



Healing Conversation  
&  
The Gift of Acceptance

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*creative tension publications*

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# Healing Conversation & The Gift of Acceptance

Exploring how different perspectives among Christians concerning same-sex relationships might meet in wise and fruitful conversation<sup>1</sup>

Stephen Elmes (Autumn 2022)

*A filmed talk based on this essay can be accessed [HERE](#).*

## SWORDS INTO PLOUGHSHARES

It is my day-off. The day is hot and balmy. I am sitting in my garden, agitated.

It's all to do with those people I work with! We are at odds and I have a deep sense of hurt. So, I'm getting my case together, against my colleagues. Tomorrow there will be a meeting at which I intend to speak out. I run my arguments in my head, over and over. They are good arguments – the 'knock down' kind. They'll have no come back. I'll give them both barrels. I'll take them out!

A little later I am out walking on the common near where we live. I pause at a favourite spot – a clearing in a forest area where I often pray. I start to tell God all about my righteous cause. All of a sudden, I am arrested, stopped in my tracks, by the words of an ancient prophecy drifting into my consciousness: *they will beat their swords into ploughshares*.<sup>2</sup> Where did that come from? As I ponder, I get a curious image of myself, 'weaponed up' with all my arguments against my colleagues. My artillery is impressive – I am armed to the teeth. And I hear God say, 'How about it?'

The next day I am with my colleagues and God's challenge to my heart definitely has some impact on how I speak and act – though it will take me a long time to really get what it means to re-fashion weapons into the means of harvest...

## WISDOM – A TREE OF LIFE

Two years on from my forest-clearing epiphany, I am in conversation with a colleague about the increasing polarisation between LGBTQ+ affirming churches and those that maintain a traditional position on same-sex relationships.<sup>3</sup> He tells me that he has been doing some reading and has come across the idea that the remedy to polarisation is to *complicate the narrative*.<sup>4</sup> My colleague shares his thoughts on what this might mean for the current conversation around the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in the church. As he speaks, an image comes into my mind. I see in my mind's eye what looks like the branches of a tree growing before my eyes. The branches seem to extend in a swirling motion, becoming more intricate as they do so.

A week or so later, my wife, Sara and I are spending a couple of days away in an *Airbnb* and it's there that I see my swirling, twirling branches on the wall of the living room – they are part of a picture woven on a canvas that fills the whole wall.



*You may recognise this work. It is by Gustav Klimt, an Austrian artist, and it's entitled, 'The Tree of Life'.<sup>5</sup> Take a moment or two with it. What do you see?*

A few days on, I am in our local Anglican church at a live screening of the Queen's Platinum Jubilee service at St Paul's Cathedral. A little into the service, I hear some words being sung from the book of Proverbs – words of an ancient Israelite King reflecting on the value of wisdom.

*She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her;  
Those who hold her fast will be blessed.<sup>6</sup>*

Klimt's magnificent Tree of Life is immediately back in my mind, and now I know its name and nature.<sup>7</sup>

I relate my recent encounter with Klimt's work here as it has been a source of inspiration for me, perhaps even an occasion of revelation. It has helped me to imagine a better conversation between affirming and traditionalist positions on same-sex relationships than is currently playing out. To invite you into my train of thought on this, I'd like to ask you do something – something unusual and probably unexpected.

Employing your imagination, take the tree out of the picture – eliminate it.

*What happens?*

It's likely that you sense an expanse (or divide) opening up between the human figures on the left and right of the painting.

*Stay a few moments with that.*

Now let the result of this drastic elimination of Klimt's central image represent something: a rift or stand-off between two opposing parties. This could be over any matter, but for our purposes, let it be

the growing divide between affirming and traditional perspectives and positions among Christians today on same-sex relationships.

### THE NATURE OF THE DIVIDE

We will be reinstating the tree, but it is helpful to first consider the nature of the divide just named. What follows is a rough sketch, not a detailed analysis. In reality, viewpoints on sexuality and faith in the church are not binary (this or that) and each is nuanced. Yet, we are witnessing a growing polarisation of positions, and its main features are not difficult to discern.

On one side of the divide there is an emphasis on keeping faith with traditional understandings of the Bible regarding human sexuality and its expression – hence ‘traditionalists’ – confirmed through biblical scholarship and held out as the God-given path for human flourishing.<sup>8</sup> On the other, there is an emphasis on social justice – rooted in the Old Testament (particularly the writing of prophets) and made vivid in the way of Jesus, especially in how he related to those on the edge of society.<sup>9</sup>

Now, it is not hard to think of both emphases as valuable gifts to a common pursuit of faithfulness to the gospel. Yet, at times, the presentations and arguments on both sides tend to infer or imply a lack of integrity or goodness in the other: affirming positions are regarded as sitting loose to the Bible or lacking credible supporting scholarship; while traditionalists are portrayed as somewhat unconcerned by the injustices experienced by LGBTQ+ people, short on compassion. Such misrepresentations arise from focusing on worst cases (which can easily be found), creating caricatures of those who hold the other perspective. Each camp eyes the other from a distance and builds its arguments, *weaponing up* against a distorted picture of the other.

There are of course some great examples of open and honest dialogue to be discovered – yet the polarisation over same-sex relationships is growing across the church, and the need for a better (wiser) conversation evermore pressing. Such a conversation – a healing conversation – will be ready to listen well to the other, and to receive their insights and gifts. A due respect for traditions passed down to us may be among them, as well as a readiness to engage with new (revisionist) readings and interpretations of Scripture.

When it comes to engaging with the Bible, both traditionalists and revisionists have given a lot of attention to a handful of passages.<sup>10</sup> These are the verses that refer directly to same-sex sex. There is no doubt in anyone’s mind that these are condemning of the behaviours they refer to. It is *what* they refer to that is disputed. Do the biblical writers have in mind only sexual relations that are exploitative, cultic or lust-driven, or are all same-sex relations ruled out, including those between loving, committed couples?

