

Beyond Affirming

Ministry in LGBTQIA-Inclusive Churches

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Introduction

We believe that affirming the lives of LGBTQIA+ people is a basic commitment that all faith communities should hold. We should welcome queer and trans people with open arms as full participants in the life of our churches and communities, and we should celebrate the unique gifts and diverse perspectives and voices that they bring.¹ That's where we choose to begin: unapologetically standing in solidarity with LGBTQIA+ people.

These commitments are ones that are held by many faith communities today. And the number of congregations, para-church organizations, campus ministries, and other faith groups that choose to make these commitments grows each year. Many churches of both mainline and evangelical denominations are openly declaring their own stance of affirmation for queer and trans people in visible and public ways.

There are myriad resources available to help churches get to this place of affirmation for LGBTQIA+ lives. There are more books than we can count that help faithfully reread and reinterpret the biblical “clobber passages” in ways that begin to undo the harm they have caused to LGBTQIA+ people and

churches. There are Bible study materials to guide churches through discernment processes toward affirmation. There are theological and ethical texts that address nearly every conceivable question related to sexuality, gender, and faith. These are necessary and vital resources for this important work.

However, in our work as pastors and seminary professors, we have found that the resource we are lacking is one that helps faith communities move beyond a stance of simple affirmation and acceptance. While it is a beautiful thing to declare “all are welcome here,” this is only the beginning of a much longer journey to be undertaken. What does it look like to move beyond affirmation? What are the embodied practices of ministry that create a deeper sense of purpose and belonging? We believe that’s where the real fun begins for communities of faith: figuring out together how to put our affirmation into action by cultivating ministries of love and justice with LGBTQIA+ people.

If you, as an individual or your entire church community, have arrived at an affirming theological stance toward LGBTQIA+ people, then we celebrate with you. Rather than having crossed the rainbow finish line, you are at the outset of an exciting journey. This book aims to help you as an individual minister, lay leader, or congregation as a whole move from a stance of affirmation into a commitment of solidarity with LGBTQIA+ people. We hope it will help you celebrate the gifts they bring into the world and into your faith community. We also hope it will help you move further toward practices of ministry that embody your affirmation for LGBTQIA+ lives in ways that contribute to the health and well-being of queer and trans people and the flourishing of your church.

WHO WE ARE AND WHY WE WROTE THIS BOOK

We are writing this book together because both of us have experienced pastoring churches at different stages on their journey toward embodying ministries of LGBTQIA+ affirmation and justice. Cody was pastor to a congregation in

Cambridge, Massachusetts, that had been officially and publicly affirming of LGBTQIA+ people and engaged in LGBTQIA+ justice concerns for nearly forty years when he arrived as pastor (the fourth openly lesbian or gay pastor to lead the church in those four decades). Art currently serves a Baptist church in Williamsburg, Virginia, that has long been a progressive-minded congregation but has officially been welcoming and affirming for only about nine years. These pastoral experiences, from historically affirming and newly affirming congregations, lend us helpful insight into pastoral leadership for churches at different stages on the journey.

We are writing this book together because we have had very different experiences as pastors of our congregations. Cody is a queer Baptist pastor, partnered to another man. Nearly the entirety of his ministry experience has been as a queer pastor and seminary professor. For most of history, the pulpit was the one most forbidden place for an openly queer person to stand. There are ways that a queer pastor experiences a church's commitment to LGBTQIA+ affirmation differently than a straight or cisgender pastor. Art identifies as a straight, cisgender Baptist pastor. His experience as an ally of LGBTQIA+ folk shapes his own ministry within his own particular congregation and broader denominational life. These embodiments of sexual and gender identity mean that our experiences in ministry have been shaped quite differently in ways that provide a more expansive perspective than any single author could offer.

We are writing this book together because we are both scholars in our respective academic disciplines, which span a wide range of the arts of ministry that inform the life and ministry of a congregation. Cody is a pastoral theologian and scholar in the areas of spiritual care and counseling. He has written several books, lectures widely in congregations and seminaries on LGBTQIA+ spiritual care, and has consulted with numerous congregations on their journeys toward becoming affirming and beyond affirmation into how those commitments are embodied in practice. Art is a New Testament scholar and former seminary professor who specializes in

imperial-critical studies. He has written a number of articles and a book about interpreting the New Testament writings in their Roman imperial context. His particular lens of empire studies has helped shape his understanding of God's liberating desire for all people. He has also lectured and taught in congregations and classrooms on sexuality and gender identity in relation to biblical texts. These combined areas of expertise, along with our pastoral experience, help us to be attentive practitioners to the breadth of church ministry.

