

## Human Sexuality and Our Future in the UMC

### Circle #5

*"How can we maintain our spiritual integrity and Christian witness despite our differences?"*

Rev. Dale R. Cohen

Fig. 5.1



The Christian church has always struggled to talk about human sexuality in healthy ways. We approach sexuality as a taboo subject, only spoken about in shame-inducing and hushed tones. This unfounded depiction of sexuality is tragic because the Bible affirms sexual desire as natural and describes it as “good” within the proper context. For instance, the Song of Solomon testifies to the beauty of sexual relationships. In *“The Goodness of Sex and the Glory of God,”* Ben Patterson noted:

*“Because of [the Old Testament’s] concern for the covenant [i.e., God’s commitment to Israel to give them the Promised Land in which to build a nation,] interest in sex is mainly related to begetting [i.e., producing offspring]. There are very few clues as to whether it should be fun, and the Song of Solomon fills this gap. It says that, along with having children, sex is for pleasure, joy, communion, and celebration.”<sup>1</sup>*

The Bible offers other insights into sexuality as God’s gift to humanity (i.e., *Proverbs 5:18-19 and 1 Corinthians 7:2-3, among others*). God’s design for our sexuality is for us to share it in a relationship that is sacred, faithful, permanent, and monogamous. The vulnerability inherent in a sexual relationship requires a holy and safe space to know fully and to be fully known without fear of getting hurt. Therefore, we must only share

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Patterson, *“The Goodness of Sex and the Glory of God,”* (<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-goodness-of-sex-and-the-glory-of-god>)

our sexuality in a committed and covenantal relationship with someone with whom we intend to spend the rest of our lives. Within this sacred boundary, our sexuality can be a beautiful and meaningful connection with the person we love.

Yet, the church's inability to talk about sexuality keeps many Christians oblivious to God's design for healthy sexual relationships, mystifying sexuality and leading to unhealthy and destructive behavior.

- *Our teens and pre-teens explore risky sexual behaviors out of curiosity and ignorance, innocently causing harm to themselves and others.*
- *Many young adults engage with multiple sexual partners before marriage, diminishing the sacred nature of sexual intimacy.*
- *There is an increase in addiction to pornography in all age groups. The impact of this addiction physically reshapes the human brain and interferes with all aspects of healthy social interaction.*
- *In our overly sexualized culture, incidences of sexual abuse and exploitation are increasing (i.e., sexual harassment, rape, pedophilia, human trafficking, pornography, and prostitution).*

These trends mimic our consumer culture, which commodifies and dehumanizes sexuality. In addition, adultery is as commonplace among Christians as in general society. Yet, we remain preoccupied with homosexuality despite, to our knowledge, Jesus never saying anything about it.

There is no denying that people in our congregation have differing ideas about human sexuality. Some people in our church are willing to accept gay and lesbian persons into the life of the church without restrictions if they demonstrate a desire to live for God and show evidence of the fruit of the Holy Spirit in their relationships. Others argue that they don't have a problem with lesbian and gay persons attending our church; however, they do not want a homosexual person to serve as pastor or leader. They assume that homosexuality is a sin, so they don't want a practicing (*and, in their minds, an unrepentant*) sinner in leadership.

As for me, I don't want anyone who "*wears their sexuality on their sleeve*" as a pastor because if someone's "*sexual*" identity is their "*primary*" identity, it's problematic regardless of their sexual orientation. These persons are emotionally unhealthy and unfit for leadership in the church. The standards for church leadership must remain high and evidenced through God's call and equipping of people for ministry.

The church has always faced challenges and disagreements about life in the community of faith, and these conflicts aren't going away – even if we decide to leave the UMC,

more contentious issues will follow. Division over ideas, people, or things will continue to threaten unity in the church because the division is a byproduct of our sinful human condition. Yet, God seems more comfortable with diversity than we are; otherwise, he wouldn't have made us all so unique and opinionated! So, how do we accept the diversity that already exists in our church? Let's look to the wisdom of John Wesley.

In his sermon, "On Schism," Wesley states:

*"[Schism] is evil in itself. To separate ourselves from a body of living Christians, with whom we were before united, is a grievous breach of the law of love. It is the nature of love to unite us, and the greater the love, the stricter the union. And while this continues in its strength, nothing can divide those whom love has united. It is only when our love grows cold that we can think of separating from our brethren. And this is certainly the case with any who willingly separate from their Christian brethren. The pretenses for separation may be innumerable but want of love is always the real cause; otherwise, they would still hold the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. It is, therefore, contrary to all those commands of God, wherein brotherly love is [prescribed]: To that of St. Paul, 'Let brotherly love continue;' to that of St. John, 'My beloved children, love one another;' and especially to that of our blessed Master, 'This is my commandment, that ye love one another, as I have loved you,' Yea, 'By this,' saith he, 'shall all men know that ye are my disciples if ye love one another.'"*<sup>2</sup>

