

Pastoral Letter on Homosexuality

6.18.2024

In this day of persistent and often confusing voices around the issue of homosexuality, we offer this pastoral letter to bring clarity and guidance for how we, as Free Methodists, live out our stated convictions on this matter while loving all people and honoring the worth ascribed to them when God created humanity in His own image. As a reminder of those convictions and commitment to offer love and compassion, we highlight three statements from our Book of Discipline that we hold to be equally relevant:

Paragraph 3221: We are committed to the dignity and worth of all humans, including the unborn, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, color, socio-economic status, disability, or any other distinctions ([Acts 10:34–35](#)), and will respect them as persons made in the image of God ([Genesis 1:26–27](#)) and redeemed by Christ’s death and resurrection.

Paragraph 3215: Same-sex intimacy is regarded by the Scriptures as immoral because it is a distortion of God’s created order. The Scriptures speak explicitly against same-sex intimacy ([Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Romans 1:26, 27; 1 Timothy 1:8–10](#)).

Paragraph 3311A: With deep compassion for persons who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, and especially those who have been mistreated and marginalized in various settings, the Free Methodist Church encourages its congregations to practice welcoming hospitality and embracing lovingkindness toward all who desire to worship among us. We will be a people who offer ourselves as agents of Jesus’s grace and love to others — all others. We will trust the Holy Spirit to convict people of their sin, to enliven hope of transforming possibilities, and then to lead people to God’s best for their lives.

From these three statements, our commitment is clear to what Wesley called “the middle way.” We are resolved to hold in tension our dual commitments to God-given revelation found in the truth of God’s Word *and* our intent to love in practical ways those who acknowledge same-sex attraction. With the Apostle Paul, we agree that love without truth is not love at all ([1 Corinthians 13:6](#)), even as truth without love benefits no one ([1 Corinthians 13:2](#)).

We are aware that some Christian leaders have used a similar phrase, “the third way,” to advocate for a “live and let live” approach that allows individuals and churches to reach their own conclusions when it comes to the way we interpret the Bible’s teaching on homosexuality. That is not what we, as Free Methodists, mean by “the middle way.” Our conviction is that Scripture is clear and consistent on this matter. Therefore, we fully align our lives and churches with God’s Word in confidence and humility. Our commitment to “the middle way” relates to how we strive to live out our commitment to biblical truth as we also obey the Lord’s command to love our neighbors, those inside and outside the church, who are same-sex attracted.

We also recognize the need to offer more robust guidance on what such a commitment involves and requires of us. To that end, the Board of Bishops and our Study Commission on Doctrine fully endorse the following statement recently released by our sister denomination, The Wesleyan Church. We offer it to you with their permission and with only minor edits to make it our own. We pray that we will move forward in unity as we continue to submit ourselves to His Spirit and the Word. This unity would empower us to reach many with the gospel message of grace and mercy while maintaining our witness to the transforming power of holiness. May it be so in the Free Methodist Church.

The Free Methodist Church and Homosexuality¹

A Position Paper of the Free Methodist Church USA

6.18.2024

The Free Methodist Church aims to approach questions over homosexuality as we approach all matters — with grace and truth, rooted in Scripture, guided by the Spirit with love, and confident that even God’s difficult commands are for our good.²

Free Methodists affirm a biblical ethic of marriage and sexuality (outlined below) as part of God’s design for human flourishing.

Yet we also confess that the church has not always done well to love and pastor those who experience homosexual desires. Same-sex attraction remains a deeply personal subject in our homes and churches because it involves *people* whom God loves: family, friends, and sometimes even ourselves. Free Methodists seek therefore to frame the matter not primarily as a political or cultural “issue,” but as an opportunity to love God and neighbor as Christ commands us ([Mark 12:30–31](#)).

No person is beyond God’s saving grace, and no person is exempt from God’s empowering call to holiness. Though our sexuality is not the most important thing about us, it matters deeply because God has made us, we were bought by Christ at a price, and our bodies are to be temples of the Holy Spirit ([1 Corinthians 6:19–20](#)).

The Focus of This Statement

Before turning to Scripture, it is important to clarify our focus and our language to avoid misunderstanding.