Together we have a broad ecumenical outlook. Art comes from a United Methodist background and is an alumnus of a Presbyterian seminary. Cody received his education at both Baptist and Disciples of Christ seminaries, has served in a Unitarian Universalist congregation, and previously taught at a United Church of Christ seminary before his current position at a Lutheran seminary. Although we have been shaped in important ways by these experiences, we both write from the Baptist tradition, a wide and diverse ecclesial family where there is no uniform theological stance on sexuality and gender identity. Within the Baptist fold, there are congregations like the one that Cody served that have long been affirming; his was one of the very first Baptist congregations to make a public stance of LGBTQIA+ affirmation in 1983. There are more moderate Baptist congregations that haven't yet made a public commitment to affirmation but nevertheless contain a diversity of theological perspectives on LGBTQIA+ lives within their pews. And there are very conservative Baptist congregations that are vocally non-affirming and even hostile toward LGBTQIA+ lives. Being part of this big theological tent (with a lot of particular collectives within it) gives us as authors a first-person sense of how many different types of congregations come to the place of LGBTQIA+ affirmation and then move beyond affirmation into ministries that fully celebrate the gift of LGBTQIA+ lives.

We're grateful to be companions with you on your own journey beyond affirmation into substantive practices of ministry that are spiritually healthy and helpful to LGBTQIA+ people and the congregations to which they belong.

JOURNEYING WITH THIS BOOK

More than anything, we hope this book helps you to be a better minister (whether lay or ordained) and helps churches cultivate richness and depth that demonstrate their commitments to LGBTQIA+ spiritual well-being and flourishing of life. Here's how we plan to lead you along this journey of learning and discovery.

We'll begin with aspects of ministry that are most public and visible and that, likely, affect the greatest number of people within your church's life. First, we'll address biblical interpretation, because it is foundational for preaching, spiritual formation, and so many other aspects of our faith. For most pastors and teachers in truly affirming churches, you've likely had the opportunity to wrestle with the clobber passages in your preaching or teaching, helping congregants undo decades of spiritually violent teaching on sexuality and the Bible. But we must say more than the fact that the Bible doesn't condemn LGBTQIA+ people. The Bible is also emphatically good news for queer and trans people. How we proclaim that good news—the gospel—in ways that cherish LGBTQIA+ lives and honor the sacredness of queer, transgender, and other gender/sexual embodiments is the subject of this first chapter. This includes rereading texts that we may have previously dismissed, reading other passages in light of queer and trans lives and experiences, and telling the story of the early church in ways that include the lives of LGBTQIA+ Christians as part of the church's larger narrative.

In chapter 2, we'll move into that equally visible and wide-reaching expression of the church's collective life: worship. Many churches that are affirming of LGBTQIA+ people find ways of bringing this commitment into the worshipping life of the community—by including more queer and trans people in worship leadership, developing liturgies that honor LGBTQIA+ lives or pride services, incorporating music written by LGBTQIA+ composers, and many other meaningful expressions of affirmation. Acknowledgment, much less celebration,

of LGBTQIA+ people has long been absent from the public worshipping life of congregations. This chapter will invite you to see worship as a liberating and celebratory occasion in the lives of LGBTQIA+ people. We'll also discuss LGBTQIA+ rites and rituals such as same-sex weddings; gender rituals for trans parishioners, such as renaming ceremonies; and the celebration of other sacred times and transitions in the lives of LGBTQIA+ people.

Chapter 3 will focus on an area that has long been lacking in most of our churches: education and spiritual formation for LGBTQIA+ affirming ministry. This includes the centrality of queer and trans faith narratives within the life of the church—and the importance of the whole congregation learning *from* LGBTQIA+ lives and experiences and not just *about* them. We'll also help you consider how to cultivate sexuality education across the lifespan in your congregation; some particulars of children's, youth, and family ministries, including supporting families with queer or trans youth; and other concerns specific to the lives of LGBTQIA+ youth. This chapter will offer starting points on a variety of subjects that congregations can carry forward in their educational and spiritual formation ministries. We'll also share some important faith narratives of our queer ancestors along the way.

In chapter 4, we'll consider spiritual care concerns that often arise among LGBTQIA+ people. If your church is going to publicly affirm and welcome queer and trans people in your community with open arms, you need to prepare to meet the spiritual needs they bring into your congregation. Many clergy and congregations are not immediately attentive to the unique concerns of spiritual care for LGBTQIA+ people when they first hang a welcoming banner in front of their church. Attending to spiritual stress and trauma is particularly important in cultivating an affirming congregation that is truly inclusive. Additionally, this chapter will address care for youth and young adults, as well as the growing population of LGBTQIA+ older adults in the life of most institutions. Think of this chapter as a crash course in spiritual care first aid for LGBTQIA+ people.

