

Gay Marriage @ LaSalle Street Church

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Christians are “people of the Book.” We revere the Bible: its complex narratives, its extraordinary poetry, its brilliant moral vision of who God is and who we are called to become as children of God. LaSalle Street Church is a daring, creative, quirky community of Christians who pray the Bible, study the Bible, preach the Bible, and hear it preached.

But what does it mean to be biblically faithful critical thinkers when the question at hand is homosexuality and especially same-sex marriage? Within Christian community nationally, opinion in this matter has been distributed along a continuum. At one end, some see same-sex marriage as something God flatly forbids. At the other, some see marriage as something God requires for LGBT individuals who are not celibate: just like straight people, LGBT folks must obey the commandment, *Thou shalt not commit adultery*. Christians of every orientation are found at every possible place on the spectrum between these two points of view. Many hold carefully considered opinions over which they have studied and prayed for many years.

Every single one of these thoughtful people can cite scripture in support of their views. What then does it mean to be biblically faithful?

More to the point: what do we mean when we say that LaSalle Street Church is a biblically faithful congregation that welcomes people without regard for sexual orientation? What does it mean that sexual orientation is not an issue when we look for people to serve in leadership positions? What does it mean that no one is excluded from leadership or personally condemned for having made a morally serious commitment to a life partner of the same sex?

The short version of the story goes like this: After years of a policy that amounted to “don’t ask, don’t tell,” we decided to come out of the closet ourselves: LaSalle Street Church has always been a diverse, inclusive, progressive congregation. We have a

distinguished history of open, pointed, edgy commitment to social justice. The old-timers among us attest that from our very beginnings in the 1960s, openly gay folks have been members of this congregation. Then and in the decades since then, gay men and lesbians have served with distinction in many positions of leadership and service.

Our inclusivity was dangerous at that point. It was a far edgier, far more confrontational social witness than the same hospitality is today. Fifty years ago, Moody Bible Institute owned our building. They would have evicted us in a blink if they had found out. So we kept silent.

In effect, then, we joined our gay brothers and lesbian sisters in the closet. We participated in the oppressive silence that was so ubiquitous half a century ago. As a result, some straight people here probably never realized that there were gay men singing in the choir or lesbians serving on committees. That's how life was. That's how closets work: some people agree to keep silent; other people agree not to see what they don't want to see; life goes on.

But life has changed. American culture has changed. It has changed for us as a congregation just as it has changed among gay men and lesbian women nationwide. We came to realize that our long history of double-talk was more than a little dishonest. But "coming out" as a congregation proved both difficult and complicated--far more so than many of us expected. Straight folks at LaSalle now understand the problems of the closet with an immediacy and a vividness we could have gained in no other way.

Truth demands courage. Faith demands courage. We turned to one another for affirmation as we sought the courage of our convictions and as we faced the ire and the outrage of people who had been oblivious. We got through it.

As we did so, we had to face repeatedly the challenges of those who read scripture literally. We reaffirmed that in this congregation, to be "biblically faithful" means to engage humbly and honestly with sacred scriptures as the Word of God--not the words of God. We believe that if we engage with scripture thoughtfully, carefully, prayerfully, then it can become for us an encounter with a *living* God who is a vital presence in our own lives.

This essay will tell a longer version of our story about how we thought through the issues involved in our own coming out. If the details of how we read the Bible on same-sex relationships doesn't matter all that much to you, or it doesn't matter at this point in your relationship with us, that's fine. You can stop reading here. This essay will always be around if you want to take a look at it later on.

But for some people, as you can easily imagine, these questions are crucial. For some people, these are up-front questions in their decision whether or not to give this church a serious look. This essay is for those people.

And because LaSalle does not believe that there can be any single "untouched by human hands" absolutist interpretation of scripture--or anything else, for that matter--this is a signed essay. It is not written "by the church." Churches don't write essays. People do. So this is my work: I'm a LaSaller who has been part of the conversation at LaSalle; I'm 60-something, straight, married for almost forty years. I'm a cultural historian with a PhD in literature.

I don't pretend that everyone at this church will agree with every word I say, but I know that many people agree with my general conclusions: I have circulated many evolving versions of this essay over several years, soliciting feedback. I've spent almost countless hours *listening* to LaSallers as I have struggled to find a way to articulate the complexity of our thinking on this controversial question. We don't believe that "anything goes" with regard to sexual behavior; neither are we willing to tell our brothers and sisters who might be openly, partnered gays or lesbians that *they* have to go.

The Complexity of Scripture

How to read scripture is a complicated question because scholars now agree that the Bible speaks with many, sometimes sharply competing voices both about morals and about the character of God. The classic example is murder: At one point God commands *Thou shalt not kill*; at other points God commands both fratricide (Exodus 32: 26-29) and genocide (Deuteronomy 7:1-4). Who, then, is God? What does God think about the morality of murder? What about the horrific accounts of God's violence both against the Jews and against their military opponents? Is that a God of love? More

pointedly yet, will a God of love torture people in hell for billions of years? *Who is God?* and *How do we read this book?* are closely interwoven questions.

There are other, equally famous examples of the ambiguity of scripture. In the nineteenth century slave-owners and slave-traders made strong, detailed, biblically-based arguments in defense of slavery. Many of these arguments reappeared in defense of segregation during the civil rights movement of 1960s. Scripture can also be used in powerful, specific ways to defend the oppression of women. Even further back, scripture was used to justify the Crusades, the Inquisitions, witch-burnings, the myriad abuses of colonialism, and so forth.

