

## **A Pastoral Perspective on Homosexuality**

Homosexuality is an issue that confronts us in the media, the halls of government, and in almost every setting of life. It has challenged the fabric of social convention and has eroded the foundations of society's strongest institutions. This is an issue that challenges the foundational tenets of our biblical understanding of the transformational character of the gospel itself. Our commitment to the compassion of Jesus remains unchanged as does our commitment to the scriptural call to holy character made possible by the invasive, transforming power of God's Spirit. Our initial reaction to homosexuality has been complicated by a variety of factors. While we embrace the compassion of Jesus for everyone, we also embrace our Lord's clear distinction between obedient followers and those who merely profess to follow but in whose lives little or no change is evident. Just as the Master held out the expectation of fruit that provides identity, it is our belief that the followers of Jesus in every era will express his character. The Lord who challenged conventional religious thinking with the statement, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8, NIV), challenges human society with a clear call to the scriptural roles indigenous to male and female: "For this reason a man shall ... be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24, NASB).

As pastoral leaders of the Church of the Nazarene, we are calling the church to a Christ-like response to the challenge of ministering to those individuals who struggle with their sexual orientation. We recognize that while some are broken, empty, and confused, others are angry and militant. The answers we provide to the questions they ask must be premised upon the witness of Scripture, the clear witness of Church tradition, the collective experience of our faith community, and a reasoned perspective informed by our Wesleyan theology.

### **The Clear Position of the Church of the Nazarene Regarding Homosexuality**

The position of the Church of the Nazarene is articulated in the "Human Sexuality and Marriage" statement in the *Manual* of the Church of the Nazarene and in the official statement of the Board of General Superintendents.

#### ***Manual Church of the Nazarene, 2017-2021***

### **31. Human Sexuality and Marriage**

The Church of the Nazarene views human sexuality as one expression of the holiness and beauty that God the Creator intended. Because all humans are beings created in the image of God, they are of inestimable value and worth. As a result we believe that human sexuality is meant to include more than the sensual experience, and is a gift of God designed to reflect the whole of our physical and relational createdness.

**As a holiness people, the Church of the Nazarene affirms that the human body matters to God.** Christians are both called and enabled by the transforming and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit to glorify God in and with our bodies. Our senses, our sexual appetites, our ability to experience pleasure, and our desire for connection to another are shaped out of the very character of God. Our bodies are good, very good.

We affirm belief in a God whose creation is an act of love. Having experienced God as holy love, we understand the Trinity to be a unity of love among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Therefore, **we are made with a yearning for connection with others at the core of our being.** That yearning is ultimately fulfilled as we live in covenanted relationship with God, the creation, and loving one's neighbor as one's self. Our creation as social beings is both good and beautiful. We reflect the image of God in our capacity to relate and our desire to do so. The people of God are formed as one in Christ, a rich community of love and grace.

Within this community, believers are called to live as faithful members of the body of Christ. **Singleness among the people of God is to be valued and sustained by the rich fellowship of the church and the communion of the saints.** To live as a single person is to engage, as Jesus did, in the intimacy of community, surrounded by friends, welcoming and being welcomed to tables, and expressing faithful witness.

**Also within this community, we affirm that some believers are called to be married.** As defined in Genesis, "a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh." The marriage covenant, a reflection of the covenant between God and the people of God, is one of exclusive sexual fidelity, unselfish service, and social witness. A woman and a man publicly devote themselves to one another as a witness to the way God loves. Marital intimacy is intended to reflect the union of Christ and the Church, a mystery of grace. It is also God's intention that in this sacramental union the man and woman may experience the joy and pleasure of sexual intimacy and from this act of intimate love new life may enter the world and into a covenantal community of care. The Christ-centered home ought to serve as a primary location for spiritual formation. The church is to take great care in the formation of marriage through pre-marital counseling and teaching that denotes the sacredness of marriage.

The Scriptural story, however, also includes the sad chapter of the fracturing of human desire in the fall, resulting in behaviors that elevate self-sovereignty, damage and objectify the other, and darken the path of human desire. As fallen beings, we have experienced this evil on every level – personal and corporate. The principalities and powers of a fallen world have saturated us with lies about our sexuality. Our desires have been twisted by sin and we are turned inward on ourselves. We have also contributed to the fracturing of the creation by our willful choice to violate the love of God and live on our own terms apart from God.