Finally, we'll end by looking beyond the walls of the church. The final chapter will explore how to cultivate ministries that increase the visibility of your congregation as a spiritual haven for LGBTQIA+ people. We will discuss practical ways to participate in meaningful outreach, sharing your church's commitment to LGBTQIA+ well-being and flourishing with the broader community. This includes ministries of advocacy and justice, especially in a political landscape that is becoming increasingly dangerous to LGBTQIA+ people. Too often, congregations that have worked hard to become inclusive and affirming stop short of engaging the wider community with this good news. We'll help you address how your congregation can make a greater impact through outreach and social justice advocacy, including participation in community Pride celebrations. We'll also point you toward meaningful advocacy for justice in an era of anti-LGBTQIA+ political attacks and help you foster congregational courage in these vital ministries.

We offer this book with deep humility, fully aware of our limitations. We are continuing to learn and grow in our own contexts about how best to minister and serve our LGBTQIA+ siblings in faith. Of course, the fields of science, biology, gender, and sexuality are evolving so quickly that it's hard for many of us to keep up. By virtue of putting words into print, some terminology may be out of date by the time this book finds its way into our readers' hands. Keeping up with the current use of terms that LGBTQIA+ people use to self-describe their lives and experiences will be important.

Even so, our hope is that by sharing some of the hard-earned wisdom and lessons from our journeys, we might offer a helpful resource to other churches and individuals navigating the path toward deeper belonging and inclusion. Like many of you, we've faced our own moments of uncertainty; we've put our feet in our mouths; and we've made mistakes we might rather not put into print! Yet we've also witnessed profound transformations in ourselves, in our communities of faith, and in the lives of others. We are deeply grateful for your trust and your willingness to learn with us.

This book is not the final word but an invitation to journey together toward a more expansive love and justice. May God bless us all as we continue to grow, learn, and embody God's expansive love and radical welcome for all God's children.

1

Reading the Bible as Good News for LGBTQIA+ People

“I JUST WANT A CUP OF COFFEE”

The young woman bouncing a baby on her hip seemed friendly enough as she approached. “Excuse me,” she said. “Are you a pastor?”

I (Art) was standing in line in a crowded coffee shop and remembered that my shirt declared “This Pastor Loves You” in bright rainbow colors—I had just come from a Pride event. “I am,” I responded, curious what direction this conversation might take.

“In that case, I’m wondering if you’ve ever heard these verses,” she said, her voice turning hostile. She started reading from her phone, loudly: “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:9–10, NKJV).

I winced, not thrilled to be attacked in public. I could handle a quiet conversation over a cup of coffee, but I was not eager for a hostile encounter in a busy public space.

Nevertheless, I responded that I had indeed read those verses—in Greek, in fact! She was unimpressed and began to verbally berate me as the line inched its way forward. Invoking Sodom and Gomorrah, she rebuked me for leading my congregation astray. The woman ignored my comment that “Jesus himself only judged those two cities for a failure of hospitality, not sexual sin” and insisted that I had fallen from the straight-and-narrow path and was on the wide road to damnation. I responded that, ironically, I was in the vast minority of pastors who support full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons. Perhaps I was on the narrow and more difficult path. After all, I was the one getting harassed in the coffee shop.

Tired after a long day, I replied, “Ma’am, I just want to get a cup of coffee so that I can go home to see my kids.”

She recoiled. “You have . . . kids?” Her tone suggested that I must also be leading them into an afterlife of eternal damnation.

It was futile. I conceded: “It seems clear to me that we won’t see eye to eye on this. Can you just let me order in peace?” Undeterred, she was about to continue her haranguing when a quiet young woman in front of us turned around.

“I couldn’t help but overhear your conversation,” she said, looking at me. “Can I buy you a cup of coffee?” She disrupted the onslaught long enough to deter my antagonist from continuing.¹ Seeing that I was about to get my coffee and leave, my adversary grumbled that she’d pray for me. Feeling snarky, I responded, “I’ll pray for you too.” She walked away frowning, still bouncing her baby on her hip.

The kind woman in front of me handed me a cup of coffee and introduced herself as a local graduate student. We chatted for a few moments about what had just happened, and I thanked her for intervening. “Thanks for shining your light,” I told her, my voice shaking with emotion. “It makes a difference. Keep it up.”

SCRIPTURE AND WELCOMING LGBTQIA+ PERSONS

Conversations like these about a handful of Scripture passages known as the clobber passages seem to be legion—in churches, at dinner tables among family members, and occasionally in busy coffee shops. They are the six or so biblical texts that are commonly used to condemn same-sex relationships, as well as a couple of others that are weaponized against transgender and nonbinary people. The interpretation of these texts is often the focus of debates over Christianity and LGBTQIA+ inclusion.

