

**Welcoming But Not Affirming: The Logic of MC USA's "Teaching Position" on
Homosexuality**
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[Author's note: This essay was drafted shortly after I taught my Introduction to Theology class, which included a unit on homosexuality. I wanted to get some of my thoughts onto paper while they were fresh. I have not yet been able to develop the argument in this essay as thoroughly as I hope to. However, due to other commitments it may be some time before I can return to fleshing out my thoughts. Especially, the paper's final section needs significant expansion. In the meantime, I am posting the essay here on Peace Theology in hopes that some may find it helpful—and that I may receive constructive criticism that will help me when I return to the essay.]

Numerous times over the past twenty-five years I have entered into conversations concerning issues related to our churches' response to the presence in our midst of gay¹ Christians. These conversations remain as challenging and seemingly unresolvable as ever. But they also remain as interesting as ever. And I keep learning as I engage in such conversations—about my own views and deep-seated values, about the dynamics of the conversation, and about the perspectives of my conversation partners (especially those with whom I disagree).

Certainly the conversations are complex and viewpoints are almost infinitely varied. We all bring a mixture of motivations, ethical resources, political agendas, social locations, levels of education, personal experiences, and so much more. However, as a trained ethicist, my tendencies run toward trying to provide some kind of conceptual order in analyzing these conversations. This leads me to suggest various ordering categories—not (heaven forbid!) as stable slots into which to fit various actors (so I will avoid the word "type" and instead use terms such as "tendency," "way of arguing," and "inclination")—as aids for growing in understanding

¹ Negotiating the language debates seems like an impossible task. We can easily enter into an interminable process of defining terms and never get beyond those debates. However, the vast majority of writing on this topic tends to go to the other extreme and use complicated terms without definition. What I will try to do in this paper is define the terms I will be using without devoting much energy to defending those definitions.

Right away we face the issue of our overall rubric. I am choosing to use the word "gay" as an umbrella term for people whose primary affectional attraction is toward people of their same sex *and* who affirm that attraction as part of their own identity generally with the additional affirmation of openness toward entering into an intimate relationship with a person of the same sex.

(the proverbial “heuristic devices” as artificial categories that have educational value but must be held lightly).

The first set of categories I will use is meant to give us reasonably neutral terms for the two sides in the debate, focusing on issues centered in the churches. These terms are “inclusive” and “restrictive.” These two terms focus on the specific question of whether a church participant’s “gayness” per se should play a role in the level of involvement this participant will be allowed.

The term “inclusive” conveys an approach that would not limit the involvement due to whether the people are gay or not (this view could easily hold that the church should restrict the involvement of all people who are involved in sinful relationships, heterosexual or homosexual—the point being, though, that heterosexual couples and homosexual couples are held to the same standards).

The term “restrictive” conveys an approach that would limit the involvement of people who are presently in intimate same-sex relationships (or perhaps also those who are open to entering into such relationships). The degree of restrictiveness might vary greatly among different churches, but in all cases the basis for restriction is the gayness of the participants.

In the conversations among Christians about the place of gay Christians in the churches, we may discern several different kinds of reasoning occurring, drawing in different ways on different ethical sources. A simply way of beginning to separate out a few of these types of reasoning is to set the types of reasoning in a quadrant. One spectrum (running left to right) would be the restrictive/inclusive spectrum. The other spectrum (running up and down) would be a biblical authority spectrum (that is, a spectrum tracking various views on the centrality of the Bible in the ethical rationales that are put forth).

(R-1) Focus on direct texts

(I-1) Start with (1) Bible's big message, then (2) analyze direct texts

(R-2) Focus on what seems "natural"—marriage, physical "fit"—natural law, Tradition

(I-2) Focus on the experiences of gay Christians—self-awareness of God's blessing, problems with persecution and hostility

This simple chart shows us that some on the inclusive side operate with a high view of biblical authority and that some on the restrictive side draw heavily on natural theology more than direct biblical texts. Surely most who are involved in this conversation draw in various ways on both biblical texts and human experience. However, it is appropriate to challenge people to be self-aware of what type of reasoning they are tending to use.