What went wrong in those times? It's easy to argue that the problem is or was biblical literalism, and blame all of it on fundamentalist thinking. But that's a facile argument. It is just as easy to argue that the problem was a failure to attend humbly to "the plain sense" of such scriptural injunctions as *love your neighbor as yourself* or *judge not, that ye be not judged*. Questions remain: *What texts do you cite? Why?* And furthermore, *How do you read them?*

If we are to be faithful to scripture in any intellectually serious way, we have to be able to read these ancient texts with intellectual care, with cultural sophistication, and with moral discernment. It's not enough to ask "what does scripture say about [fill in the blank]?" We have to be open to asking who is God in our lives, and who is God calling us to *become* both as individuals and as a community.

For a believer, questions don't get much bigger than these. It's either daunting or exhilarating to belong to a church where big questions are welcome.

The Text in Question, Part One: Romans 1:20-32

The classic New Testament text forbidding same-sex relationships is this passage from Paul's epistle to the Romans. The conclusions Paul reaches here he echoes elsewhere and in passing in other epistles, but here he lays out his thinking fully for our consideration.

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

Let's begin with the "plain sense" of this passage. That means, first, seeing the logical structure of Paul's argument and, second, situating that argument in Paul's cultural context. Then--and only then--can we begin to consider its implications for who we are now and for who God is calling us to become. Only as we ask that more deeply spiritual question does the text become genuinely *sacred* scripture--an encounter with a living God.

Paul's core assumptions are deeply problematic. There's no getting around that fact, so let's start there. He contends that the true nature of God is a simple logical inference from the facts of natural world. As a result, people of other religions are being willfully obtuse--willfully obtuse in ways that Paul then describes as "depraved."

That's a very strong accusation about people who belong to other religions. Furthermore, it is neither logically nor theologically valid: Jewish and Christian theology is *not* logically implied by the facts of the natural world. As a result, people of other faiths are *not* failing to admit "the facts" staring them in the face. That means their failure to worship the YHWH Elohim is *not* depraved.

But Paul keeps going from this initial assumption, and so must we. Let's grant him his mistaken assumption at least for a few minutes, until we have further excavated the logic of his broader argument.

Because these nonbelievers are being willfully obtuse and furthermore depraved in their worship of their own gods, Paul continues, God punishes them by "giving them over" to depravity across the board. Paul identifies two such punishments. First, they give way to "shameful lusts"--a.k.a. homosexuality. Second, they give way to a whole array of anti-social behaviors such as envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice. In effect, they become incapable of civilization; they lose their "natural" social capacity for harmonious relationships. Once again: here is an empirically dubious accusation about people who belong to other religions.

There is much in these few sentences worth exploring further; we'll get back to some of that in just a minute. But for now, let's once again grant Paul his condemnation of

all other religions. Let's do so in order to focus on the role "shameful lusts" play in this passage.

Here's an obvious first question: Why would Paul lump homosexuality in with this broad array of anti-social behaviors? Quite aside from his sweeping condemnation of all other religions, why this sweeping condemnation of homosexuals?

There are four fascinating historical reasons why he would have felt this way about homosexuality. The first has to do with the condemnation of homosexuality in the Torah, the Jewish law. We'll get back to that later. The other three come down in the end to the close association between homosexual sex and other belief systems: homosexuality is condemned because it was a pagan practice.

First, ritual homosexual congress was associated throughout the ancient world with the worship of the gods, especially fertility gods. That's Paul's major claim: God "gave them over" to "sinful impurity" because they chose to worship false gods. In Rome itself, for instance, Paul's first audience would have known about the fertility goddess Cybele (or Sybil, or, in Greek, Gaia--the Great Mother, the Earth Mother). Rome believed itself under Cybele's particular protection, and furthermore she played a particularly important role in the imperial iconography of Caesar Augustus. As a result, there was a major shrine to Cybele on the Palatine hill, right next to the palace Caesar Augustus built for himself. At her shrine in Rome, initiates were baptized, just as initiates were baptized among the Christians--but they were baptized in the blood of a bull. And, most relevantly of all, at her shrines castrated priests had ritual sex with other men. Brutal Roman imperialism, blood baptism, and pagan ritual sex: what a trio!

Ritual male-on-male sex at Cybele's shrine was not the only negative association Paul would have had. There's a second cultural context that is also profoundly relevant. In gnostic and neoplatonic spirituality, sex between men was regarded as morally preferable to heterosexual congress. That belief derived from Greek beliefs about the radical inferiority of women. Because women were by definition less than fully human, authentic interpersonal relationships between men and women were metaphysically impossible. As a result, heterosexual sex was giving way pure lust. It

was giving way to bodily urges in ways that the strictly cerebral gnostic and neoplatonic belief systems defined as both morally and spiritually degrading for the man. In Paul's day, gnosticism and other neoplatonisms were arguably the dominant philosophical system. These were the ordinary assumptions people had, especially the relatively more sophisticated urban people living in places like Rome.

Gnostic or neoplatonic sexual morality does create certain practical problems: the state needed men to conceive sons who would serve as the next generation of military leaders. What about that?

Procreation was considered a civic duty. Plato makes that clear: even Socrates had a wife and three children, good citizen that he was. The Romans, with their acute administrative skills, used tax penalties to force Roman citizens to sire legitimate children to become the next generation of citizen-warriors for the Roman state. Over time, these penalties were escalated, which historians see as evidence that the policy was not working as well as expected. All of that may seem very strange to us, but the ancient world was in fact a very different place. That's a central part of what makes biblical interpretation so complex.