Scholars on both sides have long been pointing out the limitations of such a narrow field of study, and are advocating a broader, more theological approach that sets the conversation within the whole witness of Scripture, and moves within its overarching narrative from *creation to consummation by way of the cross*.<sup>11</sup> Thereby the *cul-de-sac* of competing contextual studies focused on a handful of texts is escaped and

more promising exchanges are made possible, around such themes as creation and fall, redemption, justice and inclusion.

Most promising (perhaps surprisingly) is a focus on marriage – exploring its nature and characteristics as a gift of creation, a means of grace and a pointer to the new creation.<sup>12</sup> Both affirming and traditionalist scholars and pastors have given attention to the covenant of marriage with all its potential to shape self-giving love. All of which hints at ways in which common cause might be found in calling the church and wider community to the healing desperately needed in our society today (more on this to come). Yet, even as a biblical vision of marriage is claimed on both sides, there is something on which agreement seems elusive and the divide uncrossable.

In short, the complementarity of male and female – including the natural means of procreation – is essential to a marriage in one perspective and not in the other.<sup>13</sup>

Over this, we have taken up our positions and the gulf between us widens.

Yet, I believe that the divide is crossable and that a way forward together can be found – a way that is faithful to the gospel and maintains integrity on both sides.

To discern it, we will need to restore the wisdom tree to the picture – though not before we take a few moments to consider the ground from which it springs – the common ground on which both affirming and traditional believers stand.

### **THE DEEP SOIL OF COVENANT LOVE**

What is our common ground? We might first think of the ancient creeds that proclaim our belief in God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God in three persons, revealed to us in creative and redemptive action. To this, we will no doubt want to add the great narrative of Scripture, which richly and reliably tells us God's story and what it means for us to live as his people. I would want to add one more thing, which I believe is vital in our conversation. It is the rich and beautiful idea of *covenant love*, whereby God binds himself forever to his people to do them good – inspiring and shaping our love for God and the love between us. Covenant love is writ deep and large in our salvation story and is both root and fruit of the journey of discipleship.<sup>14</sup> As such it is a strong and trustworthy foundation for a good conversation about same-sex relationships and how we view them. Both affirming and traditionalist Christians can agree that such love is the bedrock (or cornerstone) of marriage as much as other forms of committed love, such as celibacy and friendship.<sup>15</sup> We might also agree that the lack of loyal, covenant love is at the root of so much that is harmful in our world – including promiscuity, pornography and adultery. Karen Keen has opined that what is needed today is a church that will inspire covenant faithfulness.<sup>16</sup> Such a cause should excite the hearts of affirming and traditionalist Christians – a common cause that sits beneath whatever we disagree about and might unite us in seeking a way forward together through wiser exchanges than hitherto had.

## THE GIFT OF WISDOM

Out of our common ground (and cause) might grow these wiser exchanges.

*In your imagination, re-plant the tree in the common ground on which these figures stand and watch it grow (stop-motion style) from a tender shoot to a tall tree with its branches extending, swirling to fill the space and crossing the divide.*

Wisdom is available – so the wise King tells us in the Book of Proverbs. Out in the street, calling out to passers-by. So, how might we engage wisely with one another in the matter of same-sex relationships?

## FRUIT OF THE WISDOM TREE

This brings us to the fruit of the tree (unusual and surprising in Klimt's painting).

In our imaginative use of Klimt's work, let the fruit of the tree be those wise and more promising exchanges between traditional and affirming positions (the thinking and work we might do together). These are the conversations that unify rather than deepen division, bringing peace (shalom) in holding our differences well and enabling us to be an inclusive discipling community marked by integrity and generosity. There are six fruit that have occurred to me, and I would like to set these out briefly and humbly for your consideration.

### Fruit 1 – Looking Out for Love

Firstly, I would like to venture that whatever our conviction or viewpoint on what is essential to marriage, all of us are capable of recognising and celebrating what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely and admirable in a relationship.<sup>17</sup>

A little girl in our church community came home one day and announced to her mum that she had been thinking about all the families of her friends and had concluded that the family 'most like ours' was that of a friend with two dads. The mother, one of our church members, was intrigued and asked her what she meant. 'Well,' said the little girl, 'they do the things we do, like going for family bike-rides and eating together at the table, and they have similar rules about screen time and social media.'

Without using the word, the little girl was picking up *resonance* – in values and commitments – between the two families, and the fact of the other parents being gay didn't seem to come into it. She was able to see value where she found it.

Consider what might be possible if traditionalists and those in affirming positions towards LGBTQ+ people could unhook from the dividing issue of whether or not a gay union should be regarded as a marriage, and look instead for how both gay and straight couples might witness in their own ways to the coming Kingdom of God.<sup>18</sup>

In [A Beautiful Endeavour \(click for PDF version\)](#), I tell the story of how a gay couple are welcomed into the life of a church following an Alpha course.<sup>19</sup> As you might expect, conversations are prompted among members with different perspectives about issues of Baptism, membership and participation in the life and witness of the church – oh, and gay marriage too. We'll come on to all these. For now, I want to simply note how, in the story, having a gay couple in the church prompts a shared recognition and

celebration of all that is good in their relationship and all that God might do in the lives of these fledgling (newly converted) apprentices of Jesus. This is a move from discussing categories to meeting people in the warp and weave of their everyday living and loving.

Such a warm and encouraging response to a same-sex couple finding faith is something traditional and affirming Christians can join in without changing their view of what makes a marriage – simply by applying Paul’s pastoral encouragement, ‘Whatever is true, whatever is noble... lovely... admirable... think about such things.’ (Philippians 4:8)

All this might raise a question or two about what status is therefore held by a gay couple if not (in some viewpoints) marriage. Robert Song has explored the possibility of a third vocation alongside marriage and celibacy. He calls this a covenant partnership and argues that it might serve both gay and straight couples whose focus is less on bringing children into the world and more on other kinds of fruitfulness. This contrasts with the work of Eugene Rogers, who makes the case for gay marriage, laying emphasis on the sanctifying purpose of marriage – over procreation – echoing Augustine’s teaching that marriage schools our selfish desires into self-giving love. That is, we grow up in marriage.