For example, often people on both side accept the truism that there is a direct correlation between one's view of biblical authority and one's tendency toward an inclusive or a restrictive view. However, this simply is not the case. Some who focus on general biblical themes such as hospitality and argue that the "direct texts" do not speak directly about *all* types of same-sex sexual intimacy (such as I do) still should be seen as ranking pretty high the "biblical authority" spectrum. On the other hand, many on the restrictive side draw heavily on natural law when they speak about how "unnatural" same-sex sexual intimacy seems or even when they speak about the centrality of the exclusive norm of male/female marriage.²

² Admittedly, this last statement will be contested by many on the restrictive side who cite the creation account and Jesus' quoting from that account as biblical bases for this argument. I would submit, though, that the

The “teaching position” of the Mennonite Church USA

In many public discussions of the “homosexuality issue” in Mennonite contexts, participants often refer to the “teaching position” of the Mennonite Church. An obvious example is the policy of the MC USA’s magazine, *The Mennonite*, not to publish letters to the editor that debate the “church’s teaching position.” The implication of such usage, it would seem, is that the MC USA does have a clear and settled “official position” on homosexuality. With this settled “position,” the church is also committed to on-going discernment and application, but from the point of view of having a decided position. My concern in this paper is to look more closely at this “teaching position.”

The significance of having a settled stance may be seen in this recent comment from one MC USA leader, John Roth, editor of the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*: “I think if you asked Anabaptist-Mennonites about it right now, a significant majority would likely say [this] about homosexual marriage: This is no longer a topic we are ready to keep high on our congregational or denominational agenda. *Our teaching position is clear*: Congregations or pastors who choose to take formal, public stances in opposition are, in effect, choosing to dissociate themselves from the understanding of the larger community.”³

This term “teaching position” came into prominence with the publication of the “Membership Guidelines for the Formation of the Mennonite Church USA” in 2001. Section III of the Membership Guidelines focused on “issues related to homosexuality and membership,”

Bible never uses its allusions to creation to make this kind of statement. The connection between creation and what is “natural” in marriage seems to owe much more to natural law than biblical teaching.

³ John D. Roth, “Challenges of ‘Cross-Cultural’ Communication: A Response to C. Norman Kraus,” in Michael A. King, ed., *Stumbling Toward a Genuine Conversation on Homosexuality* (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2007), 62 (emphasis added). Note that Roth simply cites the existence of the “teaching position” without saying what this position is. This focus on citation rather than exposition turns out to be common for those on the restrictive side of this discussion.

and articulated several “teaching positions”—affirming the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (1995) and especially its statement, “We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life” (Article 19); affirming the Saskatoon (1986) and Purdue Statements (1987) that describe “homosexual, extramarital, and premarital sexual activity as sin;” and affirming the call from those two statements “for the church to be in dialogue with those who hold differing views.”

These Membership Guidelines are treated as authoritative directives—certainly being the main basis for affirming that the Mennonite Church USA has an official “teaching position” on homosexuality. Of course, we actually have three “teaching positions” mentioned there: the affirmation of the Mennonite Confession of Faith’s statement on marriage, the affirmation of the Saskatoon/Purdue statement’s description of “homosexual sexual activity” as sin, and the affirmation of the call for the church “to be in dialogue with those who hold differing views.” It is a little ironic that, in the name of the “teaching position,” *The Mennonite*’s editor would restrict the possibilities of dialogue among differing views, and the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*’s editor would assert that on-going conversation about “homosexual marriage” should be limited.

Clearly, leaders such as Roth and Thomas, when they use the term “teaching position” are thinking of the assertion that “homosexual sexual activity is sin.” They also seem to assume that this is a clear and settled conclusion. However, given that the discussion among Mennonites is scarcely over, we would do well to think more carefully about what this “teaching position” might entail, as well as asking more foundational questions about what it’s based on and how its logic works.

One of the first elements of this examination that seems obvious is the lack of detail in the stating of this “teaching position” in the formal documents. We have only a few documents that this position is based on. Centrally, we have the afore-mentioned “Membership Guidelines.” These Guidelines coin the term “teaching position,” but they add no new content to that position, merely citing two earlier documents, the Mennonite Confession of Faith (CofF) and the Purdue/Saskatoon statements (P/S). So we need to turn to the CofF and P/S for the content of the teaching position.

Before turning to those two documents, though, we may note one point of ambiguity in the Guidelines where the language differs from P/S. The Guidelines state, in its third “teaching position,” that P/S calls “for the church to be in dialogue with those who hold differing views.” The actual statement in P/S reads this way: “We covenant with each other to mutually bear the burden of remaining in loving dialogue with each other in the body of Christ, recognizing that we are all sinners in need of God’s grace and that the Holy Spirit may lead us to further truth and repentance....We covenant with each other to take part in the ongoing search for discernment and for openness to each other.”