Engagement with these texts is crucial for individuals and communities of faith who are wrestling with the scope of God's welcome and inclusion, especially because they have caused so much harm. Many people who have grown up in churches with "traditional" interpretations of these passages have to do the hard work of deconstructing deeply ingrained teachings about sexuality and gender. And churches that seek to become a place of affirmation and belonging for all people must do the necessary work of studying and reevaluating Scripture as well.

Fortunately, good biblical scholarship that supports the full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people has existed for decades now. If you are reading this book, our hunch is that you have already spent time wrestling with these passages.² Nevertheless, our experience tells us that it will be well worth your time as an individual or community of faith to revisit them on occasion. We've seen big turnouts on Sunday mornings or Wednesday nights because people are eager to learn and feel equipped to respond to hostile comments from non-affirming family members—or to address their own lingering doubts.

We will offer a brief survey of the clobber passages below to help you get oriented or refresh your understanding of these texts. With each, you'll notice that there are significant *translational* and *contextual* issues that call into question the long-standing and harmful interpretations of these passages. In addition, each text raises important questions about *biblical authority*: What is the nature and role of Scripture in forming our theology and practice as people of faith? After that, we will

consider other passages that speak to affirmation and inclusion for LGBTQIA+ people. These texts can be helpful for inclusive churches to shape a culture of belonging and full participation for all.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE CLOBBER PASSAGES

Genesis

Genesis 19:1–29 tells the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The traditional interpretation of this passage focuses on the desire of the men of Sodom to rape two angelic visitors, assuming that God rains down sulfur and fire to destroy these two towns because of sinful sexual desire. As a result of the history of interpretation of this passage, *sodomy* has unfortunately entered our lexicon as a reference to same-sex sexual activity.

To be frank, this is a poor and even negligent interpretation of Genesis 19. In its literary context, this story follows closely on the heels of Genesis 18:1–15, which recounts the hospitality that Abraham and Sarah offer to three angelic visitors. Hospitality was of paramount importance in the ancient world because travelers were at the mercy of strangers to find safety, lodging, and sustenance. Abraham and Sarah are exemplars of hospitality by bringing water, washing dirty feet, and preparing food. In stark contrast, the people of Sodom and Gomorrah not only fail to offer hospitality to their visitors but also attempt to rape them. Rape is a crime of violence and domination, not sexuality, and can in no way be equated with loving, consensual same-sex relationships.

The contrast between these two passages clarifies the point of Genesis 19: It calls readers to offer radical hospitality to strangers. Jesus's own words reinforce this interpretation. When he sends out his disciples, he explains that if a village rejects them (i.e., fails to offer them hospitality), it will suffer a fate worse than Sodom and Gomorrah (Matt. 10:14–15). The sin of Sodom is a failure of hospitality, not a sexual sin.³

Ironically, a faithful interpretation of Genesis 19 should actually *encourage* people of faith to offer radical welcome to those who are often excluded as outsiders, including LGBTQIA+ people.

Leviticus

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are two of the most famous passages used to clobber LGBTQIA+ people. At first glance, Leviticus 18:22 seems pretty clear: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.” Even more severely, Leviticus 20:13 mandates the death penalty: “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their bloodguilt is upon them.” However, with these two verses, we must consider translational issues, literary and historical context, and the question of biblical authority.

The Hebrew word translated as “abomination” is *toevah*. This is actually a boundary marker, not an ethical term. Leviticus is concerned with holiness, priestly ritual, and maintaining a distinct Israelite identity in the midst of the surrounding nations. Note Leviticus 18:3: “You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not follow their statutes.” Many laws in Leviticus delineate what is considered *toevah* (perhaps better translated as “taboo”) because of this concern. For example, eating pork, shellfish, and other animals (Lev. 11), wearing mixed-fabric clothing or sowing different crops in one field (Lev. 19:19), and consulting mediums (Lev. 20:6), are all considered *toevah*. The Israelites are commanded to avoid these things to maintain their distinctive religious and cultural identity in their own time and place. They aren’t intended to be timeless and universally applicable moral commands.

Moreover, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 aren’t a broad condemnation of same-sex relationships but are likely prohibitions against specific ritual practices that were allegedly common

among the Canaanites. Taken in context, these verses most likely refer to temple-based prostitution with men, practiced in order to gain the favor of Canaanite gods. For Leviticus, the concern is not sexuality but idolatry. This makes sense given the book's focus on protecting Israel's distinct identity and avoiding pagan worship practices.

