunderstood, the left-out, the called-by-God but disqualified-by-people. Because the Spirit still speaks through the sacred text—and what She whispers is mercy, inclusion, belonging, and love without condition.

You are not an exception to grace. You are evidence of it. You are not outside God's story—you are woven into the very center of it. Your existence does not challenge Scripture. Your love helps us read it better. Your truth deepens the church's understanding of the God who is more diverse, more creative, and more inclusive than our systems have allowed.

To every pastor, teacher, and church leader wrestling with the tension between tradition and transformation: Hear this with your soul—affirming theology is not a compromise. It is a calling. You are not abandoning the gospel by embracing your LGBTQ+ siblings in the fullness of who they are. You are embodying it. You are stepping into the radical hospitality Jesus modeled again and again, where the table kept expanding and the gates kept falling.

Do not fear what you will lose. Trust in what the Spirit is trying to birth through you. You are not alone. There is a great cloud of witnesses—ancient and modern—cheering you on. And though the cost may be real, the reward is greater: a church that finally looks like Christ.

To every parent, sibling, partner, friend, or ally: Keep showing up. Your love is not soft—it is sacred. It is theological. When you affirm your LGBTQ+ loved ones, you are preaching the gospel with your presence. When you refuse to choose between your faith and your family, you become a bridge over the chasm that religion has too often dug. You are living proof that love does not fail. Don't underestimate how holy your support really is. You may be the first safe space someone ever experienced.

To every congregation reading these words, to every community that is ready to repent and rebuild: The time is now. The harvest is ripe. The Spirit is moving. The question is not whether God is calling us forward—it is whether we will follow. Let the church become what it was always meant to be: not a gate, but a door; not a fortress, but a feast. A house of prayer for all people—not some people, not the respectable ones, not the ones who fit into easy boxes—but all people.

This is our moment to reclaim Scripture from the weaponizers, to reclaim the gospel from gatekeepers, and to reclaim grace from the small boxes it has been stuffed into. The gospel is not good news if it isn't good for everybody—for everybody with scars, with stories, with struggle, with hope.

Let us go from this place with courage.

Let us go with compassion.

Let us go with the deep conviction that love is holy, and truth sets us free.

Let us walk humbly, act justly, love mercy—and do it all with joy.

And may the Spirit of the Living God—who hovered over chaos and called forth creation, who breathed life into dry bones, who lit tongues of fire and raised the crucified—go with us into this new chapter.

Let the church arise—not as a relic of exclusion, but as a resurrection people, proclaiming life for all.

Let us reclaim Scripture.

Let us reclaim grace.

Let us reclaim the gospel as good news for everybody.

Amen. And amen.