In P/S, the tone is one of fellow church members in an on-going conversation seeking, with mutual humility, to continue to discern the directing of the Holy Spirit. Fifteen years later, with the Membership Guidelines, the language has become “the church” being in dialogue “with those who hold differing views.” This latter statement seems to imply that “the church” and “those who hold differing views” are distinct entities, perhaps even implying that “those who hold differing views” are outside the church. At the least, the tone in the Membership Guidelines is that the issue is much more settled than it is presented as being in P/S. However, it appears

that the authorization for this “teaching position” of being in dialogue is P/S. No rationale is given for the change in tone.

Confession of Faith

The first source that is cited in the Membership Guidelines is the 1995 CofF. That the CofF would be cited as the basis for the “teaching position” on homosexuality is interesting. This citation, without explanation, gives the impression that the CofF provides clear and direct teaching concerning homosexuality. However, the actual CofF does not in fact even mention homosexuality. So, here again we have an example of theology by citation more than by exposition. It’s enough to cite the official doctrinal statement of MC USA with a proof-text to establish a “teaching position” that then will be used by leaders such as Roth and Thomas to justify closing down discussion.

Let’s look at the actual content of the CofF. Article 19 addresses “Family, Singleness, and Marriage.” The first sentence of this article, the sentence quoted in the Membership Guidelines, reads thus: “We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life.” At the end of this sentence, a footnote reference is given to two biblical texts.

The first text is Mark 10:9: “Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” This verse is part of Jesus’ teaching on divorce (which here in Mark is totally rejected) and remarriage (which Jesus names as adultery, i.e., “sin,” Mark 10:11-12). Note that the CofF cites Mark’s version of Jesus’ teaching which allows for no exceptions to the forbidding of divorce and characterizing of remarriage as sin; it does not cite the slightly more

relaxed account in Matthew 19:9 that does allow for a divorce exception in the case of the infidelity of the partner.

The second text is 1 Corinthians 7:10-11: “To the married I give this command—not I but the Lord—that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.” Note that the CofF ends the citation at verse 11 and hence does not include the “exception” of an unbeliever leaving a believing spouse (1 Cor 7:15).

Based on this footnote, then, it seems clear that the thrust of the CofF sentence beginning Article 19 is on the *permanence* of marriage and the sinfulness of divorce and remarriage (that is, emphasizing the “*for life*” conclusion to the first sentence). So, not only does Article 19 not speak directly of homosexuality, the one place that may be seen indirectly to allude to “homosexual practice” (the definition of marriage as “one man, one woman, for life) clearly has in mind a *different* issue—divorce and remarriage.

That divorce and remarriage are in mind in the first sentence of Article 19 is made even clearer by the commentary on this Article. The commentary (which is also part of the CofF as officially adopted by the Mennonite Church USA) speaks to the divorce issue and says *nothing* about homosexuality. “Today’s church needs to uphold the permanency of marriage and help couples in conflict move toward reconciliation. *At the same time*, the church, as a reconciling and forgiving community, offers healing and new beginnings. The church is to bring strength and healing to individuals and families” (emphasis added).

While we need to note that the commentary and scripture citations make it clear that the sentence from Article 19 of the CofF that is quoted in the Membership Guidelines is being

misused when it is construed as a basis for an official “teaching position” concerning homosexuality, we should also notice another point the CofF makes.

The commentary *softens* the strictness of the CofF article and the two New Testament texts cited. “At the same time,” the church is a place of welcome and forgiveness. This comment does not spell out a more nuanced approach to divorce and remarriage, but it does seem to open the door for such. One could easily draw from this commentary a basis for accepting divorced and remarried people as full members of Mennonite congregations (which, of course, is in fact increasingly the practice). The point, it would appear, is that the CofF makes a strong statement about the importance of Christian marriage, but implicitly allows for exceptions in the case of divorce and remarriage—exceptions that are not seen, in many contexts, to negate the theological affirmation of the marriage covenant as a life-long commitment. More important, we could say, than absolute fidelity to the ideal is that the church “brings strength and healing to individuals and families”—including even people who are divorced and remarried.

Could such an approach also be applied to people in same-sex covenanted partnerships? The CofF could be read in a way that would imply an affirmative answer to this question—if indeed the churches’ priorities should be on bringing “strength and healing.” Of course, such a reading and application would stand in tension with the Membership Guidelines’ use of the CofF.