However, even *if* these verses clearly described and condemned loving, consensual sexual activity between same-sex adults, the question of biblical authority would remain. Churches and denominations don't expect their members to keep the Levitical laws. Why should people insist that these two verses are still relevant? While some interpreters have attempted to argue that Leviticus's *ethical* laws are still binding and its *cultic* laws can be ignored, Leviticus itself offers no distinction between these two categories. Cherry-picking biblical texts like these simply reveals a reader's own biases.

Romans

Jesus never speaks about or condemns same-sex relationships. The few New Testament texts used to justify the exclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons come almost exclusively from the letters of Paul.⁴ However, as with the passages above, context and translation matter.

At a surface level reading, Romans 1:26–27 seems to be the clearest condemnation of same-sex sexual activity in the entire Bible—and the *only* passage that speaks to same-sex sexual activity between women: “For this reason God gave them over to dishonorable passions. Their females exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the males, giving up natural intercourse with females, were consumed with their passionate desires for one another. Males committed shameless acts with males and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error” (Rom. 1:26–27). For some, these verses suggest that same-sex sexual activity violates God's original intention and “natural” design for human sexuality.⁵

It's not clear what type of sexual activity Paul has in mind, however. Rather than consensual, same-sex sexual activity, he likely had in mind pederasty (men sexually exploiting young boys), cultic prostitution or prostitution in general, or masters sexually abusing their slaves.⁶ Paul appears concerned with harmful power dynamics, exploitation, and uncontrolled lust rather than loving relationships. Furthermore, within the broader context of Romans 1, Paul is critiquing idolatry and the worship of other gods—not condemning consensual, same-sex sexual activity.

Perhaps ironically, Paul turns the tables on his audience in Romans 2:1, calling out judgmental readers for their own hypocrisy, as if to say, “You who judge others are guilty yourself.” This is especially striking given how often Romans 1:26–27 has been weaponized (erroneously) to condemn LGBTQIA+ Christians. A careful interpretation of Romans 1:26–27 cannot support the judgment of others and should invite readers to deeper humility and self-reflection.

1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy

Finally, 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 and 1 Timothy 1:9–10 both contain vice lists that include sexual activity within their purview:

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! The sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes [*malakoi*], men who engage in illicit sex [*arsenokoitai*], thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, swindlers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.

1 Cor. 6:9–10

This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the righteous but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who engage in illicit sex [*arsenokoitai*], slave

traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching

1 Tim. 1:9–10

Vice lists were common among Greco-Roman authors and listed behaviors commonly considered immoral at the time. These Pauline letters incorporate vice lists to support broader arguments within the letter, not to make a sustained case against particular sexual acts. These are just things that “everyone knows is immoral” within their culture. However, faithful interpretation of these texts demands attention to two uncertain Greek words: *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*.

The ambiguity of these words is evident in the various ways they have been rendered in English. Translations for *malakoi* are wide-ranging and include “effeminate” (KJV), “male prostitutes” (NRSVue), “homosexuals” (NKJV), and many alternatives. *Arsenokoitai* has variously been translated as “abusers of themselves with mankind” (KJV), “sodomites” (RSV), and “men who engage in illicit sex” (NRSVue), among others. The NIV translates both words together as “men who have sex with men.” However, the word *malakoi* literally means “soft” and is being used metaphorically (elsewhere in the New Testament it refers to soft clothing; Matt. 11:8, Luke 7:25). While it can be used to suggest effeminacy, it can also connote “luxury” or “weakness.” The word *arsenokoitai* is a compound word formed from words meaning “male” and “bed,” and Paul may have coined the term. The problem with both is that no one really knows what these two words mean in context!

While some have argued that *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* refer to partners in male sexual activity, this is an interpretive leap of faith that is unsustainable, given the evidence. Like Romans 1:26–27, these texts quite probably indicate sexually exploitative activity, such as pederasty, cultic prostitution, or rape. Weaponizing these texts to condemn LGBTQIA+ people on the basis of two vague Greek words is profoundly unethical. If Paul intended to address consensual, same-sex relationships, he could have stated it more clearly.

