



Gracefully Engaging the LGBT Conversation

A framework to inform actions

God is love. In walking with God, we seek to love God and our neighbor. Such love compels us in engaging this conversation. It is a journey of discovery for all Christians living out an identity of humble integrity and loving purpose after the mind of Christ. We seek no argument, rather to engage from a disposition of humility and love of neighbor, realizing our own aberrant, broken condition as we pursue God's hopeful vision for us. Until the day that vision is fully realized, we accept God's grace so that in the face of our deficiencies Christ may still be seen and glorified through us.

The Wesleyan Holiness stream of the church has a history of actively engaging the challenging issues of culture in constructive and compassionate Christian ways. Standing on the shoulders of our forebears who struggled with societal issues in reflecting holiness, we draw upon our heritage in embracing the opportunity for engaging yet another significant issue at a defining moment. We invite our people to welcome every opportunity to engage the LGBT conversation as one that belongs to all. Because we all suffer from the effect of brokenness, we confess that we have not always done this well, often allowing other motives to cloud our intentions and misrepresent our passion to reflect God's holiness.

While many starting points exist to begin this conversation, our engagement stems from the Wesleyan-Holiness stream of the church that underscores the central theme of salvation as restoration. Based on a Wesleyan-Holiness reading of Scripture, we reflect deeply on God's vision of wholeness for humankind; the image of God in us; the nature of sin and salvation; and the power of grace as God's principal help in daily living. Proceeding from that framework, our engagement in this conversation becomes consistent with who we truly are.

This is a conversation. It is not an answer to all questions. We call upon leaders to integrate this framework in the particularity of their situation with grace and love that is consistent with the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition and the biblical imperative to love God and neighbor. We do not put forward a sectarian voice to exclude or demean people, for we all are created in the image of God.

Bearing the image of God is unique to humanity. Abiding in relationship and intimacy with our God allowed humanity to reflect that image perfectly and clearly. Possessing the freedom to choose, we chose ourselves over God. This selfishness is the essence of sin. The result of that selfish choice is broken relationship with God. In this estranged position, the condition of the image of God becomes warped and broken within us and in relation to others. The essence of sin is selfishness; the result of sin is separation; the effect of sin is brokenness.

God in love was not willing that any should remain estranged and eternally broken. Love compelled God to take initiative in reconciling people back into close relationship, ultimately through the singular way of Jesus Christ. In Christ, God is redeeming the world, thus allowing the image of God to be restored in us. As the image of God is restored on the way of salvation, brokenness is made whole and we are being healed.

Any evidence of brokenness in people is a result of the separation that exists between God and us. It may show itself in compartmentalization wherein dimensions of living are kept from being integrated as God intended – affect, intellect, will, and physicality. It may also manifest itself when one dimension of life shows inconsistency or incongruity with the whole. This warped image in us represents disconnectedness among the various aspects of who we are – physical, intellectual, affective, social, psychological, and spiritual. Thus,

we fall short of God's vision of complete integration and wholeness in our lives. In light of this, we believe that a same sex attraction, bi-sexual, or transgender identity represents an incongruity among the component parts of how God has made us. That disjunctive existence is the effect of separation from God. It is so in no greater measure than any other effect that falls short of the wholeness God intends for us.

God's vision for the human family is a picture of complete integration and wholeness in reflecting the similarly integrated wholeness of God. Since that image is dis-integrated as a result of separation, we live under the effects of sin. In that condition, the human family is predisposed to choices that reinforce, defend, or justify ourselves. People with a gender identity that is not the same as their physicality, whether by personal choice or the result of physical or psychological factors, reflect this condition of a dis-integrated whole. Those with a physical attraction to same sex persons as an expression of their own sexuality also reflect the condition of the human family being out of sync as a result of our not reflecting the integrated wholeness of God.

Likewise, those with a propensity toward addictions of any kind, adultery, gossip, or overindulgence are living with the effects of brokenness because of separation from God. Each of these exemplifies dis-integrated, asynchronous human life that has fallen short of accurately reflecting God's own image within us.

We all stand on common ground under the effects of broken relationship with God. There is no hierarchy of sin. We all look to the efficacy of God's path back into reconciled proximity. That way of salvation for coming back to God is through one person. Prompted by grace, it requires acknowledgement of an inadequate condition – confession; it requires a desire to be made whole again – repentance; it requires willful reliance upon the work of Christ for salvation – justification; and it requires daily surrender to the influence of God's nature transforming our nature through the work of the Holy Spirit – sanctification. Everyone may walk this path. Whether we begin in a condition of stubborn independence, addiction, greedy self-consumption, or as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, we all fall under the effects of sin needing a path to restored wholeness that only God offers us.