Third, Paul was probably also influenced by long-established Greco-Roman traditions of male-on-male predatory sexuality among men who were normatively heterosexual. These were predatory practices that today we would consider abusive at best and pedophilia at worst: young men were expected to submit sexually to older men who served as their professional and social mentors, their commanding officers, and so forth. Plato's *Phaedrus* offers a remarkably explicit account of the contempt these younger men felt for the sexual needs of their elders, even as it celebrates the love between men as spiritually more enlightened than heterosexual love. As the *Phaedrus* makes perfectly clear, submitting to such demands was simply the price of getting ahead: Plato offers shrewd and calculating advice to young men considering which sexual advances would best serve their own educational needs and career development. Historians now add that male rape was commonplace between conquering armies and defeated armies in the ancient world.

Paul has good reasons, then, to be deeply suspicious of homosexuality: in the ancient world, and especially in Rome, it was associated with the worship of other gods; it was a commonplace abusive practice in a variety of situations; and it was associated with a Greek philosophic denigration of procreative sexuality that clashed quite dramatically with classically affirmative Jewish attitudes toward heterosexuality.

So Is Romans Relevant Now?

As we have seen, close and careful analysis of these sentences reveals that the logic of Paul's condemnation of other religions is very deeply flawed. Furthermore, culturally situating his condemnation--regardless of its logic--reveals the close association of male-on-male sexual congress with religions, philosophies, and abusive practices that as a good Jew he found deeply repugnant. But none of that adds up to a meaningful critique of what we understand today as a biologically innate sexual orientation to persons of the same sex.

In particular, pedophilia, and anti-social traits like "envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice" must not be confused with the honest exchange of vows between homosexual or transgendered or biologically intersex Christians today. There is nothing sinful about sexual fidelity, regardless of the sexual orientation of the two people making that promise. LGBT people are not inherently depraved just as Buddhists, Hindus, Sikh, and so forth are not inherently depraved. LGBT Christians are ordinary Christians--except perhaps they are a bit more courageous in their faith than those of us who have never been condemned wholesale and in such poisonous language as "God Hates Faggots."

Does that mean that LaSallers have taken a black felt-tip marker and obliterated this passage from our Bibles? No. Biblical exegesis is not that simple. Paul makes these culturally-situated, culturally-explicable mistakes, but that doesn't mean that Paul was a sign-waving homophobic bigot or that this passage has nothing worthwhile to say. Critical engagement with the text must continue.

The first thing to notice, then, is that Paul's sweeping condemnation of other religions is a "myth of origins" attempting to explain the source of certain features of his own world. What shows up if we set aside that logically-flawed attempt to explain "how this came

about" and instead focus directly on the observed characteristics? Set aside everything Paul says about the etiology of "depravity." What is his bigger point?

His bigger point is that anti-social behavior is immoral. Let's take another look at the list Paul assembles: evil, greed, depravity, envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice, gossip, slander, insolence, arrogance, boastfulness, disobeying parents, and a lack of understanding, fidelity, love, and mercy. That's quite a list. If we read his logic backwards, so to speak, then the worship of "the true God" elicits pro-social concern for the common good; the worship of "false gods" leads to anti-social destruction of the common good. Morality, then--including "true religion"--requires above all else moral sensitivity to the health and functioning of social networks. Social networks, as everyone knows, are above all else dependent upon trust and reciprocity--upon personal integrity, broadly defined. *Even if Paul is wrong about other religions--as surely he is--he shows us something crucial here about his own religion: how we treat other people is centrally important. His implicit argument is that pro-social personal integrity is the measure of the authenticity of our faith.*

The relevance of that claim for contemporary debates about homosexuality is painfully clear. First, radical abuse and denigration of this population is unChristian. Honest and morally responsible people have become innocent targets of deceit, malice, gossip, slander, insolence, evil, and a lack of understanding; they have been abused without mercy and all too often denied the love of their own families. That's quite a list too.

Secondly, There is nothing *inherently* anti-social about a same-sex sexual orientation. Sexual orientation in and of itself does not constitute a violation of any aspect of the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. The LGBT population is rightly expected to be as responsible to the common good as the straight population. As they are not across-the-board evil perverts, they are not across the board saints: we cannot judge people by their orientation just as we cannot judge people by their skin pigmentation. To paraphrase Martin Luther King, they have a right to be judged by the content of their character, not by the orientation of their sexual responses.

Third, and no doubt most important, *What we do with our sexuality is not simply a 'private' issue.* What we do with our sexuality is part and parcel of how we relate to other people generally. It's an aspect of healthy, morally responsible social identity.

Exploiting one another sexually is wrong in the same way that it is wrong to be malicious, or dishonest, or slanderous. It is morally wrong because it is a failure to show due regard for the image of God within every other person. Paul is right in lumping sexual sin in with other pointedly anti-social sins. That's exactly where it belongs.

To argue, as some do, that nothing can be wrong if both sexual partners consent is like saying, "I can't be an alcoholic because I never drink alone--I'm simply a social drinker." Casual sex is both exploitative and self-denigrating, regardless of the sexual orientations of the people involved. Even if both partners freely consent, exploiting others and allowing yourself to be exploited takes a toll over time. Over time, trusting others to be honest becomes far more difficult. Psychologically intimate and trusting relationships become more difficult. Cynicism grows. As cynicism grows, people become either more callous and more exploitative and more emotionally distant from their own sexual vulnerability, or else they begin to withdraw, to keep a distance from the possibility to being used by someone else. No matter what, over time the losses involved are genuine.