First, this paper deals only with homosexuality rather than the full range of subjects sometimes located beneath the LGBTQ+ umbrella. This decision does not discount the importance of, say, transgender questions or intersex conditions; rather, it recognizes that those topics are distinct and significant enough to deserve their own response.

Second, Christians must be careful not to equate sexual temptation, or even sexual orientation, with sexual sin. Temptation and willful sin stand distinct within Free Methodist theology, as do one’s fallen inclinations and one’s fundamental identity as an image-bearer of God ([Genesis 1:26](#)) and a new creation in Christ Jesus ([1 Corinthians 10:13](#); [2 Corinthians 5:17](#)).

Third, our intention is to speak about homosexuality according to the same biblical principles by which we approach sexuality in general. We do not therefore wish to isolate those who experience same-sex sexual desires as if they alone battle for sexual holiness. We are in this struggle together. All persons must submit their sexuality to what Scripture commands, to be conformed to God’s holy and loving will.

What Scripture Teaches

Free Methodists stand with the vast majority of Christians, across continents, centuries, and church traditions, who read the Bible as prohibiting all same-sex sexual relationships. We do not seek to force this view upon society ([1 Corinthians 5:12](#)), but neither are we ashamed of it, since it aligns with God’s will for the good of all people.

The following points offer a brief outline of our biblical convictions:

- Scripture teaches that human beings and human sexuality were created good by God ([Genesis 1–2](#)). All humans are made in God’s image ([Genesis 1:26–27](#)), and all sexual relations are to be reserved for faithful marriage between husband and wife ([Exodus 20:14](#); [Matthew 19:4](#); [1 Corinthians 7](#); [Hebrews 13:4](#)).
- While human bodies and sexuality remain God’s good gifts, both our sexual inclinations and our sexual practices have been badly warped by sin. This is true of

¹The original document, “The Wesleyan Church and Homosexuality” has been graciously shared with the Free Methodist Church in its entirety for mild contextualization and distribution to Free Methodists. We thank the leaders of the Wesleyan Church for their excellent work on this article. The original article can be found at: <https://www.wesleyan.org/the-wesleyan-church-and-homosexuality>.

heterosexual desires and actions as well as homosexual ones ([Romans 1:24–27](#); [3:9-18](#) [citing [Psalm 14:1–3](#); [53:1–3](#); [Ecclesiastes 7:20](#)]; [1 John 1:8](#)).

- Scripture distinguishes sexual sin (including lust) from unwanted sexual temptation. After all, Christ Himself was tempted yet did not sin ([Matthew 4:1–11](#); [Hebrews 4:15](#)). What’s more, God provides a way to overcome temptation by the grace of Jesus and the power of Spirit ([1 Corinthians 10:13](#); [Hebrews 2:18](#); [4:15](#)).
- Though it can be difficult to say when an unchosen disposition turns to willful disobedience, the crucial ethical question involves what we choose to *do* and *dwell upon* when facing temptation of whatever kind ([Romans 12:1–2](#); [Colossians 3:1–10](#); [James 4:7](#)).
- Though God will eventually grant us victory over all temptation, we do not teach that *every* fallen struggle or desire will be instantly removed or simply “prayed away” within this lifetime.
- Scripture warns against all sin, including lust, the use of pornography, and homosexual sex as contrary to God’s will for human flourishing ([Leviticus 18:22](#); [20:13](#); [Matthew 5:28](#); [Romans 1:26–27](#); [1 Corinthians 6:9-11](#); [Ephesians 5:3](#); [1 Timothy 1:9–10](#)).
- Though some claim that the New Testament prohibits only abusive or promiscuous homosexual acts, Free Methodists deny this conclusion for numerous reasons:
 - Though same-sex relationships were prevalent in the ancient world, no passage of Scripture presents an affirming attitude toward homosexual sex in any form.
 - When Paul addresses homosexual sin, he addresses not only rape or abuse, but the way homosexual practices and desires depart from God’s natural design for human sexuality. He then highlights not only violent sexual acts perpetrated by powerful men, but also same-sex “lusts” between women ([Romans 1:26–27](#)). Paul makes no allowance for homosexual sin, regardless of whether the relationship is between a master and slave, or between two mutually consenting adults claiming love for one another.