Another question we should ask about the Membership Guidelines’ use of the CofF arises when we look at the introduction to the CofF, remembering that the introduction was also affirmed by both the General Conference Mennonite Church and Mennonite Church in 1995 when the CofF was officially approved by the denominations. In the introduction, we read of six ways the CofF “serves the church.” That is, the CofF itself gives instruction concerning the role

it is meant to serve in the Mennonite churches. This is what it says: “How do Mennonite confessions of faith serve the church? First, they provide guidelines for the interpretation of Scripture. At the same time, the confession itself is subject to the authority of the Bible. Second, confessions of faith provide guidance for belief and practice. In this connection, a written statement should support but not replace the lived witness of faith. Third, confessions build a foundation for unity within and among churches. Fourth, confessions offer an outline for instructing new church members and for sharing information with inquirers. Fifth, confessions give an updated interpretation of belief and practice in the midst of changing times. And sixth, confessions help in discussing Mennonite belief and practice with other Christians and people of other faiths.”

What’s missing? Anything hinting that the CofF is meant to be used as an authoritative basis for a boundary marking “teaching position”—not to mention that the CofF should not be used as the basis for such a “teaching position” on a topic it doesn’t even address.

The Purdue and Saskatoon Statements

What we see, then, when we look carefully at the three bases for the “teaching position” of the Mennonite Church USA on homosexuality are the (1) “Membership Guidelines” that name this “teaching position” while providing no additional content beyond (misleadingly) quoting the (2) CofF and summarizing the (3) P/S statements.

Consequently, for the content of this “teaching position” we are essentially totally reliant on the P/S statements. What do they say?

First of all, they affirm sexuality as “a good and beautiful gift of God.” Thus, they imply that sexual intimacy is a *good* thing, a valuable element of our humanness. The P/S statements

do go on to limit access to this good thing, but they do so with the benefit of doubt that there must be some other wrong that would clearly make this good thing unavailable for faithful Christians. Sex is good, we should embrace it, only if there is some other wrong involved does this good thing become wrong.

The P/S statements then list cases of the presence of wrong that is wrong enough to make the good of sexual intimacy immoral: wife-battering, premarital sex, extra-marital sex, and homosexual sex. The statements do not explain why these are wrong, presumably assuming that the rationale is self-evident. We would have a pretty easy time identifying the wrong in wife-battering, premarital sex, and extramarital sex. But what about “homosexual genital activity” as a single category? What is wrong with this “activity”?

Basically, all the P/S statements offer is a simple statement: “We understand the Bible to teach that genital intercourse is reserved for a man and a woman united in a marriage covenant and that violation even within the relationship. i.e., wife battering, is a sin. It is our understanding that this teaching also precludes premarital, extramarital, and homosexual genital activity. We further understand the Bible to teach the sanctity of the marriage covenant and that any violation of this covenant is sin.” (this is the wording of the Purdue Statement, slightly changed from the earlier Saskatoon statement).

Boiled down, the P/S statement says, the Bible teaches that all homosexual genital activity is sinful. This is pretty cryptic. No texts are cited to illustrate this teaching. No clear definition of “homosexual genital activity” is given. No clarity is offered concerning other elements of the physical and emotional elements of intimate partnerships.

This statement seems to reflect the general assumptions of the common “people in the pews” that the Bible clearly is “against homosexuality.”⁴ What is not often discussed is what this “against homosexuality” refers to. I will suggest three general responses to this question—all of which would indeed agree that the “Bible is against homosexuality” but draw quite different implications from that statement.

That this is a complicated discussion should be recognized first off from the fact that the term “homosexuality” is itself never used in the Bible nor anything approaching such a term. The word itself is recent, and is a joining together of Greek and Latin roots. Neither biblical Hebrew nor biblical Greek have any words like this.

The places in the Bible that are generally understood to speak about “homosexuality” all make reference to specific actions, not a broad category of people (such as today’s “homosexuals”). In Genesis 18–19, the story refers to men of the city wanting to “know” their male visitors (i.e., presumably have sex with them). In Leviticus 18 and 20, the commands prohibit men “laying with other men as with women.” In Romans 1, Paul writes of men consumed with lust for other men. And in 1 Corinthians 6 (echoed in 1 Timothy 1), included in a list of vices, Paul mentions “men laying” (presumably with other men assuming Paul has Leviticus in mind, though the invented word for “men laying” does not specify who the men are laying with).

So, we cannot simply find a proof text where the Bible refers explicitly to “homosexuality.” Rather, we have these several references to problematic things some men do.