Both Song and Rogers, in their different ways, are pointing to the value of loyal, covenant love, in God’s present and coming Kingdom, whether in a gay or straight union.<sup>20</sup> This leads naturally to some more fruit in our wisdom tree (promising conversations), which is reflecting together on marriage as a sign and foretaste of God’s kingdom.

## **Fruit 2 – Speaking Metaphorically**

In the penultimate chapter of Revelation, John sees ‘the Holy City of Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband’ (Revelation 21:2). This is a culmination of many pictures in the Bible where the promised joining of heaven and earth (Ephesians 1:10) is depicted in marital imagery – such as in the wedding feast stories of Jesus and the exhortations of Paul to husband and wives (Ephesians 5: 21-23). In the last of these, the one flesh union of a man and a woman is understood to point towards the union of Christ and the church – a matter of profound mystery (Eph. 5:32).

Ed Shaw has offered a more contemporary metaphor to help us understand the relationship between a human marriage and the consummation of God’s purposes – in the way a trailer anticipates a main event (e.g., a film or show).<sup>21</sup> As a gay man committed to a celibate lifestyle, Shaw has found it helpful to keep in mind that while the gift of marriage is not an option for him now – the fulness that an earthly marriage points to (the main event) will be his to enjoy. Then the faithful commitments of those married and single will be part of the great wedding celebration depicted so vividly in Revelation.

Yet, we might ask if the faithfulness of others might also feature in the celebration. Specifically, will the covenant love and loyalty of a same-sex couple also find its place there?

Traditionalists have tended to emphasise the union-in-difference of both sign and fulfilment – insisting that a same-sex union cannot depict the joining of heaven and earth. This may be to press the metaphor of marriage too hard and possibly to miss the main thrust of all the metaphorical allusions to marriage throughout Scripture – namely the promise of God’s persistent faithfulness towards a wayward people/humanity called to covenant fidelity.<sup>22</sup>

Yet, even if we see the one-flesh union of a man and a woman as unique in depicting the final union of all things under Christ, when all is made new and *shalom* complete, there is surely room for other human commitments to do the same – including those who take vows of celibacy and those who are in same-sex relationships. In fact, whenever and wherever covenant loyalty is being lived and worked at, the future God has promised is being anticipated and actualised in some measure.

This brings us back to earth and to the daily business of discipleship, and to how a same-sex union, released from a debate about categories (is it a marriage or not?), might not only be recognised and valued, but also nurtured and guided within a Christian community. Time for some more fruit in the tree.

### **Fruit 3 – Roomy Discipleship**

If a community can recognise and welcome all that is true, noble, lovely and admirable in a committed relationship (whether gay or straight), it is in a good position to call all couples to know Christ and to follow him (discipleship). To do this well, it will need to give both *agency* and *access*.

The concept of agency is more and more in use today, where the popular idea is that each person should be free to know themselves and live their truth without hinderance or prejudice, provided no harm comes to others. This is the heart of *expressive individualism*, which is fast becoming the creed of our day, propounded and reinforced in education and entertainment – indeed in every sphere of life.<sup>23</sup> The problem with this common notion of agency is that it springs from an ideology whereby the individual is self-sufficient, needing no outside authority to guide or validate them. Indeed, personal freedom is typically cast in terms of resisting being told what to do or who to be (you be you!). This, of course, conflicts head on with Christian discipleship, where a person is called to die to self in order to be fully themselves and free, following Christ.<sup>24</sup>

In my use of the word agency, I am assuming – indeed insisting upon – the context of discipleship, in which we live lives surrendered and submitted to Jesus’ leadership (Lordship) of our lives, helped by fellow disciples (the church). So, agency is the room we each need to work out what this means – to work out our salvation – within a discipling community.<sup>25</sup>

In *A Beautiful Endeavour* (ABE), there is a point in the story when the leadership team – who hold between them different views on same-sex relationships – realise the importance of giving Shaz and Davina room to work out what holiness means in their intimacy, as much as in every other aspect of their life together. It is not, they come to see, the responsibility of anyone on the team (or in the church) to specify this, but rather to trust the work of God in the lives of two new converts.<sup>26</sup>

Andrew Marin exemplifies this approach in his own pastoral involvement with the LGBTQ+ community. He stresses the priority of calling people to know and follow Jesus as the means by which the grace of God brings us all to our full and free (redeemed) selves – trusting God to lead us into all that is healthy and good. He is insistent that we should trust God’s work and not endeavour to set out some programme of change for others.<sup>27</sup>

Marin has inspired me and I see in his approach – agency in the context of discipleship – a helpful connection point for affirming and traditionalist Christians who are both relieved of the need to shape the discipleship journey of another to their own design. Let God do his work!

However, I do see the Christian community as an essential context for us all to work out our salvation – so that the insights and gifts of our brothers and sisters in Christ are available to help us grow in grace. This brings us to *access*. Every disciple of Jesus needs access to the gifts of the community to grow. These include the preaching and teaching ministries of the church, the sacraments, and the guidance of spiritual friends.<sup>28</sup>

I have recently had some interesting conversations with colleagues about how guidance and encouragement might be given to a same-sex couple in a way that gives agency within the discipleship journey. One colleague shared with me that he would want to hold out for the couple a vision of life-together that was essentially a friendship: intimate and rich, life-long in its commitment, yet not expressed sexually. In turn, I shared my own likely counsel, no different than I would offer to any other couple seeking insight and wisdom for intimacy: to look to honour Christ in this aspect of their relationship and seek him on what this means. Our different approaches reflect our different thoughts about same-sex relationships, yet I would argue that both represent an attempt to give agency (room) within the journey of discipleship. For neither my colleague nor I would be seeking to enforce our view of appropriate intimacy or check on progress!