And if the damage done by ordinary casual sex is both serious and emotionally familiar to many of us, so also Paul was morally right to object to the same-sex male sexuality of the ancient world. Those sexual practices could be dramatically exploitative and self-denigrating, whether that meant castrating men to serve as priests of Cybele, or raping defeated soldiers, or submitting to sex in order to get ahead in one's career. Sexual depravity of the most remarkable kind was commonplace in the ancient world.

But it's also common in our world, where sexual depravity has been commercialized by "sex tourism," by internationally organized sex trafficking, and by the explosion of pornography on the internet. Sexual abuse of children is both prevalent and devastating. "Shameful lusts" are all around us.

Paul was wrong, of course, in thinking that the male-on-male sexuality he saw in the world around him was the only kind of same-sex sexuality that might exist. He was

limited by the ancient Jewish understanding of biology, an interesting topic to which we will return in a moment. Nonetheless, these few sentences from Romans make a point that we need to consider. Paul's argument about anti-social sexuality has nothing to do with what we now understand to be biologically natural and innate homosexuality, just as it has nothing to do with other religions. But it has everything to do with what it means to be biblically faithful Christians in our own time and place. We too need to be clear about the prevalence and the damage done by genuinely shameful lusts.

One final point before we turn to another passage. Most people over the age of fifty or maybe sixty, and many younger people who grew up in culturally homogenous smaller communities, came of age in a cultural context where the LGBT community was almost entirely invisible. LGBT people were condemned out of hand both by religious teachers and by the medical and psychotherapeutic community as well. Many people grew up with no reason to question those condemnations. Even today they have no LGBT friends or family members (or at least none known as such).

These people have been disconcerted by the rise of the gay rights movement and dismayed by inclusivity movements within the churches. One of the points they make repeatedly is honest, thoughtful, and worth repeating: God's ways are not our ways. Over and over again, faith calls us to a difficult obedience. We must be careful not to remake God in our own image and not to read our own desires into what the Bible says. That's very true. But it cuts both ways: inclusivity has always been a disconcerting, painful obedience for communities accustomed to excluding "them"--whoever "they" might be.

In that regard, consider these ordinary facts. Many Americans grew up in a world strictly segregated racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically. In that world, it was easy enough (if not inevitable) that one came of age without a close friend belonging to another denomination, much less another religion altogether, or a sharply different ethnicity, or a sharply different socioeconomic class. "We" were not friends with "them." Growing up without good friends who are openly gay or lesbian was simply part of the cultural matrix within which many Americans came of age.

As a diverse, vibrant, urban congregation, LaSalle Street Church has from the beginning called together people seeking refuge from cultural narrowness generally. We are a community of people actively seeking a way over the walls that continue to isolate us into little boxes with other people who think very much as we think, who have educations very much like ours, who grew up in settings much like ours, who grew up attending the same kinds of churches we attended, and so forth. From the beginning, we have worked together for the healing of these divisions within our society. That started in the early sixties with friendship between twenty-somethings who were urban professionals and teenagers who were moving into what was then the new low-income highrise housing project called Cabrini Green. Before long, we were helping their younger brothers and sisters to learn to read.

In the decades since then, our outreach to make new and important friendships in this city and in the world has helped this congregation to grow in multiple directions. At this church, you are apt to become friends with people you would never meet otherwise, people who may hold opinions remarkably different from yours--but people who also have clear, articulate, thoughtful reasons for thinking as they do.

LaSalle is happy to boast about all that. But we also admit this has been difficult at times. At times we have fumbled, we have failed, we have misunderstood one another. At times we have figured out how to do something successfully only by doing it badly at first. At times that has been painful all around. Over the last fifty years, our repeated and sometimes quite fumbling efforts at LGBT inclusivity have been an illustration of that trial-and-error process.

And so, at this particular moment, it seems right and holy, a good and proper thing to give thanks to the leadership of a recent substantial cohort of openly gay men and openly lesbian women coming out into our midst without apology--along with all the straight friends who supported them unequivocally. Many of these people, sometimes at real personal cost, have stepped out from our congregational closet of "don't ask, don't tell" to say *Here I am. Hi there! You know me. I've been sitting in the pews with you for years. But did you know who I am? Did you know what I think about this issue?*

Here I am. All through scripture, that's how prophets reply when the angel of the Lord appears to them. *Here I am.* That too is an example of painful, difficult obedience. As a congregation, we have stood witness to the changing of hearts and minds on all sides as old assumptions about one another gave way to the truth. Not all who grew up taking Paul's condemnation at face value are unredeemable bigots; not all LGBT people are antisocial perverts. All of us have a right to be judged on the contents of our character, *period.* As a congregation, we have stood witness to difficult courage and difficult faith on all sides.

And on all sides--on all sides--arguing about scripture and arguing from scripture has helped us to see who we are in the eyes of God, and who others are. Slowly, sometimes awkwardly, we have discovered how God is calling us to live together as a congregation. That's what we mean when we say that LaSalle Street Church is a biblically faithful place.

We do not claim that we always succeed at being who God calls us to be. But we do try. And we do so in relationship with the living God made known to us in scripture. At this church, "who God wants us to be" is a work-in-progress. It's not set in stone. We have no secret rolodex of All The Answers About Everything, so if that's what you need in a church then this is probably not the place for you. At LaSalle Street Church, fidelity to God and to scripture is a long, complicated, sometimes obscure creative task.

But when it happens, when we see it happening among us, we know that we have been blessed beyond all deserving. As the apostle Paul also says, "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" (I Cor. 13: 4-7). God is Love--and we are not. We admit that. But with God's help and God's grace we at least know who we are called to become.