⁴ This assumption is reflected in this comment by Mark Thiessen Nation in the midst of his and my “conversation on homosexuality”: “I do believe it is important that we look carefully at [the most immediately relevant passages of Scripture]. But I think one of the reasons I have shied away from offering this sort of detailed discussion of all the passages is because, in some ways, I think it is a diversion. I tend to think we would get farther if we simply stipulated that the Bible says homosexual practice is wrong. Then let’s spend our time arguing about whether or not we still agree with that and why” (Ted Grimsrud and Mark Thiessen Nation, *Reasoning Together: A Conversation on Homosexuality* [Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2008], 207).

These are three common understandings of what the “Bible is against homosexuality” conclusion might mean:

(1) It is believed by some that the “Bible is against homosexuality” conclusion has to do with a general condemnation of the entire spectrum of what we today would have in mind when we use the term “homosexuality” including the same-sex affectional orientation, sexual intimacy between same-sex partners in the context of marriage-like relationships, and sexual acts that are also understood to be sinful when engaged in by heterosexual people.

(2) It is believed by others that the “Bible is against homosexuality” conclusion is points toward the sinfulness of all types of same-sex sexual intimacy but not the affectional orientation. This would appear to be the view reflected in the documents said to form the “teaching position” of the Mennonite Church (USA). The Mennonite “teaching position” presents itself as biblically based and suggests that it is not the orientation but the “practice” that is proscribed by the Bible. This understanding would also be common among many on the inclusive side who would then go on to argue that the Bible being “against homosexuality” is not binding for present-day Christian ethics.

(3) And it is believed by others that “the Bible is against homosexuality” conclusion should be linked with the specific kinds of activity referred to in the direct texts. This view would probably prefer language that does not use the broad term “homosexuality” but refers more specific to the actual behaviors that are mentioned—so, the Bible is against inhospitable gang rape that is used to deny hospitality to visitors (Genesis 18–19).⁵ The Bible is against sexual acts that are non-procreative in the context of the community’s survival being at stake (Leviticus 18, 20). The Bible is against lustful, promiscuous sex that reflects idolatrous practices

⁵ See Marti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

(Romans 1). The Bible is against unjust sexual practices that are economically driven (1 Corinthians 6). These are practices that are sinful for both heterosexual and same-sex couples. At least some who share this understanding would also believe that sexual intimacy that is acceptable for opposite sex partners would also implicitly be acceptable for same sex partners.

As a consequence of recognizing these three quite distinct understandings of the truthful conclusion “the Bible is against homosexuality,” we must recognize that that simple statement does not provide much help for the churches in their discernment concerning the acceptability of gay Christians in the churches.

The discussion of differences regarding understandings of the phrase “the Bible is against homosexuality” may then be expanded to include another significant definitional difference with major implications for how churches negotiate our issue. This is the difference in meaning between using the term “homosexual practice” (singular) versus “homosexual practices” (plural).

The use of the term in the singular is characteristic for many who wrote in support of the restrictive approach, including Mennonite scholars Willard Swartley and Mark Thiessen Nation who are in turn heavily influenced by Robert Gagnon’s massive *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*.⁶ Unfortunately, none of these writers take the time to explain why precisely they insist on the singular “practice” and what the implications of that usage are for how they address the issues and especially for how they interpret and apply the “direct texts” in the Bible said to be definitive for the churches’ approach to our issue.

So, we need briefly to piece together the logic behind and the ramifications of this usage. All of these writers, even if they don’t use this language, would agree that there are many

⁶ See also the document issued in July 1991 by the Mennonite Church General Board, “Summary Statements on Homosexuality”: “We support the several ministries in our church for assisting homosexual persons who desire...freedom from same-sex practice.” Accessed on Loren John’s website: <<http://ambs.edu/LJohns/GLBmenu.htm>>.

“heterosexual practices” when it comes to sexual behavior. Nation, for example, writes directly about the goodness of morally appropriate sexual intimacy (within the context of opposite-sex marriages). He also writes of morally inappropriate “heterosexual practices” (e.g., a friend who suffered from a sexual addiction). So, we have “heterosexual practices” (that is, occasions for sexual intimacy)—some sinful, some blessed by God as good.

However, we have only one “homosexual practice,” always sinful. What might this mean? It would seem that what these writers must be saying is that all the various forms of sexual intimacy that might be practiced by same-sex couples fit into a single category for the purposes of moral discernment. What follows from such an understanding is the practical conclusion that since each type of same-sex sexual intimacy is an example of “homosexual practice” and “homosexual practice” (of whatever variety) is sinful, we do not need to pay much attention to what specific type of behavior is in mind when we conclude that it is wrong.