#### **Fruit 4 – A Little Pastoral Pragmatism**

Having just given an indication of my own pastoral approach to a same-sex couple seeking to follow Christ, let me tease out a little what is going on there. It will serve to lead us to another fruit in the tree. There is a question about feasibility. If two people who are attracted to one another have a life together, there will be sexual desire. To avoid all expression of that desire could be difficult, some would say impossible. The attempt to do so might actually intensify it and distract the couple from other aspects of their life together.

In her book, *Scripture, Ethics & the Possibility of Same-Sex Relationships*, Karen Keen considers the feasibility of celibacy. She begins by rehearsing the argument of affirming Christians that if celibacy, like marriage, is a calling, then it cannot be assumed that all single people have it. Quoting Luther’s pastoral observations on the matter, Keen argues that very few people are cut out for celibacy or able to attain to it, since our biology disposes us towards sexual intimacy.<sup>29</sup>

Tackling the common argument that the situation of a gay person desiring an intimate life-partner is no different from a straight person who has not been able to find a mate, Keen counters that when a gay person has someone in their life whom they love, denying the expression of sexual desire by remaining celibate *is* different from learning to accept that a life-partner was ‘not to be’.

Keen goes on to say that for most who have the opportunity for sexual intimacy (someone in their life with whom they desire a life-long union), celibacy is just not feasible. In support of this claim, she brings Paul’s rather arresting teaching in 1 Corinthians 7 (8–9) to bear, arguing that if Paul saw marriage as preferable to ‘burning with passion’ where two people ‘cannot control themselves’, then we might consider the same pastoral wisdom applicable when the couple happen to be gay. In other words, it would be better for such desires to be held within a loving, committed union than to be a constant source of temptation and frustration, perhaps even leading to promiscuity. Keen does not suggest that Paul would have applied his teaching this way, but argues that such an application is appropriate in our context in place of imposing a ‘call’ on those who do not find themselves called or disposed to celibacy.<sup>30</sup>

Some might take issue with Keen’s use of the term ‘calling’ – arguing that it is better understood as the situation given to us and the potential we see there to live for the glory of God, rather than as a gift bestowed on some and not others. In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, both understandings seem to be present.<sup>31</sup> Either way, or perhaps seeing the value of both, Keen’s pastoral pragmatism seems to have something to offer: a wise and compassionate approach that faces up to what seems untenable or unreachable for most and recognises the value of covenant relationship for both gay and straight couples.

Not all will agree. There are gay Christians who have chosen celibacy and believe it to be not only tenable but a beautiful and fulfilling journey – not denying its costliness, but emphasising the grace of God in enabling obedience. I recently heard the moving story of a gay woman who spoke of coming to terms with her sexuality and coming to value it as a gift, and yet she did not believe it was right for her to seek or be in an intimate, same-sex relationship. Furthermore, she advocated this path for all who are same-sex attracted.

At the same event where I heard this story, I heard another. It was from a gay man who had also come to terms with his sexuality – following years of deep rejection from his church community. However, in his case, he had come to believe that a loving committed relationship could be a path of faithfulness for him (blessed by God). As a minister, he had led his church community gently to an affirming position and is actively involved in advocating for LGBTQ+ inclusion in churches.

## **Fruit 5 – Telling Stories**

I relate these two stories briefly, back-to-back, to point towards some more fruit in our wisdom tree. Whatever our worked-out theology on same-sex attraction and discipleship, we do well to listen to the stories of those for whom this is their reality. There is often the danger in church conversations about sexuality and faith of ending up talking about people ‘out there’, and this can only be averted by listening

– really listening – to the stories of gay Christians who have experiences to relate and testimonies of God’s redemptive work to share. The fact of different conclusions reached is part of the gift, I believe, prompting reflection by us all. *What might we learn? How might we be challenged in our thinking?* I should add that other stories exist: including those who are in a gay/straight union and working through the challenges this situation brings – working out loyal, covenant love.

Now I want you to imagine a church that is blessed by having a celibate gay man or woman, a same-sex couple, and a mixed orientation couple in its congregation. The church is also blessed with a range of theological perspectives and viewpoints among its members on same-sex attraction and discipleship. Is this just a recipe for strife and division, or might these be the perfect conditions for a beautiful unity of God’s making in which all kinds of people come to know Jesus and follow him? My use of the word *blessed* will give a strong clue to my own answer to this question! And it rather sets us up for our final fruit in the tree. Just to remind you: the fruit represents those more promising encounters and exchanges between affirming and traditionalist believers, fostering understanding and unity rather than deepening division. The final fruit is the call to be an *accepting* community.

### **Fruit 6 – Acceptance**

Tolerance is a relatively low bar.<sup>32</sup> The same is true of ‘agreeing to disagree’ or the idea of co-existing with our differences. We are capable of more as a Christian community. Tolerance, while a whole lot better than intolerance, makes for a rather chilly life-together. Paul does not write, ‘tolerate one another’ to the Roman church, perplexed and tense about food sacrificed to idols and what to do or not do.<sup>33</sup> He writes, ‘accept one another’. Acceptance is much warmer and more characteristic of the community we are called to be.

Affirmation is warmer too and akin to acceptance. If I speak warmly and approvingly of someone or seek to encourage them in some way, I will likely foster a sense of acceptance. However, my acceptance of another person may not always be communicated in affirmation – I might for example bring a challenge to a friend, even say some things that are hard to hear. If my friend is confident of my acceptance of her (knows herself loved), she is likely to be able to hear it and respond well to it.