We believe that presuming upon God to redefine this vision for us is selfishness. Saying that our condition should be acceptable to God just as we are and that God's expectation, vision, and desire for us should include our current condition, removes the need for grace and relieves us of any responsibility to seek healing from our misrepresentations of God's image. Changing God's vision for us is another form of self-justification that replaces pursuing God's holy intention in restoring the broken image in us. We know that God is forgiving, God is merciful, and most of all, God is love – so loving that God has made a way through Christ for us to be restored in God's image.

It is by God's grace alone that we may manage the influence of our fallen condition through daily choices that guide our behavior. Grace is the help that comes from the very presence of God, which meets us in our sinful condition. When we resist that grace, we are not allowing God to collaborate with us. It means that we are denying the need of any help from God since our condition is not in need of any remediation. By resisting this grace, we have found completeness centered upon our own vision of our own wholeness, relegating God's vision to irrelevancy.

Receiving grace means we accept the reality of our condition as being inadequate. It means we rely upon grace as compensation for our inadequacy for as long as we live under the effect of sin. It means recognizing that apart from the presence of God we remain as an aberrant image of God's vision for us. Accepting grace means acknowledging that our humble vulnerability to God's influence upon us is the only path to wholeness wherein the various parts of our being will begin again to come into integrity one with the other. Accepting grace is living with a sense of fulfillment that is not the result of redefining our wholeness but the result of the compensatory nature of God's grace.

Some may dispute the vision of God for us as a binary gendered vision. Some say that vision should be expanded to include other combinations of gender identity and sexual expression that are not necessarily hetero or singularly gendered. This is the crux of the question and one on which we appeal to the Biblical passages (knowing that some will dispute our hermeneutical interpretation) and Scriptural principles (knowing that some may come to alternative conclusions). To inform our hermeneutics and our understanding of Scriptural principles, we also appeal to our historic identity as Wesleyans for guidance. We apply our Spirit-led reason to these Scriptural principles and we appeal to the heritage of churches and believers that have preceded us and bequeathed to us a long-standing pattern of engaging knotty issues.

Sin has affected us all without exception. We humbly accept our broken condition. We do not consider any sin greater than others. Nor do we exclude anyone from the ever-present grace of God. We acknowledge God's desire to restore the image of God in all people. We are fully committed to salvation through Jesus Christ while depending on the Holy Spirit to meet our every need. Our daily quest is for God to make us whole. The grace of God is sufficient for all our needs.

Can people who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender live as growing disciples of Christ? Yes. Would the church deploy into leadership one who is humbly appropriating God's grace in not living out the practices of that broken condition? Yes. Would the church raise to leadership one who is practicing those behaviors as an expression of that condition? No. This is also true of any who willfully practice behaviors that naturally flow from conditions that tilt our hearts from God's vision for us to represent the image of God faithfully.

What is it, then, that we celebrate and encourage? We celebrate the humble appropriation of God's grace to a broken condition such that God's image is being restored – albeit with moments of failure and stumbling. We celebrate the vision of God for us in wholly reflecting God's holy nature and the attainability of that vision when we find eternity with God. We celebrate the grace of God, which sustains us until that day and gives us the privilege of living as whole people while still bearing the burden of our broken condition. We hold firmly that people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered belong in the church because the church seeks to welcome all who seek the sufficiency of Christ for their inadequacy. Acknowledging the complexities of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered life, we encourage Christian leaders to reflect God's love, grace, and pastoral care in engaging the uniqueness of particular situations they encounter, always seeking to encourage people into intimacy with God through Christ.

We hold to the vision of God for people as gendered, integrated, whole, synchronous image-bearers who reflect Christ well. This vision anchors our journey of restoration. We claim God's grace as sufficient for the enduring misrepresentation of God's image so that we may still grow though that vision may not be fully realized while living under the effects of sin in this fallen world. We may live in wholeness in this growing and intimate relationship with God, not based upon redefining our condition as whole, but upon the love of God whose mercy and grace invade surrendered and humbled hearts to make them whole.

Therefore, as Christian leaders who walk with our own limp, we reach out with acceptance and grace; we embrace with inclusive mercy; we act with motivating love – offering the hopeful call of God to wholeness in restored intimacy through Jesus Christ thereby reflecting the holy image of God in greater measure.

1 September 2015