Wesley spoke of schism from personal experience because he envisioned Methodism as a renewal movement within the Church of England; however, the church hierarchy resisted his efforts and rejected him, refusing to allow him to preach in Anglican churches. Some of his fellow priests charged that Wesley broke church law by empowering lay preachers (i.e., *uneducated and non-ordained laity*), and they wanted to kick him out of the church. Many supporters of the Methodist movement encouraged Wesley to separate from the Church of England and form a new denomination; however, Wesley stressed his commitment to the church and resolved to remain a priest in the Church of England. He also intended the Methodists to stay with him and continue their renewal work. Wesley felt like leaving would damage the Methodists' witness in the world. He also held deep concern about opening the church to the insidious nature of a divisive spirit when he declared,

*"From evil words, from tale-bearing, backbiting, and evil-speaking, how many evil works will naturally flow! Anger, jealousy, envy, and wrong tempers of every kind do not vent themselves merely in words but push men continually to all kinds of ungodly and unrighteous actions. A plentiful harvest of all the works of darkness may be expected to spring from this source; whereby, in the end, thousands of souls, and not a few of those who once walked in the light of God's countenance, may be turned from the way of peace, and finally drowned in everlasting perdition."*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> (Sermon 75, "On Schism," II.1), underlining mine, <http://www.wbbm.org/john-wesley-sermons/serm-075.htm>

<sup>3</sup> (Sermon 75, "On Schism," II.4), <http://www.wbbm.org/john-wesley-sermons/serm-075.htm>

Indeed, we've seen evidence of these "evil words" and "ungodly and unrighteous actions" as people demonize those who represent a differing view or who misrepresent the position of others to galvanize support for their perspective. Wesley's primary concern was that "these works of darkness" would turn souls away from the life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ. The world is watching us and wondering how we will resolve this tension, and they're hoping we can show them a better way than what the world has to offer.

In Wesley's sermon, he allowed that separation under some circumstances might be justified:

*"I know God has committed to me a dispensation of the gospel; yea, and my own salvation depends upon preaching it: 'Woe is me if I preach not the gospel.' If then I could not remain in the Church without omitting this, without desisting from preaching the gospel I should be under a necessity of separating from it or losing my own soul. In like manner, if I could not continue united to any smaller society, church, or body of Christians, without committing sin, without lying and hypocrisy, without preaching to others [the] doctrines which I did not myself believe, I should be under an absolute necessity of separating from that society."*<sup>4</sup>

Wesley set the standard for separation at the level of "doctrine." Wesley held that he would be justified in separating from the Church of England if they required him to preach doctrines he did not believe. He specifically referenced his call to preach the "gospel," the Good News of God's redeeming love. Wesley argued that anything short of being prevented from preaching God's love is insufficient for separation in his mind.

Doctrines are beliefs in the Christian church that speak directly to the person and nature of God and his role as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. These include those beliefs about God contained in the Old and New Testaments and outlined in the two historic creeds of the Christian faith: "The Apostles' Creed" and "The Nicene Creed." These credal statements define Christian "orthodoxy." On the other hand, "practices" are the teachings, procedures, and rituals adopted by the church that do not rise to the level of Christian orthodoxy. Christian practices have consistently changed over the last two thousand years as our understanding of God has developed or as societal norms have changed. For instance, drinking alcohol was allowed in the early church, but then it was forbidden later, and now it's allowed again, except among some of the most fundamentalist Christians.

Baptism is one of our Christian doctrines, for as the Nicene Creed states,

*"We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins." – the Nicene Creed*

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<sup>4</sup> (Sermon 75, "On Schism," II.7), <http://www.wbbm.org/john-wesley-sermons/serm-075.htm>

In the United Methodist Church, we can “*practice*” baptism using water in sprinkling, immersion, or pouring. Utilizing these different forms of baptism does not change the nature of baptism or what it symbolizes as a rite of initiation into the family of God. At the same time, as a UMC Pastor, the Book of Discipline forbids me to “*re-baptize*” someone at the risk of losing my ordination. According to the Nicene Creed, our “*doctrine*” on baptism says we acknowledge “*one baptism*” for the forgiveness of sins. Multiple baptisms are outside of Christian orthodoxy.

I will continue with the example of baptism to further clarify my point. Although we may stray from God after our baptism, breaking our end of the baptismal covenant, God’s faithfulness never wavers. To reactivate God’s empowering forgiveness, we must repent of our wandering from God. His grace is still available because God always keeps his end of the covenant. To re-baptize someone assumes God didn’t hold up his end of the deal and changes the nature of baptism, not to mention it also impugns the integrity of God! Re-baptism denies the truth of God’s faithfulness and violates our doctrine of Christian baptism. How we baptize is practice; why we baptize is doctrinal.