Acceptance is the wellspring of affirmation. It runs deeper. It bestows belonging. It goes to the heart of our faith: for Christ died to reconcile us to God and to each other – so that we cry out ‘Abba Father’ and recognise each other as brothers and sisters. We are accepted – we belong.<sup>34</sup> This is also the ground on which affirming and traditionalist Christians might stand together in fashioning an environment for all to find and follow Jesus, where agency is given in discipleship, with all the gifts of the church on hand to help us all in the journey we are making together.

Here is the final fruit of the tree. The call to be an accepting community gathers up and gives vital context to all the promising discourses we have been considering. Such a community is able to hold different perspectives on sexuality, as well as other matters, and give room (agency) to all who seek to

know and follow Christ. This is agency within discipleship, so that each person has room to work out their salvation within a gift-filled community, packed with insights and experience of the way of Christ.

Along with agency, access to all the gifts of a Christ-following community is vital. Every means of grace to grow in Christ-likeness is needed by every disciple. These include, of first importance, the sacraments of baptism and communion. Traditionalists might question whether a same-sex couple need first to repent of their relationship or some aspects of their life together. Affirming Christians might reply that no such judgement should be made on the couple. In an accepting community, both should be content with the repentance made – for repentance is involved in every turning to Christ – in the knowledge that repentance deepens on the road for us all, trusting God to do his good work in the couple according to his design not ours.

Likewise, membership is an essential gift for every disciple of Jesus – giving expression to our reconciliation with God and with each other, enacted powerfully in baptism. We walk together and watch over one another as fellow travellers, ambitious for one another's spiritual growth and ready to help and encourage one another whenever we can.

Working out our belonging in a local church means bringing our gifts to the life of the church and its mission, which brings us to something that has vexed both traditionalists and those who affirm same-sex unions. To put it simply: there are some who wonder if there should be limits to participation in church life for those in same-sex unions; there are others who strongly object to this line of thinking. Such wonderings and reactions usually focus on leadership roles.

I would like to offer a simple and pragmatic suggestion in response to this potential source of tension and conflict within an accepting community. It is *to trust the usual means of discernment given to us by God*. This is preferable, I would argue, to attempting to draw up some list of roles that are open or closed to those in same-sex relationships, leading to long and fruitless debates, and much discouragement. Why not, instead, work from the premise that God has given every good gift to build up and enrich the church in love and service, including the wisdom we need to call and nurture these at the right time?

In ABE this approach is briefly explored when Davina – one partner in a same-sex relationship – is nominated to join the leadership team. Tensions arise between traditionalist and affirming Christians over this, and it is Davina who reads the situation (showing discernment) and decides to withdraw her nomination.<sup>35</sup> The suggestion in the story is that Davina acts for the good of the church, not wanting to be a source of conflict. This moves the matter from potential arguments about what is fair or right for an individual to what makes for *shalom* (the peace and wellbeing of the community) – a distinctively Christian emphasis in the age of expressive individualism.

My urging would be that all avenues of service in the church and in our mission-fields can be guided by the wisdom and discernment (both gifts of the Spirit) within the body of the church – trusting, as I wrote above, our usual discernment processes. So, from leading worship to teaching in Sunday School

to taking a role in the leadership team, let's look for calling, character and God's timing, and seek out what benefits the whole community, for all growing disciples of Jesus.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, there is the matter of gay weddings. In ABE, Shaz and Davina are in a civil partnership. Yet a request for marriage comes from another gay couple and the pastor declines to marry them – on the basis of his theological convictions and the likelihood of dividing the church if he conducted a gay wedding.<sup>37</sup>

This will be difficult for those who hold affirming views, yet it seems the one thing an accepting community – holding its differences well – wouldn't be able to do is conduct a gay wedding. Not without severely affecting the unity and *shalom* of the community. However, this does not mean that a couple married outside of the church community cannot be received and valued, and play a full part in the life of the church as envisaged above. I recognise this will be disappointing for those in affirming positions and a potential source of hurt. Some will not be able to live with this limitation. Yet, it may be that this is the point at which affirming believers might wisely and graciously give way for the good of the community, allowing a generous discipleship to emerge for us all, focused and built on covenant love.

### Covenant Love

The biblical idea of covenant love has been a vital reference point in this paper. Thus far, I have not paused to attempt a clear definition, preferring to develop the idea gradually with occasional endnotes to sharpen the picture (see notes 14, 15, 20 & 22). However, a good friend of mine suggested that I might attempt to draw the strands together. So here goes.

Covenant love is God's way of loving us. In this, his intention is to be our God and for us to be his people – an intention that is declared throughout Scripture (e.g., Exodus 29:45–46, Jeremiah 7: 23, Zechariah 8:8, 2 Corinthians 6:16, Hebrews 8:10) and comes to its zenith when heaven joins earth (Revelation 21:1–4). In covenant love, God binds himself to his people (an ever-widening circle) to do us good and bring us home to himself.

God's covenant love calls for and enables covenant love between his people. This is beautifully illustrated in the words of Ruth as she pledges her commitment to her mother-in-law, Naomi, on the road to Bethlehem – notice the unmistakable echoes of God's intentions towards his people:

Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried (Ruth 1:16–17).

Here is a form of covenant love between two people that both reflects and gives specific shape to God's way of loving us.

Marriage is of course the most clearly defined form of covenant love between people in the biblical narrative. Frequently in Scripture, the ardour and persistent faithfulness of God's love is imaged in the metaphor of the covenant of marriage – often to draw sharp attention to the unfaithfulness of his people and call us to fidelity (e.g., Hosea 3:1–5).

Within and beyond particular covenant forms, we can also discern the qualities of covenant love extolled and modelled throughout Scripture – particularly in relation to Israel and the church (e.g., Colossians 3:12–17), corresponding to the Old and New Covenants (Testaments). In our Baptist ecclesiology, each local church is a covenant community that seeks to grow in love and so witness to the world (John 13:34–35).