- To assert that Scripture forbids only abusive or promiscuous homosexual acts is to ignore the consistent witness of both the Old and New Testaments on sexual relations as reserved for faithful marriage between husband and wife ([Genesis 1:26–27](#); [Leviticus 18:22](#); [20:13](#); [Matthew 19:4](#); [1 Corinthians 7](#); [Ephesians 5:31–32](#)).
- Despite prohibitions against sexual immorality, the early church was filled with people who had experienced sexual sinfulness, including homosexual practices. Paul testifies to God’s forgiveness and transforming grace in the lives of these Christians to move them away from sin and toward holy living ([1 Corinthians 6:9–11](#)).
- For this reason, Free Methodists do not relegate those who experience same-sex attraction to a lesser status within God’s family. Nor does the mere experience of temptation disqualify one from ordination or church leadership. To claim otherwise is to equate temptation with sin, to forget that Christ Himself was tempted, and to treat same-sex sexual temptations as a separate category of fallen experience that is beyond the reach of God’s transforming grace ([Matthew 4:1–10](#); [Romans 6:12–14](#); [1 Corinthians 10:13](#); [Galatians 5:19–21](#); [Hebrews 2:18](#); [4:15](#)).
- Finally, Scripture promises that our present state of fallenness and temptation is not the final chapter in the Christian story. Suffering and sin will pass away in the resurrection, and the church will experience the supreme joy of eternal worship and perfect love in God’s renewed creation ([Mark 12:24–25](#); [Ephesians 5:32](#); [1 Thessalonians 4:14](#); [1 Corinthians 15](#); [Revelation 19:6–8](#); [21–22](#)).

While Scripture must be carefully interpreted, we take heart that our reading of the Bible on sexual holiness stands in harmony with that of countless other Christians throughout the ages.

On Marriage and Celibacy in God's Family

Free Methodists confess that until we reclaim a Christian account of celibacy, marriage, and the church as *family*, our good news for those experiencing same-sex temptation will be both unbiblical and impoverished.

Jesus, Paul, and countless saints across the centuries model and affirm that celibacy may be a rich and fruitful calling ([1 Corinthians 7:7](#)). And while the celibate life sets aside both marriage and sexual activity, it does not sacrifice deep friendship, possible leadership, and a place of honor in God's house. Hence, Free Methodists seek to reclaim celibacy, alongside the spousal life, as a foretaste of the age to come ([Mark 12:24–25](#); [1 Corinthians 7:8, 32–35, 38, 39b](#)).

Christ reoriented the ancient notion of “family” around obedient faith in Him ([Mark 3:35](#); [10:29–30](#)). Thus, early Christians spoke of one another as “brothers and sisters” in recognition that the Spirit has knit together the church not as a gathering of individuals or nuclear households, but as a *family* that makes space around the table for widows, orphans, married, and celibate persons.

Questions of Identity and Self-Description

Though many important and unique factors make us who we are, Free Methodists celebrate that the believer's most important identity is found in Christ as a part of God's new creation ([2 Corinthians 5:17](#); [Galatians 3:28](#); [Ephesians 1:4, 7](#)). Thus, when Paul speaks to Christians about their former sinful habits and lifestyles, he does so in the past tense:

“And that is what some of you *were*. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” ([1 Corinthians 6:11](#); emphasis added).

Free Methodists therefore encourage all people to find their deepest identity as beloved image-bearers of God, and (for Christians) new creations being transformed by the Spirit of Christ Jesus.

At the same time, we acknowledge the value of being honest about our unchosen inclinations. To deny or hide these aspects of our lives may push us further from community and impede our Christian transformation.

For this reason, some Christians speak of being gay or lesbian not as an endorsement of homosexual practice, but as honest testimony to their unchosen inclinations. Other committed Christ-followers speak of being “celibate gay Christians” as a way of naming *both* their fallen predispositions and their faithful pursuit of sexual purity. These celibate Christians often face tremendous misunderstanding from all sides. How then should we proceed?