Does the church’s stance on homosexuality represent an inherited and traditional societal norm, or is it a doctrine of Christian orthodoxy? In my papers on the Scriptures, we saw how severely limited these passages were in lifting this issue to the level of doctrine. First, the passages presumed to be about homosexuality lack the necessary volume of texts usually dedicated to matters of doctrine (*i.e., only seven on this matter at most, but appropriately only five*). These Scriptures also lack clarity about the context in which they apply. Secondly, nowhere is homosexuality mentioned in the church’s historic creeds or elevated by other ancient Christian texts as doctrinal. We cannot assume unaddressed matters are part of our orthodoxy; therefore, becoming practices by default. Consequently, one could argue that the issue of human sexuality does not meet Wesley’s standard for resorting to schism, separating, or in our case, disaffiliation.

The different perspectives about human sexuality in the church remain. Since we are of such diverse minds on this matter, how can we hold our distinct views and still commune together? Unity is never easy, but Jesus requires us to be unified. It was summed up in his prayer for unity when he said to his Father,

*“I ask not only on behalf of these [my disciples] but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (John 17:21-23, NRSVue)*

According to Scripture, it’s not our agreements that unite us; it’s Jesus who holds us all together! He gathers our differences and reconciles them for us; therefore, as followers

of Jesus Christ, we don't have to sort through our differences to determine who's right or wrong—he's already reconciled them. 2 Corinthians 5 puts it this way,

*"So, if anyone is in Christ, [they are] a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us." (2 Corinthians 5:17-19, NRSVue)*

Paul describes the prerequisite postures we need to find unity in Jesus:

*First, we must be "in Christ." I believe that everybody at First UMC of Florence is in a relationship with Jesus Christ—at least if you claim to be in a relationship with Jesus Christ, I take you at your word. I hope you will take me at my word that I am "in Christ," too!*

*Secondly, I believe God is crafting you into a new creation, meaning you are a work in progress even as I am a work in progress. God is not finished with either of us yet, and it's not fair to judge each other based on God's incomplete "works." I am not who I was, but I'm also not whom I will become by God's grace.*

*Thirdly, whatever happens "in us," is the work of God's grace and not merely a function of our efforts or ideas. Ultimately, God's work of grace through Jesus Christ reconciles us, first with God, and then calls us to join in reconciling the world. It's only possible if Christ is at work in us because we can't work it out on our own.*

*Finally, if we accept God's call to the ministry of reconciliation, we must be reconciled with one another. For God to reconcile with us, it cost him his Son. For us to reconcile with each other, it will cost us, too. The cost of reconciliation is to give up the idea that we must be right, even allowing we could be wrong. We still hold our beliefs with conviction, but we will not require those who disagree with us to "come over to our side" for us to stay in fellowship with them.*

This last step is genuinely an act of faith where we believe Jesus can "reconcile" everything that seems like a contradiction, paradox, difference, or division. I am not saved because I am right. I am saved because of the grace of my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and I accept that grace, even with my limited understanding of it. Whatever is wrong with me, Jesus reconciles with God. Whatever is wrong with you, Jesus reconciles with God. Whatever is wrong between us, we must reconcile, that is, bring our relationships back into balance. Reconciliation doesn't necessarily end in agreement, but it always ends with a "right" relationship with each other.

We can remain together if Jesus reconciles our differences as the Scripture says he will. It won't be comfortable or easy and will require us to compromise on practices but

never doctrine. If we commit to remaining in fellowship, we won't always get our way, but God will be in the middle of it all, and he'll delight in our unity – no matter how awkward or clumsy we feel trying to maintain the fellowship. And here's a significant benefit:

*"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another." (John 13:34-35, NRSVue)*

Our love for one another is the primary witness we must share with the world. Again, this witness was utmost in Wesley's mind when he preached these words,

*"I entreat you, therefore, my brethren, all that fear God and have a desire to please them [i.e., the Trinity], all that wish to have a conscience void of offense toward God and toward man, think not so slightly of this matter [of schism], but consider it calmly. Do not rashly tear asunder the sacred ties which unite you to any Christian society... [If] you live the life that is [hidden] with Christ in God, then take care [of] how you tend the body of Christ by separating from your brethren. It is a thing evil in itself. It is a sore evil in its consequences. O, have pity upon yourself! Have pity on your brethren. Have pity even upon the world of the ungodly! Do not lay more stumbling blocks in the way of these for whom Christ died."<sup>5</sup>*

I choose to love you and accept you for who you are because you are a child of God and, therefore, a brother or sister in Christ. It matters not that we may disagree about important issues for each of us. Loving you is more important than being right; therefore, insofar as possible, I choose to respond to you with love in all our interactions. This commitment means I will strive to,

*"Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which [I've] been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with [you] in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace...." (Ephesians 4:1-3, NRSVue)*

I believe that if we all live this way, we can continue to worship, pray, and love together as the Body of Christ at First United Methodist Church of Florence. That is my hope and prayer.

Thank you for faithfully attending to these papers and for your questions, comments, and criticisms. I am indebted to you for your willingness to engage with me, for your reflections help me grow in God's love and grace.

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<sup>5</sup> (Sermon 75, "On Schism," II.9), <http://www.wbbm.org/john-wesley-sermons/serm-075.htm>