The Text in Question, Part Two: Leviticus

Paul's condemnation of homosexuality was deeply rooted in Jewish scriptural condemnations found mostly in the book of Leviticus--the main text of the Jewish law given by God during the exodus from Egypt. Christians no longer observe the Jewish

law in all its detail, of course; but Jesus affirmed and we affirm the continued relevance of many of its core teachings. For instance, Jesus himself cites the Great Commandment, the summary of Jewish law: "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'" The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:29-31).

But these complex Christian roots in Jewish moral teachings raise the question whether or not the Levitical condemnation of homosexuality remain relevant. Is this a part of the law with which we can dispense? Or is this a part of the law to which we are still bound? Here's one of the major texts in question for that dispute:

"You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. You shall not have sexual relations with any animal and defile yourself with it, nor shall any woman give herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it: it is perversion. Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves. Thus the land became defiled; and I punished it for its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants" (Leviticus 18: 22-25)

This passage prohibits both homosexual congress and bestiality; it is the concluding set of prohibitions of a chapter devoted to laying out the boundaries of Jewish incest prohibitions.

Most human cultures have incest prohibitions, anthropologists say, although different cultures set the boundaries in different places. Some people think that incest prohibitions may have something to do with the hazards of inbreeding, but not all prohibitions make sense on that basis. Other people think that incest prohibitions may have something to do with minimizing occasions for conflict in small hunter-gatherer bands; but once again these prohibitions don't always make sense on that basis either. Sexual tensions or attractions can erupt in almost any direction. There is no single, logical, utilitarian or functional purpose served by all incest prohibitions everywhere. No

one knows for sure why incest prohibitions exist. They seem to be part of the social construction of sexuality--the social boundaries placed around these very important drives.

For the ancient Jewish community--and unlike other cultures around them--homosexuality was over the line. Why would that have been the case? Why such strong condemnation? What's the cultural-theological thinking behind these prohibitions?

Let's start with the word "abomination" itself. What does that word mean? It has three parts. *Ab* is a preposition meaning "away from." *Omin* is a different spelling of the word "omen." The etymology of "omen" is fascinating: it means "foreboding," as in the word "ominous." Etymologically, then, to call something an "abomination" is to say it should be shunned as an ill omen. Ab-omin: an omen to avoid. This clarifies the question somewhat.

According to the theologically laden biology of very ancient Judaism, there was only one morally acceptable version of any kind of creature. Others fail to meet what was seen as God's intention for creation: just as we fail to be who God wants us to be, so also various animals have failed to be what God originally intended them to be. For instance, Leviticus 11:10 cautions that "anything in the seas or the rivers that has not fins nor scales" is also unclean. Shellfish, squid, the octopus, jellyfish, porpoises, whales, et cetera--all of these were also an abomination. The same kind of distinction sorted mammals into the pure and the abominable. Ritually pure animals had split hooves and chewed cud. Pigs may have split hooves, but they do not chew their cud, and so they too are unlawful. So are camels. So are rabbits.

In fact, every animal with paws rather than hooves is an abomination.

It might be noted, in this regard, that the ritually pure animals are also those who would never have preyed upon human beings nor upon the flocks they tended. Lions, for instance, have paws. So do wolves. Carnivorous predator species do not chew cud. In the Garden of Eden, recall, there were no carnivores at all: lambs really could have lain down with lions, because lions were vegans. Death and killing come only later, as a consequence of human sin. With human sin, *all* of creation fell away from God's intention.

Such observations barely hint at the complex mix of theology and culture shaping the Levitical codes about what is lawful and what is an "abomination." But given these complex assumptions, of course the relatively less-common human biological variant of homosexual orientation would be judged harshly. If there can be only one proper kind of sea-creature or four-legged animal, of course there can be only one kind of sexual orientation--and that will have to be a heterosexual.

But this ancient suspicion of biological variation is not a suspicion we have any reason to share. Ancient Jewish tradition failed to understand the legitimate, natural, and perhaps necessary biodiversity of the world God has created. That's not surprising: Leviticus is an Iron Age text. As Christians today do not feel obligated to avoid pork or shellfish as an abomination, so also we are not obligated to shun and condemn LGBT individuals.

The "Perfect Will of God" Argument

Closely related to these ancient Jewish condemnations is the theological claim, common in certain Reformed traditions, that homosexuality is an obvious failure to conform to "God's perfect will." As the argument goes, reproductive biology demonstrates that only heterosexuality conforms to God's will: homosexuality is immoral because it has no logically-obvious utilitarian function in human evolution.

But is "logically-obvious utility" a philosophically stable, defensible moral criterion? For instance, dishonesty can have remarkable utility. So can killing our enemies. In the 19th century, under the influence of Social Darwinism, utilitarians strongly criticized any generosity to the poor and to the disabled: society as a whole would be better off without such people, they argued. That gave rise to the eugenics movement that sought actively to eliminate "social undesirables." Morally condemning whatever and whomever strike us as "useless" has a very dark history.

On the other hand, it's helpful to remember that both mechanistic and utilitarian thinking strongly characterized the European Enlightenment, the cultural era in which both Reformed theology and Newtonian science first arose. But Enlightenment mechanism collapsed more than a century ago, as strictly rational inquiry discovered the absolute limits of strict rationality. Quantum physics, ecosystems biology, and mathematical

“chaos” effects all testify in dizzying detail that the natural world is far more complex than our ancestors could have imagined. Enlightenment rationalism or Enlightenment mechanistic thinking was a culturally-local mistake, just as Paul's view of other religions was a culturally-local mistake. We know that now. God, like the biosphere and quantum physics, is far far more complicated than our ability to predict using simple, linear, mechanical extrapolation. We cannot condemn as morally tainted every aspect of the world around us we do not understand.