So, when we turn to the Bible, we do not need to concern ourselves with the specific context or type of behavior our several direct texts speak to. If today’s same-sex marriages between two committed Christians fit into this rubric of “homosexual practice” they are wrong, just as all the allusions to “homosexual practice” in the Bible are also wrong.

We may identify two ramifications from this logic. First, since there is just one “homosexual practice,” all we need to establish from the Bible is that this “practice” is condemned in order to be certain that every type of behavior that is an example of this one practice is sinful. And, clearly we may establish this condemnation from the direct texts that all are negative about this “practice.” Second, we accept that “homosexual” and “heterosexual” sexual behaviors are not morally parallel. We may recognize a variety of “heterosexual

practices,” each with its own distinct moral status, while also recognizing only one “homosexual practice” with a uniform moral status for all varieties of behavior within this single “practice.”

When we consider the other option, seeing a variety of “homosexual practices” analogous to the variety of “heterosexual practices,” we can see why so many of the inclusive/restrictive conversations make little progress. This is so, at least in part, because one’s understanding of whether we should be thinking in terms of a single homosexual “practice” and a variety of homosexual “practices” will greatly shape one’s way of reading and applying the Bible.

Those who are more inclined to think in terms of “homosexual practices” with distinct kinds of moral status for the distinct practices (parallel to how everyone seems to think of “heterosexual practices”) will put much more weight on the specific contexts for the direct texts. They may well think that texts that when read in context actually are proscribing *specific* practices for men (all the direct texts that clearly link behavior with gender refer to men⁷) that would be equally sinful for same-sex and opposite-sex couples. If so, they would reason, there is no reason not to assume based on the Bible itself that “practices” that are morally approved for opposite-sex couples might not also be acceptable for same-sex couples.

Turning back to the P/S statements, we also have a clause that calls the churches to “confess our fear and repent of our absence of love toward those with a different sexual orientation.” This clause leads to several questions. As it stands, it is pretty cryptic. What

⁷ The one often-cited possible exception is Romans 1:26-27. This passage reads (NRSV): “Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men exchanged shameless acts with men...” We simply cannot say with certainty what the “same way” that links the women’s behavior with the men’s refers to here — either “consumed with passion” or “for one another.” Is Paul’s concern the “unnaturalness” of the women being “consumed with passion” and acting lustfully or is it the “unnaturalness” of the women having sex with other women? It could be either. One’s conclusion likely follows from one’s sense of Paul’s overriding concern here — with out of control promiscuous sex or with same-sex sex. Strong arguments can be made either way, at least making clear that this text (the only one remotely hinting at “female homosexuality” in the entire Bible) cannot be used as a basis for the *certain* assertion that the Bible has in mind a “homosexuality” that equally includes males and females that it is against.

would such a confession entail? Would the expectation be that the repentance would lead to any efforts at overcoming the problems caused by the “absence of love”? What might those problems be? Might the use of the P/S statements themselves as boundary-marking absolutes about the sinfulness of “homosexual practice” and the main basis for the “teaching position” that in practice is used to shut down the promised on-going process of conversation among fellow-church members about their different views on homosexuality itself be an expression of “absence of love”? Who determines whether the “absence of love” is truly overcome—those who make this confession or those who have borne the brunt of this absence?

A different kind of question emerges in relation to the acknowledgement of “a different sexual orientation” here. As has commonly been expressed as the intent of the P/S statements, the general sense of the statement as a whole is to combine two affirmations: (1) some people are fundamentally affectionally attracted to people of their same sex, and (2) such people are forbidden by the churches to enter into same-sex intimate partnerships (since 1987, when the P/S statements were written, the possibility of actual legal same-sex marriages has become a reality, so calling same-sex partnerships “extramarital” or “pre-marital” by definition is no longer possible). These two points obviously stand in tension with one another. The tension heightens when we add to the mix the earlier part of the P/S statements that makes a strong affirmation of the goodness of sexuality (with the implication I have noted that the logic of the statement seems to be that only some clear moral wrong would override the acceptance of the goodness of sexual expression for Christians).