There is room for disagreement on some questions of terminology and self-description. Yet we offer the following advice with the goal of Christian charity and moral clarity:

- Because words like “gay” and “lesbian” are pervasive, we do not think it is wise for churches to police every use of such labels. Instead, we strive for *charity* in understanding what individuals intend by these words, so that we do not impugn their motives or their character.
- Because talk of being a “gay Christian” is easily misunderstood as an endorsement of same-sex sexual activity, we ask Christians who align with Free Methodist theology to strive for *clarity* to avoid confusing one's temptations for one's truest identity in Christ. (The addition of the word “celibate” represents one approach to this challenge.)
- Because these conversations are sometimes dominated by the harshest voices in the culture or on social media, we urge gentleness, discernment, and a posture of patient listening when individuals voice their experience with same-sex sexual attraction. In this way, we hope to avoid the kind of “quarreling about words” that “only ruins those who listen” ([2 Timothy 2:14](#)).

It is important to name our fallen struggles, but it is even more important to discover and live out our deepest belonging and identity as beloved children of God.

Rejecting Two Forms of Religious Intolerance

Free Methodists oppose two forms of religious intolerance regarding homosexuality.

First, we reject and repent of the way our gay and lesbian neighbors have been mocked, bullied, ostracized, or even subjected to physical violence. Such actions do not represent the heart of Jesus, and they have no place within the Free Methodist Church. We also repent of an embarrassed silence that leaves those who experience same-sex sexual temptation to feel ignored, unseen, or unwanted. Though Free Methodist leaders, including pastors, professors, and staff members, commit to unapologetically uphold our biblical convictions, we also call our communities to love and serve those who experience same-sex sexual temptation.

Second, Free Methodists also oppose a secular or progressive bigotry that seeks to punish or marginalize Christians for affirming what Scripture teaches. Though we do not expect the broader culture to share all our beliefs, we do seek to uphold basic freedoms of conscience, faith, and religious practice that are hallmarks of a free society. Disagreement does not equal hate. Nor is biblical faith synonymous with bigoted fundamentalism. When religious freedoms are imperiled, Free Methodists commit to love those who oppose us, pray for them, and peaceably advocate for liberty and justice with a posture of respect ([Matthew 5:43–48](#)).

One way Free Methodists uphold our Christian convictions involves the kind of weddings we officiate and host. Though many nations recognize same-sex marriages, Free Methodist pastors do not preside over these unions, nor do we hold them in our churches or facilities. This decision stems not from a desire to be unkind toward friends and family who disagree, but from the biblical mandate that “we must obey God rather than human beings” ([Acts 5:29](#)).

Though “tolerance” is a watchword within modern culture, Free Methodists confess that love is both better and more costly than mere tolerance: Love compels us to go beyond begrudging coexistence to biblical hospitality, honest conversation, joyful service, and truthful witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Pastoral Conclusion

In the end, Free Methodists acknowledge that mere “statements” on homosexuality, however careful or biblical, fall far short of what God asks. While Christ made bold pronouncements regarding sin and righteousness, He also shared more tables than He flipped. Thus, Jesus was criticized most frequently for the way sinners, outcasts, and religious outsiders were drawn to Him, and Christ to them ([Luke 15:2](#)).

We conclude, therefore, with a call to patient pastoral care toward those who experience homosexual temptations. May we not sacrifice truth in the name of “love,” nor stop loving in the name of being truthful.

We grieve abusive reparative therapies³ even as we also reject the destructive ideology, so pervasive in our culture and our media, that fallen longings represent one’s “true self” that must be obeyed. Hence, Christ’s command to His disciples was not “follow your heart,” but “follow me” ([Matthew 4:19](#)), because He alone offers fullness of life ([John 10:10](#)).

Finally, we rejoice that hope and holiness are available to all. All are loved by God; all are made in His image; all are fallen; and all are called to be renewed by the grace of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit. Free Methodists believe in God’s transforming grace.

² Here we follow John Wesley’s affirmation that God’s commands are “covered promises” because they are given for our flourishing, and accompanied by a grace that enables our obedience. See John Wesley, “Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount Discourse the Fifth (Sermon 25),” in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler, Vol. 1: Sermons I, 1–33 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), II.3 (p. 555).

³ We also acknowledge that therapeutic terms are understood and used differently by Christians, and we must journey with all toward holiness in Christ.