Furthermore, as historical theologian David Bentley Hart points out in *Atheist Delusions*, theologians from Augustine to Aquinas have cautioned about exposing scripture to ridicule by mistaking the Bible for a scientific treatise (p. 63). We must not expose scripture to ridicule, or to dangerous misuse, by insisting that our faith requires us to adopt either the biology of Jewish antiquity or the mechanistic assumptions of seventeenth century Newtonian science. Just as creation did not take place in six twenty-four hour days, so biological variants and apparently-inexplicable, apparently "useless" biological phenomena are not morally tainted. Despite the Levitical condemnations, neither whether whales nor shellfish, rabbits nor camels, nor Gentiles nor LGBT human beings are rightly adjudged an ominous abomination that we must avoid or exclude at our peril.

We can and indeed we must understand why such claims appear in scripture, if only to make sure that the Bible is not exposed to ridicule and to abuse. But if God is a living God, and if scripture is the living Word of God, then we cannot be content with proof-texting our way through the moral challenges of our own time. To do so is to betray the faith we inherit. It is to fail to follow the examples set both by Paul and by Peter: they were faithful individuals who at one point stopped--or were caught up short--and upon reflection *changed their minds* about what God required of them. Paul changed his mind in the famous story where he falls from his horse and a voice in effect tells him to stop persecuting Christians. Peter has a similar moment that is much less famous but deeply relevant to the question at hand.

The Text in Question, Part Three : Acts 10:9-48

The classic text cited by those who support same-sex marriage and LGBT inclusivity is a story from Acts of the Apostles, chapter ten. In this story, Peter has a vision. Then he travels to Caesarea, where he explains the meaning of this vision to other Jewish Christians. And then, later in the same scene, Peter calls on these Jewish Christians to baptize Gentiles into their community.

The inclusion of Gentiles was a momentous decision, an iconic choice demonstrating just how radically the first generations of Christians understood the teachings of Jesus. That's why the story of explaining and defending this decision is now seen as relevant to the question of inclusivity across lines of sexual orientation.

“About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ But Peter said, ‘By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.’

"The voice said to him again, a second time, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven. . . .

"The next day he got up and . . . the following day they came to Caesarea . . . and he said to them, 'You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. . . . I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.' . . .

"While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on

the Gentiles . . . Then Peter said, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing from these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 10: 9-48, substantially excerpted as noted).

In the dream-vision related here, a voice Peter addresses as "Lord" sets aside the Levitical code of clean and unclean foods--foods that are ritually pure and foods labeled "an abomination." But the Levitical codes were the very foundation of the covenant between God and humanity. They defined a way of life, a way of life to which the prophets had recalled the people over countless generations. The Torah demand for socioeconomic justice, like its demand that we love our neighbors as ourselves, was central to Jesus's teachings across the board. How could Peter imagine turning away from that way of life? Away from the Law itself, away from God's law?

Peter's interpretation of his vision takes this extraordinary change and pushes it an unthinkable step further: he breaks down the barrier separating the Jews from the Gentiles. As Peter acknowledges here, under Jewish law it was "unlawful"--an abomination--for Jews to have *anything* to do with Gentiles. Gentiles were *by definition* an abomination because they did not observe the codes required to be ritually pure. That radical separation--anchored by the Levitical codes governing diet and intermarriage--had preserved the Jews as an identifiable ethnic group despite centuries of exile, occupation, and other pressures to assimilate.

When the Jewish Christian community in Caesarea welcomed Gentiles into their congregations, they did so in radical defiance of the authority of scripture. "God has shown me," Peter says, "that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." In the eyes of God, no one is inherently "an abomination." If Gentiles are not an abomination, then surely faithful Christians who are gay, lesbian, bi-sexual or transgendered are not an abomination either. No one is categorically abominable; no one is categorically unclean in the eyes of God.

What matters to God, Peter continues, is whether people "do what is right." Anyone who does "what is right" is acceptable to God. Peter's radical inclusivity was also troubling for many in the first generations of Christians. They had difficulty with this

decision. That's obvious in the many subsequent epistolary arguments about dietary regulations, circumcision, and so forth. What parts of Leviticus were dispensable? What parts were crucial? How can we tell the difference? *They struggled with scripture just as we do.*

Scholars map in considerable detail the evidence for ongoing disputes between Peter and Paul on how this inclusivity was supposed to work at the practical level. Neither takes a wholly consistent position. Arguments roiled the early Christian communities, ultimately giving rise to Christian anti-semitism--with its horrific subsequent history.

Our confused and conflicted heritage of attitudes toward homosexuality are another result. Some say that LGBT people are morally acceptable--and hence welcome in Christian community--if and only if they are celibate. As some people see it, sexual abstinence is what it takes for an LGBT person to "do what is right" in the eyes of God. That flatly contradicts Paul's repeated insistence that salvation cannot be dependent upon our doing anything to deserve God's favor, but it is consistent with his condemnation of homosexual behavior as inherently anti-social. Insisting that LGBT people must be celibate also contradicts Peter's insistence that "God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean."

What then are we to do as a congregation? No matter what we do, someone can say we are being "unbiblical," because here we have one of those issues where scripture itself speaks with many and sometimes contradictory voices. We spent years arguing these issues with one another. Three times the Elder Board voted, by overwhelming margins, that sexual orientation is not an impediment to leadership--and, furthermore, that same-sex committed relationships are not an impediment either. In effect, at LaSalle Street Church sexual orientation is as relevant as eye color, skin pigmentation, or where you grew up.