## CONCLUSION

Covenant love is, I believe, a strong and trustworthy foundation to stand on together and the needed centre-piece of the church's preaching and teaching on relationships and sex in Christian community.<sup>38</sup> Living this out as an accepting community is, I believe, a beautiful endeavour in a world that desperately needs to be inspired again to value the good gifts of God. In such acceptance and belonging, it will not only be the same-sex attracted who find room to know and follow Christ. Such community will be a safe and nurturing space for our transgender kin too, for whom the matter of belonging is quite critical, as much as for other LGBTQ+ people.<sup>39</sup> In fact, acceptance, as I have tried my best to portray it, is the soil we all need to find ourselves (loved) and grow in grace.

## AND FINALLY...

### A BLESSING

May your sexuality  
Be suffused with joy and kindness;  
Be expressed in faithfulness;  
Be disciplined by love;  
And point towards the beauty of all things made new  
In God's eternal Kingdom.

# Appendix: Inspiring & Nurturing Healthy Sexuality

## An Ethos & Approach for a Local Church

*Healthy Relationships are fruit of following Jesus together – rooted in the love of God*

God's immense and unfathomable love for us is where we begin: the ground of our being and of all that it means to be human – including our sexuality and its expression. To help us understand this, the Bible gives us the rich and beautiful idea of **covenant love**, in which God binds himself to his people to do them good and to never forsake them. Such love inspires and enables our love.

### COVENANT LOVE & COMMUNITY

The church is a **covenant community**, in which we experience and respond to the love of God, and learn to love one another.

As a **Baptist church**, we call people into God's covenant love through **baptism** and **membership**. We offer these to any who have come to faith in Jesus Christ and follow him, seeing them both as vital for all apprentices in love (aka disciples).

In preparing people for baptism and membership, we recognise that while our **core beliefs** are the same, we have diverse views on some matters of faith and practice. These include how we read and understand the Bible, as well as different convictions on a range of ethical issues relating to money, sex and power. We seek to hold our differences with humility and generosity, not allowing them to become barriers to those who are finding faith among us. Our shared endeavour is to create an environment where each of us can work out what it means to follow Jesus (Phil. 1:12-13), within strong bonds of friendship (1 Thess. 5:11, Heb. 10:24-25).

We feed and nurture our life together through Bible reading and teaching, friendship (aka fellowship), worship and the celebration of communion (Acts 2:42).

We encourage all members in a full and joyful participation in the church community and God's mission in the world (Rom. 12:3-8, 1 Pet. 4:10). Every gift is needed. All are encouraged to serve, according to character, maturity and gifting, and guided by the wisdom and discernment of those set apart to lead in the church. For leadership team roles, special attention is paid to the biblical criteria for overseers in the church (1 Tim. 3:1-13 & Titus 1:5-9), as well as what will best serve the wellbeing of the church community.

It is our shared calling and commitment to learn and grow in the way of Jesus, in all areas of life (Col. 3:17). To this end, we pledge to make known and to practice clear biblical values for strong, loving relationships – including how our sexuality is both valued and expressed.

### LOVING SEXUALITY

Sexuality is a gift of creation and a wonderful ingredient to being human. We are committed to pursuing healthy sexuality in our life-together, undergirded and guided by the **following relational** values:

- **KINDNESS** – Healthy relationships are characterised by kindness (Colossians 3:12-14, Romans 12:9-16).
- **PERSONHOOD** – We are made in God's image (Gen. 1:27). Here is our essential identity, loved by God and precious. In loving community there is no place for the objectification or control of others. (Rom. 13:10). Our safeguarding policy commits us all to keep each other safe – especially children and adults at risk.
- **FAITHFULNESS** – Sexual desire and chemistry come with being human; their expression/acting upon them should always seek to honour and protect our commitments (e.g., friendship or marriage) and our kinship in Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 5:1-2).

- **RELATIONSHIP** – Sexual desire is meant to be expressed within loving relationship. Non-relational sex moves against the Creator’s will and all that is good for us – e.g., casual sex and pornography, areas that need to be addressed as a community and pastoral care given (Gal. 6:1-5).
- **INTIMACY** – In healthy relationships, intimacy keeps pace with commitment (Song of Songs 8: 4–12). The deepest sexual intimacy is to be enjoyed within the strongest commitment: within a life-long, loving union established through vows made publicly.
- **FORGIVENESS** – Everyone slips and there is forgiveness for sexual sins as much as for non-sexual sins, e.g., acts of greed, selfish ambition and dishonesty, where there is repentance. (1 John 1:9).
- **GOD’S WORK IN US** – We are all ‘work in progress’ - e.g., many of us do not yet live free of our possessions (Luke 12;33) or struggle to widen our circles to include the poor and marginalised (Luke 14:12).

We seek to make these things known in a way that all can take hold of and apply to their lives, through preaching and teaching, pastoral care and spiritual friendships – for all ages and all stages of life.

## SINGLENESS

Outside of the church, being sexually active is a cultural norm/expectation today. Living the Jesus way as singles, where intimacy keeps pace with commitment, and the deepest intimacy is kept for the strongest commitment, is a tough call and we must be ready to offer the friendship, support and encouragement needed to fulfil it (1 Tim. 4:16) – especially for those who know a call to life-long celibacy. The church has not always been the most nurturing environment for singles – something we need to work on.

## MARRIAGE

The Bible gives us a rich and beautiful vision of marriage as a form of covenant love that joins a man and a woman in a one flesh union and creates a context for self-giving love to grow and children to be nurtured, a wonderful work of God that actually points to the joining of heaven and earth. (Gen. 1:26-28 & 2:21-25, Mark 10:1-9, Eph. 5: 25-33, 1 Cor. 7:1-16 & Rev. 21:1-5)

It is our privilege to prepare couples for marriage and to conduct a wedding for them, with care to follow through on the friendship and support we pledge as a community.