PASSAGES TARGETING TRANS PEOPLE

Beyond the clobber passages used to condemn same-sex relationships, there are a small handful of passages commonly wielded against trans and nonbinary people as well. Opponents of LGBTQIA+ inclusion argue that the Genesis creation account establishes a strict gender binary encoded in creation itself: “Then God said, “Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:26a, 27). This interpretation ignores science, which suggests a more complex picture of biological sex and gender, including the existence of people who are intersex. It also fails to recognize that Genesis 1 is poetic and theological language; the paired opposites (light and dark, land and sea, day and night) convey that God establishes the fullness of creation, without denying that each of these pairs exists on a continuum. Genesis does not reject the existence of shadows, swamps, amphibians, or sunrise and sunset; instead it poetically affirms the diversity of life all along a spectrum.⁷ Creation actually resists strict binaries, and the Genesis account supports the goodness and beauty of all creation. Furthermore, it may be worth stating aloud what everyone who has ever seen a sunrise or sunset already knows: Oftentimes the nonbinary parts of life are the most interesting and beautiful!⁸

Deuteronomy 22:5 is also used to attack trans and nonbinary folks: “A woman shall not wear a man’s apparel, nor shall a man put on a woman’s garment, for whoever does such things is abhorrent to the LORD your God.” This verse is cherry-picked to criticize people who are gender-nonconforming. Meanwhile, Christians regularly gloss over verses such as Deuteronomy 22:11–12, and rightfully so (“You shall not wear clothes made of wool and linen woven together. You shall make tassels on the four corners of the cloak with which you cover yourself.”). These are verses that attempt to insulate early Israelites from Canaanite culture and religious practices, not shape Christian belief and practice. Deuteronomy 22:5, in particular, was

probably intended to prevent participation in pagan religious rituals.⁹ There is nothing in the text itself to suggest it has trans and nonbinary people in view.

Furthermore, weaponizing this verse ignores the reality that gendered clothing is entirely cultural. “Masculine” and “feminine” styles and preferences change quite dramatically over time and across cultures, and so there is no universal standard for what constitutes “man’s apparel” or a “woman’s garment.” Who gets to decide which is which? Can men wear earrings? Do women have to wear a veil (cf. 1 Cor. 11:4–16)? Deuteronomy 22 has to be interpreted in its historical and literary context for it to make sense.

Scripture does not directly address trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming people. These passages are pulled out of their literary and historical context to make harmful and universal claims that extend far beyond what the texts themselves say. None of these so-called clobber passages can support the condemnation or exclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals from faith communities, given the myriad issues related to context, translation, and biblical authority.

Even in churches that are already openly and explicitly affirming, there is value in regular, ongoing engagement with these texts. We can’t ignore them, or our silence might convey to our congregations that we’re choosing to overlook these passages simply because they don’t suit our theology. We should address them directly and shine a critical light on harmful interpretations, especially because many LGBTQIA+ people and allies continue to wrestle with their meaning. It is easy to underestimate (especially for straight, cisgender allies) how much damage has been done by the weaponization of these verses and the Bible as a whole against the LGBTQIA+ community. It’s also easy to underestimate how much healing can be found in a pastor willing to preach affirming sermons based on these Scriptures or others.

This is not to say that we should address them *every week* in worship—they are still sensitive texts for many and perhaps should come with a content warning. Still, regular preaching

and teaching on these passages can help our members and guests embrace their own belovedness while also equipping them to have the confidence to respond when confronted by family members—or by a random stranger in a coffee shop!

However, it's not enough simply to claim that these passages and the Bible as a whole are not bad news for LGBTQIA+ people. Even if we've deconstructed the clobber passages, we can and should engage the Bible for material and resources that affirm and encourage LGBTQIA+ beloved ones and their allies. And so, we turn now to consider passages of Scripture that can offer good news for LGBTQIA+ people.¹⁰

CELEBRATING LOVE AND RELATIONSHIPS BEYOND HETERONORMATIVITY

Stories of love and commitment show up in surprising and unconventional ways in Scripture. Far from presenting one, monolithic understanding of “traditional marriage” being between one man and one woman, Scripture has a nuanced and expansive view of covenantal relationships, which at times defy societal and cultural norms. The stories of Ruth and Naomi and of David and Jonathan especially offer a view of love and relationship unconstrained by a heteronormative perspective. Taken together, these stories offer biblical examples of love that transcends all barriers, and they invite us all to deeper loyalty and commitment in our own relationships today.

Ruth and Naomi

The book of Ruth contains beautiful words of commitment that are often heard at weddings. What is remarkable is that these words are shared between two women: Ruth and Naomi. Male characters are secondary, at best, as the narrative centers on the commitment between these two women who demonstrate creativity, commitment, and love in supporting one another through their mutual challenges.