The will of God is not determined by vote of the Elder Board, of course, nor can conscience be compelled--especially not in a congregation as thoughtful and sophisticated as this one. Some people disapproved of these actions by the Elder Board. Some of them left. They left in anger and in grief, and we grieved their going. Others stayed despite their sharp disapproval, confident in the testimony of their own

conscience and their own reading of scripture. That's how healthy congregations work. Only time will tell whether LGBT inclusivity is in fact parallel to the end of slavery and the emancipation of women. But such uncertainty hasn't stopped us. That's also characteristic of a healthy congregation.

Yes, But *Is It Sinful*??? Theological Ethics Weighs In

Biblical exegesis is not the only approach we have taken to studying these questions. We have also analyzed the issues involved using theological ethics. It seems wise for this essay to explain what we found there as well.

A stunning array of medical and psychotherapeutic organizations now attest that sexual orientation is not a choice. It cannot be changed.¹

It is a normal variant in human sexuality--an aspect of biodiversity among us. And given that that's the case, sexual orientation cannot be sinful either.

There's a somewhat elaborate but very ancient line of moral thinking behind that conclusion. Let's stop here for a moment to explore what it is. If you are not interested in this bit of theological backstory, skip ahead to the next subhead: once again, this is a topic vitally important to some and quite irrelevant to others.

To be sinful, tradition teaches, an act must meet all three of the following criteria:

1. It must be morally wrong in and of itself.
2. You must know it is morally wrong.

¹ These organizations also advise their members that it is unethical to provide or to endorse any therapeutic regimen claiming to change sexual orientations. The Surgeon General: <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/sexualhealth/call.htm#III> accessed 3.11.11; the American Medical Association: <http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/about-ama/our-people/member-groups-sections/glb-advocacy-committee/ama-policy-regarding-sexual-orientation.shtml> accessed 3.11.11; the American Academy of Pediatrics: <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/reprint/92/4/631.pdf> accessed 3.11.11; the American Psychological Association: <http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/therapeutic-response.pdf> accessed 3.11.11 and <http://www.apa.org/topics/sexuality/orientation.aspx> accessed 3.11.11; the American Psychiatric Association: <http://www.psych.org/Departments/EDU/Library/APAOfficialDocumentsandRelated/PositionStatements/200001.aspx> accessed 3.11.11; and the American Counseling Organization: <http://www.counseling.org/PressRoom/NewsReleases.aspx?AGuid=b68aba97-2f08-40c2-a400-0630765f72f4> accessed 3.11.11

3. You must choose it freely.

If sexual orientation is not a choice and it cannot be changed, which is what the best science now attests, then sexual orientation cannot be sinful. Some argue, of course, that compulsive bank-robbing might also "not be a choice" that can be changed, but that doesn't mean that robbing banks is morally acceptable. Someone with a biologically inherent compulsion to rob banks must be stopped from doing so.

That's not a facile argument. The more we understand about the genetic and neurological determinants of behavior, the weaker any defense based upon claims, "but this is 'natural' for me." Many kinds of deeply persistent behaviors can be deeply destructive both for the individual and for the society generally.

The question, then, is whether a same-sex sexual orientation is deeply destructive either for the individual or for the society generally. Even to begin to consider that question we must, in imagination, set aside the social and psychological consequences of radical, even rabid opposition to LGBT individuals. Christianity has a long dark history of extraordinary condemnation of subpopulations: this is a deeply fraught question.

In American society today, it is clearly dangerous for any individual to lay claim to an LGBT orientation. Because same-sex marriage is even more dangerous, there exists an LGBT subculture that scorns sexual fidelity to life-long relationships. But as demographers document in considerable detail, married people live longer, are healthier, happier, more productive, and so forth: marriage is a social good from which LGBT populations have been largely excluded, or in which they have participated only at the cost of isolation from and condemnation by popular culture generally. That's changing, of course, especially in big cities. But the disadvantages of a same-sex orientation are both many and severe, and to consider the ethical question clearly we must imagine away all the consequences of condemnation by others.

The remaining question, then, is this: does a same-sex orientation inherently or necessarily involve any violation of the Great Commandment to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself? Scientific testimony is again relevant: *except for sexual orientation*, LGBT individuals are as high-functioning a group psychologically as any other population. By inference, then, and of course setting aside the Levitical

condemnations of biological variants, they are as capable of obeying the Great Commandment as anyone else. No one suffers when two lesbians love one another, or two gay men. They benefit. Their community benefits because more people are enjoying the physical and psychological health provided by stable partnerships.

It is possible, of course, to argue that LGBT relationships are sinful because God forbids them, and God forbids them because they are sinful; but to argue that way is buy into the arbitrariness of the Levitical code. Over two thousand years, in generation after generation of theological and spiritual reflection upon the teachings of Jesus himself, Christianity has come to center itself on the love of neighbor as the central principle of social ethics--not the Levitical code that governed every detail of social life in the Jewish community in the thousand years before Jesus. *By that measure*, and by the testimony of contemporary science, a same-sex orientation and the living-out of that orientation cannot be counted as sinful.

Strictly speaking, that settles the question: orientation is not a free choice, and acting on that orientation is not morally wrong. But let's keep going anyhow, because these questions are both deeply painful and deeply important to many of us today. What about the second criterion?

If you are (erroneously) convinced that homosexual acts are wrong, and you marry a same sex partner anyhow, are you culpable? It is always wrong to act against one's own conscience, moral theologians insist; but what if the conscience testifies falsely? We all know people wrongly or falsely oppressed by their own overwhelming sense of guilt. How can they be "wrong" for stepping beyond the radical inhibitions that constrict their lives?