These questions and tensions and the acknowledgment of differences within the churches (“We covenant with each other to mutually bear the burden of remaining in loving dialogue with each other in the body of Christ, recognizing that we are all sinners in need of God's grace and

that the Holy Spirit may lead us to further truth and repentance.” Purdue) leave us in a bit of a quandary. We could reject the possibility of some people having a fundamental attraction toward people of the same sex. We could nuance our understanding of the Bible’s teaching on this issue to allow that some same-sex intimate relationships might not be forbidden for Christians. We could decide that the commitment to “remaining in loving dialogue” is not as important as establishing clear boundary lines and moving ahead without continuing debates. We could assume that the P/S statements were only occasional, ad hoc formulations from a past generation that no longer speak for Mennonites. Probably we will have to follow at least one of these possibilities (many of us already have).

Certainly, though, the P/S statements alone do not provide us with much guidance (in spite of the authoritarian use of them by the Membership Guidelines). They don’t give us explanations or rationales or clarity about many of the most important questions. At the heart of their message, especially as inferred in the Membership Guidelines, is a reassertion of the basic unquestioned assumption that characterizes much of the discussion on the homosexuality issue in general: “The Bible teaches....”

However, the P/S statements do not explain *what* the Bible teaches. They cite no texts—either about sex in heterosexual marriage or about “homosexual practice.” They also do not cite any teaching documents that would explain what the Bible teaches except, a bit ironically, the “working document for study and dialogue” commissioned by the Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church, published in 1985 as *Human Sexuality in the Christian Life*. This citation is ironic because that book, a careful, thoughtful, 166-page treatment of a wide variety of themes (only 16 pages are devoted to homosexuality) does not support the simplistic conclusion of the P/S statements. The *Human Sexuality* book reflects the genuine

differences in the churches on homosexuality and draws no clear conclusions on what “the Bible teaches.”

Human Sexuality, a study document prepared by a large committee made up of a wide diversity of Mennonites, asserts after its survey of the “direct texts” of the Bible: “The passages reviewed above focus rather narrowly on specific homosexual acts and by themselves do not help us move toward redemptive actions.”⁸ The section on homosexuality concludes with a comment that points in the opposite direction than that taken by the P/S statements: “If the church should err, let it be on the side of caring for and loving a group of people who are much persecuted in our society.”⁹

⁸ Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church, *Human Sexuality in the Christian Life: A Working Document for Study and Dialogue* (1985), 113.

⁹ *Human Sexuality*, 118. In fact one member of the committee that produced *Human Sexuality* later published an article where he expressed dismay of how political machinations undermined the careful, consensus-building work of the committee and resulted in a highly problematic “official” statement. See Maynard Shelly, “Compassion for Today’s Lepers,” *Mennonite Weekly Review* (April 18, 1996). Shelly wrote about the work of this committee: “We prepared reports for the church not only on homosexuality but also on the broad range of related issues from marriage and singleness to intimacy and abuse. We drew on the teachings of the Bible from Genesis to Jesus. Though we reflected differing points of view, we agreed on a statement that opened a small door for gays and lesbians to feel they belonged to our Christian family. That was our best judgment after six years of prayer and study. But the Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church General Boards rewrote out statements for Saskatoon ’86 and Purdue ’87. They closed the door to fellowship with our homosexual children. Politics won out over prophecy.”

The GCs and MCs undertook one other sustained organized effort to gather together a representative group of congregational representatives to pay sustained attention to discernment concerning homosexuality among Mennonites. The “Joint Listening Committee for Homosexual Concerns” was formed by the two General Boards in 1990 and completed its work in 1992. The Listening Committee understood its mandate to follow from the P/S statements expressed commitment to ongoing “loving dialogue” and focused its energies on soliciting input from various church members, especially those attending the denominations’ three General Assemblies that occurred during the course of the Committee’s life.

The Listening Committee’s final report included a strong recommendation that in light of the on-going questions and disagreements they had heard from church members concerning biblical and theological understandings of the issues related to homosexuality, that the denominations “intensify its efforts to help congregations study homosexuality to discern how homosexuals can relate to the church’s life and ministry” (quoted in Melanie Zuercher and Ed Stoltzfus, “The Story of the Listening Committee,” in C. Norman Kraus, ed. *To Continue the Dialogue: Biblical Interpretation and Homosexuality* [Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2001], 84).

Both General Boards rejected this recommendation and decided to make the Listening Committee’s final report available only to those who requested it (instead of formally releasing it). And the copies made available in this way did not include the Committee’s concluding sections of recommendations (the entire report, with recommendations, was published in Kraus, ed., *To Continue*, 303-322; it is available on-line at: <http://www.ambs.edu/LJohns/ChurchDocs.htm> [accessed 5/6/10].