Some of our members hold the view that while the biblical vision of marriage is cast as a male-female union, all the good of marriage can be pursued and enjoyed by a same-sex couple, and that such unions should be recognised and celebrated as marriages. Other members hold the conviction that the complementarity of one man and one woman is vital to what makes a marriage. Given our different views on this, we cannot, in unity, conduct a wedding for a same-sex couple, but we **can** together warmly receive same-sex couples into our community, valuing their love and commitment to one another (Phil. 4: 8), and encouraging them in following Jesus.

## WHEN VOWS ARE BROKEN

We recognise that despite even the best support from family and friends, vows are broken and sometimes beyond repair.

We will love, guide and support those couples whose relationship is in crisis, as well as those separating or seeking divorce. We are ready to prepare divorcees for marriage supporting them in a healing journey, believing that new beginnings are possible by God’s grace.

## RECOMMENDED READING

For concise biblical thinking on our subject within a traditional perspective, I would recommend *Same Sex Relationships* by John R. W. Stott (Good Book Company, 2022) – which is an updated and expanded version of chapter 16 in Stott’s *Issues Facing Christians Today* (4<sup>th</sup> edition, Zondervan, 2016). To explore traditional approaches further, read the Evangelical Alliance’s *Biblical and Pastoral Responses to Homosexuality*, edited by Andrew Goddard and Don Horrocks (London, 2012).

For biblical and theological studies underpinning affirming positions, I would recommend David P. Gushee’s *Changing Our Mind: Definitive Edition of the Landmark Call for Inclusion of LGBT Christians with Response to Critics* (Michigan: David Crumm Media, 2017) and Karen Keen’s *Scripture, Ethics & the Possibility of Same-Sex Relationships* (Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 2018).

For those who prefer audio-visual media to reading, you might find the video talks of Doctor Robert A.J. Gagnon, at the *Walking Together Ministries* website ([HERE](#)) helpful for a traditional approach, and/or those of Doctor Jonathan Tallon at the *Bible and Homosexuality* website ([HERE](#)) for an affirming approach.

For an excellent discussion of contrasting views and approaches, read *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible and the Church*, edited by Preston Sprinkle (Zondervan, 2016). I was thoroughly impressed by the quality and tone of the contributions, and the interaction between the authors. It was such a stimulating and heartening read – a conversation rather than a treatise.

For a compassionate, thoughtful pastoral response that arises from a deep engagement with LGBTQ+ people, read Andrew Marin’s *Love is an Orientation: Elevating the Conversation with the Gay Community* (Downers Grove, IL, IVP Books, 2009). For a similar, wise and compassionate approach to the experience of gender dysphoria, I would recommend Mark Yarhouse’s *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture* (IL, InterVarsity Press, 2004).

For autobiographies, I recommend reading and comparing Wesley Hill’s, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), and Vicky Beeching’s, *Undivided: Coming out, Becoming Whole, and Living Free of Shame* (London, Harper Collins, 2018).

For practical teaching on healthy sexuality, it would be hard to better Richard Foster’s classic, *Money, Sex & Power: The Challenge to the Disciplined Life* (Harper & Row, 1985) – biblical, wise, compassionate and practical on all three areas of life gathered into its title.

For an insightful and creative exploration of the theme of **acceptance** in the life of Jesus and those who follow him, I would recommend Trevor Hudson and Jerry P. Haas’, *Cycle of Grace: Living in the Sacred Balance* (Nashville, Upper Room, 2012).

Finally, my own book, *Sexuality, Faith & the Art of Conversation – Part One* (Surrey UK, Creative Tension Publications, 2017), explores how the conversation about same-sex attraction and following Jesus might be pursued with integrity and kindness, weaving together original research, stories, essays and conversations. *Parts Two, Three and Four* are also available in a single volume, as well as *A Beautiful Endeavour: Pursuing a Conversation About Same-Sex Attraction and Following Jesus* (Surrey UK, Creative Tension Publication, 2019), which gives a story to prompt and help the conversation about sexuality and faith in the church, and comes with a study guide for leadership teams and/or small groups.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> If you would prefer to read this essay with footnotes rather than endnotes, you can access it in that format [HERE](#).

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 2:4b.

<sup>3</sup> In my use of ‘traditional’ and ‘traditionalist’ within this essay, I am not meaning to infer a *stuck in the past* attitude or an automatic resistance to change – rather, a reasoned and passionate defence of traditional understandings of the biblical narrative in regard to same-sex relationships. Likewise, in using ‘affirming’, I am not meaning to imply an ‘anything goes’ approach that sits loose to the teachings of the Bible – rather an alternative understanding of the same narrative that leads to the view that committed, same-sex relations can be blessed by God and fully included in the life of the church.

<sup>4</sup> The phrase was coined by journalist, Amanda Ripley, who has done some interesting work on how journalists might enable a move from polarised views to a shared and nuanced understanding of a situation and the motivations at play. See Amanda’s blog entry, *Complicating the Narratives* (updated Jan 11, 2019) [HERE](#).

<sup>5</sup> The image above is in the public domain, downloaded from Wikioo.org, Encyclopaedia of Infinite Art and included without alteration and with the watermark (access [HERE](#)).

<sup>6</sup> Proverbs 3:18.

<sup>7</sup> I rather like comedian Peter Kay’s one-liner: ‘knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit; wisdom is knowing not to put it in a fruit salad’. He’s on to something, for wisdom in the Bible is about using what we know to live well in God’s world, an idea helpfully put across in the short Bible Project video on the book of Proverbs (see [HERE](#)) and explored in the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity (LICC) resource, *Be Wise: Theology for Everyday Life* (see [HERE](#)).

<sup>8</sup> Read Glynn Harrison’s, *A Better Story: God, Sex & Human Flourishing* (London, UK, IVP Books, 2017) for a fresh and insightful presentation of traditional beliefs and values concerning human sexuality.

<sup>9</sup> Read David P. Gushee’s, *Changing Our Mind: Definitive Edition of the Landmark Call for Inclusion of LGBT Christians with Response to Critics* (Michigan: David Crumm Media, 2017), for a well-argued case.