Our brokenness in the areas of sexuality takes many forms, some due to our own choosing and some brought into our lives via a broken world. However, God's grace is sufficient in our weaknesses, enough to bring conviction, transformation, and sanctification in our lives. Therefore, in order to resist adding to the brokenness of sin and to be able to witness to the beauty and uniqueness of God's holy purposes for our bodies, we believe members of the body of Christ, enabled by the Spirit, can and should refrain from:

- **Unmarried sexual intercourse and other forms of inappropriate sexual bonding.** Because we believe that it is God's intention for our sexuality to be lived out in the covenantal union between one woman and one man, we believe that these practices often lead to the objectification of the other in a relationship. In all its forms, it also potentially harms our ability to enter into the beauty and holiness of Christian marriage with our whole selves.
- **Sexual activity between people of the same sex.** Because we believe that it is God's intention for our sexuality to be lived out in the covenantal union between one woman and one man, we believe the practice of same-sex sexual intimacy is contrary to God's will for human sexuality. While a person's homosexual or bi-sexual attraction may have complex and differing origins, and the implication of this call to sexual purity is costly, we believe the grace of God is sufficient for such a calling. We recognize the shared responsibility of the body of Christ to be a welcoming, forgiving, and loving community where hospitality, encouragement, transformation and accountability are available to all.
- **Extra-marital sexual relations.** Because we believe this behavior is a violation of the vows that we made before God and within the body of Christ, adultery is a selfish act, a family-destroying choice, and an offense to the God who has loved us purely and devotedly.
- **Divorce.** Because marriage is intended to be a life-long commitment, the fracturing of the covenant of marriage, whether initiated personally, or by the choice of a spouse, falls short of God's best intentions. The church must take care in preserving the marriage bond where wise and possible, and offering counsel and grace to those wounded by divorce.
- **Practices such as polygamy or polyandry.** Because we believe that the covenantal faithfulness of God is reflected in the monogamous commitment of husband and wife, these practices take away from the unique and exclusive fidelity intended in marriage.

Sexual sin and brokenness is not only personal but pervades the systems and structures of the world. Therefore, as the church bears witness to the reality of the

beauty and uniqueness of God's holy purposes we also believe the church should refrain from and advocate against:

- **Pornography in all its forms**, which is desire gone awry. It is the objectification of people for selfish sexual gratification. This habit destroys our capacity to love unselfishly.
- **Sexual violence in any form**, including rape, sexual assault, sexual bullying, hateful speech, marital abuse, incest, sex trafficking, forced marriage, female genital mutilation, bestiality, sexual harassment, and the abuse of minors and other vulnerable populations. All people and systems that perpetrate sexual violence transgress the command to love and to protect our neighbor. The body of Christ should always be a place of justice, protection, and healing for those who are, who have been, and who continue to be affected by sexual violence.

Therefore we affirm that:

- **Where sin abounds grace abounds all the more.** Although the effects of sin are universal and holistic, the efficacy of grace is also universal and holistic. In Christ, through the Holy Spirit, we are renewed in the image of God. The old is gone and the new comes. Although the forming of our lives as a new creation may be a gradual process, God's healing is effective in dealing with the brokenness of humanity in the areas of sexuality.
- **The human body is the temple of the Holy Spirit.** We affirm the need for our sexuality to be conformed to God's will. Our bodies are not our own but have been bought with a price. Therefore, we are called to glorify God in our bodies through a life of yielded obedience.
- **The people of God are marked by holy love.** We affirm that, above all the virtues, the people of God are to clothe themselves with love. The people of God have always welcomed broken people into our gathering. Such Christian hospitality is neither an excusing of individual disobedience nor a refusal to participate redemptively in discerning the roots of brokenness. Restoring humans to the likeness of Jesus requires confession, forgiveness, formative practices, sanctification, and Godly counsel – but most of all, it includes the welcome of love which invites the broken person into the circle of grace known as the church. If we fail to honestly confront sin and brokenness, we have not loved. If we fail to love, we cannot participate in God's healing of brokenness.