This confusing situation was perfectly familiar to the classic Christian moral theologians. They didn't talk about depression or a need for SSRIs; they talked about the diagnosis and remedy of a condition they called the "scrupulous conscience." In the case of the scrupulous conscience, the individual's sinfulness is an exaggerated sense of guilt and self-loathing and self-condemnation. It is a failure to love yourself as God loves you.

It is appropriate, in such situations, to repent of this sin and to pray for forgiveness and to pray for the grace necessary to overcome this tendency in your life. That may sound

like facile advice--for those who have never needed to pray such prayers. Those of us who have can attest plainly that such prayers can be a profound spiritual and moral challenge. To pray to see ourselves as God sees us can be stunningly difficult, no matter what the distortion in self-image.

But having an angry, judgmental God ranting inside our heads can be the result of our upbringing and subsequent socializing. It can be like growing up with nutritional deficiencies or inadequate education. We are not at fault for having these voices, but after a point we can become at fault for failing to recognize them as perverse, especially if our social situation supports that recognition. We become *actively* at fault, spiritual tradition teaches, only if we have a realistic, spiritually and psycho-therapeutically adequate opportunity to *change our mind* and yet we fail to do so or to seek the means of doing so. Spiritual masters also insist it is appropriate to pray for the grace to *begin* to resist a scrupulous conscience--in short, to pray *that we may begin to be able to pray* to see ourselves as God sees us.

In general, theological ethics and spiritual direction have been replaced in our society by psychotherapy, a split that has impoverished both fields. That split complicates any discussion of the ethical status of same-sex relationships, because scientific data are morally relevant and yet theologians are not trained in the evaluation of scientific research in the social sciences. Nor are psychologists willing to think rigorously about concepts like sin. But real congregations, like real individuals, exist in a cultural context shaped both by theological ethics and by professional social science. We have to find our own way onto a reasonable middle ground between competing academic disciplines off in their own ivory towers.

At street-level, then, here on the ground at LaSalle Street and Elm, the leadership of this congregation has concluded that morally-serious same-sex life-long committed relationships--by whatever name you wish to call them--are not a moral impediment to leadership positions among us. We acknowledge the legitimacy of arguments that these relationships are not sinful.

For decades now, professional theologians have been duking it out regarding homosexuality. As a result, *whatever* position LaSalle church takes on the question of homosexuality, some Christians will disagree with us--and quite passionately so. There is no way to escape the possibility of being wrong. What Genesis calls "the knowledge of good and evil" is forbidden us: absolute certainty is not a morally legitimate part of the human condition. As I said earlier, everything depends upon what texts are selected, and why, and how they are read. The Bible is not a sacred rolodex of absolutist answers to moral questions. And so, since the risk of error is inescapable, LaSalle has decided to risk erring on the side of inclusion.

In making this decision, we have been guided by what Jesus himself taught:

"Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back. . . . No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of the evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks" (Luke 6: 36-38, 43-45)

We have chosen to risk loving and including the marginalized because that was the example Jesus set. Jesus reached out over and over again to marginalized and condemned figures such as Samaritans. In the Lukan birth accounts, shepherds are the sole witnesses to the first proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah--and yet shepherds were both ritually unclean and commonly condemned as thieves. The first witnesses to the Resurrection were women, unreliable figures whose testimony was not acceptable in court. In the Last Judgment scene in Matthew, God warns that "as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Matt 25:41).

We take all that very seriously, because faithful LGBT Christians who have dared to pledge morally serious commitment to one another are a despised minority. They are denounced by many churches, barely tolerated by the majority culture, and often condemned by the rest of the LGBT community for belonging to a religion that despises them. These are lonely and besieged Christians, abused from all sides.

LaSalle Street Church embraces and included these individuals as part of our own proud and long-standing congregational commitment to social justice. In the 1960s, when this congregation incorporated, civil rights was no less riveting a division within American Christianity than LGBT inclusivity is today. Many of our older members lived through those bitter and sometimes murderous disputes over race relations and civil rights. Many of us also experienced first-hand the virulent denunciations of women who sought leadership both in church and in the wider society. This church took a strong stand at that point, at a time when it was nearly unheard of for women to participate in church leadership or for Christians to worship together across the racial divide.

Those were costly decisions. We lost major financial support. People left; we dwindled to a few dozen stalwarts--mostly 20-somethings. But from that small group of mostly 20-somethings fifty years ago, this congregation rebuilt to the vibrant congregation we are today. This time around, bolstered by that example and by its enduring, complicated heritage among us, we have once again heeded the demands of a new generation of 20-somethings--and we have weathered our most recent commitment to inclusivity much more easily. Our congregation is steadily growing both in absolute numbers and in financial security.

Yes, some people on all sides of the issue have left us--both straight people and LGBT people. We mourn those losses, and we hope in time these people may yet reconsider and return. But we are, in the end, committed to an inclusive reading of our biblical faith and to its Great Commandment. We struggle to love God with all our heart, all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength; we struggle to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12: 28-34). We struggle to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8). And we struggle to engage with our sacred scriptures

thoughtfully, carefully, prayerfully, open to the big questions that are intimidating and exhilarating in equal measure.

The path of such a faith is never easy. Often it's difficult to see more than a few steps ahead. But that's the journey we have undertaken, all of us, straight and gay, old and young, men and women, married and single, urban professionals and homeless guys from the neighborhood, people from across the city and from around the world, one very complicated, somewhat talkative, extraordinarily lively community.

If that's the kind of place you are looking for, we are delighted that you have come through our doors.