<sup>10</sup> Leviticus 18:22 & 20:13, Genesis 19:1–13, 1 Corinthians 6:9–10, 1 Timothy 1:9–10a, Romans 1:18–32.

<sup>11</sup> I use a phrase here that I heard from Dave Benson, *Director of the Centre for Culture and Discipleship* at the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity (LICC).

<sup>12</sup> See key passages on marriage that bring out all these aspects of the gift: Genesis 1:26–28 & 2:21–25, Mark 10:1–9, Ephesians 5: 25–33, 1 Corinthians 7:1–16 & Revelation 21:1–5.

<sup>13</sup> For discussion of the significance of procreation in marriage, see in *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible and the Church*, edited by Preston Sprinkle (Zondervan, 2016) – especially pp. 127–131, 148–156, 170–176, 194–199, 200–206.

<sup>14</sup> It seems quite unnecessary to attempt to substantiate this claim given that the two sections of our Bible are named as covenants (testaments) and God’s covenant making from Noah to the New Covenant – announced in the breaking of bread and the sharing of wine – give an unmistakable structure to our faith story. If you would like to explore the biblical theme of Covenant in more depth, alongside five other key biblical themes, I would recommend starting with Mike Pilavachi and Andy Croft’s *Story Lines: Tracing the Threads of the Bible* (Kingsway Publications, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> It is helpful (and important) to recognise both forms and qualities in the way covenant love is experienced by the people of God. That is, we may speak of a covenant pattern, such as marriage or vow of friendship (e.g., 1 Samuel 20:16–17), and we may speak of the virtues lived by a covenant community (e.g., Colossians 3:12–17).

<sup>16</sup> Karen R. Keen, *Scripture, Ethics & the Possibility of Same-Sex Relationships* (Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 2018) – throughout, but see especially pp. 30–34, 74, 104 & 107.

<sup>17</sup> I am, of course, quoting Paul in his letter to the Philippians (4:8).

<sup>18</sup> A question may be prompted for some at this point: even as we seek to value all that is good, don’t we also need to be ready to name and challenge sin in the lives of our brothers and sisters in Christ?

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The answer to this is yes, of course – but in most churches there will be different ideas around what repentance and holiness mean for a same-sex couple, and not just between traditional and affirming views. For example, some traditionalists would see a need for a same-sex couple to separate, while others would see the need for a chaste-life together or perhaps the setting of appropriate boundaries for intimacy. How we hold well our different ideas about what holiness means for others is considered later on in this paper.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Elmes, *A Beautiful Endeavour: Pursuing a Conversation About Same-Sex Attraction and Following Jesus* (Surrey UK, Creative Tension Publication, 2019), pp. 15–24.

<sup>20</sup> We do not, of course, see a same-sex relationship portrayed in the Bible as a covenant relationship, yet the covenant form of such a relationship – especially when established by life-long vows – is hard to miss, and the potential to embody the virtues and qualities of covenant love clear (see note 15).

<sup>21</sup> For a short, animated telling of this illustration by Ed Shaw, click [HERE](#). For more of Shaw’s thinking, read *The Plausibility Problem: The Church and Same-Sex Attraction* (Nottingham, IVP, 2015), especially pp. 107–115.

<sup>22</sup> For an excellent exploration of how the marriage metaphor represents the Covenant between God and his people throughout Scripture, see Stetson Glass, *The Metaphorical Use of Marriage in Scripture: A Pentecostal Exploration* (2017), Masters of Theological Studies 6. You can access it [HERE](#).

<sup>23</sup> See Carl Trueman, *Strange New World* (Crossway, 2022) for a wonderful history and investigation of the rise of expressive individualism.

<sup>24</sup> See John 12:24–25 & Romans 6:11–14.

<sup>25</sup> I explore further the idea of *agency within discipleship* in an on-line article written for a London Institute for Contemporary Christianity (LICC) ‘Wisdom Lab’ – *Following Jesus in a Secular Age* (access [HERE](#)).

<sup>26</sup> Philippians 2:13.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew Marin, *Love is an Orientation: Elevating the Conversation with the Gay Community* (Downers Grove, IL, IVP Books, 2009), pp. 129, 133–134, 155.

<sup>28</sup> By stressing the need for room within a discipling community to work out holiness, I am not meaning to suggest that strong counsel and action is never required. Imagine that a member of a church is having an affair. If this comes to light, the member would (and should) be called to repentance and right action. Contrast this situation with that of a same-sex couple seeking to be faithful to their vows within a community holding different ideas about what this might mean.

<sup>29</sup> Keen, pp. 68–82.

<sup>30</sup> Keen, pp. 80–82.

<sup>31</sup> 1 Corinthians 7 (see also Jesus’ words in Matthew 19: 10–12).

<sup>32</sup> Here, I am not meaning to diminish the travails of our early Baptist forebears and others, who put their lives on the line in standing up for freedom of conscience and belief, leading to the Act of Tolerance (1869). Rather, I am pointing to what might be built upon the foundation they helped to lay – acceptance of one other as kin in Christ.

<sup>33</sup> See Romans 14:1 – 15:7.

<sup>34</sup> See Romans 8:14–17 and 1 Peter 4:8.

<sup>35</sup> Elmes, *A Beautiful Endeavour*, pp. 17–18.

<sup>36</sup> See 1 Peter 4:10–11 & Romans 12:3–8.

<sup>37</sup> Elmes, *A Beautiful Endeavour*, pp. 17–19.

<sup>38</sup> An attempt in this direction is set out in Appendix 1.

<sup>39</sup> Mark A. Yarhouse has helpfully explored the potential of a church community to be a place of belonging for those who are unclear about their gender identity, where acceptance and supportive friendships are key, in *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture* (IL, InterVarsity Press, 2004), pp. 145–161.