As the global church receives and ministers to the people of our world, the faithful outworking of these statements as congregations is complex and must be navigated with care, humility, courage, and discernment.

## **Official Statement Board of General Superintendents**

The Church of the Nazarene believes that every man or woman should be treated with dignity, grace, and holy love, whatever their sexual orientation. However, we continue to firmly hold the position that the homosexual lifestyle is sinful and is contrary to the Scriptures.

We further wish to reemphasize our call to Nazarenes around the globe to recommit themselves to a life of holiness, characterized by holy love and expressed through the most rigorous and consistent lifestyle of sexual purity. We stand firmly on the belief that the biblical concept of marriage, always between one man and one woman in a committed, lifelong relationship, is the only relationship within which the gift of sexual intimacy is properly expressed.

### **What the Bible Tells Us about Homosexuality**

The Bible clearly references homosexual acts or practices. We do not wish to contribute to the often-toxic environment surrounding discussions related to the issue of homosexuality; however, we do need to be clear in stating no less than the Bible says. Scholars considering both sides of the “homosexual question” generally agree on the passages in Scripture that directly address homosexual activity. There are several reasons for the small number of passages. It is clear that the idea of homosexual practice in the lives of either Israelites or Christians was never considered in biblical times. Both the Old and New Testaments are consistent in their rejection of homosexual activity, and it appears that neither Old Testament Israel nor the New Testament Church ever considered homosexual practice as something that would be allowed in their faith communities. There is no indication that these Israelites or Christians frequently struggled with the temptation or the pull toward homosexual practices.

The first two passages from the Old Testament are similar. In Genesis 19:1–11 the two angels who had first appeared to Abraham entered the city of Sodom and were invited to spend the night with Lot, Abraham’s nephew. The men of Sodom surrounded Lot’s house and demanded that he bring out the two men so they could have sex with them. Lot described their request as “wicked,” and the story unfolded in such a way that the request of the men of Sodom was not fulfilled. While this passage is an example of the excessive wickedness of the city, it should also be noted that Sodom was not considered part of Israel. In this case the homosexual desires of the men of Sodom represented a pagan reality rather than something practiced or tolerated in Israel.

The second passage, Judges 19, is similar to the first. A man and his concubine were journeying from Bethlehem north to the hill country of Ephraim. They stopped in

Gibeah, a few miles north of Jerusalem, where an old man offered them hospitality and a place to spend the night. Men of the city surrounded the house and demanded that the old man bring out his male guest so they could have sex with him. This is one of the most horrible stories in the Bible. The similarity between the two accounts is obvious. Regrettably, the characters in this account were not pagans but were Israelites who were pounding on the door.

These verses regularly use negative words to describe the proposed homosexual actions of the men of Gibeah. They were described as "wicked men," and their actions were called "vile" and "disgraceful." The homosexual desires of the men in this story are reflected in their horrific perversity as they participated in the gang rape and abuse of the concubine.

The third instance in the Old Testament that addresses homosexual practice appears in the section often referred to as the Levitical Holiness Code. In the midst of commands regarding forbidden sexual relationships, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 clearly prohibit sexual relations between men. The prohibition of homosexual acts is stated with unmistakable clarity in the Old Testament and is reinforced in the New Testament by the way the early church upheld that same prohibition.

In the New Testament we once again have two passages that are similar. 1 Timothy 1:9–10 contains a list of sins and sinners. Homosexuals are listed with murderers, the sexually immoral, kidnappers, and liars as persons practicing behaviors contrary to the gospel. The Greek word used here for "homosexuals" is a bit unusual, as the modern translations reveal. The New International Version (1984) uses "perverts," the Good News Bible uses "sexual perverts," and the New Revised Standard Version uses "sodomites." The Greek word appears to have been coined by Paul out of the Greek translation of Leviticus 18:22 that we have just discussed.