The book begins when an Israelite named Naomi goes with her husband and two sons to live in Moab during a famine. Naomi's husband dies, and after both of her sons marry Moabite women, the sons die as well. This leaves Naomi and her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, in a precarious situation because they lack a male provider in their patriarchal society. Naomi makes plans to return to the land of Judah, but she begs Ruth and Orpah to return to their own people, the Moabites, so that they can remarry and ensure their own survival. This is a brave and selfless act on Naomi's part—she has little hope for her own future, and she will likely become destitute. Eventually, Orpah agrees to leave; she kisses Naomi goodbye and returns to her family. But the story emphasizes that Ruth *clings* (Hebrew: *davqah*) to Naomi and will not leave her (Ruth 1:14). Naomi makes one last plea: "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law" (v. 15). Ruth then responds with a stunning statement of commitment:

"Do not press me to leave you,
to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die,
and there will I be buried.
May the LORD do thus to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!"
vv. 16–17

Ruth will not leave Naomi, even if it means the promise of a dire future.

Curiously, the Hebrew word "to cling" (root: *davaq*) is used often in the Old Testament to indicate marriage and covenantal relationships. Genesis, for example, observes that "a man leaves

his father and his mother and *clings* to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24, emphasis ours). Jeremiah casts Israel’s relationship with God in similar language (Jer 13:11).¹¹ By using this language, the text frames Ruth and Naomi’s bond in covenantal and even marital language. Ruth’s statement of commitment is extraordinary. We might even say these are *wedding vows*. Ruth pledges herself to Naomi, and together they form a new family to face all that life has to offer. For better or worse, for richer or poorer—but likely just for poorer. As a Moabite and Israelite, their love and commitment for one another crosses religious, ethnic, and generational boundaries. It is an unexpected and transgressive love.

Once the two women return to Bethlehem, Ruth gleanes food from the field of Boaz, a wealthy kinsman of Naomi. Boaz welcomes her and is generous in providing for her: he looks out for her safety (2:8–9), provides water and food (vv. 9, 14), and asks his workers to leave extra grain from their bundles for her to glean (vv. 15–16). By the beginning of the third chapter, Naomi concocts a plan to ensure Ruth’s long-term security (3:1–4), and Ruth spends the night with Boaz on the threshing floor—also a transgressive moment! From there, Boaz promises to marry her, but only if a closer relative does not claim her first (v. 13).¹² The process that follows seems more transactional than romantic: the next-of-kin declines Naomi’s field and by extension Ruth, and so Boaz acquires both in order to maintain the dead man’s inheritance and family lineage (4:10). Boaz and Ruth marry, and Naomi nurses the child they conceive (Obed).

The book ends with a short genealogy tracing the connection from Obed to his grandson, David, who will become Israel’s most consequential king. It is remarkable that this origin story for King David centers not on Boaz or even Obed but rather on the covenantal relationship between two women. Even once Boaz enters the story, the center of gravity continues to be Naomi and Ruth’s commitment to each other.

While there is no explicit indication in the text that Ruth and Naomi's relationship is sexual, one might wonder why interpreters have assumed they are straight. At the very least, if we acknowledge the possibility that they might share a mutual attraction, we allow queer readers to see themselves reflected in the story. Regardless of Naomi and Ruth's sexuality, their story offers a portrayal of love and commitment with echoes of marital language.

Through Ruth and Naomi's commitment to each other, the story decenters heterosexual relationships as the norm and pinnacle of human interpersonal life, with every other family variant as an "alternative." It thus opens up new and creative possibilities for imagining what "family" looks like. Mona West observes that the unorthodox relationship dynamics between Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz are "similar to the ways in which queer people of today create families: a bisexual man and two lesbians live together with their biological child; a gay man is a sperm donor for a lesbian couple and is part of the parenting of their child; three gay men live together as lovers and family for twenty years; a lesbian mother and her lover live two doors down from her lesbian daughter and her lover."¹³ Just as importantly, Ruth and Naomi's love for each other becomes a model for us all—and a reflection of God's own love.

Ruth's appearance in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:1–17) is also noteworthy. It offers a reminder that God's purposes are carried forward not just by patriarchs and kings but also by the faithful commitment of two women who choose to embrace life together. Pastor and public theologian Brandan Robertson states it well: "The message of the Book of Ruth is clear—love has no boundaries or borders; it transgresses all our categories, including gender, religion, and ethnicity. When love is allowed to flourish, it can transform our lives and transform the world."¹⁴ Read in this light, Ruth's vows of commitment are wholly appropriate to use in any wedding ceremony—whether between two women, two men, or some other creative combination of family.

