

# **“Can I Be Christian and Gay?”**

## **1 Corinthians 13**

### **Meriden United Methodist Church**

**3 March 2013**

It was a critical moment in Christian history. The Church, including the Methodist Church, was deeply divided over a pressing social concern. On the one hand, there was a group of Methodists who were convinced that they had discerned God’s Will on this critical social issue, and they were also convinced that God wanted them to prophetically claim their position to the secular American society. They had built a very, very persuasive argument for their position, based upon careful scriptural research. And, their diligent search of the scriptures for guidance on this issue revealed many, many scriptural verses that clearly substantiated their perspective.

Yet, on the other hand, there was another group of Methodists who were equally convinced that they had discerned God’s Will on this critical social issue and through their discernment this second group was thoroughly convinced that the first group was absolutely, positively, dead-wrong on the issue. Still, like the first group, this second group was also convinced that God wanted them to prophetically champion their position to the secular American society. And, like the first group, this group could build a very, very persuasive argument for their position, based upon careful scriptural research. Further, their diligent search of the scriptures for guidance on this issue revealed many, many scriptural verses that clearly substantiated their perspective.

The year in which Methodists were so deeply and passionately divided was ....1855, and the pressing social issue was....slavery. Eventually this hugely divisive issue would split

Methodists into two separate denominations, one Northern and opposed to slavery; the other Southern and in favor of slavery.

Today, in 2013, we are once again one **United** Methodist Church. Yet, at the same time, we are once again divided by a critical social issue. This time, the question is: “Can I Be a Christian and Gay?”

Through a faithful and careful reading of scriptures, some Christians of good will believe that homosexuality is immoral and incompatible with Christian teachings. Their position is grounded primarily upon eight scattered biblical passages that appear to condemn homosexuality as morally corrupt and evil. David Kinaman and Gabe Lyons take this position that homosexuality is sinful in their book, *unChristian*. Yet, they hasten to draw a distinction between a “sin” which they hate and the “sinner” which they continue to love. They also point out that each and every Christian continues to be afflicted by their sinfulness so that all of us stand in need of God’s constant forgiveness. For these authors, homosexuality is no greater sin than stealing or pride or jealousy or selfishness. Jesus himself cautions his followers from obsessing too much on other persons’ sins, which ignoring or minimizing our own sin, when he asks in Matthew 7: “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?” All of us stand in need of forgiveness, and God calls upon us to love everyone, regardless of who they are or what they have done.

They write: “It is one thing to be *against homosexuality*, to affirm that the Bible rejects the practice of same-sex lifestyles, but it is another to be *against homosexuals*, to let your disappointment with their behavior spill out in your feelings and words toward them as people. It is unChristian to lose your sense that everyone’s fallen nature affects all aspects of his or her life...”. (p. 84)

By contrast, through a faithful and careful reading of scriptures, other Christians of good will are not so sure that the Bible condemns or rejects same-sex relationships, so long as these relationships are loving and mutually affirming—just as heterosexual relationships should be. For these Christians, the authority of scripture is just powerful as it is for Christians who condemn homosexuality. However, these Christians interpret scripture differently. In the first place, it is not clear that those 8 scriptural passages are condemning a mutually affirming, loving relationship between two gay men or women. For instance, two of the passages in Genesis 19: 1-11 and Judges 19: 22-26 are about gang rape as acts of violence towards strangers. Certainly, Christians would condemn these acts as evil, regardless of whether it was homosexual or heterosexual rape.

It is also important to recognize that strong biblical arguments can be made that support slavery—as we saw in my introduction this morning—the subordination of women to men—especially in the church—and sexual ethics. Commenting on sexual ethics, Adam Hamilton has observed: “The [Bible] condones polygamy, concubines, and the forcing of slaves to sleep with their master in order to bear him children. Do these practices represent God’s timeless will for sexual ethics? I hope not.” (p. 60) Two of the most explicit Biblical condemnations of homosexuality appear in the “holiness code” of Leviticus: 18:22 and 20:13. However, biblical scholars point out that interspersed between these two condemnations in chapter 19:19 is a prohibition against wearing any garment made from two different types of fibers. These scholars note that most of us frequently wear blended garments made of cotton, wool, polyester, and other fabrics, yet we never think of that as a heinous sin.

So, what emerges here is a question of consistency in how the Bible is interpreted. Why do we reject slavery, the subordination of women, and the use of concubines, even though they

are biblically justified, while condemning homosexuality? Why do we believe that it is permissible to wear blended garments, even though the Bible prohibits that practice, yet we believe the Bible condemns loving, mutually affirming gay relationships? How is that consistent?

There is a third perspective concerning how we should view, treat, and respond to gay and lesbian persons. Some people believe that homosexuality is such a heinous sin that there is no possible hope for gay and lesbian persons. This group fervently believes that “God hates fags.” This perspective is epitomized by the Westboro Baptist Church. Some of you may have seen and encountered some Westboro members who were protesting in front of our church this morning.