A similar passage is found in 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 in which there is a list of people who will not inherit the kingdom of God. Paul uses two words for those involved in homosexual practice. The second, translated in the NIV (1984) as "homosexual offenders," is the same word used in 1 Timothy 1:10. The first word, translated in 1 Corinthians 6:9 as "male prostitutes," is a word with several meanings. Its most basic meaning is "soft." The word was used as a kind of slang in the New Testament era for the passive or receiving partner in a male homosexual relationship. The term describes young men who offered themselves to men seeking homosexual activity. Thus the two terms in 1 Corinthians 6:9 indicate first the passive and then the active partner in a homosexual erotic relationship. Again, this is clearly rejected as incompatible with Christian behavior. However, Paul notes that some of the Corinthians had lifestyles prior to their conversion for which some of these terms were relevant.

The clearest and most detailed passage dealing with homosexual practice in the New Testament is Romans 1:18–32. The passage shows God's wrath being revealed against human unrighteousness, and homosexual practice enters the text as an illustration of one of the worst forms of unrighteousness. Technically, the passage suggests that the

consequence of homosexual practices is an expression of the wrath of God brought into the lives of people who think they know better than God. The flow of Paul's argument is that homosexual practice is a degrading outcome of refusing to acknowledge God as God and of exchanging the glory of God for human desires. It is equally clear that Paul considered homosexual practice as being contrary to the will of God. His language echoes the words of several philosophers of that time who argued that homosexual practice was contrary to nature and a disgusting rejection of God's creation design. It is also important to note that for the first time in Scripture female homosexual practice was rejected along with male homosexual practice.

These biblical texts that speak of homosexual activity do so with unqualified disapproval, and the whole of biblical witness speaks as one voice prohibiting homosexual activity. The church has always taken the sexual instructions of Scripture as universal. Expressions of human sexuality have some variation according to culture, but human sexuality is an essential and core element of our humanness. It is not culturally bound or culturally conditioned. In fact, Genesis 1 and 2 make it clear that sexuality is a significant part of our humanity. Therefore, God's creation design for sexual relationship between males and females is a universal, not a cultural matter. The only exception Scripture admits is celibacy. Scripture considers a monogamous, heterosexual marriage as the only appropriate context in which sexual intimacy is expressed. For that reason, we do not regard the biblical condemnations of homosexual practice as culturally- outdated portions of Scripture that we can choose to disregard. From a biblical perspective homosexual practice is a sin.

### **What Church Tradition Tells Us about Homosexuality**

Church tradition has for more than nineteen hundred years served to strengthen the prohibition of homosexual behavior; this behavior has always been considered contrary to the will of God. Major voices throughout the history of the Church have condemned homosexual behavior as sinful/immoral. The early church (A.D. 100–600) condemned homosexual behavior. The Didache, an early theological document, lists *arsenokoitia* and *paidophthoria* (both words denoting homosexual behavior) along with fornication and adultery as sinful/immoral. Tertullian, Theophilus, Origen, Athenogoras, and Clement of Alexandria all associated homosexuality with what is unnatural. John Chrysostom felt that genuine pleasure can only come from what is natural; therefore homosexual behavior could not bring true pleasure. All of these theologians tended to link the lust of the Sodomites with the moral challenge posed by homosexual behavior.

Augustine, a fifth-century theologian, makes a distinction which bears upon the moral argument against homosexual behavior. While this distinction between ordered love (charity) and disordered love (cupidity) is fundamental to understanding his theology, it is also crucial for considering questions of morality. When we love God first, all other loves come into healthy focus. When we love self first, all other loves are distorted.

Life, when it is centered on the self, is unhealthy. According to Augustine, disordered love explains the nature of sin and the circumstance of the world. One example of this disorder is homosexuality.

Sin is linked by Augustine to concupiscence (lust). When love is disordered we reverse the order intended by God; that is, we love self before God. This is part of the reason that Augustine refers to homosexual acts as shameful. Like others in the early Church, Augustine considers the lust of the Sodomites to be at the root of homosexual behavior.

Aquinas, the great thirteenth-century theologian, described homosexual behavior as violating God's intent for humanity. Luther, the sixteenth-century German reformer, linked the practice and the toleration of homosexuality with the spiritual decay of the Roman Catholic Church. He agreed with the early fathers of the Christian Church that the judgment of God on the Sodomites was a result of their unnatural lust. John Calvin condemned the internal disposition of homosexual behavior.

A Wesleyan response is defined by a clear conviction that homosexual behavior is immoral. The Scriptures, along with the received tradition of the Christian Church, speak to the issue with sufficient clarity to make it plain to all that homosexual behavior is part of the fallen nature.