The “teaching position,” as affirmed in the Membership Guidelines, lacks the nuances of the *Human Sexuality* study, depending solely on the P/S statements and ignoring the one official study document the ancestor denominations of MC USA commissioned. Instead of the careful, if brief, recognition of the complex *content* of the Bible on sexuality issues presented in *Human Sexuality*, the “teaching position” relies simply on the P/S statement that “the Bible teaches... homosexual genital activity is sin” without any elaboration.

So, the role the Bible actually plays in the “teaching position” is more as a source of authority for the global condemnation of “homosexual practice.” It is the Bible’s authority that matters, not careful consideration of its *content* in all its complexity. And the authority of the Bible here is impossible to reason with since the P/S statements provide no content *from* the Bible itself.

The logic of the “teaching position”

Interestingly, though, when we consider ways the logic of the position on homosexual practice actually works, we see that the Bible may not actually play as central a role as is generally assumed. Since we don’t have any specific biblical content in the “teaching position,” we need to extrapolate a bit in relation to other writings on this issue.¹⁰

The irony of the General Boards’ decision not to pursue helping “congregations study homosexuality” in 1992-3 may be seen when nearly 20 years later, the merged Mennonite Church USA, at its General Assembly, passed a resolution that stated, “We affirm the church’s commitment to ongoing dialogue and discernment, and ‘agreeing and disagreeing in love.’ We confess that we as a church (congregations, conferences, denomination) have rarely found a way to create a healthy, safe environment in which to have this dialogue, one that builds up the Body of Christ, and is respectful and honest about our differences....And so we call upon the Executive Board of Mennonite Church USA to work with conferences to provide and encourage the use of resources which assist conferences and congregations to engage in this discernment. Our hope is for a broad range of resources that help us live faithfully, extending hospitality to all of God’s people” (*The Mennonite* [July 7, 2009]) [online at http://www.themennonite.org/issues/12-13/articles/A_resolution_on_following_Christ_and_growing_together_as_communities_even_in_conflict; accessed 5/6/10].

¹⁰ The two most thorough treatments of these issues from an overtly Mennonite perspective that are supportive of the “teaching position,” both published by the Mennonite Publishing House and written by Mennonite seminary professors, are Willard M. Swartley, *Homosexuality: Biblical Interpretation and Moral Discernment*

But this is how the logic seems to work. The “teaching position,” in a nutshell, is that “homosexual practice” is sin. That is, given the use of the singular “practice,” that any possible sexually intimate relationship including fidelity in the context of marriage, is sin and hence to be rejected by the church.

Why do we say this? Because the Bible teaches this. Though the documents that the “teaching position” affirmed in the Membership Guidelines rests on (CofF and P/S statements) don’t themselves refer to any specific places where the Bible teaches this, we may learn from scholars such as Mark Thiessen Nation and Willard Swartley that texts such as Leviticus 18 and 20, Romans 1, and 1 Corinthians 6 do give us the data we need to know that the Bible condemns “homosexual practice” as sin—and that this condemnation extends to same-sex marriage.

But, in light of my above discussion on the difference between thinking in terms of “homosexual practice” (singular, different than “heterosexual practices”) and “homosexual practices” (plural, parallel with “heterosexual practices”), how do we know that the “direct texts” (which everyone agrees do not speak of same-sex marriage) should be seen as support for condemning *all* possible homosexual practices (including same-sex marriage)?

It’s impossible to say for sure, because I am not aware of anyone supportive of understanding the Membership Guidelines’ “teaching position” as condemning same-sex marriage having addressed the question as I have posed it. However, it does seem that for many (e.g., Swartley), the basis for knowing that same-sex marriage is condemned is not so much biblical authority as it is what we could call general revelation. That is, because only opposite sex marriage is “natural”—capable of producing biological offspring, the way bodies fit together, what seems to most people over most of history as disgusting.

(Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), and Mark Thiessen Nation’s contributions to Grimsrud and Nation, *Reasoning Together*.

So, actually, the basis for the “teaching position” may not so much be “the Bible teaches...” as what seems best to fit with human experience. However, once the locus moves from the direct texts, then much of the rhetorical force of the “teaching position” is lost. Once we are in the realm of human experience many other kinds of questions arise. Why should some people’s opinions about what is natural (the way males and females fit) carry more weight than other people’s opinions about what is natural (some people are both with both a fundamental attraction toward people of their same sex and an inclination to flourish best with an intimate partner—just like those with a fundamental attraction toward those of the opposite sex)?