I believe that our scripture reading this morning offers some helpful guidance as we struggle with this question, “Can I Be Christian and Gay?” 1 Corinthians 13 is nicknamed the great love chapter in the Bible. Very often, couples will choose this passage as part of their wedding ceremony. It feels as though the Apostle Paul wrote this passage specifically for weddings because it captures so beautifully the romantic love between two individuals. Yet, weddings were not what Paul was focusing on, when he wrote this passage.

The early church in Corinth, to whom the letter was addressed, were a consistent problem for the Apostle Paul. This church was deeply divided by several different factors. There was a deep rift between wealthy and poor Christians. And, there was an especially deep schism between different factions, based upon who possessed the most important spiritual gifts. Some thought that speaking in tongues was the highest spiritual gift, while others thought that it was knowledge. There was just a rampant jealousy that was tearing up the church. So, in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul seeks to address these divisions and bring healing to the congregation. In

the 13<sup>th</sup> Chapter, Paul uses a rhetorical device called an **encomium**. Now, in Paul's day, an **encomium** praised an individual or a virtue, admonishing listeners to emulate this ideal. Each **encomium** followed pre-set outline with a prologue, a discussion of the virtue, a comparison with other virtues, and a closing appeal for emulation by listeners.

The first three verses form the prologue. In these verses, Paul reminds the Corinthians of his authority as the supreme model of Christian discipleship. But, he presents himself hypothetically as a negative example. He begins, "If I speak in tongues...but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge, and if I have all faith...but do not have love, I am nothing." In verses 4-7, Paul describes what love is. He writes, "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way ; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." Continuing, verses 8-13 offer a comparison with other virtues, culminating in Paul's famous line, "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three but the greatest of these is love." In 14:1, Paul concludes with the call, "Pursue love."

What does it mean to pursue love on the question of homosexuality?

If we take this passage seriously, it seems to me that the first two perspectives have much more in common with each other than they do with the third perspective, represented outside our doors this morning by Westboro Baptist Church. I believe that it is imperative that Christians who may disagree on the morality of homosexuality, stand together united in their condemnation of this third position of hatred, represented by Westboro Baptist Church. I believe that Jesus Christ in Heaven must surely weep because of the hatred spewed by Westboro Baptist Church in his name. Although the two perspectives may disagree on their interpretation of the scriptures

and the morality of homosexuality, we must stand united in rejecting the third position of hatred, which is clearly incompatible with scripture and is simply not Christian belief.

Throughout this sermon series, I have felt that as your pastor it was important for me to share my personal, theological position on each of these doubts. Before sharing my position on homosexuality, however, it is important that I explain the official position of the United Methodist Church. As a denomination, we have taken the first position, which sees homosexuality as morally wrong and sinful, while at the same time recognizing that gay and lesbian persons are children of God, whom we are called to love and accept just as God does. To quote our official position, “We affirm that all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God. All persons need the ministry of the Church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship...[Yet] The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.”

That is the official position of my church. But, I believe that my church is dead wrong on this issue. For the question, “Can I Be Christian and Gay?” my personal response is “Yes.” I do not believe that a loving and affirming relationship between two gay men or lesbian women is incompatible with scripture or Christian teaching. It is very, very, very difficult for me to stand in opposition to my church on this issue. There was a time, when I thought very seriously about leaving the United Methodist Church over its stand on homosexuality, and I must confess that I was heavily, heavily recruited by a United Church of Christ pastor to “switch teams” and transfer my ordination credentials to that denomination. Ultimately, I discerned that God was calling me to remain in The United Methodist Church and work for change in this denomination, which has been spiritual home since the day I was born.

Yet, regardless of whether you agree with me or agree with our denomination, we can unanimously agree with each other that guiding principle on this question should be love. 1 John 4: 19-20 reads: “We love because God first loved us. Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.”

Last month, I had a conversation with a parishioner, who told me about a gay couple whom they knew. They said that they really respected these two men, and had gotten to know them very well. In talking with this gay couple, they learned that the two men would really like to join a church and attend together as a couple. When I heard this, my first reaction was to say, “Well, why don’t you invite this couple to come to church here at Meriden, with you?” But, I bit my tongue and didn’t say anything. You see, even though I was eager to welcome this couple to my congregation, I didn’t know how the rest of you would react. I didn’t know for sure, whether you were ready to welcome a gay or lesbian couple into our community of faith.

I still don’t know and that’s my question to you. What about it? Are you ready to welcome a gay or lesbian couple into our community of faith? Are you ready to take 1 Corinthians 13 seriously? Are you ready to take The United Methodist Church’s position seriously, when it calls upon us to welcome gay and lesbian persons?