The challenge of responding to the issues surrounding any discussion of homosexuality is complicated by the erosion of the primacy of Scripture with regard to the interpretation of moral properties concerning human behavior. When competing criteria are given equal billing, adherence to the scriptural, ecclesial norms can easily slip, allowing broader, less specific explanations for the pathology of human behavior.

While scientific experiments conducted to determine the answer to questions surrounding homosexual orientation have proven inconclusive, there has been no lack of theories put forth, appealing to genetic, hormonal, or physical properties. Another theory is that disordered family relationships can leave people confused about their sexual identity. To date, there is no evidence upon which to draw any of these conclusions. We need to be careful about accepting uncritically the so-called scientific findings on either side of the homosexuality debate. Research is still in progress, and much of it is twisted by the personal agendas of researchers. The fact is that there is presently no scientific explanation for why some people are homosexual. As pastoral leaders we do not wait for scientific explanation to determine our pastoral role in this matter. The one thing that we do know from walking with people in a fallen world is that homosexuality is real, and sooner or later we may be asked to respond to serious questions regarding the attitude of the Church toward this important topic.



## **Charity in the Context of Conviction**

Our biblical and theological understanding of sin suggests that it is both personal and corporate. We personally choose to sin and are responsible/accountable to God for the willful choices that we make. Questions about the pathology of sexual orientation aside, sexual behavior, acting on our orientation, is a choice. The *Manual* of The Church of the Nazarene and the official statement of the Board of General Superintendents makes a clear distinction between behavior and orientation. One is sinful; the other is not. What is clear is the fact that behaving heterosexually or homosexually in relationships with the opposite/same sex is a moral issue. Accordingly, homosexual behavior is sinful because it reflects the fallenness of our world. Like other sins, it is something that we are called to respond to by grace according to the character of God. The person who is homosexually oriented needs a church that calls for a response that is in keeping with the character of God. While the church should not be a place of ridicule and condemnation, it must also be a place of love, of grace, and of redemption. As pastoral leaders, we must extend the invitation of grace to the homosexually-inclined person without accepting/condoning homosexual behavior.

Clearly, homosexual behavior is expressly prohibited in Scripture and in Christian tradition. At the same time, Scripture and Christian tradition wonderfully expresses how God has created us with the capacity for faithful, loving relationships. Marriage is the epitome of such relationships and is described in Trinity-like language by the Apostle Paul. The love of Father-Son-Spirit is a self-emptying, giving, bonding, other-preferring love. As humans, we are carefully crafted, intentionally designed to bond in covenant relationship. Each part of our bodies has a functional form, and that includes our sexual organs. God created us to fit together as male and female. This "fittedness" is biological and also psychological, emotional, and spiritual. Men and women are created to desire each other and are physically equipped to act on that desire. We preach and teach that sexual union is God's gift for marriage, and through this physical act a lifelong covenant of devotion is celebrated. Sexual union is not haphazard and casual, but it is an expression of life-bonding.

Given the factual reality that homosexual behavior cannot comply with the divine intention to establish a God-honoring lifetime relationship, we believe that such behavior is destructive and endangers the soul. In most homosexual behavior, sexual union is not viewed as a covenant-making, life-bonding experience. It lacks the commitment that goes along with such an intimate connection. By the objectification of the other's body as an instrument of gratification, homosexual behavior destroys the human capacity to relate to another and remain whole. It is relational suicide. It destroys the sacredness of human relationships. When we use each other sexually without the depth of a marriage commitment, we are being less than human.

The logic that condones homosexual behavior is innately selfish. This logic claims that homosexual desires are natural and that a person has the right to act on their

natural desires. "I want what I want regardless of others, regardless of what it does to society, regardless of what it does to me or to my family."

As Christians we are ultimately called to discipline our desires, to lay down our lives for others, and to bear the fruit of the Spirit, which is self control. The pit of selfish sexual pursuit is easy to fall into and hard to crawl out of. Its patterns dig tracks in our soul. Homosexual behavior damages a person, a relationship, a family, a world. Choosing to practice a lifestyle regardless of its consequences is ultimately selfish.