David and Jonathan

In a similar fashion, some interpreters have drawn attention to David and Jonathan's potentially homoerotic relationship. David first encounters Jonathan after David's battle with Goliath. The unexpected victory captures the attention of King Saul, who summons David to speak with him. Saul's oldest son, Jonathan, is present, and after David introduces himself, there is an immediate and deep connection: "the soul of Jonathan was bound [Hebrew: *niqsherah*; "knit"] to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul" (1 Sam. 18:1). From there, the description of their relationship does little to dispel romantic undertones. Rather than returning home, David goes to live in Saul's household, and Jonathan makes a covenant with him, "because he loved him as his own soul" (v. 3). Jonathan even strips to his undergarments before David and offers him his robe, armor, and weapons (v. 4). Like Ruth and Naomi, this covenantal language hints at the sort of loyalty and steadfast love akin to marriage.

As David's military success grows, Saul becomes paranoid and plots to kill him (19:1); meanwhile, Jonathan takes "great delight in David" (the Hebrew phrase suggests longing and desire) and informs him of the plot (v. 2). He then advocates on David's behalf, arguing that Saul should trust David because of all the good he has done. The plot unfolds from there like two star-crossed lovers caught up in both political drama and a parent's anger and paranoia. Saul finally explodes at Jonathan, saying, "You son of a rebellious woman! Do I not know that you have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame and to the shame of your mother's nakedness?" (20:30). Saul's anger at his son suggests that Jonathan and David are more than close, platonic friends; it may remind readers of the many parents who have erupted in anger after finding out about their own child's forbidden romance.

Jonathan angrily defends his relationship with David but is unable to change his father's mind. Jonathan goes to David to warn him, and they realize the risk to David if they attempt to

stay together. They then kiss and weep (v. 41) before David departs. Jonathan and David see each other only once more, yet again they affirm their covenant before God (23:16–18). Their story ends in tragedy when David discovers that Saul and Jonathan have been killed in battle; David tears his clothes, weeps bitterly (2 Sam. 1:11–12), and then sings as he laments their loss:

“Jonathan lies slain upon your high places.
I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;
greatly beloved were you to me;
your love to me was wonderful,
passing the love of women.

vv. 25b–26

These words are stunning: David describes Jonathan’s love for him as greater than any love he might have for women. It is an emotional conclusion to their story.

Even though interpreters have long detected hints of homoerotic love in this story, many have resisted such an interpretation. Some point to David’s later sexual relationships with women to argue that he was straight—yet it makes better sense simply to view him as bisexual. While some insist that a sexual relationship between Jonathan and David would not have been accepted in antiquity, this actually helps make sense of Saul’s anger!¹⁵ If a man and woman were described in the language used for David and Jonathan’s relationship, would any reader doubt the depth and intimacy—even sexual intimacy—of their relationship? Removing our heteronormative lens, the text suggests deep attachment and covenantal love between these two men. For readers today, their story offers a poignant invitation to consider the beauty of two souls who “bind” themselves to one another, even in the face of obstacles such as parental rejection and the threat of violence. This story of David and Jonathan offers a loving relationship between two men that depicts deep loyalty and devotion and opens possibilities for affirming and encouraging not just same-sex relationships but all relationships today.

BREAKING DOWN THE GENDER BINARY IN SCRIPTURE

Scripture also offers texts that help deconstruct a strictly binary understanding of gender. As we've already seen, Genesis 1 does not insist on a rigid binary view of the world, and in fact it invites readers to see light and dark, day and night, water and land, and even gender along a continuum. Perhaps just as importantly, Genesis 1 also affirms that God created *all humankind* in God's image. Each and every person—straight, gay, nonbinary, queer, trans, intersex, and otherwise—bears the *imago Dei*. This is a core theological claim. Moreover, God repeatedly calls creation “good” and even “very good” after creating people (v. 31).¹⁶ The divine spark and essential goodness present in all people should shape how we see others and serve as a foundation for all Christian theology and biblical interpretation.

If Genesis 1 creates theological space for recognizing gender diversity among humans by moving beyond a binary view of creation, passages in the New Testament about the incarnation offer fertile ground for reflection on a God who resists the binary. This can be especially compelling around the Christmas season as people of faith celebrate the birth of the Christ child. One of the fundamental claims of the Christian faith is that God became human in the person of Jesus. The Christian God is a God who chose to take on newborn flesh and become fully human, bridging the gulf between the divine and mortal. The same God who created the heavens and the earth and everything in between also breaks down the starkest binary there is—human and divine. This should be good news for all who struggle to fit into the neat, binary boxes that we humans tend to put ourselves and others into.

While Genesis 1, the incarnation of Jesus, and other parts of Scripture provide a basis for broad theological reflection on gender diversity, it can also be encouraging to draw attention to biblical characters who themselves disrupt binary norms

and expectations. For LGBTQIA+ lives, it can be incredibly life-affirming to be able to see themselves in the stories of Scripture. The Ethiopian eunuch, Joseph, Mordecai, and others offer wonderful opportunities in this regard.