We wish to be absolutely clear. A person who claims to be a Christian and a practicing homosexual is making two contradictory statements: 1) I am a practicing homosexual, and 2) I am a follower of Jesus Christ. Which one supersedes the other? Which one is most basic to his or her identity? If someone says "Christian," then as a disciple of Jesus this person's sexuality must bow in obedience to Christ and what Scripture says about the sin of homosexual behavior. If a person says "practicing homosexual," then God and Scripture must bow to the person's sexual orientation, and this makes homosexuality an idolatrous identity. For the practicing homosexual, his or her sexual identity supersedes identity in Christ. Anything above God is an idol.

As strong as our stand may be, it is important to remember the distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual behavior. Homosexual orientation is the inclination to desire sexual intimacy with a person of the same sex. Homosexual behavior is achieving sexual gratification with someone of the same sex. The first is a desire, the second is an action. The call to the Christian who may have homosexual tendencies is to continue to avail himself or herself of the sustaining grace of God as He continues to shape that person into His likeness. The call is also the same as the call to the single Christian heterosexual—avail yourself of the sustaining grace of God in a life of disciplined sexual abstinence.

### **What can we say regarding the power of God to transform?**

It is imperative for our pastors to appropriate counseling resources in the community who can assist as they serve those wrestling with questions of sexual orientation. Discovering answers to difficult questions surrounding one's orientation may be further facilitated through professional counseling alongside proper pastoral care. We embrace the optimism of grace to transform lives and encourage homosexuals to remain available to God's abundant grace. For those who are not reoriented, they are called to live a life of abstinence that is graced by the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

### **A Closing Pastoral Word to the Church**

It is imperative that the Body of Christ commit to loving unconditionally. God so unconditionally loved the world that He sent His one and only Son, not to condemn but

to save (John 3:16–17). While Paul states clearly that homosexual behavior is one of the worst forms of human unrighteousness, he also describes just as clearly the unconditional love of God: “God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8, NIV); nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:39, NIV).

God does not love someone any less because he or she is a homosexual. Extending grace to homosexuals begins with allowing God to love them through you. Loveless judgmentalism and ridicule does little to enable Christ’s Body to grant grace and to show forth God’s unconditional love.

Let the people of God be available to come alongside in the complexity of the journey. Let us resist the ever-present temptation to make this a simple matter. Navigating homosexuality is seldom a simple journey. We must not offer simplistic remedies that compound the frustration experienced by those who struggle with homosexuality. At the same time, we must not minimize God’s ability to reorient a person through the power of His grace.

The people of God must not cave in to the belief that homosexuality is irreversible or that homosexual behavior is natural—“it’s just who I am”—and thereby offer no hope at all. This response surrenders to pro-homosexual rationales that are called biblical but are far from it. The result is to push the homosexual to other denominations that are beginning to sanction the homosexual lifestyle as acceptable though not desirable, or even accepting the homosexual lifestyle as completely natural and acceptable.

Our response to homosexuals must mirror the complex journey-alongside character of Jesus. While Jesus was a friend of sinners (including pagan Gentiles like you and me), eating with them and loving them, He also invited them to share in His life. He offered good news to captives and recovery and freedom to the oppressed, and He proclaimed to them the blessing of God. Grace to the homosexual is demonstrated in our availability to come alongside in the complexity of the journey. *God, grant us grace for the journey.*

We must not shy away from telling the truth about homosexuality, its roots, and its consequences. The Church may well be the only place left in the world where homosexuals can be loved and hear the truth of God. From Scripture, Christian tradition, and the doctrines of our church, we compassionately and persistently affirm that homosexual practice is contrary to God’s will and cannot be acceptable behavior for followers of Christ. At the same time we must always point to hope in the Christ who came to redeem all of us from the power of sin. Wesleyan theology offers resources of hopeful grace for the homosexual. By grace God is able to either deliver them from homosexual desires or enable them to live celibate lives. *God, grant us grace to teach Your hope-filled truth.*

The homosexual needs the community of grace available through your church. If the homosexual community offers a better welcome than the people of God, a struggling

person will seek help from that community. If we as the church will take time to get to know that person and to share God's love, we can show that he or she matters to God.

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